

APOLOGIA[©]

THE JOURNAL OF THE WELLINGTON CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS SOCIETY (Inc.)

Photo of James Veitch : Courtesy of the Dominion.



FOCUS ON JAMES VEITCH

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Fides quaerens intellectum

VOLUME 7 (1) - 2000

The Wellington Christian Apologetics Society (Inc.)

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We believe in:

- The divine inspiration, infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible as originally given and its supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct. The Bible comprises the 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament.
- The eternal, everlasting, self-existing nature of the Godhead, Who is the Maker of the universe, which is separate from, but being finite is completely dependent on Him; Who is both transcendent of and immanent within His creation; Who is the great I AM and Immanuel of the Christian Scriptures; Who is Creator and Saviour, Judge and Lover of humankind.
- The unity of the individual Persons of the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the Godhead; and the full divinity and humanity of the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.
- The universal sinfulness of human nature and the universal guilt of mankind since the Fall, rendering all humanity subject to God's wrath and condemnation.
- Redemption from the guilt, penalty and power of sin only through the sacrificial death on the Cross (as Representative, Substitute, Victor etc.) of the Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God.
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Apologia aims to stimulate rational reflection on, and reasoned defence of, the Christian faith as truth. Since human opinion is always corrigible and meaningful assertions imply conditions under which they may be falsified, *Apologia* is written in the belief that truth is ultimately independent of opinion. The opinions and views expressed in *Apologia* are not necessarily the views of the committee, nor do they necessarily wholly reflect the Society's stance. They are simply deemed to be worth publishing for readers to consider, evaluate, respond to, etc. A careful effort is made to ensure that no article is published that promotes or defends any doctrinal view contrary to our statement of faith. In such cases where views are expressed that are contrary to our beliefs, this is done to provide for a critique of erroneous doctrines.

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Contributors to this volume: Dr Arnold Fruchtenbaum, Dr G.H. Duggan SM., Dr Derek Tovey, Justin Cargill, Dr Stephen J. Scott-Pearson.

Reproduced articles: by Rev. Dr James Veitch, Bob Shaw, Professor Murray Harris, Dr Paul Trebilco and Dr G.H. Duggan SM.

Acknowledgement: Front cover photograph of Rev. Dr James Veitch. Courtesy of the *Dominion*.

Editorial

In his book *Two Thousand Years Later: A Novel* (Hovenden Press, 1997) Peter Longley presents a 'New Age' version of 'Christianity'. It is one which is totally at odds with the New Testament records and all that the Christian Church has taught for almost 2000 years. Longley presents some "first century scenarios" in an attempt to popularise the findings of the "Historical Jesus movement" among theologians. This 'movement' finds one expression today in the so-called Jesus Seminar. This group of 200 theologically liberal Bible scholars rejects, among other things the historicity of most of the Gospel accounts. They consider Jesus to have been an illiterate peasant who was merely an itinerant Jewish "cynic sage" and not the divine Son of God, Messiah and Lord. Rev. Dr James Veitch, whose work is the focus of this issue of *Apologia*, is one member of the Jesus Seminar. Last year he helped organise the visit and lecture tour to New Zealand of the co-founder of the Seminar, John Dominic Crossan. In 1998 he was involved in organising a similar visit by Dr Robert Funk, the other co-founder.

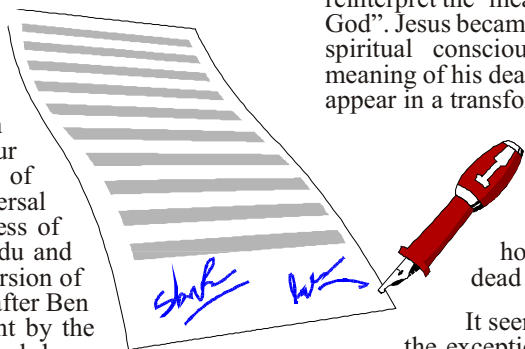
In his novel Peter Longley presents Jesus (referred to as "Joshua of Nazareth") as having been married for two years to a young girl Joanna, before her untimely death. Later Jesus had a son Ben Joshua who he never saw due to Jesus' untimely death at the hands of the Jewish authorities. The child's mother was Maria of Magdala (Mary Magdalene), Jesus' closest confidant and lover. Ben Joshua travelled to India to promote his father's real message, a message centred on the "Christ consciousness" within all of us which is interpreted as our soul energy, the chi or life-force of God. This message of universal divinity and the inter-connectedness of all life forms was fused with Hindu and Buddhist thought and the fuller version of Christianity was lost to the world after Ben Joshua's death. The version taught by the Apostles Peter and Paul and handed down through the Church Fathers is therefore not the real message and is based largely on non-historical accounts. Longley concludes that Jesus' disciples never really understood his message and they incorrectly interpreted his death as being of sacrificial necessity for mankind's salvation from sin.

Veitch, an ordained Presbyterian Minister, has described Longley's book as "superb" and agrees with "almost all" of the "first century scenarios" he presents. Veitch is currently Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Victoria University and favours the view that Jesus Christ of Nazareth was born to a young unmarried Jewish girl who was raped by a Roman soldier. This bizarre theory is not original. However, Veitch has refined it further, exhibiting a flair for extraordinary originality and breathtaking historical precision in his reconstruction when he goes on to suggest that the rape undoubtedly occurred at the time of the girl's first ovulation. The timing of the resultant pregnancy, he argues, accounts for why Jesus' followers came to regard his birth as a 'miracle' and embellished his birth account to include the "myth" of the "Virgin birth". Therefore Veitch rejects the teaching

of the Virginal conception of Christ as taught in the Scriptures and by the Church. Jesus, he argues, was illegitimate and probably never even knew his father.

Veitch has publicly denied the doctrine of the bodily Resurrection of Christ on national television (see p.9) and elsewhere and favours the view that Jesus' body was dumped into a common criminals' grave following his crucifixion. Like John Dominic Crossan, he believes that the body was probably eaten by scavenging disease-ridden dogs and the Gospel records of the Resurrection, including the empty tomb tradition, written by eye-witnesses, are all mere fabrications without a shred of historical validity. Veitch considers the call to faith in Christ's death on the Cross as a substitutionary atonement for sins as having nothing to do with the real message of Christ. However, he has no adequate theory to explain the real meaning of the death of Christ and believes that the teaching of an afterlife and judgement following death played no role in Christ's ministry. Jesus was just an illiterate peasant who came to prominence because of his wise sayings, his good deeds and his novel and somewhat radical political views. Over eighty percent of the sayings attributed to him by the Gospel writers were never uttered by him, but were rather attributed to him by his followers. Much later, after the death of all eye-witnesses to his ministry, accounts were written of Jesus' ministry and life to give him spiritual stature and reinterpret the 'meaning' of his reputed "closeness with God". Jesus became 'alive' to his followers only in their spiritual consciousness, as they reflected on the meaning of his death. He did not rise from the dead and appear in a transformed resurrected bodily form to any of his followers. Like his mentor, Lloyd Geering, Veitch believes that Jesus' bodily remains underwent normal decomposition and that the Christian belief and hope in the bodily resurrection of "the dead in Christ" is wishful thinking.

It seems that in any other profession, with the exception of Christian ministry, those who no longer subscribe to a set of shared beliefs or code(s) of practice endorsed by the professional body to which they belong and to which they have given their commitment, depart voluntarily or involuntarily from the profession when they choose not to adhere to such codes or accepted practices. For example, when a politician unwittingly espouses policy at clear odds with his party, and such a deviation is brought to his attention, he is expected to apologise and make amends by clarifying and recommitting himself to uphold the party policy. If he promotes erroneous policy knowingly and then refuses to apologise or modify his stance following party discipline, he is either forced to resign or steps down in an effort to protect his own integrity. Not so with ministers in many of the mainline churches! They can flourish on handsome stipends funded by the sacrificial giving of those committed to keeping "the faith once delivered to the saints". At the same time they publicly undermine, without a twinge of conscience, so it would seem, the doctrinal teachings that they once took a serious oath, before God and Church leadership, to faithfully honour, uphold, defend and propagate. The Apostle Paul spoke about such individuals who seek to undermine the faith of true



¹ The Newsletter of Jesus Seminar Aotearoa New Zealand (\$15 per annum) was produced following the visit of Robert Funk, to update subscribers with "issues that are at the heart of *the Jesus Seminar*". The community of Saint Luke in Auckland has coordinated efforts to disseminate this material.

² See Veitch's review comments: <http://www.spiritualchallenge.com/reactions.html>

believers, as liars who are “seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron” (1 Tim. 4:2). The onus is on Church leadership to remove from public ministry those who have departed from the faith or who prove by their actions that they have never been regenerated and truly come under the Lordship of Christ (Gal 1:7-9; 2 Jn 9-11).

Financially suckled by their churches, such ministers, hucksters of so-called “modernity”, lack the backbone to abandon the Church and its teachings and go and join the Skeptics Society or similar-minded groups where they would no doubt receive a warm reception. Instead, they choose to remain on like termites devouring the doctrinal foundations of the Church, proselytising for their ‘scholarly’ views and ‘reinterpretations’ of the Christian faith, and all the while preaching the message of tolerance in an attempt to protect their own self-interest. The irony is that they are intolerant of those who seek to uphold the cherished beliefs of the Christian Church, labelling them “literalisers”, “ignorant fundamentalists”, and “closed-minded”. They fail to recognise that they themselves have their own set of rigid presuppositions that they bring to bear in all their studies of Scripture. They fail to recognise that the vast majority of foremost New Testament scholars in the leading world universities today have rejected the findings of the Jesus Seminar. The Seminar group does not even represent mainstream scholarship. Nor does it possess the monopoly on “scholarship” as they would have the general public believe.

Dr Veitch would have us believe that he is a “free thinker” and that his understanding of the Christian message and its origins is superior to that taught by the Apostles and Church Fathers and throughout almost 2000 years of Church history. In recent years he has crept from behind the shadows cast by his mentor, Emeritus Professor Lloyd Geering, former Chairperson of the Department of Religious Studies at Victoria University, to publicly deliver his recipe on the ‘real meaning’ of the Christian message. He tries to convince his hearers that the mainline churches have been remiss in holding back from their laity (that ever decreasing number of the faithful who warm the pews) the true facts of modern scholarship relating to the person and work of Christ and the origins of Christianity. He assumes that there is a sort of conspiracy afoot to withhold from the faithful the findings of true “scholarship”, such as those of the Jesus Seminar.

In a booklet entitled *The Birth of Jesus: History or Myth?* published by St Andrew’s Trust, Wellington in 1997, Veitch sets out to advance a case for a reinterpretation of the Gospel narratives dealing with the birth of Jesus, the origins of Christianity, Christology and the authorship and dating of the Gospels. The text of his booklet is based on a lecture he delivered at St Andrews on the Terrace on November 28, 1996, a lecture well-publicised by the dotting media, including front page coverage by the *Evening Post*. The text of the booklet is buttressed by an array of footnotes to give it, as Dr G.H. Duggan, a contributor to this issue

[Dr Veitch’s booklet *The Birth of Jesus : History or Myth*] “is incredibly shoddy. It abounds in categorical statements about the New Testament books and the history of the early Church, many of which are not merely doubtful but demonstrably false.... If this booklet by a Senior Lecturer in Victoria University, is an indication of the level of thinking that prevails in that institution of higher learning, then God help us all.” Dr G.H. Duggan SM.

of *Apologia*, argues, “the semblance of a scholarly work”. In fact its publication was delayed for many months so that this ‘needful’ buttressing could be completed, to add ‘weight’ to a series of controversial assertions unsupported by any documentation in his lecture. Dr Arnold Fruchtenbaum, another contributor to *Apologia*, notes that:

“While the author certainly has many footnotes in his articles, a survey of what he quotes shows a lack of quotation from actual original historical documents and a heavy reliance on writings by other liberal theologians, accepting their conclusions as pretty well verbally inspired. At the same time, there is a simple dismissal of the testimony of the Gospels without feeling any need to substantiate such dismissal.”

In other words Veitch has a mindset dominated and encrusted with the presuppositions of his fellow liberals. His dismissal of the historicity and reliability of the Gospel accounts themselves, despite independent verification from other literary sources, archaeology and other lines of research, would appear to demonstrate his lack of critical and balanced scholarship. Dr Duggan concludes his critique by stating:

“...[Veitch’s booklet] is incredibly shoddy. It abounds in categorical statements about the New Testament books and the history of the early Church, many of which are not merely doubtful but demonstrably false....If this booklet by a Senior Lecturer in Victoria University is an indication of the level of thinking that prevails in that institution of higher learning, then God help us

all”.

Our purpose in putting together this issue of *Apologia* dealing with Rev. Dr Jim Veitch’s booklet is to address some of the many errors of fact, faulty presuppositions, flawed reasoning and unscholarly conclusions it contains. Dr Veitch has stated publicly that he values critical thinking. We have shown that his case is far from conclusive. In our view he has advanced a case which makes his position as an ordained minister within the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa/New Zealand quite untenable.

On a positive note, the article in this volume by Dr Stephen J. Scott-Pearson, taken from an address given to our Society at our 1996 AGM, provides a clear account of the doctrines of the Bodily Resurrection and Ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ.

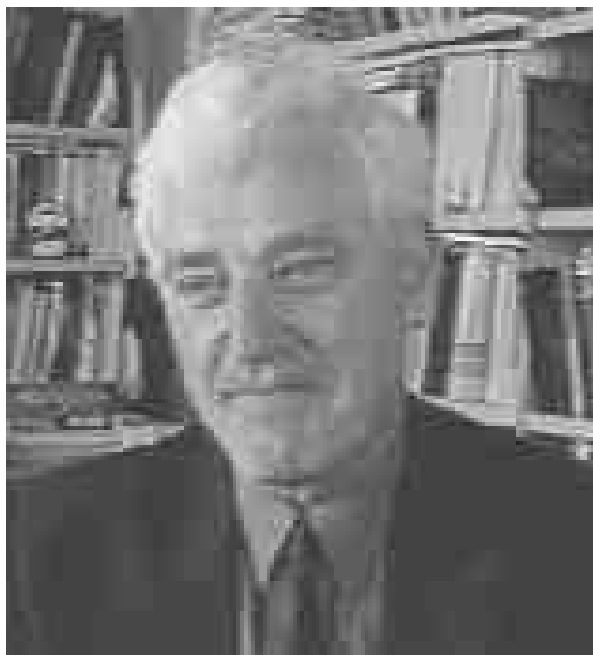
The Editorial Committee wishes to sincerely thank all those authors who have made contributions of articles to this issue of *Apologia* for 2000.

David H. Lane

Editor

SPECIAL NOTE : No issues of *Apologia* were published in 1998 or 1999.

Who is *Rev. Dr James Veitch*?



Rev. Dr James Veitch (Photo : Courtesy of Holmes Show, TV1)

(I) Introduction

Rev Dr James Veitch (1940 -) was born in Christchurch and grew up in Oamaru, North Otago. After attending Waitaki Boys High School, he went to Otago University, Dunedin, where he graduated with a BA in Hebrew. He then studied for the ministry of the Presbyterian Church at the Theological Hall, Knox College, Dunedin, completing a BD at the same time. He was the first student to complete a MTh at the University of Otago for a thesis he wrote on Revelation and Old Testament. It was prepared under the supervision of Lloyd Geering, who was tried about this time for heresy before the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, for denying the doctrine of the bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Veitch travelled overseas and studied at the University of Birmingham where he gained his PhD under the supervision of Dr Ninian Smart. His thesis was entitled "Christianity, India and the Problem of Revelation: A Contribution to a Theology of Religions". In parallel to doctoral studies, he studied for over three years at the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham (now a constituent part of the university), taking courses on various aspects of Islam, Judaism, Primal Religions and Mission History.

Following university studies, Dr Veitch taught Biblical Studies and Asian Religions for five and a half years at the Theological College for Eastern Indonesia in Ujung Pandang (Makasar) on the island of Sulawesi (Celebes). He also served as academic Dean for a college.

He then taught Asian Religions at Trinity Theological College, Singapore, where for a time he was Director of the Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, centred at the College. Since 1978 he has been lecturing on Religious Studies at the Victoria University of Wellington and was Chairman of Department from 1986–1994. He is currently Associate Professor in the Department of World Religions, Victoria University.

As an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church, Rev. James Veitch has served as parish minister for more than twenty years. During the mid-1980s he took time off from teaching to help establish the Council for Mission and Ecumenical Cooperation of the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches of New Zealand. In 1998 he was granted a ThD from the Australian College of Theology. He is currently a "Minister Within the Bounds" within the Presbytery of the Wairarapa. He is married to Jan and has three daughters.

He is perhaps best known to New Zealanders as an occasional contributor to religion programmes on National Radio and as a presenter of TVNZ's Credo programme in the mid-80s. Unlike his mentor, Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies (Victoria University), Lloyd Geering, who has been a household name since the 1960s, Dr Veitch is not well-known to the New Zealand public, either as an author or public lecturer. He is author of only two books, both self-published by Colcom Press (see Appendix A page 48), a small press recently relocated from Red Beach, Orewa, to 20 Tui Grove, Pahia, in the Bay of Islands.

These books are -

- *Jesus of Galilee: Myth and Reality, a translation with introductions to the Five Gospels of the New Testament*, (Red Beach, Orewa, NZ: Colcom Press, 1994).
- *The New Testament in modern translation arranged in chronological order*, 4 volumes (in five), (Red Beach, Orewa, NZ: Colcom Press, 1994–1995). [I. The origins of Christianity and the letters of St Paul. II. Searching for identity and founding the Church. III. Part 1. Christianity at the crossroads. Part 2. The radical and the revolutionary. IV. Faith for a new age].

While the latter four volume work is entitled a "modern translation," as Ian Harris has pointed out in his review of the first volume:

"It is more than a translation: it is a running interpretation, with two aims in view. One is to prune away the jargon and religiosity of many earlier translations in order to make the intent immediately clear, the other is to publish the New Testament in the order in which the books were written (which is quite different from their order in the traditional Bible)" (*Dominion*, Jan. 22, 1994).

In his work *Jesus of Galilee: Myth and Reality* Dr Veitch states:

“It is no longer appropriate for preachers to interpret texts in the gospels as if they are eye witness accounts of what happened in the life of Jesus or first-hand records of words and stories spoken by the historical Jesus.”

Dr Veitch has edited three books:

- *Faith in an age of turmoil: essays in honour of Lloyd Geering* [Festschrift] (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1990; London: Oriental University Press, 1990). [Dr Veitch contributed Chapter 17 entitled “The Lloyd Geering Story: A Biographical Essay” (pp. 221-240)].
- *In search of truth! Frank Nichol. Church theologian: a tribute to the man and his influence in the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa/New Zealand and the wider Christian community* (Wellington, NZ: Endeavour Press, 1994).
- *Can humanity survive? the world’s religions and the environment*, (Newmarket, Auckland: Awareness Book Co., 1996). (Dr Veitch contributed about 35 pages to this 310 page work [“The Environmental Context” pp. 1-9; “Jainism: A Religion of Ecology, pp. 41-49; ”African Religions: The Wisdom of Mother Africa," pp. 217-226; and “Humanity can survive if ...” pp. 289-297]).

Dr Veitch has edited, co-edited and authored a number of small booklets and papers on various topics, including:

- *Disarmament: a Christian comment* (A response to the NZ Government’s Green paper “Disarmament and arms control” [April 1978]) (Published by the International Relations Committee of the Presbyterian Church of NZ, 1978).
- *The heritage of Christian thought: an introduction to some of its influential thinkers*, edited by Gordon Harper and James Veitch (Victoria University Tertiary Christian Studies Programme, 1979).
- *Religion in New Zealand: Christians in public planning*, edited by Christopher Nichol and James Veitch (Victoria University Studies Programme, 1981).
- *A church in mid-life crisis: the debate of 1966-1970*. Dunedin, N.Z. (Issued in series: Annual lecture delivered in Christchurch in 1983 [Presbyterian Historical Society of New Zealand, 1984]).
- *New light on the New Testament: an introduction to some recent developments in New Testament study*, James Veitch and Watson Rosevear. Edited by Christopher Nichol (Tertiary Christian Studies Programme of the Combined Chaplaincies and the Religious Studies Department, Victoria University, 1984).
- *Earthing our faith in the 21st century*, Ian Harris. And *The church and the new era*, James Veitch (Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, 1989).

- *The great sin of John Gibson: the story of the 1908 heresy trial in the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand* (Issued in series: Annual lecture [Presbyterian Historical Society of New Zealand, 1989]).
- "Religion: The Future of religions", *Future Times*, (Autumn 1989): 8-9.
- “The Making of a Myth: The Case of Judas Iscariot and the Rise of Anti-Semitism,” *Asian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 10.2, 1966, pp. 363-376.
- James Veitch, “1961-1990 Towards the Church for a New Era,” pp. 144-182 in *Presbyterians in Aotearoa 1840-1990* edited by Dennis McEldowney (Wellington: The Presbyterian Church of NZ, 1990).
- “Judas Iscariot: The Dark Shadow on Jesus The Galilean,” in James Veitch (Ed.), *To Strive and Not to Yield: Essays in Honour of Colin Brown*, (Wellington, Victoria University, 1992), pp. 87-101.
- *“Fundamentalism and the Presbyterian experience in ‘Be ye separate’: fundamentalism and the New Zealand experience,”* Waikato Studies in Religion, Vol. 3 (1992): 24-45.
- James Veitch, “Fundamentalism and the New Zealand Experience,” in Bryan Gilling (ed.) *‘Be Ye Separate’: Fundamentalism and the New Zealand Experience*, Red Beach, Colcom Press, 1992, pp. 24-45.
- "James Moffat and the case for an historical New Testament", *Stimulus: the New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice*. 2(4): 6-11 (November 1994).
- *“Christianity: Protestants since the 1960s in Religions of New Zealanders,”* (Victoria University-Dept of Religious Studies, 1995): 90-103.
- *The birth of Jesus: history or myth?* (Wellington, NZ: St Andrew’s Trust for the Study of Religion & Society, 1997). [Based on a lecture given by the author for the Trust on November 28, 1996 at St Andrews on the Terrace].
- "James Moffat: his legacy for New Testament studies", *Colloquium*, 28(2):68-81 (November 1996).
- "Searching for Jesus", *Stimulus: the New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice*. 4(4):2-8 (November 1996).

Dr Veitch was appointed Begg Travelling Scholar by the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand in 1966. In the summer of 1997 he was appointed Distinguished Visiting Preacher, St. Michael’s Uniting Church Melbourne, Australia and in 1991 he was appointed Reid Visiting lecturer, Westminster College, Cambridge (UK) and an Associate of the College 1990–1991. He is currently a Fellow of the Jesus Seminar and was awarded the D. F. Strauss medal, Westar Institute, for 1999. He is Editor of the Fourth R, Westar Institute 1999– .

(II) Carrying the liberal banner of his mentor Lloyd Geering

Challenging the faith

Prepared by Bob Shaw (Reprinted from the *Evening Post*, April 11, 1998).

Jesus Christ, who is still able to shock and challenge after 2000 years, remains an enigma for many. This Easter thousands of New Zealanders will commemorate his death and celebrate the resurrection (when Christ, according to the Bible, rose from the dead).

Thousands more will ignore him.

Even his own followers in first-century Judea found this Jesus of Nazareth mysterious and fled ignominiously when he was arrested and crucified.

But after his resurrection they were transformed, willing to give their lives for a man whom the Apostle Paul called the Son of God.

Jesus of Nazareth had become the Christ, or the anointed one of God. The movement called Christianity began the explosive expansion that was to see it become the largest of the world's religions.

It also spawned a culture that has been handed down through the generations and is deeply embedded in Western civilisation.

Traditional Christianity is a belief system which points to the transcendent reality of a God who can be seen only through the eyes of faith. According to this faith, Jesus, through the power of God, is a divine saviour and an abiding presence in the lives of believers.

Such a tradition inevitably clashes with modern materialism and its emphasis on careful weighing of scientific evidence.

As the scientific revolution gathered pace, liberal theologians began to question cherished beliefs and built up an alternative way of looking at Jesus. They claimed that in the light of the huge changes in knowledge, biblical scholarship and culture during the past 400 years a core belief such as the bodily resurrection of Jesus was no longer tenable.

In New Zealand, this clash between traditionalists and liberals came to a head in 1967 when Professor Lloyd Geering, then principal of the Presbyterian Church's theological hall in Dunedin, was tried for heresy. The charges were laid after Geering challenged two central tenets of Christianity: the bodily resurrection of Christ, and the belief that man has an immortal soul.

He was cleared of the charges. The Presbyterian General Assembly - the Church's governing body - upheld his right to hold alternative views about the resurrection and immortality.

From 1971-84 Geering was head of religious studies at Victoria University in Wellington. Through his writings and his lectures at St Andrew's on the Terrace, he has become the country's foremost proponent of liberal theology.

Helping carry the liberal banner is Dr Jim Veitch, senior religious studies lecturer at Victoria University and, like Geering, a Presbyterian minister.

Veitch caused a stir in 1996 when he said Jesus was not the Son of God but created to be divine by the Church. Last month, further controversy arose when he said that according to modern scholars no more than about 18 percent of the sayings and 16 percent of the actions attributed to Jesus in the New Testament Gospels were derived from the historical person.

Jesus was a wise man, not a saviour figure, according to Veitch.

"We're discovering the metaphorical value of much of the storytelling about Jesus in the Gospels," he said.

The elders and members of Naenae Gospel Hall were so incensed at these comments that they paid for a disclaimer to be run in *The Post*.

"This is intellectual snobbery fantasy," they said. "Amazingly, Dr Veitch, his associate Dr L. Geering and others of the New Age heresy, claim better knowledgeability 2000 years later than the New Testament writers who personally associated with Christ ..."

They dissociated themselves from *The Post* report and the pre-Easter lectures held by Veitch at St Andrew's on The Terrace.

In a more measured response, Associate Professor Paul Trebilco of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Otago University, said the case for wholesale creation of sayings by the early Church, as Veitch proposed, was far from proved.

"Further, the criteria often used to try and determine which sayings are authentic are dubious".

Many reputable scholars argue that the account by the Gospels of Jesus' words and deeds is reliable, Trebilco says.

"The fact that the Gospel writers see such profound meaning in Jesus' life, death and resurrection, has not led them to play fast and loose with history".

On the question of the resurrection, Trebilco says alternative explanations of what happened were far harder to accept than the stories that the evangelists gave of the empty tomb, and of the appearance of the risen Jesus.

For example, some sort of hallucination - one theory for sightings of Jesus following his death - did not explain why the early Christians proclaimed Jesus as Messiah, and why they believed the new period of salvation had begun.

“Nothing short of bodily resurrection of Jesus is required to explain these beliefs of early Christians,” Trebilco says.

Veitch is active as a minister in a local parish. “I go to church every Sunday.”

His Jesus is the man who put a human face on God. Veitch regards the word God as a metaphor for the sum total of the best values to which human beings have aspired.

“I’m not talking about a being who is in another reality outside the cosmos, but of a God who is a reality within human experience.”

Asked whether he believed in life after death, Veitch says: “Death appears to be the end but there may be surprises. Why should death close off all the options?”

His views have changed over the years. “When I wanted to become a minister in the early 1960s I was an innocent literalist. My theological education exposed me to other possibilities.”

At the cutting edge of change in the Church, he says he stands within a solid scholarly tradition that stems from the Reformation.

“The essence of being human is to keep probing and journeying ... I’m addressing issues faced by people who have left the Church because they think Christianity no longer has any relevance,” he says.

He says the Christmas stories are myths but his faith is still strong

“Breaking the Faith”

by Giles Wilson
Republished from the *Dominion*
7 December 1996, p. 18.

The fervent teenager James Veitch, armed with a Bible and the power of the Holy Spirit, would probably have denounced the liberal views of the white-haired 56-year-old lecturer he has become.

Conservative, almost fundamentalist, in his beliefs, he decided at 17 to become a minister and went to university to study Greek and Hebrew. For someone who hadn’t even learnt French, this was no mean feat, but he had been converted at 12 at a Christian youth camp in Wanaka and knew God had work for him.

He feels he’s been doing that work ever since, though many churchgoers would disagree. At St Andrews on the Terrace in Wellington last week, Dr Veitch said that the Christmas stories were myths. His belief that the divinity of Jesus was created by the early church has aroused the ire of the faithful.

How can someone who does not believe Jesus was the son [sic] of God call himself a Christian, they are asking.

Robin Corner, who stood as the Christian Coalition

candidate in Wellington Central, even called for the Presbyterians to sack him as a minister.

Angry letters have flooded into Dr Veitch’s Victoria University office which towers with tottering piles of learned volumes. Among the usual kind, which promise “God will smite you”, he has even received one from a fellow academic at another university which says: “For my part, I’d welcome your departure from the Presbyterian church ... I do not know why doubters like you remain in the Christian church.”

He is used to such letters. When he presented TVNZ’s *Credo* programme in the mid-80s they went with the territory. He remembers standing in the kitchen at home, tears rolling down his cheeks, having had dozens of letters promising God’s wrath on him.

It would have been enough to turn many away from the church. So what changed Dr Veitch so drastically? Even studying under controversial liberal theologian Lloyd Geering, who would later be tried for heresy by the Presbyterian Church for his belief that Jesus’s resurrection was spiritual, not physical, did not quash his evangelical tendencies. Dr Veitch still argued that the literal interpretation was the correct way to read the Bible.

He did a master’s degree under Geering in 1966, the year before the trial. During the trial - on which Veitch is to publish a book next year - he was studying in England, all the time being exposed to new ways of thinking, having moved there with his wife Jan.

“I wasn’t too liberal. I was a bit cautious about it all. But I like Lloyd [Geering] as a person. I was immensely impressed with him as a teacher and I had a lot of respect for him. He didn’t roll me because I had a different view, he just taught me to sort out why I had a different view, and to do my research.”

It is a lesson Dr Veitch says he learnt well, priding himself on not being the kind of person who shoots from the hip. Everything he has said, the controversial statements in particular, are, he says, the result of thorough research and long pondering. He published his own translation of the New Testament in 1994.

He believes Geering’s acquittal, far from being a victory for the liberal wing of the church, was a disaster and that liberals had shot themselves in both feet by trying to accommodate the conservative view.

After England, still an idealist, he wanted to be a missionary in India, but he ended up in Indonesia where he encountered the influences which changed his life. Studying and living alongside Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism made him aware of parallels with Christianity. “I started to rethink,” he says. “When the call of the minaret is bellowing in your ear five times a day, you can’t help but think about things.”

He began to realise that the divinity of Jesus had been used to give Christianity the necessary authority to make it the religion of the Roman empire. In a world where the emperors were routinely thought of as divine,

how could Christ have been anything else?

“If we have to accept that the divinity of Jesus was a metaphor for how close this guy was to God, how much of God seemed to peek through unambiguously in what he did, that’s fine.”

“But Jesus was a *real human being*. No messing around with that.”

He adds. “We actually live in a very different age from the one that produced all these beliefs that we went around with. That is what I think has caused the alienation of people born before the 1960s, who didn’t really think much about it, from post-60s people who think a lot about the world we live in. I want to rethink things so that it intersects with people in this modern era.” That rethinking will take another 100 years, he says. It will develop a faith that values stories for what they are but not intellectually defend what it holds to be true.”

“These are amazing times,” he enthuses with an excited smile and a glint of the eye.

He is not the Scrooge some would paint him as. He loves Christmas, even if it is a myth. “Hearing at midnight that God came down from heaven to earth, sung by a single voice in a packed cathedral with the candles flickering ... if you don’t have tingles running up and down your spine, there’s something wrong with you.”

“That’s what Christmas is all about. At least for an hour you’ve got the chance to believe we can change and hold the world together... ”

With his congregation at St Anselm’s in Karori he has made some wonderful discoveries about Christianity, he says. Some of which have even prompted members of the congregation to take issue with him during his sermon.

Confessional prayers have been dropped for instance. “People get treated as ants in the Christian tradition. They get battered around. That’s not the way it was meant to be. You’re not meant to go limping around trying to pretend that by doing it you’re going to get lifted up by God,” he says.

And he has more in the way of radical thinking up his sleeve. He views the Eucharist more as a celebration of life than of Christ’s sacrifice.

The wine of the Last Supper was probably inspired by Jesus picking up his glass, clanking it with his friends’ glasses, saying “Let’s drink to life.”

Dr Veitch clearly believes rethinking can eventually do something to halt the decline in the church. While he doubts there would be another heresy trial, he admits there could be a mood for it. “I never throw stones at the evangelical side of the church. I came from that side.

But I must admit the conservative side is not always as accommodating as it could be.

“The reality is that we have fewer bums on pews. People are not impressed with the church, its intellectual credibility has been seriously undermined, and it has failed to respond positively.”

“I think we’re facing a major critical point where some of us have to rethink and see where we get. Hopefully we won’t get torpedoed too badly by the rest of the Christian community.”

(III) The Gospel According to the Rev. Dr James Veitch¹

It has apparently become customary each Easter for apostles of the Gospel according to the Jesus Seminar to go to air publicly with their message of unbelief.

In New Zealand, just as we anticipate at the beginning of each ski season a spewing forth of volcanic ash and cloud that besmirch the freshly covered snowfields, so we have come to expect each Easter a similar eruption, religiously speaking, from the Rev. Dr. James Veitch, as Easter approaches, and the Christian message fills the thoughts of people with faith and hope.

This Good Friday was no exception. This was really the only ‘religious’ reminder this year by TV1 programming that Good Friday is in any way significant in the calendar.

Not only is Dr. Veitch a lecturer in religious studies at Victoria University but also a Presbyterian minister in good standing in Wairarapa Union District Council, and has been pulpit supply for Martinborough Co-operating Parish.

Included here is what Dr. Veitch had to say on Good Friday, April 10, 1998, as he interacted with the Holmes Programme fronted by Susan Woods and Mark Sainsbury as the interviewer.

Susan Woods:

“Tonight on Holmes an academic who claims Easter is a myth, the resurrection of Christ is a fabrication, 80 per cent of the New Testament simply is not true. He and a team of Christian scholars challenge the very foundations of Christianity....

“For many, Easter means chocolate, hot-cross buns, holidays, and a chance for time-out. But for Christians it’s also about celebrating the Resurrection of Christ. Even non-believers acknowledge that’s what it’s about. Ironic therefore that on Easter this year a group of scholars are telling us it never happened. That’s right! Jesus never came back. The concept of Christ rising from the dead as seen by his disciples is a myth. Who is saying this? Not the atheists, but clergymen and academics - Christians who reckon the intellectual base of Christianity is crumbling. That much of what we

¹ Introduction republished with permission from the *Evangelical Presbyterian* 48/2 (1998) 30-34. Transcript has been edited to highlight only those questions put to Rev. Dr James Veitch and his answers.

have been led to accept as fact in the New Testament just doesn't stack up."

"The claim has come from an American based group - Jesus Seminar. One of the members, Dr. Jim Veitch, lives in Wellington and lectures in religious studies at Victoria University no less.

Mark Sainsbury with the story ...

Mark Sainsbury:

General comment - "All round the country many Christians have been preparing for Easter.... through song and drama recounting what many took quite literally as gospel"

Dr Veitch:

As a taped statement made by him, is introduced here

"Jesus was not raised or did not appear bodily after his death."

Mark Sainsbury:

General comment - "But what would have been considered heresy not long ago is coming from those who love Jesus. Influential scholars involved in an American group called the Jesus Seminar who argue most of the Bible is simply not historically true."

Dr Veitch:

"How much of the real Jesus is in it? I think very little of the real Jesus is in it."

Mark Sainsbury:

General comment - "Why the Bible departs from reality, say the scholars, is packaging. We're used to Easter being packaged for consumers. But the market for the first published gospels was a dominant culture at the time - Greek! In fact there were big differences between the Hebrew version of the Gospel and the one we inherited, the Greek version.

Dr Veitch:

"They used myths, they used legends, they used the style of writing at the times. There's not a question of whether something is right or whether something is wrong, it's how you actually convey something: how do you package it? In the Saatchi and Saatchi technique: How do you package this stuff - to the environment in which people are facing? And so Jesus was actually packaged to the Jewish community first and then to the Greek community. And he was packaged very differently in both communities. And it so happens the Western world has really taken the Greek community packaging and made it the basis for its life. And it's that which is unravelling."

Mark Sainsbury:

General comment -

"And what that undermines goes to the heart of much Christian belief - Easter"

And then as a question to Veitch - "What sort of things would you look at as packaging that may not have, in hindsight, and may not necessarily, be historically true?"

Dr Veitch:

"The bodily resurrection of Jesus I think. Packaged in that time in the Greek and not in a Jewish environment, because that wouldn't work. But in a Greek environment - that would work. Because here you have a world full of Greek goddesses and gods and spirits and you have the story of a rising dying god who is really the god of the universe who was actually incarnated in this man and the world killed him, but he came back to life again and confirmed all the things that he stood for. That's the kind of things that evidently grabbed people's attention."

Mark Sainsbury:

"Are you saying the resurrection of Jesus is not necessarily historically accurate?"

Dr Veitch:

"That's true!"

Mark Sainsbury:

"What is there in the Bible you can say 'Yes, you can rest assured that bit's okay'?"

Dr Veitch:

"He was really crucified, this Jesus of Galilee. He was crucified and that was one of the most horrific things that can happen to anybody."

Mark Sainsbury:

A general question - "So how can a Christian undermine such fundamental beliefs?"

Dr Veitch:

"Most people have realised that it can't be basically correct - to use your words. And that's why there's been such huge defections from Christianity. I think more people now leave the church on a given Sunday forever than ever join it, world-wide. And those are the statistics that has been plotted for all this decade. And it's quite alarming. Why do people leave? It's because the intellectual structure of Christianity is [sic] really gone down the gurgler."

Mark Sainsbury:

In general - "As the debate over God and reality continues, Jim Veitch believes there's a shift away from what Jesus did or said."

Dr Veitch:

"Gradually there's a move away from that to emphasise the man himself and his holiness or his close relationship with God and out of that is born the kind of ideas that really make Christianity the greatest world religion that we've seen."

Susan Woods in conclusion

"And later this year one of the foremost theologians involved in the Jesus Seminar is visiting this country. We will be talking to Robert Funk about the latest developments in this controversial debate when he arrives in New Zealand." [Editor's note: Dr Robert Funk visited NZ from the end of August to the middle of September 1998].

Anyone for honesty at Christmas?

Originally written for broadcast by the BBC world service.

Republished from *The Evening Post*,

December 24, 1998.

By James Veitch.

How honest should the church be at Christmas? For that matter how honest should the clergy be? But wait a minute. It doesn't hurt to make it to church on Christmas Eve or the next morning. We all know that Christmas is a time for celebrating, partying, lavish spending, lots of presents and a few fibs here and there. So why rock the boat with all this talk of honesty?

Churches are all hustle and bustle transformed with coloured lights, tinsel-covered fir trees and ornate nativity scenes.

The best silver is on display. The clergy and choir are resplendent in their robes. The music is awesome for a change, replacing the dirge of canticle, psalm and hymn. It is a time to be merry - in a sober and proper way. The soft, gentle, intimate words of the birth stories fan generous and warm fuzzies in the hearts of young and old. A baby is born, all is well in the universe.

The truth? Honesty? Forget it! It's Christmas.

Christmas, if the church is to be believed, is about God turning the world into a spectacular theatre and creating an epic drama. It's about angels visiting women with names like Mary and Elizabeth and appearing in dreams to chaps like Zecharia and Joseph. It's about cosmic angel choirs hovering over the Earth. It's about startled shepherds, one minute freezing in the night air and the next galvanised into becoming evangelists for the greatest story ever told:

"God is here," they shout as they sprint excitedly towards Bethlehem.

It's about poverty stricken pious teenage Mary clutching a radiantly divine newborn babe to her breast with a baffled if not embarrassed Joseph standing by. It's about a special birth in the smelly basement of a hostelry, a feed-box for a bassinet and animals for an audience. It's about angels moving in and out of history weaving a story scripted by the Creator before the cosmos and the world began.

Thus, says the church, is what Christmas is all about.

"Joy to the world, the Lord is come," wrote Isaac Watts.

"O come and adore him," urges the choir.

An unbeatable story for action, drama and brilliance. It's sheer poetry! Leave the myth alone! It

has a magic all of its own and, God help us, the world needs that magic for a night and a few bonus hours next day. The world is desperate for a gripping fairy tale to keep it from falling over the cosmic cliff into the bottomless abyss of chaos!

But that's the problem. Christmas is just that: a dramatic fairy story - at least the way it is celebrated today. The baby conceived by God in the womb of the teenage Mary is born king for a day, only to be killed the next (in divine time) to become saviour of the world!

The church's Jesus, often confused the world over with Santa Claus, is the main actor in a fairy tale drama. Most festive churchgoers, however, never get past the pantomime and don't have a hope of hearing what's really important - the wisdom of the man, Jesus.

That's not the way it was in the first century and for quite some time thereafter. Those early Christians did not have birth stories for their hero until around 90 AD. Birth stories in the Gospel of Matthew were put there by Jewish Christians, to let Jews know that Jesus was greater than all the great heroes of Jewish faith and history. The stories were scripted in because there were points to be scored.

The writer of the Gospel of Luke (95AD), without any knowledge of Matthew, used a similar technique to tell Greeks and Romans that Jesus was of greater rank and significance than the Emperors. It was a case of our Jesus is better than your Emperor! Both sets of birth stories are incompatible and point in very different directions. The accounts are actually not about events that really happened: they are fiction in the best sense of the word.

Neither Mark, the first gospel to appear (around 75 AD), nor John, the last gospel in the New Testament (100-120), contain birth stories - an omission which suggests the actual circumstances of the birth of Jesus are missing.

It was actually in the sixth century that Dionysius Exiguus, now famous for creating the Christian millennium, turned the church's attention away from gazing at the crucifixion to pondering the birth of its victim.

The church then lost its way and allowed the story of Jesus to be increasingly corrupted and distorted. He is well past his use-by date as the babe of Bethlehem.

It is time to rescue the figure of Jesus from the cradle of the fairy tale world of Santa. Isn't it time to tell the truth about his birth? To be honest about whom he was ... and is?

Christmas as we now celebrate it in the church is nothing at all like it was in the first century. So who's for honesty this Christmas?

In Critique of “The Birth of Jesus: History or Myth?” by James Veitch

By **Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum Th.M., Ph.D.**

President, Ariel Ministries,

Tustin, California.



Dr. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum

If one wishes to have an example of a very theologically liberal perspective on Jesus and the Gospels and an example of how to rewrite history based upon presuppositionalism rather than hard core evidence, this booklet would be a good example to use. While the author certainly has many footnotes in his articles, a survey of what he quotes shows a lack of quotation from actual original historical documents and a heavy reliance on writings by other liberal theologians accepting their conclusions as pretty well verbally inspired. At the same time, there is a simple dismissal of the testimony of the Gospels without feeling any need to substantiate such dismissal.

Up front, we should note that the author writes his article with certain presuppositions that he accepts as fact. He does not believe that the Gospels were written as eyewitness accounts. It should be noted that this is merely an assumption on his part since he does not produce clear evidence that they were not written by the ones they claimed to have been written by. No such proof is put forward unless one simply accepts his quotations of other liberal theologians as having substantiated that fact but this will not do. Another presupposition the author makes is that the Gospels were written quite late, at least sixty years or more after the events. Again, no facts or documentation are presented to substantiate this presupposition. Here

again, the author merely quotes conclusions of other liberal theologians without questioning their validity. What the author totally ignores is the substantial apologetics written by more conservative theologians and he totally ignores the evidences they have presented for the authenticity of the Gospel accounts. So it must be noted up front that the author writes his articles presupposing that the Gospel accounts cannot be accepted at face value and are nothing more but propaganda tractates by those with vested interest in re-writing the life story of Jesus. But on this basic faulty presupposition, the author of the article writes his own revision of the life of Jesus and we are asked to believe him because he says so and a true “scholar” certainly would not question those presuppositions.

One more thing should be stated up front. He defines “history” as “an account of something that actually happened as it is reported and interpreted by participants and/or observers.” On the other hand, he defines “myth” as any “story, oral in origin, which does not appear to have a basis which can be checked, and where central figures are ‘superhuman’ or ‘divine’ beings” (p. 27). Now these are his own definitions and it should be stated that the author assumes that the Gospel accounts are not “history” as he defines it, i.e. they are not eyewitness accounts. Therefore, the Gospel stories are only “myths,” in that these are merely oral stories that were embellished and elevated in which the figure becomes “supernatural” or “divine,” but these stories have no basis in fact. To this author, the four Gospels are myths and not histories.

On the “history” aspect, although the Gospel writers claim to be eyewitnesses (except for Luke who states that he used eyewitness accounts), the author assumes they were simply lying and were not really eyewitnesses. What is the evidence and documentation for such a conclusion? It should be noted that looking up every reference in his footnotes will not show that he has produced any such evidence. He is merely going along with the liberal flow and what is popular to believe today in his particular circle.

Concerning the myth facet, the writer has clearly used this term to slant the mindset against the authenticity of the Gospels. If a myth is merely oral tradition that focuses on a divine being, any account of a divine being has to end up being a myth. One should not miss his circular reasoning here. A myth elevates a normal person to a divine being. If a story contains a supernatural divine being it is, therefore, a myth. The

Gospels present Jesus as a supernatural and divine being. Therefore, the Gospels must be myths. But this is pure circular reasoning. What if it is true that God became a man in the Person of the Messiah Jesus of Nazareth? If this is true, how should it be reported? It should be reported exactly as it was and that will render it history. In other words, the story of a supernatural being by itself would not render the account mythological. If something like that really did happen, it would therefore qualify as historical. To say that we cannot have a story of a supernatural being as being pure history is also pure presuppositionalism.

As to the story being “oral in origin,” one can readily concede that the original Gospel stories were oral in origin and certainly the preaching recounted in the Book of Acts preceded the actual writing of some of these accounts. But is that not true of all histories? Do not all histories begin oral and then are written down? Certainly the great Battles of Gettysburg or Gallipoli were first recounted orally by eyewitness accounts and then written down by historians. Yet no one I know of claims that the Battles of Gettysburg or Gallipoli were pure mythology and not history. To say the same thing could not be true of the Gospel accounts is to use a double standard in evaluating history.

So much for some general observations about the article. I would like now to address some specific points raised in the article. Certainly it is impossible for me to deal with every point he raises that needs to be challenged since that would make this article much too long. But I think certain points should be addressed, if for no other reason than to show the measure of presuppositionalism and revisionism being used by the author, not based on primary sources, but rather based upon the assumptions and presuppositions of liberal theology being true and, therefore, no one should question it.

On page five, the author presents what is now a cherished article of faith in such theological circles: That Jesus was basically a good Jew who did His best to try to present God to His contemporaries, but then Paul came along and created a religion out of Jesus and Jesus who “had spoken about God” now “became identified with God.” His point is that Jesus was upgraded to divinity by His followers, especially by the Apostle Paul, although He Himself never claimed to be God. Using the author’s own terminology, is this “history” or “myth”? If history is the relating of accounts by witnesses, where are his eyewitness accounts that Jesus did not claim to be God and that only His followers claimed that title for Him? On the contrary, the Gospels quote Jesus as claiming divine authority so that

whatever His disciples said of Him was only repeating what He Himself claimed for Himself. In other words, the teaching that Jesus did not claim to be God, but His followers turned Him into God, is itself the myth because such a deduction has no basis in actual historical documentation.

As the Gospel accounts relate the story, Jesus many times claimed to be God and was so understood by His Jewish contemporaries. In John 5:18 His Jewish contemporaries sought to kill Him because He claimed to be “equal with God.” In John 10:33, His Jewish contemporaries tried to stone Him because He actually claimed to be God Himself. In other words, the author’s claim that Jesus was merely a “Galilean Jew who gave the religion its birth with his storytelling about God...” and “who was trying to live out his faith to the point of his own death...” simply does not square with the actual eyewitness accounts. So who is being mythological here? Certainly the storytelling of Jesus to give God “a human face” would not have brought about His execution. Storytelling was not unique to Jesus but was the common *modus operandi* of rabbinical teaching in the first century Israel. It was not storytelling about God that brought about His execution. The animosity that arose from the Jewish leaders had to be based on more than just that. Certainly His claim to be the Messianic God-Man would have created that kind of a stir, and that is exactly what the Gospel accounts tell us happened. Although the author tries to make the Gospels very late documents, even the latest date he ascribes to them is much older than the conclusions of his more liberal theologians whom he seems to quote rather heavily. But this is another example where his conclusions are based upon presuppositions and not based upon primary sources and the reader should be aware of that as one reads the booklet.

Dr Arnold Fruchtenbaum graduated from Cedarville College in Ohio with a B.A. in Hebrew and Greek. He moved to Israel in 1966 where he studied archaeology, ancient history, historical geography and Hebrew at the American Institute of Holy Land Studies and at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In 1971 he graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary with a M.Th. degree and gained a Ph.D. through New York University in 1989 with a ground-breaking dissertation entitled *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*.

Dr Fruchtenbaum is the author of a number of books including *Jesus Was a Jew, Hebrew Christianity: Its Theology, History and Philosophy*; *Biblical Lovemaking: A Study of the Song of Solomon*; *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*; *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*; *Hebrew Christian Passover Haggadah*, and *Messianic Christology*.

The author spends a lot of time discussing how the December 25th date for the birth of Jesus came about. I fail to see any connection between that issue and the authenticity of the Gospels as eyewitness accounts. I for one have no idea whether Jesus was really born on December 25th. I have no strong feelings one way or the other. But even accepting all of his conclusions that the December 25th date was basically an innovation by Constantine, this is a totally separate issue from His divinity for one simple reason: The Gospels nowhere state the date of the birth of Jesus. The historical narratives simply give us who was ruling where at the time, allowing us to draw a basic conclusion that He was probably born between 7-6 B.C. But there is not enough information for us to determine when during that year He was born. Furthermore, the author has not proved that Jesus was not born on December 25th. Developing the analogy of how the date

of the birth of Jesus came into being and then using that as a criteria to judge the other issues concerning Him is a non sequitor. We are not trying to defend what the Gospels do not say. The logic of the author, therefore, runs something like this: The date of the birth of Jesus as December 25th was something that was invented by the Church. As the author concludes, “Constantine gave birth to the church as we know it.” Maybe the Roman Catholic Church, but not the Church as we know it. Again, the real issue is: What do the Gospels affirm to be true? The Gospels do not claim that Jesus was born on December 25th (or January 6th). They do claim that Jesus was the God-Man. Furthermore, these are not merely in the narrative sections of the Gospels. They quote Jesus as making the very same claims as in examples noted above. So now who is being historical and who is being mythological?

The author says, “so a new mythology was created: that there was a year 1 in the Christian calendar, and this began on January 1, 754, in the Roman calendar.” Such a statement should not confuse the reader with the real issues involved which is not the exact date of Jesus’ birth but rather who He Himself claimed to be as quoted by eyewitness accounts and their writings that we have with us to this day. The exact date of the birth of Jesus may fall into the realm of mythology. It is a non sequitor to automatically claim that the same has to be true of the Messiah’s divinity. Those two issues must be separated since the Gospels do not affirm the first, but do affirm the second.

In addition to Constantine, the author gives a lot of credit to two other persons for creating Christianity as we know it: Dionysius Exiguus and Francis of Assisi. The former is credited for the December 25th date and the latter for a nativity scene which the author claims was created by Jerome, but Francis of Assisi “created a live outdoor performance with real animals and real people” (p. 9). The author accuses Francis of Assisi that “by presenting a living picture of the nativity in this way, he uncritically historicized or literalized the birth story...” (p. 10). I am not here to defend Francis of Assisi. My question is to the critic: What does he mean by “uncritically historicized and literalized...”? What would make this scene unhistorical? The Gospel accounts do emphasize that when Jesus was born He was laid in a manger. What does a manger imply? And what evidence does the author present that Jesus was not laid in a manger shortly after he was born? According to the Gospel by Luke, he got his information from eyewitness accounts. Mary would still have been living at the time of Luke’s writing. This fits within the author’s own view of “history.” Nevertheless, to the author, all of this is a myth but the author does not prove its mythological origins. Such assumptions themselves are hardly historical.

The author concludes that, “Constantine, Dionysius, Francis – each in turn created an image of Jesus which others were to develop, embellish and expand in the arts. It is through such eyes that we read the New Testament lives of Jesus” (p. 10). Is all of this really a true statement? By the time of Constantine, Dionysius and Francis, the New Testament was intact pretty much the way we have it now. Is what we know about the life

of Jesus determined by what these three created? So let us try a little exercise. Let us remove these three men and all of their innovations from our thinking. Let us not read the Gospels through their contributions, but let us read the Gospels as they are written. Taking the Gospels as they are written, what do they basically claim? The following are the basic facts: Jesus was born in Bethlehem sometime during the last years of the life of Herod the Great; He grew up in Nazareth; He was baptized by John the Baptist and proclaimed to be the Messianic Son of God; at the first Passover following that baptism He went public with His messianic claims and performed miracles to authenticate those messianic claims; during a three-year public ministry He taught in synagogues and to outdoor audiences the true character of the righteousness of God and the type of righteousness necessary for entering into the Kingdom; he claimed to be the God-man Messiah with authority to forgive sins in a salvation sense; He rejected the authority of the Pharisaic oral law as binding in the religious sphere; His rejection of their authority eventually led to the rejection of His Messiahship by the religious authorities of that day; He was arrested and tried in a Jewish court of law and condemned on the basis of blasphemy; since the Sanhedrin had no authority of capital punishment, He was turned over to the Gentile authorities and there tried on the accusation of sedition or treason against Rome; He was crucified; He rose again on the third day; He spent forty days teaching his disciples and preparing them for the mission in the Book of Acts; and when He ascended to Heaven He left the promise that He will someday return.

These are the facts as presented by the four Gospels themselves and Constantine, Dionysius and Francis have nothing to do with this. These facts were in place before these men arrived on the scene. In actual fact, take away all of the contributions made by these three men and it does not change the basic Gospel story. It certainly does not remove the claim of deity from the Messianic Person.

The circumstances of the birth of Jesus were not created by Constantine or Dionysius or Francis, nor did the claims that Jesus made for Himself originate with these men. The myth may have created a December 25th date, but the account of the miraculous Virgin Birth precedes all of that.

After asking, “What is to be made of the birth stories in Matthew and Luke and the prologue to John?”, the author engages in presuppositionalism that can only be labeled as “myth.” The claim that the Gospel of Matthew “began to circulate around sixty years after the death of Jesus” is purely suppositionalism. The author fails to interject with scholarly writings showing that Matthew was written much earlier. What should be obvious to a critical reader of this article is that he attempts to prove one presupposition by another. And starting with the assumption that what the Gospels say could not possibly be true, he creates his own scenario two thousand years after these Gospel accounts (even with his own dating) came into being. Is it really more possible to know what the real story was than people living two thousand years earlier? That could be a possibility if there was documentation to support it, but

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the fact is that there is none. So when the author states, "The story of the visit of the wise men probably owes its origin to an incident in the mid-60's when a king of an area in a part of Persia, with his entourage of officials and supporters, journeyed across the Roman Empire to surrender sovereignty to the emperor Nero," one should not miss the word "probably." What documentation is there that Matthew's Gospel took the wise men account for that incident? There is almost no similarity. One king coming from a part of Persia to surrender his kingdom to Rome hardly fits the description of the wise men (who were never said to be kings by Matthew) who came to worship the child, but they did not surrender their kingdoms to this child. The presentation sounds scholarly and the reader might be influenced by the way it is presented. But one must not be fooled by such camouflage. There simply is no sure evidence that one incident influenced the Matthew account and the relationship does not even qualify for the word "probably." Again, the author merely assumes that the Matthew account could not really have happened. But that is a presupposition, not the historically validated fact. Again, the author is more guilty than the Gospel writers of engaging in myth.

Many other examples could be noted to show how he uses unrelated historical incidents with virtually no point of similarity but tries to make them the origin for what happens in the Gospel accounts. The reader should never be afraid to ask: What is the documentation for such conclusions? And are these documents truly primary sources or merely the quoting of others who believe the same thing?

So when he accuses the Gospel of John of being "a radical reworking of early Christianity" (p. 12), one should note this to be a good example of the pot calling the kettle black. Who is it that is engaging in a "radical reworking of early Christianity"? To me, John's account is far more probable than Dr Veitch's one. In going back to the author's definition of "history," even if we assume that John was not written by the Apostle John (an assumption I do not make), the author is still much closer to the events of the time than our revisionist trying to rework the history of Jesus.

After his survey of the four Gospels, the author asks, "So what can be gleaned from 'Matthew' and 'Luke' about the actual historical circumstances of Jesus' birth? Very little." "Very little" only because the author chooses to ignore the historical sources that we do have and engages in his own "radical revision of early Christianity." He has not proven that the accounts given by Matthew and Luke are "myths." He has only assumed them to be such since his own theology needs it so desperately. On the contrary, we have more details

concerning the birth of Jesus than we have of many other accounts of famous persons such as Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar.

There are many other points I could respond to, but it is time to draw this article to an end. These examples should be sufficient to note that other issues he raises are again based upon presuppositions or a misleading account of what the Gospels actually claim. But contrary to the author's own conclusion, we know that we can draw a lot more from the birth stories than the fact that "Mary was Jesus' mother" (p. 14).

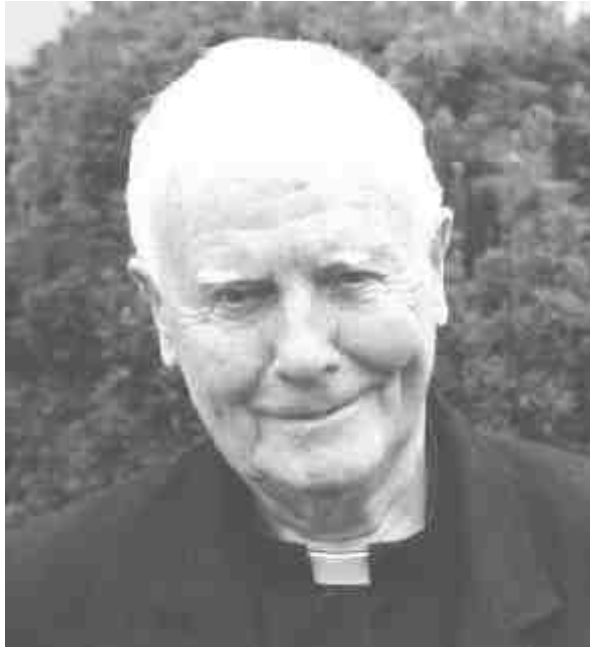
One more point should be made. When the author concludes his article, he asks the question, "Why, then, celebrate Christmas?" Obviously, if all of his revisions are true, it is a useless exercise. Even for many of us who are believers, especially Jewish believers, we do not necessarily observe Christmas anyway since there is no evidence that Jesus was born on that date. But again, the author tries to project the mythology of Christmas to make the messianic divinity itself a mythology. The best answer the author can give for celebrating Christmas is, "So forget the history and enjoy the myth. Christmas enshrines the myth that we all need to hear at the end of a busy year, before we plunge into the uncharted waters of a new year" (p. 17). If this is the Messianic Hope, there is no hope there. I, for one, cannot enjoy the myth because myths do not change my life. But divine history does change my life. If the whole birth account is a myth then there is no meaning to it and it has no value. And there is no hope. And I cannot enjoy the myth and forget the history. But if the account is true: that in the last years of Herod the Great the Messianic Child was born of a Virgin, destined to die for the sins of the world, and that this God-Man Messiah did die for my sins, and arose again, this fact can change my life. Because when He died, He died as a penal substitutionary death for the sins of us all. Because this is history and not myth, we can enjoy forgiveness of our sins and come to know God in a personal way by trusting His death on the cross for our sins. His death has meaning because this was the death of the Messianic God-Man. God became the Messianic God-Man by virtue of the virgin conception and birth. That is why the virgin birth is so crucial to the whole theology of the Person of the Messianic God-Man. Take that away, and the rest will have little meaning and becomes only a story.

I conclude with a different admonition: Forget the myth and enjoy the history. The history is that Jesus, born of a Virgin in Bethlehem, died for your sins. If you are willing to trust His death on the cross you can receive the forgiveness of your sins. He is the Messianic God-Man. This means that as a man He could die for our sins. As God, He can forgive us our sins.

The Birth of Jesus; History or Myth?

by **Dr James Veitch, St Andrew's Trust,
Wellington, 1997, 28pp. \$6.00.**

This is an expanded version of a lecture delivered on November 28, 1996.
It has 13 pages of text and 11 of footnotes. Review by Dr G.H. Duggan SM.¹



Dr G. H. Duggan SM

This is an extraordinary production. Although the text is buttressed by an array of footnotes to give the semblance of a scholarly work, it is incredibly shoddy. It abounds in categorical statements about the New Testament books and the history of the early Church, many of which are not merely doubtful but demonstrably false.

I shall deal with the contents of the booklet under these heads:

1. Veitch's concept of God. This is a philosophical preconception or prejudice which leads him to deny the possibility of a miracle or of a supernatural revelation.

1. His Christology. Following in the footsteps of the Rationalist critics - Toland, Reimarus, Strauss, Renan and others, he maintains that Christ was no more than a superior human being.

3. The Authorship and Dating of the Gospels. He puts the Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John late - from 90-100 and holds that they were produced by Christian communities.

4. The Origin of Christianity as a Religion distinct from Judaism. He holds that it emerged as a distinct religion somewhere between 90 and 100. We

shall see that this is much too late.

5. The Role of Constantine, who is said to have changed the form and content of Christianity.



1. Veitch's Concept of God.

On page 17 we read:

God is the metaphor we give to those primary values which, through nurturing in a particular tradition, enable us to rise above evil within and above us, to realise our full potential as humans.

Comment:

Since values are to a great extent created by the human mind, as, for example, in the case of a valuable postage stamp, God would in Veitch's philosophy be a creation of the human mind, no more than a figure of speech - a metaphor - to designate the values we rate most highly.

It is obvious that if one has accepted this concept of God, one must hold that a genuine miracle is impossible, for a miracle is by definition brought about by the direct intervention of God, as an efficient cause in the running of the Universe. And this is something a metaphor could never accomplish.

This a priori rejection of the possibility of a miracle is called by Veitch (p. 15) "the historical principle". It is only by using this principle, he adds (p. 16) that we can "find within the shadow of the Gospels, the character of the historical Jesus", after we have "got rid of the Church and its views of Incarnation, Virgin Birth, Second Coming and a divine/human Jesus."

We shall see later what becomes of Veitch's Christology when he has removed these Christian doctrines from his interpretation of the Gospels.

We read (p. 15) that:

[Jesus] became identified with God; not just the God of his Jewish faith, but the God who had created the cosmos and all things within it.

¹ Review submitted 16.4.97. Final amendments made 2.5.97. Dr Duggan sent a copy to Cardinal Williams who has expressed his appreciation.

Comment:

It is hard to understand how Veitch has managed to make a distinction between the God of the Jewish faith and the God who created the cosmos. For the God whom the Jews worshipped was the God who created the cosmos. The first verse of the Torah reads: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Perhaps his distinction was necessary so he could [try to] turn them into Modernists who worship the "god within," who is the personification of their highest value.

Stanley Jaki proved in his book *The Road of Science and the Ways of God* (the Gifford Lectures of 1975-6) that it was by developing the implications of this verse of Genesis that the medieval thinkers laid the foundations of modern science. For since God created the universe it must be intelligible - that is, governed by discoverable laws, since He is intelligent. And since He created it freely out of nothing, it is contingent: that is, it need not exist at all, and it could be other than it is. We have to discover what it is actually like by scientific enquiry, and not decide beforehand what it must be like, as some of the Greek thinkers did when they decreed that the heavenly bodies must move in perfect circles. Thinkers as disparate as A.N Whitehead, Jacques Monod and J. Robert Oppenheimer have admitted that Jaki's thesis that science as we know it, in the sense of a self-supporting enterprise with an organised body of knowledge, is found only in one culture - that of Western Christendom, is true. The medieval thinkers, like John Buridan who in 1350 formulated Newton's first law of motion, broke the shackles of Aristotle's Physics and paved the way for Galileo and Newton.

The notion espoused by Veitch, that the doctrine of Creation, taught by the Christian Church and inherited from Judaism, is no longer tenable by an educated man, is nonsense, and if really accepted, would bring scientific inquiry to a dead stop.

2. His Christology

Veitch, following in the footsteps of Toland (17th century), Reimarus (18th), Strauss, Baur, Renan (19th), Bultmann and many others (20th) contends that Christ was no more than a superior human being who worked no real miracles, made no transcendent claims, and did not rise bodily from the dead.

He writes (p.5) that Jesus "was a Galilean Jew who lived probably between 4 BC and 30 AD." On pp. 14-15 he expands this account. He writes:

Jesus was a Galilean Jew, born in Nazareth, who spent the public years of his life living in Capernaum, a town on the shore of Lake Galilee. He developed a reputation for his insights into matters of faith and his views on a whole range of human relations and situations. He may well have been understood as a "wise man" in the tradition of Jewish wisdom. He lived out his words and his thinking and to many this would have made him a prophet. A lively, charismatic person, with a wide range of stories, told with pithy humour, to illustrate his thinking would

have brought him into people's lives with a startling vividness and stimulating freshness. No wonder some who felt his touch were healed and experienced an inner wholeness which changed their lives. A person like this puts a human face on an invisible God: love, care and compassion are transforming human values. That such a good man should die a horrible death by crucifixion traumatised his close friends and cast them into depression and deep grief. But the more they thought about him as they tried to relieve the pain of their grief and guilt, and the more they consciously recalled his words and incidents in the life they had shared with him, the more they realised he was still alive.

Comment:

This is not only a travesty of the Gospel story, it makes it so absurd as to be incomprehensible.

Veitch omits to mention Christ's claims to be "the Son" of God (e.g. Matt. 11:27; Mk. 13:32) and "Lord of the Sabbath" (Matt. 12:8), his violent denunciation of the Scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23), the parable in which he depicted them as murderers (Matthew 21), and his miracles, which they attributed to Beelzebul (Matt 12:24; Lk. 11:15). Veitch's omissions make it impossible to understand why they wanted him to be crucified.

We have the witness of the Gospels and St. Paul (1 Cor. 15) that it was not the musings of the Disciples that created their faith in the Resurrection, but the empty tomb and Christ's appearance to them in bodily form that convinced them that he was alive. That Christ was alive was the gist of Paul's preaching according to Festus in his report to King Agrippa (Acts 25:18). Nor was Christ alive, merely as the souls of the dead are alive in God, as the Book of Wisdom (3:1-4) proclaims, but with the body that was placed dead in the tomb on the Friday and emerged alive, glorious and immortal, on the Sunday morning, the date being almost certainly April 9, 30 AD. "We know," St Paul declared, "that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him" (Rom. 6:9).

On page 12, citing Crossan, a member of the Jesus Seminar, in support (note 41), Veitch writes:

Since the Roman Senate deified its emperors from Julius Caesar onwards, it is not surprising to find Christian writers doing the same for Jesus.

Comment:

This supposition is preposterous. It shows the straits to which those are reduced who reject as inauthentic the many texts, explicit and implicit, in which Christ affirmed his true divinity.

It is the plain fact, as Martin Gengel has pointed out, that Jews, the strictest of monotheists, to whom the pagan deities were an abomination, were paying divine honours to Christ within a few years of the Crucifixion. One instance must suffice - that of Stephen, stoned by

the Sanhedrin, probably in 32 or 33 A.D. for blasphemy and addressing Christ as God as he died. Veitch writes (p. 16):

How can divinity be meaningfully applied to a human Jesus? Responses will depend on what is meant by divinity and whether the concept is to be applied literally or understood metaphorically... As we have seen, the Church, for reasons of theology and politics, chose centuries ago to read these metaphors and images literally and to create a divine-human person, Jesus Christ. It is this that caused the confusion.

Comment:

It was not for reasons of theology, still less politics, that the Church taught from the beginning that Christ is truly divine, but because Christ Himself had revealed this truth.

Moreover, it is not correct to describe Christ as a "divine-human person" - this was the heresy of Eutyches, the Monophysite. As was defined by the Church at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, He is one Divine Person, the Word, who exists simultaneously in two distinct natures, one divine, the other human.

If the Church taught that Christ is God, it is because He made this claim many times during His mortal life. Thus in Matthew 25, it is He, the Son of Man, who will come to judge the world, separating sheep from goats. When He said to the Jews (John 8:58): "Before Abraham was born, I am", they picked up stones to stone him for blasphemy. When at His trial he responded to the challenge of Caiaphas by applying to Himself, the Son of Man, the words of Daniel 7:13, they condemned this claim as blasphemous, as they could not have done had it been merely a claim to be the Messiah. It was, they explained to Pilate (John 19: & 7) because He had claimed to be the Son of God, that He had to die. Jesus ratified this claim by rising from the dead on the third day (Mark 9:10; Luke 9:21).

This was the Good News which the Apostles began to proclaim on Pentecost Day, as a well-established historical fact, and continued to proclaim, ignoring an order from the Sanhedrin to desist. It was the fact, admitted by the Sanhedrin, that the tomb was empty. Christ had appeared, fully alive, endowed with mysterious properties, to various witnesses who were, as Peter explained to Cornelius (Acts 10:41) chosen by God beforehand.

B.F. Westcott, the eminent biblical scholar, maintained that no historical event of that time is better attested than the Resurrection of Christ. He wrote:

Taking all the evidences together, it is not too much to say there is no single historic event better or more variously supported than the Resurrection of Christ. Nothing but the antecedent assumptions that it must be false could have suggested the idea of deficiency in the proof of it... In any ordinary matter of life, the evidence would be amply sufficient to determine our action and belief.

This antecedent assumption that a miracle is impossible is no doubt what led Hastings Rashdall to aver that even if the evidence were fifty times as strong, he could not admit that the Resurrection actually happened.

According to Veitch (p. 7), it was "Constantine and his bishops who conflated Jesus of Galilee, the historical person, with the Jesus of faith, thus obscuring the historical figure in myth and theology."

Comment:

Had this conflation occurred, it would have been at the Council of Nicaea in 325. In fact it was done much earlier. We find that St. Paul, writing in 60 to the Philippians, (2:6-11) states clearly that Christ, a Divine Person, equal to the Father, took upon Himself our human nature, in which He suffered and died, and is now in glory, because of this, and is entitled to the worship of every creature, such as was due to Yahweh (cf. Isaiah 45:23).

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews, writing probably between 65 and 70, makes a similar claim. He writes:

We see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone (2:9).

The Rationalist attempt to separate the Jesus of history, a mere man, from the Christ of faith, worshipped as divine, has always ended in an impasse. As Ricciotti put it in his *Life of Christ*:

Almost every new generation, from Reimarus to the present, has raised the shout of victory in the belief that it has finally found the definite solution to the problem of Jesus; but the next generation has invariably rejected the applauded solution in search of another. (p. 215)

Earlier in this century, Drews in Berlin, Couchoud in France, and Williams in England solved the problem by taking the bold step of denying that there ever was an historical person called Jesus of Nazareth. He was simply a mythical figure, created by the lively imagination of the early Christians, meeting their religious needs, as Apollo and Hercules did for the Greeks and Vishnu or Rama do for the Hindus. This has the great advantage that it saves the scholar the trouble of distinguishing the mythical from the historical items in the Gospels.

I notice that Veitch has argued in published articles (cf. 19, note 9) that Judas Iscariot did not really exist, but is a figure created by the Gospel writers to account for the death of Jesus, rather like Iago in Shakespeare's play. Many of Veitch's problems would, I suggest vanish, if, walking in the footsteps of Drews, Couchoud and Williams, he applied the same criteria to the Gospel account of Jesus of Nazareth as he has done for Judas Iscariot.

The Conception and Birth of Christ

Veitch attributes the Gospel accounts of the conception and birth of Jesus, not to Matthew and Luke, but to a "Matthean community" (p. 11) and to a "Lukan community" (p. 12), and he locates the writing of these accounts in the 90's.

Both evangelists state very clearly that the conception of Jesus was virginal. Raymond Brown has maintained that this cannot be derived with certainty from the Gospel accounts, but this just shows that in this instance he cannot read.

But a virginal conception would have been miraculous, and Veitch, with his philosophical preconceptions must rule this out as impossible.

He has no grounds whatever for his statement that Mary conceived at her first ovulation (p. 13), nor for allowing that there is the slightest probability in the slander that the father of Jesus was Pantera, a Roman soldier from Sidon (p. 25, note 54).

Nor are there any grounds for suggesting that there is some mystery why Matthew cited Isaiah 7:14 when writing of the conception of Jesus (p. 13). Throughout his Gospel, Matthew was on the lookout for texts that would serve to show that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, who fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies. The Septuagint translators had used the word *parthenos* (virgin) to translate the rather broader term in Isaiah. As such, the passage could be used to show that the conception of the Messiah would be virginal.

Veitch has stated categorically (p. 14) that Jesus was born in Nazareth.

Comment:

Matthew and Luke, much nearer in time to the event, have stated categorically that he was born in Bethlehem.

Such notable historians as W.M. Ramsay, E. Meyer, and A.N. Sherwin-White have testified to Luke's remarkable accuracy as an historian in Acts, making the book of inestimable value to the secular historian.

In the prologue (I:1-4) to his Gospel, Luke tells us that he has been painstaking in his research to make sure that his story relates true historical facts. We are entitled to assume that his habit of accuracy did not desert him when he came to write his Gospel.

In his book *The Rise of Christianity*, the eminent historian W.H.C. Frend comments:

The question of the two censuses bristles with difficulties, but the New Testament accounts of Joseph and Mary's journey to Jerusalem are too circumstantial to be dismissed. There would be no point, for instance, in describing Mary's stay in Jerusalem after Jesus' birth (Luke 2:22f) if in fact it had never happened (p. 78, note 17).

Regarding the Magi, Veitch writes:

The story of the visit of the wise men probably owes its origin to an incident in the mid-60s when a king of an area in a part of Persia, with his entourage of officials and supporters, journeyed across the Roman Empire to surrender sovereignty to the emperor, Nero. (p.11)

Comment:

This is sheer guesswork. William Barclay has pointed out that Ethelbert Stauffer has constructed "a not inconsiderable case" for the star (*The Gospels and Acts*, Vol. I, p. 233). It is based on the fact, recorded on some of the latest cuneiform tablets, that in the year 7 B.C. there was an extraordinary astronomical phenomenon, the *conjunctio magna*, which occurs only once in every 794 years. In the spring of that year, Jupiter crossed the path of Venus and in the summer and autumn Jupiter and Saturn met in the Sign of the Fishes. The astrological interpretation, also recorded in the cuneiform tablets, is that this meant that the ruler of the last days will appear in Palestine, for Jupiter was the star of the world ruler, the constellation of the Fishes signified the last days and Saturn was regarded as the star of Palestine. Stauffer concluded:

It is clear that the Matthean account stands on solid ground and agrees perfectly with the documents of the time... The star of Bethlehem is a fact of history.

Veitch states that Christ was born in 4 B.C. in the three months that preceded King Herod's death in the spring of that year. It is much more likely that it was earlier, perhaps as early as 7 B.C., given Herod's order that the male children of two years and under in Bethlehem were to be slaughtered.

On page 16, Veitch quotes with approval the statement of M. Eugene Boring:

Modern historians not only can recover the real Jesus and give the contemporary world a different option from the Jesus of canonical Christianity, but also should do so, since the real Jesus has a message to which we should respond, a message obscured by the Church.

Comment:

The "real Jesus" which Rationalist scholars since Reimarus have been trying to extract from the Gospels is a will-o'-the-wisp which Boring has no more chance of catching than any of his numerous predecessors. All he will have to offer his readers is a lifeless artifact, one more specimen to put in the museum of abandoned theories.

What Veitch and his fellow Rationalists do not seem to realise is that, if they have the text of the Gospels from which to spin their far-fetched theories, they owe this to the Church. It was She who cherished these texts and preserved them for posterity, when countless contemporary documents disappeared without trace, sometimes without even a mention in a list of an author's works.

She it was who tossed aside the plethora of “gospels” produced by the Gnostic sects in the 2nd century, as well as the truncated New Testament produced by Marcion in the middle of that century.

Rationalistic exegesis of the New Testament, which is practised in great numbers of universities in the world, is a parasitic growth, dependent for its survival, so far as one can judge, on the continued existence of the Church. It does not seriously threaten the life of the Church, but it is the cause of spiritual death to those who embrace it during the ever-changing phases of its existence.

3. The Authorship and Dating of the Gospels

Veitch rarely mentions Mark, since it contains no mention of the birth of Christ and begins, as all the early preaching of the Gospel did (cf. Acts 10:37) with the ministry of John the Baptist.

He accepts without question the view which was developed by Holtzmann in 1863 and spread in the English-speaking world by B.H. Streeter, that Mark’s was the first Gospel to be written. So he refers to Matthew as “the second Gospel” (p. 10).

The Church, accepting the witness of the early tradition (Irenaeus, Origen, Jerome) that Matthew was the first Gospel to be written, has always placed it first in her Canon. It was therefore an aberration of the editors of the Jerome Commentary on the Bible to put Mark before Matthew. It is one of the few commentaries to do this, and it goes on to deal with the other books in what the editors think is their chronological order.

The case for the priority of Matthew has been argued by John Chapman, W.R. Farmer and others and it cannot be dismissed out of hand. Mark does not contain the promise of the primacy to Peter (Matthew 16:17-19), and Farmer has suggested that this fact may have won for Holtzmann the appointment by Bismarck to the chair of theology in Strasbourg at the beginning of the Kulturkampf, in which the enemy was Rome.

Veitch puts the writing of the other three Gospels at the end of the first century and he attributes the composition to various Christian communities and indicates the anonymity of the authors by placing the names in inverted commas.

“The Gospel of ‘Matthew’”, he writes, “began to circulate around 60 years after the death of Jesus” (p. 10).

Similarly, “the third gospel, known to us as ‘Luke’, probably circulated in the wake of the persecution of Diocletian in the mid-90s of the first century.... In the light of persecution they (the communities of Greek Christians) wished to present a story of Jesus using the language and thought forms of their contemporaries living in cities throughout the empire.” (p. 11).

“The Gospel of ‘John’”, he writes, “is still later than ‘Matthew’ and ‘Luke’. It is a turn-of-the-century life of

Jesus put together for people who are in for the long haul... The opening verses are a poem which connects Jesus with God, using metaphors which undergird these hopes.” (p. 12)

Comment:

“In the world in which I live,” A.H.N. Green-Armytage wrote in 1952, “almost every book, except some of those produced by Government departments, is written by one author. In that world (of the biblical scholars) almost every book is produced by a committee, and some of them by a whole series of committees.”

The early tradition is that Matthew was the first to write a Gospel and that he wrote it in Hebrew. But this text has disappeared and we have only a Greek translation which could well owe something to Mark.

The literary judgement of anyone who thinks that there is more than one author for Luke and John must be singularly obtuse.

Luke, which was described by Renan as “the most beautiful book in the world,” is certainly the work of a single author, as is, for example, *Pride and Prejudice*. He was Luke, the physician and the companion of St. Paul., who, as Green-Armytage has shown, in composing his Gospel, obeyed the canons of Greek composition in prose. The same author has shown in his book *A Portrait of St Luke* that from the Gospel and Acts of the Apostles we can learn a great deal about the kind of man Luke was.

As regards the Gospel of St. John, C.H. Dodd and Peter F. Ellis have shown that it is a close-knit whole and obviously the work of a single mind.

Veitch’s late dating of John is in harmony with the current view of biblical establishment; it is arbitrary, and his description of the verses that “connect” Jesus with God as metaphors merely reflects his Rationalist prejudice. St. John wrote that the Word was God, the same Word who became flesh and dwelt among us.

John A.T. Robinson has pointed out that there is little real evidence that Domitian persecuted the Church as such. He did persecute many members of the upper class, among whom were some Christians.

Dating

The dating of the New Testament books has been dealt with systematically by John A.T. Robinson in his magisterial *Redating the New Testament* published in 1976 by SCM Press, and by J.W. Wenham in his scholarly *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem*, published in 1991 by Hodder and Stoughton.

Veitch shows no sign of being acquainted with either of these works. Neither is popular with the biblical establishment, since they will compel some arduous re-thinking. It was ten years before Robinson’s book, the first comprehensive chronology of the New Testament books since Harnack’s published in 1897,

was published in a German or French translation.

Both are obviously the product of scholarship of a high order. Both were thoroughly conversant with the New Testament text and with the scholarly literature and Wenham tells us that his book was the fruit of fifty years of grappling with the Synoptic Problem.

Robinson argues that all the NT books were written before 70 A.D. None of them, he points out, mentions the destruction of the Temple which occurred in that year as a past event. It was a cataclysmic event and should have rated a mention in any book written after that date.

Wenham puts the writing of the Gospels surprisingly early: Matthew around 40, Mark around 45, and Luke around 54; and his arguments for these dates cannot be dismissed out of hand. His book, writes Michael Green, the editor of Hodder and Stoughton's *I Believe* series, is "full of careful research, respect for evidence, brilliant inspiration and fearless judgement. It is a book no New Testament scholar will be able to ignore." The reviewers, Wenham has told me, even if they did not accept his conclusions, were respectful.

Before Robinson's book was published, he sent the MS to C.H. Dodd, arguably the greatest English-speaking biblical scholar of the 20th century. Dodd's reply included the following passage:

You are certainly justified in questioning the whole structure of the accepted 'critical' chronology of the NT writings, which avoids putting anything earlier than 70, so that none of them is available for anything like first-generation testimony. I should agree with you that much of this dating is quite arbitrary, even wanton, the offspring, not of any argument that can be presented, but rather of the critic's prejudice that if he appears to assent to the traditional position of the early church, he will be thought no better than a stick-in-the-mud. The whole business is due for a re-examination.

Wenham, with whom many people will be familiar because of his popular *Grammar of New Testament Greek*, has presented the fruits of just such a re-examination. There are good grounds for thinking that Luke wrote the first draft of his Gospel, beginning at 3:1, during the years (50-57) he was in Philippi, and added the first two chapters in 58-59 when he was in Palestine, Paul being in custody in Caesarea. Matthew would have written the first draft of his Gospel during the twelve years (30-42) that the Apostles remained in Jerusalem. Mark would have written his Gospel in Rome in 45, after assisting Peter during the years (42-45) that he was preaching in the Eternal City. Robinson has shown that there are no grounds for putting the writing of John's Gospel after 70, and one text (5:2) which seems to indicate that when John wrote, the Holy City was still intact.

In 1941 C.C. Torrey, who had been Professor of Semitic Languages in Yale from 1900 to 1931, wrote:

I challenged my NT colleagues to designate even one passage from any of the four Gospels giving clear

evidence of a date later than 50 A.D.... The challenge was not met, nor will it be, for there is no such passage.

It is time to tell the story of *The Jesus Papyrus* the work of Carsten Peter Thiede and Matthew d'Ancona, published in 1996 by Weidenfeld and Nicholson, and described by them as "the most sensational evidence on the origins of the Gospels since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls." (See review p.42). As we shall see, this claim is justified.

Thiede is Director of the Institute for Basic Epistemological Research in Paderborn, Germany, a member of the International Papyrological Association and a Reader in the Church of England. D'Ancona gained a First in Modern History in Magdalen College, Oxford in 1989 and is Deputy Editor (Comment) of the *Sunday Telegraph*. In religion, he has described himself as an agnostic.

From a study of papyrus fragments Thiede concluded that the Gospels of Matthew and Mark were being read in Egypt and Qumran before 70 AD.

In 1900 Revd. Charles Huleatt, an Anglican chaplain in Luxor, came into the possession of some fragments of papyrus containing texts from chapter 26 of the Gospel of St. Matthew. He realised they were early, and sent them to his Oxford alma mater, Magdalen College. There Thiede found them in a glass case in February 1994. After scrutinizing them closely, and comparing them with the script found in a papyrus dated July 24, 66, he concluded that this text was contemporaneous and could well have been transcribed before 50 A.D.

Thiede studied another papyrus fragment, this one from Cave 7 in Qumran, the site of the monastery destroyed by the Romans in 68. Fr. Jose O'Callaghan S.J., one of the team of experts studying the Qumran documents, identified this as from the Gospel of St. Mark, 5:52-53. The fragment from Qumran is very small (3.3 - 2.3 cm) and contains only 21 letters on five lines. O'Callaghan's identification was challenged, but it is now quite certain that it was correct.

Matthew d'Ancona is convinced that Thiede has proved his case that the Gospels were written early. So in reviewing *The Tomb of God* in the *Daily Telegraph* he dismissed the author's view that the story of the Resurrection was a concoction of the early Church, as "historically illiterate."

When he was invited to collaborate with Thiede he was told that he would have to be ready for a row. He found that the warning was fully justified. He wrote:

The whispering campaign against Thiede in common rooms and some clerical circles has been remarkable. One clergyman I called slammed the phone down when he heard who my co-author was...Passions run high in this demi-monde, and laymen such as myself who trespass into it must have their wits about them.

The motives for espousing the late dating of the Gospels are largely ideological, for most of the critics

know that their theories would collapse if the Gospels were written early. D.F. Strauss, who held that they were mostly myth and were written towards the end of the second century, admitted that he would have to abandon his theory if it was established that they were written a century earlier, for that would not leave enough time for myths to be elaborated.

It is indeed true, as Robinson remarked in the final sentence of his book, "Dates remain disturbingly fundamental data."

4. The Origin of Christianity as a Religion distinct from Judaism

Veitch's account of the origin and early development of Christianity is entirely fanciful. He puts the emergence of Christianity as a distinct religion much too late, and exaggerates the diversity in the teachings in early Christianity. We read on page 5:

Late in the first century, severing its Jewish roots and institutionalising its own map of the invisible world, this movement became a religion, competing for recognition against other religions in the Roman Empire.

Similarly in note 47 on page 24:

'Matthew' is a response to developments in the reconstruction of Judaism around 93 CE and contrasts the emerging Church with Judaism.

We have the same assertion of a late emergence in note 5 on page 19:

Somewhere between 90 and 100 'Christianity' emerged, having grown out of a 'Jewish reform movement' and a 'New religious movement.'

In the first few decades after 30, many of the pagans regarded Christianity as only one more Jewish sect, like the Essenes. This would have been the case for Gallio in Corinth in 51 (Acts 18:14-15). But Nero in 65, perhaps advised by Poppaea, his mistress and a Jewish proselyte, was better informed, and it was on his orders that only Christians, "called Christians by the populace, the name having its origin from Christus, who suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius" (Tacitus, *Annals XV*, 44), were massacred.

That Christianity, or more precisely, the Christian Church, was distinct from Judaism was known to the Jews much earlier.

In 43, Herod Agrippa I had ordered the execution of James and he would have executed Peter, the recognised head of the new movement, had Peter not been spirited out of jail.

In 49, the Council of Jerusalem decreed that one could become a full member of this community without being circumcised, and we know that Titus a prominent figure in the early Church. He is not mentioned by name in Acts, perhaps because he was the brother of Luke, but he often figures in the letters of St. Paul (cf. 2 Cor. 8:16-24). To be a member of any of the parties that belonged to the Jewish community, one had to be

circumcised. So an uncircumcised man who went beyond the Court of the Gentiles into the Court of the Israelites would have defiled the Temple (Acts 21:28) and incurred the death penalty.

Nor were the Jews in Asia Minor who had Paul and Barnabas ejected from their cities in 46 in any doubt that this new religion, preached to Gentiles as well as Jews, was distinct from theirs.

5. The Role of Constantine

Veitch argues that for a long time there were many different "Christian" ways of expounding the Gospel and saying who Christ was and he suggests that all were equally valid. If one triumphed, this was mainly due to Constantine who inserted the word "consubstantial" in the Nicene Creed and so resolved the impasse between the two contending parties - the Catholics and the Arians. On p. 6 he writes:

Different ways of interpreting and disputing this identity [of Jesus and God] soon developed. The new religion was nurtured in diverse cultural centres - Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus, Rome, and Alexandria, to name a few - and these centres ensured that different philosophical and religious thinking was brought to bear in forming answers to the question of who Jesus was. The differences were tailored to the concerns of the religious communities living in the urban centres of business and culture. For 300 years, the debates and the diversity continued.

On p. 7, we read:

Constantine gave birth to the Church as we know it. Its bishops, finding themselves the allies of a new patron, restructured its theology, so that Church and State became the pillars on which a new world view was created. He and his bishops conflated Jesus of Galilee, the historical person, with the Jesus of faith, thus obscuring the historical figure in myth and theology.

This implies that there was no uniformity of belief in the various Christian communities in the Roman Empire and that uniformity in belief was secured only by the intervention of Constantine when he convoked the Council of Nicaea.

On the contrary, it is clear that from the beginning the Apostles and the bishops who succeeded them were at pains to secure uniformity of belief among the faithful.

It is clear that very early there was a set formula in which the Christian faith was expounded. This was "the form of sound words" of which we read in 2 Timothy 1:13. This was the basis for the instruction of neophytes as they prepared for baptism. It contained, we may be sure, the passages concerning the Resurrection of Christ and Holy Eucharist (1 Corinthians 15 and 11) which St. Paul handed on to the Corinthians as they had been handed on to him, by word of mouth, after his sudden conversion in 35.

In Irenaeus (180) and Tertullian (200) we find a

formulation of the Christian faith that contains several elements later incorporated in the Apostles' Creed.

Irenaeus pointed out at length in his *Adversus Haereses* that the Gnostics' account of the faith was a perversion of what God had revealed in Christ, what the Apostles had taught and what all the churches, in the Empire and beyond, believed.

St. Ignatius of Antioch (107) first used the term "the Catholic Church" to indicate that the various local congregations, although troubled by heretical preachers, the forerunners of the Gnostics, yet formed one community which acknowledged "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:5).

Around the year 150 Marcion was excommunicated from the Christian Church for heresy. (He had denied that the God of the Old Testament is also the God of the New). In 268, Paul of Samosata, the Bishop of Antioch, was deposed from his see by the Synod at Antioch for maintaining that Christ differed only in degree from the Prophets.

Veitch is not happy with the Councils in which the Church defined her faith in Christ. He writes (p. 20, note 15):

It was only in 451 that a polished statement was finally drawn up balancing the humanity and divinity of Jesus. The period 325-451 is crucial in producing the Christology of the Church and in preventing an alternative way of interpreting the relationship between Jesus and God in terms of Jesus' full and complete humanity from developing.

It is most unlikely that Veitch's "full and complete" alternative Christology will be substantially different from one or other of the numerous heresies which the Church has condemned in her long history.

Conclusion

Veitch concludes on p. 17 with an exhortation to affirm certain "primary values" that will "enable us to rise above evil within and about us to realise our full potential as humans." He writes:

We have a deep need to affirm values that give us a sense of purpose, a sense of belonging to our

world, a deep sense of our own worth as humans and a compassion for others, especially those who are crushed by injustice and who are hungry and thirsty..."

This proclamation of a sentimental gospel of secular humanism borrows its moral ideals which have their roots in Christian revelation. Cut off from their roots, these ideals will wither and die. Secular humanism, as it makes headway in the world, will usher in a paganism which like that into which Christianity was born, will be very cruel.

The "values" of which Veitch writes, are in large measure a creation of the human spirit and exert no real pressure on that spirit.

What is needed is the recognition of, and submission to, moral laws that are always binding on everyone in every circumstance, because they are expressions of the natural law that is stamped on our nature as human beings.

But the existence of such a law implies the existence of a Law-giver, our Creator, and of sanctions, for a law that has no sanctions does not deserve the name of law. In the case of the natural law, as in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), Christ has warned us that the sanctions can be very grim.

The French have a proverb, which Maritain used to quote, that when a fish rots, rot begins in the head. If this booklet by a Senior Lecturer in Victoria University, is an indication of the level of thinking that prevails in that institution of higher learning, then God help us all.

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James Veitch's "The Birth of Jesus: History or Myth?": a reader's response

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Dr Derek Tovey

The genesis of Dr. Veitch's essay, *The Birth of Jesus: History or Myth?* provides this reader with an initial difficulty in knowing how to respond to it. It began life as a lecture, no doubt pitched at the level of the interested and 'educated' lay person, but has since been emended and the notes 'developed' to 'enhance the lecture as a study resource'.¹ Thus, at what level ought one to engage with it: as an expanded lecture, or as an essay? Should one interact with the main text alone or with the footnotes as well? And what depth of argumentation and analysis should one expect it to deliver? Obviously, it is not a monograph, and yet neither is it any longer a 'mere' lecture. I have decided that I can only engage with it in terms of what it professes to be, and as it has appeared in its printed form: an 'essay' heavily and extensively footnoted.

The problem I face is that at one level the essay provides information over some of which there need be little serious objection. However, taken as a whole, it seems to me that it begs a number of questions and tends to 'smooth out' (by a rather too general presentation) what are some very difficult historical questions over which there is much scholarly debate. I suppose my difficulty is that one might have expected a greater depth of engagement with some of these questions in the transition from lecture to essay.

That Christmas is a celebration, the date of which has been fixed by a complicated history which has little to do with the actual birth date of the historical Jesus, need scarcely be controversial, nor, it has to be said, central to the main issues at stake. However, even a cursory glance at some of the dictionary articles to which Veitch refers, suggests that the dating of Christmas has a somewhat more complicated history than his settling upon the role of Dionysius Exiguus implies. Surely, the question is not so much when the date of Jesus' birth became fixed and formalised, but how and why the celebration of Jesus' birth became important to the Church and how early or late the impetus towards a celebration developed? Here Veitch, following Duchesne, points to Hippolytus, writing early in the third century, as fixing the date at Wednesday, December 25th.² But nothing is completely certain, moreover, the Church did not necessarily celebrate the festival everywhere and even today, as Veitch points out, does not universally celebrate December 25th as the Nativity of the Christ. None of this is central, it seems to me, to the main thrust of the essay, which is how much of the Church's inherited traditions, including and especially those contained within the New Testament, may be taken to provide useful historical information for determining not only the date and circumstances of the birth of the historical Jesus,³ but also the 'historically determined' import of his life.

The heart of Veitch's argument, if I have followed it well, is something like this. The Christian celebration of Christmas (leaving aside its commercialisation), and

¹ Veitch, *Birth*, p. 18, fn. 1.

² Veitch, *Birth*, p. 8; cf. L. Duchesne, *Christian Worship: Its Origin and Evolution*, (SPCK, 1912), p. 258.

³ Nothing in the New Testament helps us with a date of birth, of course, except that historical-critical analysis of some highly debated information, especially that provided by Luke 2.1-2, has led to the scholarly consensus that the birth of Jesus occurred, most probably, in 4 B.C. Historical issues surrounding the death of Jesus (perhaps the most secure historical 'fact' about the historical Jesus there is) are, in the end, not materially affected by the Church's celebration of Good Friday being a 'moveable festival'.

the beliefs which surround it, are a result of the Church's formalisation of the question of divinity (Constantine and the creeds), the fixing of a date (Dionysius), and the 'historicising' of the gospel story (St. Francis of Assisi).⁴ Behind this process lies the early Christian attempts to explain the significance of Jesus, attempts which saw history refracted through the 'faith-generated' interpretative lenses of Gospel writers such as 'Matthew' and 'Luke' (not to mention the religion establishing activities of Paul). We should understand this interpretative activity as, at heart, a 'myth making' (and fictionalising?) process: certainly it has had the effect of "obscuring the historical figure in myth and theology".⁵ The outcome has been the ascription of divinity to a 'lively, charismatic' fully human person. What is required is a recovery of the 'real Jesus' by an application of the 'historical principle' to the New Testament.⁶ As for our celebration of Christmas, we should 'forget the history and enjoy the myth', which provides a way of reaffirming our sense of purpose and meaning in the world, so that we may live to our full human potential and be compassionate to others.

One aspect of the argument which is 'smoothed out' is the whole question of Christian origins, and the development of primitive Christology. Traditions which suggest a 'special birth' for Jesus and the process of the 'divinisation' of Jesus are likely to be much earlier and their development more complex than the essay suggests. Indeed, I suggest, the Matthean and Lukan birth stories may well be a reflection of a developing understanding of a special and exalted status (possibly 'divine?') already accorded to Jesus in Christian thought and worship. Let us take Paul: Galatians 4.4 refers to the fact that Jesus was 'born of a woman' (NRSV). There is nothing here to lend support to the notion of a virginal conception⁷ necessarily, though R. E. Brown points out that Paul's silence on this does not settle the matter either way (and cites one scholar for whom the phrase 'born of a woman' is turned into an argument for virginal conception).⁸ What I wish to draw attention to, however, is the fact that both here, and in Rom 1.3,4, Paul describes Jesus as God's Son. It would be disingenuous of me not to admit that there are large debates to be had here over what

Paul might have meant by describing Jesus as the Son of God. We cannot read back into the New Testament later Chalcedonian formulations; and much discussion would need to be entered into over the background to such language, and what a first century Jew might have understood by the term. But, by the same token, it may be misleading to play up the silence of Paul on the precise circumstances of Jesus' birth, while ignoring the statements (within the same textual ambience) which indicate the conception of an exalted status for Jesus. The hymn of Phil 2.6-11, which may well be pre-Pauline, expresses a view of Christ which suggests divine 'pre-existence' and a special relationship with God.⁹ From the earliest times Christians referred to Jesus as 'Messiah' (Greek: Christos = Christ) and as 'Lord'. In a world which sometimes 'divinised' its secular, political 'lords', the title 'Lord' itself may be telling.

Of course, what early Christians believed about Jesus does not necessarily amount to being the same thing as who the 'real Jesus' was in his historical existence, or what historical scholarship might determine about the nature and status, intentions and aims of the historical Jesus. But the point I wish to make is simply that the whole question of how and why a 'high Christology' developed, whether it is early or late, or how early or how late a 'divinisation' of the historical Jesus may have begun is complex. The motivations and influences upon early Christian thought are matters for intense, detailed and continuing scholarly debate. The issue is certainly more complex than the generalised statements made in the essay about the contributions of Paul, the gospel writers, and Constantine and 'his bishops' suggest. In a public lecture the generalisations might be excused (though one would hope that the fact that large issues are being treated somewhat cursorily would be made clear), but one would have thought that the written form would have engaged in the debate at more depth, if only in the notes.¹⁰

To turn to the Matthean and Lukan infancy narratives for a moment, there is no doubt that there are serious difficulties in reconciling the details of these accounts with each other, let alone using them to obtain

⁴ The charge that Francis's dramatization of the Nativity story was a major influence in the historicising or literalising of the birth stories strikes me as a strange argument. The Gospel infancy narratives, surely the script and stage directions for Francis's dramatisation, might well be, and are, charged with having the same effect. That is not to say that Francis's nativity play cannot be regarded as the precursor to many subsequent dramatisations which have embellished the Gospel stories and have fed popular conceptions of those stories.

⁵ Veitch, *Birth*, p. 7. Veitch attributes this obscuring of Jesus to "Constantine and his bishops" but the thrust of this essay is that it is a process which began with the early Christians.

⁶ See here, especially, Veitch, *Birth*, pp. 15-17.

⁷ A virginal conception for Jesus is technically more precise than to speak of a virgin birth; this is a formulation which R.E. Brown, in *The Virginal Conception & Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (Paulist Press, 1973), wishes to use partly to avoid confusion with other, more 'recondite' beliefs about the manner of Jesus' birth (see pp. 27-28, and especially fn. 31). Brown is a model of careful and cautious scholarship and his work is important for the depth and range of issues within his grasp; *Virginal Conception* provides a concise entrée to his arguments. Geza Vermes provides an interesting excursus in *Jesus the Jew* (Collins, 1973), pp. 213-222.

⁸ See Brown, *Virginal Conception*, p. 57, and fn. 90.

⁹ Again, there are exegetical issues here which cannot be entered into now, such as, for instance, what should be understood about Jesus' status and nature from the statement that he did not grasp after 'equality with God', Phil 2.6, (in implicit comparison with Adam and Eve, Gen. 3.1-6?).

¹⁰ To be fair, Veitch does at least on occasion point the reader in the direction of where counter arguments, and different perspectives may be found. But the title, and some of the rhetoric of the essay, invites one to expect more of an engagement with the issues, and the difficulties which must be addressed on the way to reaching his conclusions.

what might be taken for good historical data. It may well be the case that under the canons of scientific historical enquiry the accounts will yield, or seem to yield, less 'history' than some, especially conservative Christian readers might expect or hope for. But the process of determining how far the material may yield historical data, and the nature of that data, is, again, a far more complex matter than Veitch's essay leads one to expect. The complex questions cannot be entered into here: and given that Veitch does not treat them to any great extent, perhaps there is no need. Suffice to say that the tone of Veitch's appeal to the background situation of the Matthean and Lukan communities, and the possible motivations and influences upon the Gospel writers (some of which, e.g. a Domitian persecution setting for Luke, requires a dating later than that generally advanced¹¹), tends to suggest a far more certain set of conclusions than may be warranted. This tendency is only occasionally mitigated by the use of a word such as 'probably', or phrases (e.g. 'appears to have been') which indicate the personal judgment being made. The critical debates, it would seem, are relegated to another arena which the reader is left to discover for him or herself.¹² Again, one is mindful that Veitch is writing an essay not a monograph, but the title, *The Birth of Jesus: History or Myth?*, and the claim that the essay attempts to separate what is historical from what is 'fictional' in the accounts, leads one to expect more.

Here are three aspects of the infancy narratives where the data needs to be subjected to a fuller investigation. First, we may assume that, given the differences between Matthew's and Luke's accounts, they are independent of one another. In that case, the fact that both locate the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem is significant, for it suggests that where they concur, they are likely to be drawing on an earlier tradition. Thus it is not sufficient simply to explain the references to Bethlehem as Luke's desire (and Matthew's as well?) to supply a 'superior theological address' for the birth.¹³ One must address the issue of whether the evangelists are drawing on an earlier tradition; and one which may well have an historical basis. It is possible, of course, that earlier tradition has itself been shaped by theological impulses. But determining whether that is

so will be a matter of historical probabilities and not historical fact (as is the determination of the evangelists' motivations). The balance may be evenly tipped. A rigorous historical analysis of the data may have to return the verdict that it is not possible finally to determine the historicity of the Bethlehem setting.

Second, Paul states that Jesus 'was descended from David according to the flesh' (Rom 1.3). This suggests that, whatever difficulties there may be in reconciling and interpreting the genealogies of the two Gospels, the fact that both assert that Jesus is of Davidic descent may well point to an early tradition. If Jesus' Davidic descent is historically solid, this may strengthen the historicity of a birth at Bethlehem, though it is also possible that knowledge of Jesus' genealogical connections may have created the unhistorical tradition of a birth at Bethlehem. The tradition of a Davidic descent may arise out of early Christian interpretation which is taken up (perhaps unwittingly) by Luke, Matthew and Paul, or it may point to a piece of solid historical data. Given the importance attached to genealogical information in Jewish society, the support of Paul for this is surely significant.¹⁴ At the least, this datum suggests that the yield of historical information which can be derived from the infancy narratives may be greater than Veitch allows.

Third, that both Matthew and Luke independently assert that the birth of Jesus is a result of the special action/intervention of God (Mt. 1.20; Lk. 1.35) points to the possibility that this also goes back to an earlier tradition. It is possible that the belief that Jesus' conception was 'special', in the sense that God brought it about by the power of the Holy Spirit, is a theological statement which should not be understood to lead directly to the assertion of a virginal conception. However, there is a widespread scholarly consensus that a virginal conception is precisely what Matthew and Luke wish to assert.¹⁵ The road from this belief to the assertion of historicity for the virginal conception of Jesus is a long one and by no means certain. There is room for much debate over the possible origins of such a belief and the circumstances of Jesus' birth can be set against a range of hypotheses.¹⁶ It is impossible to enter

¹¹ Against Veitch's 'mid-90s' see e.g. J.L. Mays, ed., *Harper's Bible Commentary*, p. 1011 ('most scholars settle for a time between AD 80 and 90'), cf. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (Vol. 4), p. 404.

¹² For which, see Veitch's footnotes, where there is a bias (natural enough) towards citations which support his positions. I expect that many of the books and articles mentioned would not necessarily lend support to his conclusions, but often the reader would require more guidance.

¹³ Veitch, *Birth*, p. 14; presumably Matthew shared the understanding of his community which took 'for granted' that Jesus was born at Bethlehem.

¹⁴ Would Paul, who as a Jew referred to his own descent from the tribe of Benjamin (Rom. 11.1), readily accept a genealogy for Jesus known to be doubtful? But, that aside, it is not entirely certain that a claim to Davidic descent was absolutely necessary to early Christian claims for Jesus (on this see Brown, *Birth*, pp.505-512).

¹⁵ Geza Vermes finds that in Jewish terms, the idea of a virginal conception brought about by divine intervention is a 'totally novel' one; but he does not deny that such an idea was what the evangelists intended (Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, pp. 213-222).

¹⁶ These debates have to do with, among other considerations, the intellectual and cultural milieu within which early Christian thought developed, whether e.g. the influences are to be understood as mostly Jewish, or Hellenistic, or non-Jewish ('pagan'); Matthew's use of Is 7.14 and the meaning of the Greek word *parthenos* ('virgin') and the Hebrew words it translates; and possible alternative traditions about the circumstances of Jesus' conception (e.g. that it was 'illegitimate', or a normal human conception understood as 'miraculous' in the same sense as the conceptions of, say, Isaac, or John the Baptist). I personally believe it is possible to mount a good defence for a solid historical base for traditional beliefs about the Incarnation. But I acknowledge that this would be based on presuppositions about God, the nature of the world, and history which would not gain universal agreement. And, in the end, the defence would rest as much on theological grounds as upon 'purely historical' considerations. As for whether modern scientific knowledge can allow for the possibility of a virginal conception, I sometimes think (wryly) that we would allow far more to the

into all of this here, and unnecessary in so far as there is plenty of material available elsewhere.¹⁷ My point is that assessing the material in the infancy narratives, and in the rest of the New Testament, in order to determine their value for historical reconstruction, and their status as 'story created to serve a religious purpose' is a problematic exercise. As it stands, Veitch's contribution represents, in my view, conclusions awaiting substantiation by greater argumentation: and an invitation to debate.

It seems to me that Raymond Brown's conclusion that 'the totality of the scientifically controllable evidence leaves an unresolved problem' regarding the historicity of the virginal conception is both cautious and honest.¹⁸ This leads me directly to what I find is my most serious difficulty with Veitch's essay. It is that it displays what I would describe as a somewhat naïve, or at best poorly articulated, understanding of what the operation of the 'historical principle' is and what it can be expected to achieve. This impression arises more from what I take to be the general drift and 'subtext' of the argument, as from what is explicitly stated, or rather, left not stated. The footnotes, however, do provide two statements which suggest a worrying simplicity of definition as to what 'history' is. Veitch says that '[s]cholars are not always prepared to separate what is historical - that is, what actually did happen - from what is fiction - a story created to serve a religious purpose'.¹⁹ And further: "'History", on the other hand [as opposed to "myth"], is an account of something that actually happened as it is reported and interpreted by participants and/or observers'.²⁰ Veitch's comparative lack of engagement with many of the difficult exegetical and critical issues raised by the New Testament data tempts me to think that he believes that establishing 'what actually happened' is a far more straightforward exercise than in reality it is. To charge him with this would be unjust in view of the nature of the booklet's genesis. But, at the least, the question, 'history or myth?' and the stated intention that he is striving to separate what is historical from what is fiction, or myth, requires, I suggest,²¹ a more rigorous discussion of the nature of history. There is a more

profound issue at stake here. It is hinted at in the second quotation above. It is that the nature of an historical account is itself both an attempt to get at solid historical data ('what actually happened'²²) and an exercise in the interpretation and evaluation of that data. Veitch acknowledges the interpretative activity that goes into the report of participants and observers of an historical event. (It ought to be remembered, of course, that historians are quite willing to work with material offered by those who report at 'second hand' - and here the Gospels as well as much other documentation from antiquity are 'second hand'). But the interpretative and evaluative activity must be carried out by the historian as well. When it comes down to it, the 'history' which is really under consideration is an 'historical account', that is, historiography. And, as often as not, this amounts to the historian's account of 'what must have happened' or the event as it 'might have happened'. In reality, the operation of the 'historical principle', it seems to me, means that one is often faced with highly ambiguous and indeterminate historical data which must then be ordered and made coherent against what is taken to be the hypothesis (or hypotheses) which most plausibly explains the data. It is precisely at this point that presuppositions, including theological presuppositions, will become important. That is, it is the kinds of theological, philosophical and existential judgments one makes about God, the world and the epistemological possibilities open to humans, which will determine the kinds of hypotheses which are found to be most plausible. Brown makes the point that 'those who deny the [virginal conception of Jesus] sometimes do not recognise that they too are passing judgment from a theological vantage point'.²³ The truth is that we will all, conservative and liberal alike, allow our presuppositions to shape the historical judgments which we make, and we need to acknowledge that. The fact is, I suggest, that both conservatives and liberals often leave unacknowledged the presuppositions on which their historical reconstructions are based.

Dr. Veitch has at least made some of the presuppositions with which he works reasonably clear. These are, for instance, that 'God is a metaphor' for our

potentialities of human technology than to the power of God! Having said that, there are dangers in trying to draw analogies between modern birth technologies and the Gospel stories of a 'virgin birth'. In the end, the traditional Christian claims for the birth of Jesus are claims for the unique action of God over the circumstances of a particular human birth for which, if the belief in the divine-human nature of Jesus is allowed full play, there is *ipso facto* no real possibilities of a scientific or historical analogy. That is a problem for an Enlightenment understanding of the nature of science and of history: whether it is will always *necessarily* be a problem depends upon how epistemology may develop in a post-modern age, and hence remains to be seen.

¹⁷ Veitch's notes helpfully provide a wide range of the relevant literature, and to this extent he well fulfils his intention to provide a study resource. It must also be said that, while he may not engage at depth with the issues (especially in the main text), he does indicate in the notes where critique and counter positions may be found.

¹⁸ Brown, *Virginal Conception*, p. 66 (italics his); cf. also his *Birth*, p. 698. 'Unresolved' might be a verdict brought against the usefulness for historical reconstruction of material in the gospel accounts other than simply that pertaining to a virginal conception.

¹⁹ Veitch, *Birth*, pp. 18-19, fn. 4.

²⁰ Veitch, *Birth*, p. 27, fn. 68.

²¹ Dr. Veitch, *Birth*, p. 15 states that '[o]nly by taking the historical principle seriously and applying it to the New Testament can we make progress with the origins of Christianity'. At this point, by way of a footnote (fn. 64, p. 27) he adds a rider: 'But see the cautions set out by Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*'. Well and good: but what does he *make* of those cautions? This reader of his essay would like to know!

²² This, in itself can be a difficult exercise, even when the event in question is temporally contemporaneous with an investigator of the event. Furthermore, when it comes to historical accounts, establishing the 'facts of the matter' (which at its simplest may leave one with a 'simple' chronicle, or list of unassimilated, incoherent bits of data) is generally accompanied by an analysis of cause and effect, motivations, influences and outcomes. This will require subtle, and often, debatable acts of interpretation.

²³ Brown, *Birth*, p. 702.

primary human values, that the humanity of Jesus should be pushed 'as far as we can,'²⁴ and that the Church's theological and political agenda has turned what should be taken as metaphorical and symbolic imagery into historical fact and has created the divine-human person Jesus. Another, epistemological presupposition is that theology and history don't mix, and that theology should be classed with myth. Furthermore, 'there must be flexibility now to rethink the humanity and divinity of Jesus in the light of the state of knowledge about the Bible we possess today and in the light of the actual world we live in'.²⁵ These, I take it, are some of the presuppositions which would undergird his application of the 'historical principle' and determine the kinds of historical hypotheses which he would find plausible. Please understand that I would not reject all of these out of hand: but I would want to clarify what is intended by the somewhat round statements in which some are expressed.

I have put forward some of my own understanding of the nature of 'historical discourse' elsewhere, and would maintain that we need to recognise that there is no such thing as 'history' per se, but rather forms of history.²⁶ It is entirely possible that theological presuppositions that accept the historic understanding of the divine-human person, Jesus Christ, may be brought to bear upon the data of the New Testament and produce a historical hypothesis which is every bit as plausible as that Veitch offers. And one that makes historical sense of a broader range of data, such as why the early Church developed so (relatively) early and so widespread an understanding of the 'special' nature or status of this particular historical figure. It is an axiom of New Testament scholarship that the data in the Gospels is written from a post-resurrection, and faith perspective.²⁷ Any progress to be made on the 'origins of Christianity' must wrestle not only with theological, but precisely ambiguous and difficult historical conundrums which lie at the very birth of the Christian movement, let alone what occurred as late as Constantine, Dionysius and Francis.

What, finally, of the 'myth' (to use that terminology for the moment) enshrined in our Christmas celebrations? I should like to hear more from Dr. Veitch on this. It surely does not simply come down to

what every parent hopes for their new born child? As for the values which the 'myth' generates or encapsulates: a sense of purpose, of belonging, of human worth, and compassion for others, especially those 'who are crushed by injustice and who are hungry and thirsty',²⁸ these are held to be important also by those who identify with 'church thinking'. I do not accept that the Church has always or necessarily obscured the message of the 'real Jesus' as Veitch's use of Boring seems to imply;²⁹ nor that belief in a divine-human person, 'the Jesus of canonical Christianity' means that those values cannot be adequately articulated or grasped. It is, of course, sadly true that often what is practiced and lived is far short of what is professed and proclaimed. For many in our society today, the chords which the celebration of Christmas strikes, I suspect, have little to do with forgetting the history and enjoying the myth. The emotions stirred by the carols sung on TV, or in beery tunelessness as the party wears on, or heard in our commercial centres, may well have much to do with the stirrings of vague sentiment, nostalgic memories of a 'more innocent childhood', fleeting hopes that the world might become a better place or simply that 'I might be a better person'. They snatch at the yearnings of busy people soured by lost dreams, shattered by disappointments, failures, tragedies, or sheer human cussedness and greed.

Perhaps Dr. Veitch would agree that we do not need more religious panaceas, nor commercial ones either. Rather we need the tough gospel of a real historical and historic Jesus who proclaimed a message of 'God with us, and for us' and, as I believe, incarnated that God in life and in death. Where we will disagree, no doubt, is how that Jesus is to be defined and what kind of historical reconstruction will best deliver the 'real' Jesus.

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²⁴ I do not believe that pushing the humanity of Jesus 'as far as we can' need be incompatible with affirming the Incarnation: God as fully human in Jesus is surely what the mystery of incarnation is all about. Recognising that 'God was in Christ', however, may determine how we understand the manner in which Jesus was 'fully human' (see e.g. Hebrews 4.15).

²⁵ Veitch, *Birth*, p. 27, fn. 65.

²⁶ See D. Tovey, *Narrative Art and Act in the Fourth Gospel* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 201-207, 223-228, 264-267.

²⁷ Discussion of the question of Jesus in the end cannot be divorced from a consideration of that other most problematic datum of history, the 'Easter event'.

²⁸ Veitch, *Birth*, p. 17.

²⁹ Veitch, *Birth*, p. 16. In quoting Boring in this way, in my opinion, Veitch cuts across the context of Boring's argument which is raising questions about the extent to which historical reconstruction can deliver the 'real Jesus' and what or who validates theological presuppositions which underlie attempts to recover the historical Jesus. The sentence which Veitch quotes is actually, as I read it, a summary of other scholars' positions.

Brief Response to Veitch's booklet The Birth of Jesus: History or Myth?

by **Chris Marshall PhD, Head of New Testament Studies,
Bible College of New Zealand.**



Chris Marshall PhD

Like his mentor, Lloyd Geering, Dr Veitch works within a framework in which “myth” and “history” are mutually exclusive categories (he says as much in fn 68). If an ideological or theological motivation or agenda can be postulated for a biblical story, then it ceases to be historical; instead it is the result of “creative imagination.”

He seems oblivious to the possibility that a New Testament story can be told in such a way that it addresses current theological needs in its audience or deliberately echoes Old Testament texts (or even recent political events) without ceasing to be based on genuine historical occurrences.

On the other hand, he seems to assume “history” is a value-free, objective recounting of what actually happened. Yet historical events are never recounted in a value-free or interpretive-free manner; history is, by definition, an interpretation of the meaning of historical data, and even the selection of data considered relevant to the enterprise is a value-laden exercise. His own recounting of the “history” of Jesus is itself driven by an ideological agenda - to meet the intellectual needs of modern skeptical Europeans.

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Dr Paul Trebilco reviews

The Birth of Jesus

Review of James Veitch, *The Birth of Jesus: History or Myth?* (Wellington: St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society; 1997) ISBN 0-9598011-9; 28 pages.



Dr Paul Trebilco

This booklet is the text of a lecture entitled “4BC-AD1996: Celebrating the 2000th Anniversary of the Birth of Jesus of Galilee” given by Dr Veitch on 28 November 1996 at St Andrew’s on the Terrace, Wellington. Eleven pages of helpful footnotes have been added to the text.

The booklet begins with a brief introduction to Jesus, and then gives an outline of the significance of the Emperor Constantine for the development of theology and Church-State relations. Veitch then discusses the work of the sixth century Russian monk, Dionysius Exiguus, who confirmed the date of Jesus’ birth as December 25 in the year 1, which Dionysius calculated to be 753 years after Rome had been founded. In doing so, Dionysius may have been following the lead set by Hippolytus in the third century. Prior to Dionysius, the birth of Jesus had been celebrated, but its date varied.

Veitch then turns to Francis of Assisi, who may have been responsible for the first dramatic presentation of the Nativity, and so another figure who influenced the way we celebrate Christmas. Veitch suggests that these three figures - Constantine, Dionysius and Francis - form a significant background against which we read the New Testament lives of Jesus today.

He then turns to Matthew’s birth stories, and argues that these “were created out of stories in the Hebrew Bible ... to contrast as radically as possible the differences between Jesus and Moses” (p. 11). It is then suggested that the Lucan birth narratives serve to

undergird the contrast between Jesus and John the Baptist. Veitch then writes:

The point of the contrast is not to rule out the role of a male in conception, but to emphasise the part God plays. Every conception is special but none more special than when a young woman at the beginning of puberty conceives at the moment of her first ovulation - a happening designed to set the tongues wagging. If perchance a boy is born, then the expectation grows that there has been special - divine - intervention. (p. 13).

Veitch does not argue for this interpretation, but rather asserts it. It remains unclear how he came to the conclusion that this is what Matthew and Luke meant by a virgin birth.

Finally, Veitch turns to brief discussions of the humanity of Jesus, the non-canonical Gospels and “Questions of divinity”. Here, Veitch focuses his theme. The church came to apply “divinity” to Jesus, and chose “to create a divine-human person, Jesus Christ.” (p. 16) However, “in spite of the Church and its view of Incarnation, Virgin Birth, Second Coming, and a human/divine Jesus”, we need to find “the character of the historical Jesus of Galilee ... within the shadow of the gospels; and the task facing us today is to separate this from ‘church thinking’ in the gospels and in the subsequent history of the Church” (p. 16)

So what is the enduring message of Christmas? For Veitch, Christmas is not concerned with Incarnation. Rather we should “enjoy the myth” that “every new-born baby carries the potential to change the course of history.... The Lucan birth stories capture the hopes of every parent, but to give birth to a child whose insights and wisdom will ignite radical religious change and be remembered for doing so is the privilege of very few. But that in itself will never stop us hoping - or believing in the myth” (p. 17).

Much of the booklet is interesting and helpful. However, the weakest part of the book is its underlying polemic. As noted above, Veitch suggests that the church has “decided to create a divine-human person, Jesus Christ” (p. 16), or has imposed its belief in a divine Jesus onto Jesus of Nazareth. This, he argues, has caused confusion. Instead, we need to get back to the human Jesus, and “should push the humanity of Jesus as far as we can.” (p. 16) That the Church “created” belief in the divinity of Jesus is often asserted or implied. The underlying theme is that we should set this belief aside, and focus instead on the human Jesus.

However, a number of questions can be raised concerning this suggestion. Firstly, I do not see why it needs to be an either/or. Much of what Veitch says

about the humanity of Jesus, and the search for the historical Jesus is a helpful reminder to us. We must continue to seek to understand what Jesus said and did in his first century context, lest we create a politically correct Jesus who validates our current beliefs, or a Jesus who is simply current church (or academy) ideology writ large. But do we need to jettison belief in Jesus' divinity in order to do so? I see no compelling reason for this. Clearly, one must resist sidelining Jesus' humanity, but in many "high" Christologies the nature of Jesus' humanity, the substance of his teaching and action and that Jesus was really human as we are, are all crucially important.

Secondly, if belief in Jesus' divinity involved completely overlaying the historical Jesus with something that was totally alien to him, then Veitch has a point. If, for example, Jesus vehemently denied that he himself had any special significance, or any different relationship to God than all other people, we would need to revisit later belief about him. But is this in fact the case?

There is much in the Gospels that argues against this view, and suggests, rather, that in speaking of Jesus in very elevated terms the early church took what was implicit in Jesus' own views about himself and made this explicit, developing it fully in the light of Jesus' resurrection. The situation can be compared to the opening of a bud into full flower, or of a blossom into an apple. The early church did not take an apple and make it into an orange; they did not make Jesus something entirely alien to what he had been. Nor did they give him a place and a status which was entirely foreign to how he had seen himself. Whilst there is diversity today in the scholarly world concerning who Jesus was, many scholars would argue that there is continuity between Jesus' own self-understanding about who he was and who the early church proclaimed Jesus to be.

Let me focus this point. The later creeds gave Jesus a unique status, but did Jesus see himself as having a unique relationship to God? Raymond Brown argues that this was indeed the case. He contends that a body of evidence in the Gospels on this topic goes back to Jesus and can be regarded as historically reliable. He points to Jesus' use of the term "Abba" for God. This was the term that adults would use within the family circle for their father. It was not the normal term of address to God in prayer; in fact it was simply not used, as far as we know, as a personal address for God by an individual. There is a distinctiveness in Jesus' usage of the term Abba for God then. Jesus experienced a highly unusual degree of intimacy with God; Jesus' relationship to God was then in some way superior to that of all those who would follow him. The reverse side of this special intimacy with God was that Jesus referred to himself as "the Son" on some occasions (eg. Matt. 11:27; Mark 12:1-12; Mark 13-32 - which since it attributes ignorance to Jesus surely could not have been made up by the early Christians). Brown concludes that this evidence makes it "likely that Jesus spoke and thought of himself as 'the Son', implying a very special relationship to God that is part of his identity and status (Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, Paulist Press, 1994, p. 89). When the early

Christians proclaimed Jesus as Son (eg. Rom. 1:3-4) they were drawing out the implications of what Jesus had said and implied about himself, which they saw to be vindicated by God in the resurrection; they were not transforming Jesus into something entirely foreign. The early Christians did not, I think, "create" Jesus as the Son of God. They recognised what he had been, and made explicit what had been implicit, which had now been confirmed by God in raising Jesus from the dead. The roots of the early Church's elevated belief about Jesus were thus in Jesus' own understanding, in what Jesus thought about himself.

Apart from Jesus' use of the term "Abba", there is much evidence in the Gospels that Jesus sometimes implicitly assumed what we may call "divine functions" for himself. This evidence is very relevant in this regard; we note the following. Jesus asserted that he was able to forgive sins, yet Jews believed that only God could do this (Mk. 2:1-12). Jesus saw himself as the arbiter of people's destiny (Mt. 7:21-3), and as judge at the end (Mt. 25:31f); for Jews, God was judge. Jesus taught on his own authority (Mt. 7:28f), and sovereignty over-rode the interpretations of others. Jesus attributed to his own words the eternal validity of the word of God (Mk 13:31; Isa. 40:8). Jesus pictured himself as the king in an eternal kingdom (Mt. 25:31-4). Jesus demanded absolute personal loyalty of his followers (Mt. 10:37-9). Jesus offered rest and salvation which he himself would give (Mt. 11:28-30). Jesus said that to reject or receive him was to reject or receive God (Mt. 10:40). Jesus applied Old Testament texts to himself that in the Old Testament referred to God (eg. Mt. 21:16, where Jesus applies Ps. 8:2 to himself; in its original context it applies to God; see also Lk. 19:10 and Ezek. 34:16,22) (See further R.T. France, "The worship of Jesus: A neglected factor in the Christological Debate?" in *Christ the Lord*, ed. H.H. Rowden, IVP, 1982, pp. 17-36).

What do we make of such language? It seems unlikely that it was all a later creation of the early church; it is too varied, too pervasive, too unobstructive for this. These passages rather imply that Jesus saw his own role in very elevated terms. Here in Jesus' own teaching we seem to have the raw material for an increasing awareness by the early Church that Jesus was much more than a prophet. We can suggest that the early Church saw these sayings of Jesus confirmed by the resurrection, and that this suggested that it was indeed right to worship Jesus alongside God (eg. 1 Cor. 8:5-6; Col. 1:15-20), and to use very elevated language indeed of Jesus. Again, it is wrong to assert the early Church "created" Jesus as something he was not. Or to put it another way, if we go back to "the human Jesus", then we still have these sayings to account for, sayings which suggest that Jesus saw his role and status in elevated terms indeed.

One related factor that Veitch does not consider in this connection is how quickly this elevated language about Jesus arose. Veitch discusses Matthew and Luke in most detail, and dates both in the 90s. But very elevated language is used of Jesus at a very early date indeed. We note that in Philippians 2:6-11 Paul asserted that the risen Jesus now bore the name of "Lord", God's

own name, and that to Jesus, every knee should now bow (cf. Isa. 54:22-3)? In Philippians 2:6-11 Paul is generally thought to be quoting a hymn, and so the passage may date from an earlier period than the letter to the Philippians itself. Further, note 1 Corinthians 8:5-6, in which Paul “splits” the Jewish “Shema” (Deut. 6:4) and again gives Jesus God’s own name of “Lord”. This was an amazing thing for Paul to do, and is a modification of Jewish monotheism so as to place Jesus within the description, almost the definition of the one God. Finally, calling Jesus “Lord” seems to go back to Aramaic speaking Palestinian Jewish Christians, judging by the use of Maranatha (“Our Lord come”) in 1 Corinthians 16:22.

Yet why was it that the early Christians so quickly spoke of Jesus in language previously reserved for God? It is unlikely that this was because of the influence or imposition of outside factors, such as Hellenistic religions, the mystery cults, and so on, since these developments took place within a very short time when most Christians were Jews. The reasons for this development lie rather, amongst other factors, in the impact of the life and ministry of Jesus himself, in his addressing God as Abba, in the implicit claims he made as outlined above, in the resurrection as the vindication of Jesus’s ministry, and in the presence of the risen Lord in their midst. This means that rather than speaking about the early Church “creating” a divine Jesus, we would be better to speak of the early Christians making explicit what was implicit about Jesus, or developing

what was there in embryonic form from the beginning.

I have one final area of concern. Can Jesus’ message (which Veitch clearly regards as important) be dissociated from the person of Jesus himself. Clearly, Jesus was not teaching a timeless ethic, but was proclaiming the arrival of the reign of God (Mk. 1:14-15). But his teaching about the kingdom was bound up with his Person. In this context we can understand Luke 11:20 “But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” Jesus seems to be saying that it was precisely because of his mission and his activity that the reign of God had dawned. This, and much else in his teaching, implies a great deal about who Jesus himself was, about his status and person. Can one then retain his message, but reject what Jesus implies about himself? Can one pick up one dimension of Jesus’ teaching (about the reign and presence of God) and ignore the other dimension, that is, what his teaching says and implies about himself?

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**FOCUS ON BISHOP
JOHN SPONG**

Cornered by Corner?

By Justin Cargill

From time to time, the press comes out with headlines like “Jesus created by Church - lecturer.”¹ And so it did in late November 1996.¹ It was a simple report in *The Evening Post* describing briefly Dr Jim Veitch’s views and promoting a talk he was to give the following day at St Andrews On The Terrace. This is, of course, precisely where we would expect it to be given. On those occasions when St Andrews is not sponsoring a concert or recital, it will be providing a platform for those who wish to redefine the faith they were ordained to defend.

Dr Veitch’s views are not new and it is difficult to see why it was necessary to promote his talk on the front page of *The Evening Post*. Why did reference to Dr N.T. Wright’s recent lectures in Wellington not appear there as well? Wright, formerly lecturer in Theology at Oxford, responded capably to the sort of views expressed by Dr Veitch - views which even the *Evening Post* seemed content to describe merely as “theory.”

Jim Veitch has since published his talk in a little booklet.² This booklet is designed to do two things. First, it is designed to inform us that what Dr Veitch has said is not new, although we should hardly need reminding since we are frequently bombarded with views of this nature. It is also designed to inform us that other scholars can be found agreeing with him and this should hardly surprise us since scholars can be found agreeing with all sorts of positions. We may wish to ask, of course, whether all the scholars he cites would individually or cumulatively support the overall thrust of his arguments? Some do. Others do not.

So what then has Dr Veitch been saying? Dr Veitch believes that the Church deified Jesus. Well, it must have moved very quickly. The accumulation of legend usually requires many generations. Well over a century ago, Muller challenged scholars to show when in 30 years a series of significant legends anywhere could have gathered around an historical individual.³ More recently, the classical historian, Sherwin-White, observed that even two generations are too short a span to allow myth to prevail over the hard historic core of oral tradition.⁴ But, in conformity with the thinking of Dr Veitch, we must conclude that completely erroneous stories grew up about Jesus within little more than one

generation, and all this in the presence of eyewitnesses. Dr Veitch clearly subscribes to a belief in miracles.

Mind you, if I had no reason to believe in miracles before, I have them now. Ripley would have had a field day with this but, believe it or not, *The Evening Post* actually asked the main churches to respond to Dr Veitch’s comments, and these were published in a full-page spread which carried the title “Was Jesus the Son of God?”⁵ Actually, to be fair, Dr Veitch does not deny that Jesus was the Son of God. The *Post* writer implied that by denying Jesus’ divinity, Jim Veitch was also denying that Jesus was the Son of God. But since the expression “son of God” would not have implied deity to a first century AD Palestinian Jew but merely a just and saintly man,⁶ Jim Veitch has no need to deny that Jesus was the Son of God. He does, however, deny that Jesus was God the Son and this is, of course, a rather different denial altogether. But in the light of Jesus’ resurrection, it is small wonder that Jesus’ followers so quickly came to describe Jesus with absolute confidence as “the Son” and the writers of the New Testament very quickly came to use this concept as a means of conveying Jesus’ equality with deity. They were simply acknowledging the evidence.

The following night, again in the *Post*, appeared the headlines “Lecturer’s view on Jesus sparks sacking call.”⁷ Here we read that Robin Corner, described as a born again Christian and Wellington Central general election candidate, had called for Dr Veitch to be sacked. In essence, Corner took the view that since Dr Veitch is an ordained Presbyterian minister practising part-time, it was not his business to go around insisting that Jesus was not divine, since this contradicted Christianity’s “fundamental doctrines.”

This is, of course, a reasonable point, although Jim Veitch would respond that Christianity must be redefined to accommodate his own position. But the significance of all this does not lie in what Jim Veitch had to say. Jim Veitch has said this before and he will continue to say it with increasing fervour once he approaches his retirement and has more time to devote to saying such things. In fact, neither Veitch’s comments nor Corner’s reaction were particularly surprising. This sort of thing has happened many times before and it will happen again. The significance really

¹ Angela Ots. “Jesus created by Church - lecturer.” *The Evening Post*, Wednesday, 27th November, 1996, 1.

² James Veitch. *The birth of Jesus: History or myth?* (Wellington, N.Z.: St Andrew’s Trust for the Study of Religion and Society, 1997).

³ Julius Muller. *The theory of myths, in its application to the gospel history, examined and confuted*. (London: John Chapman, 1844), p.26. Cited in William Lane Craig. *Assessing the New Testament evidence for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus*. Studies in the Bible and early Christianity, 16. (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1989), p.381.

⁴ A.N. Sherwin-White. *Roman society and Roman law in the New Testament*. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), p.190.

⁵ “Was Jesus the Son of God?” *The Evening Post*, Wednesday, 4th December 1996, 7.

⁶ Geza Vermes. *Jesus the Jew: A historian’s reading of the gospels*. (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p.200. Cited in Josh McDowell and Bill Wilson. *He walked among us: Evidence for the historical Jesus*. (Amersham-on-the Hill, Bucks: Scripture Press, 1989), p.309.

⁷ Angela Ots. “Lecturer’s view on Jesus spurs sacking call.” *The Evening Post*, Thursday, 28th November 1996, 3.

lies elsewhere.⁸ It lies with the response by Reverend Kerry Enright.

Although he is presumably known to his family, most people will not have heard of Kerry Enright. He is, in fact, the Presbyterian Church Assembly's executive secretary, and assuming he was quoted correctly (and I hope he was not) he had some rather intriguing ideas. Rev. Enright began by saying that the Presbyterian Church had room for those who believed that Jesus was God and those who believed he was not. Now, let us suppose - oh, surely no one minds us just supposing - that God was incarnate in Jesus, then this is probably a matter of some importance. And it probably matters to God - even if it does not matter to Rev. Enright - that this idea not be treated simply as a matter of theological preference. Some people prefer to eat white bread. Some people prefer brown. Some people prefer to believe that Jesus was God. Some people prefer to believe he was not. Does Rev. Enright mean that Presbyterians, regardless of what they believe, can all worship and pray together because they are, after all, Presbyterians and Presbyterians never let their beliefs affect either their communal worship or their prayer? This is theological schizophrenia and when the Church suffers from schizophrenia of a theological kind it becomes a half-way house in more ways than one.

Rev. Enright also had other things to say. He told us that "Presbyterians were not afraid of questions in searching for the truth about Jesus." Excellent! He then added that "the gospels, rather than history, influenced Presbyterians." What a disappointment. Rev. Enright has forgotten to think again. Does history not matter? If history does not matter to Presbyterians then presumably the reason Presbyterians are not afraid of questions regarding the truth about Jesus is because they are not interested in the truth about Jesus!

Rev. Enright believed Dr Veitch "was not discounting the Jesus of faith along with the historical figure of Jesus." What does this mean? Enright was drawing a distinction between the Jesus of history (the real Jesus) and the Jesus of faith (what the Christian Church proclaims about him). This is a distinction which was drawn and made particularly popular by Rudolph Bultmann in the early years of this century and it has continued to plague certain areas of theology ever since. But there is little need to embark on a study of dialectical and existential theology at this point, suffice to say that Rev. Enright appears to be affected by this theological schizophrenia and this is a pity because it dates his theological thinking. As far back as 1954, Ernst Kasemann was recognising the need to wed the Jesus of faith to the Jesus of history.⁹ And the ordinary person in the street has long recognised that if Christianity is not historical it is not true.

Theological liberals are known for their insistence that the theologically orthodox are in fact theologically "unsophisticated." But it is the theologically orthodox who recognise the need to build their faith upon history.

History is important. In fact, it is vital. True faith is not opposed to either knowledge or evidence. On the contrary, the New Testament writers invite us to believe on the basis of the evidence. None of them would have taken the position that faith and evidence are mutually exclusive and, of course, no one comes to biblical faith without thinking there is some sort of evidence to justify their commitment. If Jesus is God incarnate, then we are foolish not to place our faith in him. If Jesus is not God incarnate, then we are foolish to insist on the need for faith in him. But the most foolish thing of all is to place our faith in the sort of vacuous Christianity which results from the kind of sentimentally-minded theologizing which opposes faith based on evidence. Only theologians are apt to be impressed with their own theological salvage operations - this is why they engage in them. The ordinary person knows better.

At its simplest, then, if Christianity is not historical it is not true. If Jesus was not God incarnate then he was not God incarnate. If he did not literally rise from the dead then he did not rise from the dead in any other sense worth talking about. No amount of special pleading, or redefining of the faith will do. Christianity is finished. It is all over. Let us pack up shop and go and find something else.

So Rev. Enright wants to distinguish between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith, and he implies that it is only the Jesus of faith that matters. He is satisfied that Jim Veitch has not discounted the Jesus of the Church. Jim Veitch may say we cannot know much about the Jesus of history but that is fine because history is of little significance for Christianity anyway. What matters is what we believe, not what is true. This theology is really another form of the old "it does not matter what you believe as long as you are sincere" idea. And it has always been a source of bemusement that anyone should engage in such self-defeating folly. If I believe sincerely that Rev. Enright is a gumboot and treat him as such, that probably matters - at least to Rev. Enright!

But it gets worse. How much worse? Having appeared to concede a distinction between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith, Enright then proceeded to tell us that the Church firmly believed that Jesus was the Son of God. "If God didn't become human God is remote from human experience." But hold on a minute. Jim Veitch does not believe that God did become human. This may be the Church's teaching but it is not what Dr Veitch believes. Rev. Enright seems to be saying that the issue of whether God became man has profound implications and this is what the Church teaches. But he also seems to be saying that this may not correspond to what really happened - that is another matter but there is no cause for alarm because Presbyterians are influenced by the Gospels, not history!

This is an interesting approach, of course. There is only one problem. It is stupid; and it is for precisely this

⁸ Ots.

⁹ Ernst Kasemann. "Das Problem des historischen Jesus." *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 51 (1954): 125-53. Cited in Craig, p.xi.

reason that so many theologically liberal Presbyterian Churches have difficulty getting people to fill their pews. This is often attributed to the increasing secularisation of society. No, the reason is more likely to be found in the fact that people's hearts cannot rejoice in what their minds reject as false. People are not convinced by the idea that Christianity is true and demands allegiance although it is really false because it does not conform to reality. This is why people have turned to the New Age craze. They believe the New Age has answers because it works. How can Christianity work when some of its theologians tell us that its central tenets are based on a fundamental mistake? What else can we call it if the Church proclaims that God was incarnate in Jesus when Jesus was only, as Dr Veitch calls him, "a very special boy"? In any other field of human understanding, such an approach would be intellectually dishonest, yet theologians write whole books trying to justify this foolishness. They should be embarrassed.

Finally, of course, the *Post* article featuring Corner's response concluded with a comment from

Professor Lloyd Geering. No show without Punch! Professor Geering retired many years ago but he is always available for comment. Professors do not die. They just lose their faculties. To be fair, Professor Geering is a clever man and a good communicator. He just suffers from very bad presuppositions.¹⁰ Nevertheless, he suggested that perceptions on these issues had changed enormously in the last 30 years although he said he, himself, had only voiced what had been debated at least since the 1830s. In one sense, this is, of course, nonsense. The claims the Church makes about Jesus have been debated since the Church began making the claims. But Professor Geering probably means to say that it is only since the 1830s in particular that some people within the Church have been debating these issues. This is quite true but, of course, most people wonder why they are still in the Church. When I see atheists and agnostics, cynics and critics behind the pulpit, I always get a funny feeling. It is the feeling I think I would get if I were to see a man chairing a Temperance meeting with whisky on his breath.

In a recent article in *Life and Work*, the magazine of the Church of Scotland, the Very Rev. Professor Thomas Torrance of Edinburgh, who is possibly the world's greatest living theologian, wrote these words:

"We believe that Jesus Christ is God and man in one person. If Jesus Christ is not really man, then what God did in him has no relevance to us human beings at all. If he is not really God, then there is no divine reality in what Jesus said and did, no salvation. Jesus' word of forgiveness, for example, would be a mere human word empty of ultimate divine validity.

"The resurrection of Jesus was a real physical event, a bodily resurrection, a historical event, dateable and fixable at a definite point and place in time and space."

¹⁰ O'Collins demonstrates clearly that Geering's world view dictates the conclusions he is prepared to draw from the New Testament data. *The Easter Jesus*. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973), pp.98-100. Although Geering cannot be faulted for possessing a world view, he can be faulted for uncritically permitting it to control his conclusions.

The Bodily Resurrection and Ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ

by Dr. Stephen J. Scott-Pearson¹



Dr. Stephen J. Scott-Pearson

Tonight we are brought to behold and contemplate the Lord Jesus Christ on the fair page of Scripture at the end of His living upon the earth.

We behold Him in the gloom of Gethsemane, as He prepares Himself as never before to fulfil the role of the Redeemer.

“We think of all His sorrow in the garden and then the morrow”

Then we behold him in the gore of Golgotha as He bleeds and dies as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

“See from His head, His hands, His feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down.”

But tonight we behold Him in the Glory of the Resurrection and Ascension.

“Christ the Lord is risen today - Hallelujah!”

Son of Man and angels say - Hallelujah!”

I want to speak initially of the Bodily Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ tonight and in doing so to notice five things.

1. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is Scripturally Asserted.

2. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is Prophetically Anticipated.

3. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is Historically Accredited.

4. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is Apostolically Acclaimed.

5. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is Experientially Attested.

1. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is Scripturally Asserted.

The Christian religion is primarily a documentary religion.

The document by which all doctrines are tested and deeds tried in the true Christian church is the Bible.

The people of God claim that the Holy Scriptures are :

Inspired by Almighty God - They are not the inventions of men.

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God.” - *“Pasa graphe theopneustos.”*

All that is written - every letter of the 66 books in the Canon of Holy Scripture is God breathed.

The people of God claim that the Holy Scriptures are -

Inerrant. There are NO errors or mistakes, no myths, no contradictions, no conflicts in the accounts, assertions and predictions of the Bible.

When it speaks of historic matters, scientific matters or theological matters the Bible is never wrong! It never misinforms.

The people of God claim that the Holy Scriptures are -

Infallible. The Bible faultlessly and flawlessly guides the soul from darkness to light, from death to life. It alone, supremely and sufficiently tells the people of God what to believe and what to do. - It never misguides.

All Confessions of Faith, and Statements of Belief

¹ Transcript of address given to the Wellington Christian Apologetics Society at the 1996 AGM, Turnbull House, 13 December.

issued by men are subordinate to the Holy Scriptures and are only valid in as much as they strictly conform with the Scriptures and are invalid and they are erroneous in as much as they ever depart from the Scriptures. Among all of the doctrines declared by the Bible and subsequently held by the people of God to be true, the Glorious Doctrine of the Bodily Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is the great cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith!

The Doctrine of The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ as the God appointed, all-sufficient and effectual Redeemer of sinners is the CENTRAL DOCTRINE of the Bible and of the Christian Gospel.

But the Doctrine of The Bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the FOUNDATIONAL DOCTRINE of the Christian Gospel.

In the 15th Chapter of his 1st Epistle to the Corinthians the Apostle Paul declares:

"... Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; ... He was buried, and ... He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures". (verses 3, 4)

The Messianic Psalms (for instance) had declared that the Messiah should not be left in the grave -

Psalm 16:10 "For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption."

The four writers of the Gospels all combine to assert the resurrection of Christ -

Matthew wrote, "And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for He is risen, just as He said..." (Matthew 28:5,6).

- Matthew then recorded two post resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ.

Mark wrote, "Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils."

- Mark then recorded three post resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ.

Luke set on record the words of the angels, "... Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen:"

Luke then recorded four post resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ.

John wrote an account of the weeping Mary Magdalene being confronted by the Risen Christ and he also records four post resurrection appearances of the Saviour.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is clearly Scripturally Asserted!

The Christian doctrine of the Resurrection is primarily based on the scriptural assertions of these four Gospel writers plus the Epistles of Peter and Paul.

Akin to our first observation that the Resurrection Is Scripturally Asserted is our second which is that -

2. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is Prophetically Anticipated.

The Lord Jesus Christ Himself on numerous occasions predicted His bodily resurrection from the grave.

It is recorded in Matthew 12:39, 40 how the Lord answered the sign-seeking Scribes and Pharisees saying

"... An evil and an adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

Again in Matthew's Gospel we find the record of Christ prophetically anticipating His betrayal, His condemnation to death, His scourging and His crucifixion and then at the end of this in Matthew 20:19 He says, speaking of Himself as the Son of Man,

"... and the third day he shall rise again."

In the second Gospel we read at Mark 9:9 following the transfiguration that:

"And as they came down from the mountain, he charged them that they should tell no man what things they had seen, till the Son of man were risen from the dead."

According to Mark 14:28 Christ promised the disciples:

"After that I am risen, I will go before you into Galilee."

In the Gospel of Luke we find a very clear prophetic anticipation of the resurrection in the words of the Lord Jesus,

"The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and be slain and be raised the third day."

In John's Gospel we find there is the most clear, prophetic assertion by Christ of His body being raised from the grave,

John 2:18-22. "Then answered the Jews and said unto him, What sign shewest thou unto us, seeing that thou doest these things? Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.

Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days? But he spake of the temple of his body. When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said

this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said."

The resurrection that Jesus Christ prophetically anticipated was a BODILY RESURRECTION - That is, the very body of flesh in which the eternal Son of God was incarnated, by the Holy Spirit, in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

3. Thirdly, let us observe that, The Resurrection Of Jesus Christ Is Historically Accredited.

History has been the great corroborator of the bodily resurrection.

The weight of historical proof and the absolute truth of the New Testament records have ever increased down through the years.

There have been those who have suggested that the whole story of the resurrection was a DELIBERATE INVENTION.

In the light of the fact that the Apostle Paul writing in the year A.D. 56 to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 15:6) asserted that, "... he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve; After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain ...".

The whole authority of the primitive Christian Church crushes any idea that the resurrection account is a lie or a legend.

We are aware that some have suggested that the body of Christ was removed from the tomb by Joseph of Arimathaea or Jewish or Roman authorities. Others have suggested that the women in the early dawn of the Eastern day-break mistook the tomb - an idea that conveniently overlooks the angelic presence and testimony, "He is risen!"

Then some have suggested that Christ never really died on the Cross but swooned from exhaustion, from agony, from loss of blood but was revived by a rest in the cold tomb.

The Romans, the Jews and the Disciples, were never known to have entertained such an idea for one second.

In the 18th Century two unbelieving sceptics, Gilbert West and Lord Lyttleton, (both noted intellectuals), set about disproving and overthrowing two great Scriptural assertions.

West would prove the Bodily Resurrection of Christ to be a fabrication and Lyttleton would disprove the Scriptural claim of Paul's miraculous conversion on the Damascus Road. Eventually at one of their conferences together West said to Littleton, "I have something of great importance to relate." He then related how he had been forced to the conclusion that Jesus Christ really rose from the dead and how he had knelt and asked for salvation by the risen Saviour and found it.

Lyttleton responded with a similar testimony both to the truth of Scripture and to a personal experience of God's redeeming grace through Christ.

If the evidence for the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ is sifted and weighed honestly it will be found to be both convincing and conclusive.

The bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is one of the great attested facts of history.

The institution of the Christian Sunday by an early Church composed largely of converted Jews fanatically attached to the old Sabbath indicates that some tremendous event must have occurred and so influenced them in this matter.

The apostolic preaching of which the resurrection was the very substance - the facts of which were unchallengeable and incontrovertible.

If we do not know that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead we do not know anything historic whatever.

The German Biblical critic and archaeologist, William De Witte, wrote:

"Although a mystery which cannot be dissipated rests on the manner of the resurrection, the fact of the resurrection can no more be brought into doubt by historic evidence than the assassination of Caesar".

We believe that the bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is thoroughly, historically accredited.

4. The Resurrection Of Jesus Christ is Apostolically Acclaimed.

In Apostolic preaching and in Apostolic writing the bodily resurrection was most clearly acclaimed.

Peter, on the Day of Pentecost spoke of the Crucified Christ saying of Him:

"Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it." (Acts 2:24)

He is the Prince of Life! Every time Jesus Christ went to a place where death had taken place what happened? Death gave up its prey. He was the scourge of undertakers, every time Christ went to a funeral it never took place. Have you ever noticed that? Death could not reign in His presence. Death could not keep its prey in His presence. As he walked among them death always had to give up its prey for He is the Prince of Life. How could death hold Him. It, says the Apostle "was not possible that he should be holden of it."

Again in chapter 2:32, "This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses."

We are informed back in verse 14 of Acts chapter 2 that, "Peter standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice,"- that is Peter spoke on behalf of the entire body of the Apostles when he said these things.

This was most remarkable.

When you look back in Mark 16 you see that:-

Firstly, according to the record of verses 10 and 11 that when Mary Magdalene went and told the eleven mourning, weeping disciples "that he was alive, and had been seen of her" - they "believed not."

Secondly, according to verses 12 and 13 after that Christ had appeared to two of their own company as they walked, and these two came and gave an account of what had happened, "neither believed they them."

Finally, according to verse 14, "Afterward He appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen."

Never perhaps was there ever a more striking example of man's unwillingness to believe.

Among their number was Thomas - doubting Thomas.

We read in John 20:25 that,

"The other disciples ... said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into His side I will not believe."

Just eight days later Christ came again and stood in the midst of the disciples and this time Thomas was present. No more scientific an analysis could have been conceived or carried out than this - the doubting, disciple seeing with his own eyes and feeling with his own fingers the wounds of the Risen Christ.

If these Apostles who were so slow to believe at first were so utterly convinced at last, then what strong proof is the Apostolic acclamation of the Resurrection of Jesus!

5. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ Is Experientially Attested.

Wonderfully converted sinners, wondrously changed lives, bear witness to the soul-saving, life transforming power of the risen Saviour!

A personal knowledge and experience of Christ's saving power is ultimately the greatest evidence to the believer that Christ is risen and living.

To believe in the Bodily Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ with the head but not to know Him and to love Him with all of the heart what would that be?

A very sophisticated infidel was speaking in the open air to put forward his rotten and ruinous ideas one afternoon and he turned to this young boy who stood there and he said: "Son if you will show me where God is I will give you an orange." "Sir," said the little boy "if you will show me where God is not I will give you a pound of oranges."

The testimony of boys and girls, men and women, gloriously saved by grace, whose lives have been

changed by the living Christ, this is the greatest testimony to the bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The greatest evidence of the resurrection of Christ is in the simple experiences and testimonies of humble believers who have found Him and proved Him to be a suitable and all-sufficient Saviour.

Now we must move on in our thoughts.

We read in Romans 6:4 that:

"Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father."

Then we read in Mark 16:19 that:

"he was received up into heaven".

As we think now to the Glorious Ascension Of The Lord Jesus Christ I want to state simply four things concerning it.

The Ascension was Visible.

The bodily ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ was a visible sign that Heaven was His true abode.

The place of the Ascension was a garden on the eastern side and near the summit of Olivet. - This was the place of His glorious TRIUMPH.

A garden lower, and on the western side of Olivet - had been the place of His deepest TRIBULATION not long before. Christ did not secretly, mysteriously pass into oblivion but from a precise geographical, earthly location, miraculously was "received up."

Angels did not come and bear Him aloft, neither did He go, but He was taken.

Christ is the Prince of Life - death could not hold Him! He was taken from death's ravenous clutches by the power of God to the land of endless day.

Christ is the Prince of Glory - the earth could not hold Him! He was taken from its shadows by the same power of God to the realms of measureless Glory.

He who was seen by the crowds at the cross to descend into death is now seen to ascend into Glory. What a sight it must have been. It was visible.

The Ascension was Viewed.

Acts 1:9-11. "And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven."

In the gloom of Gethsemane, men of the earth and angels from the heavens were present with the tearful Son of Man. Now in the glory of the ascension Apostles of Christ's earthly Church and angels of His Heavenly kingdom are present with the triumphant Son of God.

There were men to testify that they saw Him rise from the earth.

There were angels to testify that they saw Him enter Heaven.

These disciples viewed the departure from the scene of time of their dearest Friend, their wise Counsellor, their great Teacher, their honoured Lord with very great sorrow you may be sure.

- But what rejoicing there must have been in Heaven!

What rejoicing among the angels of God leaning over the parapets of Heaven to welcome the Lamb of God the Prince of Glory back into the Gloryland. What rejoicing there must have been in His presence as the Lamb sat upon the throne.

While it was visible and viewed I will tell you something more about the ascension of Christ:

The Ascension was vindicative and validated His Calls and Claims.

Christ had undeniably taken a posture living among men as the Son of God and the Saviour of sinners. I have sometimes heard these modernistic, liberal clergymen in their debates say, "Of course Jesus Christ never said He was the Son of God and He never claimed that He was the Son of God." I wonder if these people have ever read the Gospel accounts. The Lord Jesus Christ most assuredly asserted that He was the eternal Son of God. He said "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." He said, "I and my father are one." He had invited the thirsty saying, "If any man thirst let him come unto me and drink." He had invited men to believe in Him for salvation and eternal life. He had made numerous promises such as the heavenly preparation for His people and the sending forth of His Holy Spirit into the world. Were all these calls and claims, invitations and offers valid? Here was the crowning affirmation of Christ as the one God appointed, God owned Mediator between men and God. The resurrection completed by the ascension was the effectual and irrefutable vindication of all that Jesus Christ revealed and claimed Himself to be.

But not only did the glorious ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ vindicate and validate His calls and claims:

The Ascension Vindicated and Validated the Hopes and Trust and Faith of His Believing People.

They had unhesitatingly left all to follow Him and unreservedly accepted His teaching as being divinely authoritative. They had unconditionally embraced Him as their Saviour and Lord and entrusted their never-dying souls and eternal destiny into His hands. All have had those actions justified in the Ascension. What a suitable object of faith, hope and confidence is the One of whom alone it can truly be said that "He is the Christ whom we preach." Christ crucified, risen, ascended and glorified.

Well not only was the glorious ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, visible, viewed and vindicative. The last thing I want to say tonight is, it was vital.

As the miraculous incarnation was the

commencement of Christ's work upon the earth, so the glorious ascension was the conclusion of it. But the ascension, though the conclusion of Christ's work upon the earth, was not the end of His work. For He carried His work forward into Heaven. On earth He was our propitiation - The putter away of our sin - our propitiation with the Father. In Heaven He is our Advocate with the Father. He has gone to prepare Heaven for His people. He sits upon the throne of glory at God's right hand. And as Heaven is being prepared for His people so Christ the great Advocate pleads and prays for His Church - His blood-bought, blood-washed bride. Oh the advocacy of Christ. How much we need it friends. If you or I stand before the judgement throne of God and the devil comes and stands alongside of us and he points to me and says "that man is not of himself fit to go to Heaven." I will not be able to quarrel with him, he is right. If he says "that man is an incorrigible sinner by nature" I shall say "Amen, devil"; "an incorrigible sinner by choice", yes, faced with the choice between good and evil I have chosen evil many a time. "He is and has been an incorrigible sinner by practice," - "Quite true devil." "That man was never fit to be called to preach the Gospel." "Amen, devil you are right." "That man is not going into Heaven." "No, devil you are wrong!", because the blood of Jesus Christ God's Son cleanses me from all sin." I tell you friends that when my Advocate has entered an effectual plea for me - His precious shed blood - I shall be fully absolved. I shall never be pronounced guiltless for I am guilty. From the tip of my toe to the crown of my brow I am wounds and bruises and putrefying sores. But there is One who lives above for me to intercede.

Thank God tonight we have a Mediator between us and God, the man Christ Jesus. Thank God tonight that we have a great Advocate Who pleads at God's right hand.

What does He plead? He pleads the precious, blood that flowed in Immanuel's veins. Sinless, soul-saving, sin-destroying blood, shed at Calvary for guilty sinners such as we.

Oh thank God tonight that there is One, "We have not a great high priest that cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities." There is One who became bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, now glorified in the very presence of the Father. He stands as the great Advocate of His people and by His effectual advocacy, His intercession for His blood-bought, blood-washed bride, He keeps His true Church from fainting, defeat, decay and declension. There in the glory-land the blessed Lamb of God, bearing the wounds inflicted by men pleads His precious shed blood for the redeemed from among men.

"Where high that Heavenly temple stands
The house of God, not made with hands,
A great High Priest our nature wears,
The picture of mankind appears.

He who for men their surety stood
And poured out on earth His precious blood,
Pursues in Heaven His mighty plan,
The Saviour and the Friend of Man."

Gospels' record of Christmas events historically correct

By Professor Murray Harris

(Reprinted from the *Auckland Herald*)

In spite of what sceptics say, the Bible's four gospels can be relied on to provide an accurate transcript of history, writes MURRAY HARRIS.

James Veitch wants us to believe that the Christmas story as recorded in the gospels is simply a gripping fairy tale, a mesmerising myth with magic all of its own.

Such sceptics have always been with us. Today they attack the Christmas story, tomorrow the Easter story, next week the miracles of Jesus, and so on. There is certainly no shortage of targets for those who are bent on trying to discredit traditional Christianity.

All the attacks of these would-be iconoclasts have this in common - they assume that the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) are merely pious frauds, an uneasy mix of fact and fiction, unreliable records of the life and teaching of Jesus.

But nothing could be further from the truth. When we read the gospels, we are in the realm of rock-solid history, not of fairy tale magic. For example, when Luke introduces us to Jesus, he enables us to date the beginning of John's ministry with precision.

"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert" (Luke 3:1-2). That is, John began to preach in AD 28 and Jesus shortly thereafter.

Of course, to have dates is not to have proof that this or that event actually occurred but it does show a writer's concern for historical accuracy. Again and again Luke's reliability as an ancient historian of the highest order has been shown by inscriptional evidence throughout the Roman Empire that has been uncovered by archaeologists.

Before 1961 sceptics sometimes declared that Pontius Pilate, the Roman ruler of Judaea mentioned in all four gospels, was a figment of the writers' imagination. But in that year an inscription was found at Caesarea that establishes that Pilate was indeed the prefect or procurator of Judaea at the time of Jesus' trial. We now have multitudes of similar examples that illustrate the reliability of the four gospels.

It is said that because the gospels were written 30 to 70 years after the events that they record, they must be

distorted or fictitious accounts. But the crucial point is not the date of writing but the reliability of the sources on which the gospels were dependent.

An illustration will demonstrate the point. The best-known contemporary of Jesus was the emperor Tiberius, who ruled from AD 14 to 37. Our knowledge of his reign derives mainly from four Roman sources. The least satisfactory is actually a contemporary record written about AD 30 by the amateur historian Velleius Paterculus, whereas the most valuable sources date from some 80 to 200 years later: Tacitus (about 115), Suetonius (about 120) and Dio Cassius (about 230).

Right at the outset of his two-volume history (Luke and Acts) of Christian beginnings, Luke claims that he had carefully researched the earliest eyewitness sources - personal and literary - that were relevant to his theme. Modern historians rightly take seriously any such claim by ancient historians and treat them as innocent of error until proved guilty rather than guilty until proved innocent.

Nor can the accusation that the gospels are scripted to score theological points be sustained. True, the four gospels were not written to satisfy the curiosity of the detached historian but to induce or strengthen faith in Christ. But this theological purpose need not endanger the historical reliability of the narratives.

No historian believes that history can be written without presuppositions or purposes. There is no such thing as "uninterpreted fact." In all writing of history there is a blend of fact, interpretation and literary purpose. The gospels are no exception. But this does not amount to a bias that plays fast and loose with history.

According to Professor Veitch and some other members of the Jesus Seminar, Jesus was an itinerant Jewish sage, sharing helpful insights for living. Traditional Christianity also sees Jesus as doing this - but much more. The heart of the Christian faith is not the Sermon on the Mount but the Cross on the hill, not Jesus as a teacher of wisdom who simply gives us good advice but Jesus as the Saviour of humankind who himself provides us with a way to be reconciled to God.

But there is a real sense in which Jesus does not need to be "rescued" by anyone or from anything. He is well able to care for himself, as he has been for 2000 years. Sceptics come and go but he goes on for ever. At present they grapple with the living Spirit but they do not face him in person - yet.

Christianity's debunkers fail to find their Holy Grail

Matthew d'Ancona reviews *The Tomb of God* by Richard Andrews and Paul Schellenberger (Little Brown, 1997)

In 1886 a French country priest named Francois Berenger Saunière discovered a cache of mysterious parchments in his home village of Rennes-le-Chateau. For reasons never explained, the discovery made him fabulously rich. But it also cursed him. Saunière's closest friend - also a priest - was savagely murdered in 1897 by a man apparently looking for documents, and Saunière was visited by a mysterious stranger shortly before his sudden death 20 years later. What dark secret had he chanced on?

The mystery of Rennes-le-Chateau was made world famous in 1982 by the book *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, which claimed that the village's "treasure" was the knowledge that Christ had not died on the Cross, that his royal bloodline survived in France, and that the "Holy Grail" was not a cup but a sacred dynasty. Richard Andrews, a historian, and Paul Schellenberger, a civil engineer, have now revived this controversy, but drawn dramatically different conclusions. The village's secret, they say, is to be found buried in a mountain a few miles away from Rennes. Beneath the weathered rock of Mt Cardou, they claim, may be found no less a treasure than the body of Christ. The authors hypothesise that Jesus survived the crucifixion and ended his days in Languedoc; or, alternatively, that his remains were brought from Jerusalem to Rennes by the Knights Templar during the 12th century. The dread secret chanced upon by Saunière is that the Resurrection never happened and that the Church is built on a foundation of sand.

The cover of *The Tomb of God* breathlessly proclaims the "solution to a 2,000-year-old mystery" and its pages are full of "shocks of recognition", "stunning thoughts" and, appropriately, "small miracles". Andrews and Schellenberger seem convinced by the end of their investigation that they have found Christ's final resting place and shattered the doctrine of the Resurrection. Sadly for them, only the most credulous reader will share this confidence.

Where previous treasure hunters at Rennes have relied mainly on written sources, the authors of this book resort to geometry and code-breaking. Encrypted in Saunière's parchments, they claim, is a treasure map, an "X-marks-the-spot" for the very few (such as the Templars and the Rosicrucians) who have known how to crack the code. The same esoteric geometry can be detected, they suggest, in three paintings of which Saunière owned copies: Poussin's *Les Bergers d'Arcadie II*, *St Antony and St Paul* by David Teniers, and an anonymous *Coronation of Pope Celestine V*. Protractor and compass in hand, they finally locate the site that is also the secret. Cardou, they suggest, is really *Corps-Dieu* - the body of God.

Amid the pyramidal designs, tilting equilateral triangles and meridional lines, there are some interesting finds. The authors seem to have found some evidence

that Poussin's famous painting was tampered with - perhaps at the instigation of Louis XIV - to disguise the location it depicted. They also suggest ingeniously that the Cross of Lorraine - the centuries-old emblem that links Rene of Anjou to Charles de Gaulle - is not a crucifix but a surveying instrument, a symbol of all this arcane map-making.

Yet, after 300 pages of often baffling geometry, one is more intrigued than persuaded. Even if we accept that hermetic patterns are there to be found on the parchments and canvas, do they represent maps, or something else? How can one be sure that the code-makers were, in fact, giving directions to a holy place? "Had the process of deduction been straightforward," the authors write, "this grandest of secrets would not have stayed secret for so long". In other words, the very obscurity of their methods proves they must be right.

It is in the last part of the book, however, that the authors go wildly awry. They argue that the doctrine of the Resurrection was an invention of St Paul, and misrepresent the Gospels as Pauline propaganda designed to entrench this great lie in the minds of the first believers.

In fact, the Gospels according to St Mark and St Matthew were completed within a generation of the Crucifixion and would have been subject to stringent tests of reliability - as were all statements of witness at this time. The idea that the story of the Resurrection was a concoction of the early Church is historically illiterate.

Worse, the authors revive the old canard that Gnosticism - the heretical branch of early Christianity based on the mystical quest for revelation and self-knowledge - was the true faith, ruthlessly suppressed by the official Church. The Gnostics, such as the seers who wrote the Nag Hammadi texts unearthed in Egypt in 1945, did believe that Christ was a purely spiritual being and did reject the doctrines of Incarnation and Resurrection. But they did so for esoteric philosophical reasons, rather than because they knew for a fact that Jesus had not risen from the grave.

This is an important book, though not in the way that the authors hope. It illustrates more vividly than any work I can think of the extremes to which modern scholars are prepared to go to prove the Gospel story wrong, the lengths to which they will go to show that we are all the victims of a 2,000-year-old hoax.

The Holy Grail of the post-Enlightenment age has become the final, indisputable proof that Christianity is nonsense. But this book is not it.

Matthew d'Ancona is deputy editor (Comment) of *The Daily Telegraph*. His book *The Jesus Papyrus*, co-authored with Carsten Thiede, is published by Weidenfeld (See following page).

Caught up in a holy war

A review of *The Jesus Papyrus* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson)

“It will drive you mad,” one publisher warned. “It will take you a decade just to get started.” He was wrong - on both counts, thankfully - but I know what he meant. Learning to be a Gospel scholar in less than a year is not for the faint-hearted.

In September 1994 I was phoned by an Oxford contact. He said an extraordinary discovery had been made at the university that would transform our understanding of the Gospels and early Christianity. Was I interested? A year-and-a-half later, after thousands of miles of travel and hundreds of hours in libraries and archives, it is strange to remember that unexpectedly important telephone conversation and odder still to consider the path it took me on. Some people learn to drive in a week. I had to take on the most important question in the world in six months.

My donnish Deep Throat alerted me to three papyrus fragments of St Matthew’s Gospel owned by Magdalen College, which bear a handful of verses from its 26th chapter. The scraps - the largest of which is no bigger than a postage stamp - had been assumed to date from the 2nd century AD. Bequeathed to the college in 1901, they have spent most of this century in a sequestered? library showcase, along with other college memorabilia including Oscar Wilde’s ring and a portrait of Henrietta Maria. But in 1994, the German papyrologist, Carsten Thiede, redated them to the third quarter of the 1st century - well before the destruction of the Jewish Temple in AD 70.

In his new book *The Quest for God*, Paul Johnson describes the Magdalen papyrus as “more important” than The Dead Sea Scrolls. Why have he and others become so animated about these tiny scraps of ancient paper? Like the other Gospels, St Matthew is generally believed to be a work of folklore written late in the 1st century proclaiming a theological message rather than an historical one. But Thiede’s finding that a copy of Matthew was already circulating in the mid-Sixties AD suggested powerfully that this Gospel was a personal recollection, written by a contemporary, or near contemporary of Jesus.

The fragments, remnants of a 150-page book, are old enough to have been handled by one of the “500 brothers and sisters” who saw the resurrected Christ. Far from being a metaphor, the Resurrection described in St Matthew’s Gospel could be an eye-witness account. These fragments are arguably the most important Christian document ever found.

In the next few weeks, the book which Thiede and I have written about this remarkable manuscript will be published in seven countries. My co-author is one of the most eminent papyrus experts in the world: this book is a reflection of his life’s work and his campaign to use forensic scientific techniques to answer fundamental questions about the origins of Christianity.

For me, however, collaboration on a book about the origin of the Gospels and the historic Jesus - “the greatest, perhaps of all questions” as Enoch Powell has put it - was an intellectual rollercoaster. It was like creeping into a room of the mind in which a furious learned debate had been going on for 2,000 years. In it, one can encounter any one of the countless writers and thinkers who have had their say about the historic Jesus and the books he inspired, from Nikos Kazantzakis and Dorothy L. Sayers to Gore Vidal and A.N. Wilson. You have to speak up if you want to be heard.

You also have to be ready for a row. Thomas Hobbes understood academic sensibilities well. “Their public reputation,” he wrote, “demands that in the subject in which they teach no one should have discovered anything which they have not already discovered.” This is particularly so of biblical scholarship, where the stakes are as high as they could possibly be. To say that the first readers of St Matthew’s Gospel may have heard the very words which the Nazarene preacher spoke during his ministry - that this book was written barely a generation after the events it describes - is to issue a profound challenge to the theological establishment.

Many biblical scholars and papyrologists have applauded Thiede’s research and the state-of-the-art technology he used. But the reflex response of others has been more aggressive. So evidently threatening did the distinguished British Gospel scholar Graham Stanton find the Thiede thesis, that he published a pre-emptive attack upon the book last year entitled *Gospel Truth*, attempting (unsuccessfully) to debunk Thiede’s work on the Magdalen fragments.

The whispering campaign against Thiede in common rooms and some clerical circles has been remarkable. One clergyman I called slammed the phone down when he heard who my co-author was. I have never received so many letters about a story, often charged with religious feeling. Passions run high in this curious demi-monde, and laymen such as myself who trespass into it must have their wits about them. Already, I understand, Thiede’s opponents around the world are bracing themselves to attack our book.

Writing it did not shake my agnosticism or turn me into a fundamentalist. We do not have to accept that the Gospel is spiritually truthful just because it was written earlier and is more historically reliable than we thought. None the less, the questions remain: what *did* these people witness in Galilee that made them feel so driven to record their experiences. What was the exceptional occurrence that inspired them? No more than when I started - no more than anyone in that crowded, 2,000 year-old room - do I have the slightest idea.

The Phenomenon of Teilhard: Prophet for a New Age

by David H. Lane (Georgia, Mercer University Press, 1996), 189pp.
(ISBN 0-86554-498-0 MUP/P131)¹

Reviewed by Dr Murray Rae

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The French Jesuit palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who died in 1955, has attained, at a popular level, a quite remarkable status as a prophet delivering a vision of a new spirituality which unites human beings with one another and enables them to recognise their evolutionary destiny as participants in a divine cosmos. Although Teilhard himself claims continuity between his vision and Christian tradition there is, with only a few exceptions, very little enthusiasm for his work amongst academic theologians. His prominence is largely at a popular level, amongst post-Christian New Age sympathisers.

While a great deal has been written about Teilhard and his work, most published critiques have been written by those who are largely in agreement with his philosophical position. In contrast, David Lane offers a critique of the inadequacies and errors of Teilhard's thought, outlining both the nature and extent of its divergence from orthodox Christian faith, and giving insight into the degree to which many New Age philosophies claim inspiration from the works of this populariser of the notion of spiritual evolution.

It is a moot point, as Lane himself makes clear, whether New Age thinkers are deliberately reflecting on and extending Teilhard's thought or whether instead they are simply calling upon his name in order to give some academic respectability to their own work. Nevertheless, Lane's book clarifies the extent to which Teilhard's attempt to graft Christianity onto evolutionary theory issues in the kinds of pantheism, monism and gnosticism favoured by New Agers. There can be little doubt, as Anne Roche Muggerridge has observed and Lane abundantly confirms, that, despite his retention of the language of Christian dogma, Teilhard's religio-philosophical writings empty that language of its traditional content. His appeal, amongst Christians as well as New Agers, can be attributed as much to the power of his poetic expression as to the

mistaken perception, encouraged by Teilhard himself, that his work takes Christianity to the next step of its evolutionary development.

While Lane's analysis of Teilhard is thoroughly documented and clearly establishes the main lines of his critique, not all aspects of the argument are equally convincing. While Teilhard undoubtedly enjoys some degree of influence upon Roman Catholic theology, for instance, Lane tends to overplay that influence. He relies rather too heavily on reactionary critics while ignoring the mainstream of Catholic theology represented in such figures as Rahner, von Balthasar, Congar and Kasper. Latin American Liberation theology is also a victim of some rather sweeping critique that does not accurately reflect the orthodox commitments of the vast majority of liberation theologians. Finally, the analysis of Teilhard's work in terms of its alleged dependence on a modernist worldview is a little insecure. Again, the critique is somewhat overplayed.

Commonalities though there may be between Teilhard and some lines of Modernist thought, Teilhard's divergence from Modernism, in such aspects as his mysticism, for example, is surely quite substantial.

These criticisms should not unduly detract, however, from the valuable study of Teilhard that Lane has presented. He promises us another book offering a more comprehensive critique of Teilhard's theological and philosophical work. We can expect that work too to be carefully argued, thoroughly documented and to provide further evidence that Teilhard is a false prophet whose engaging rhetoric ought not to blind us to the erroneous nature of his theological vision. Lane is in the process of making a very important contribution to the literature on Teilhard.

¹ Available from Amazon.com (\$21.95 US, Paperback); Borders.com (\$15.37 US, Hardcover); Fatbrain.com (\$21.95 US, Paperback); 1bookstreet.com (\$19.76, Trade paperback); VarsityBooks.com (\$20.85 US), Barnes & Noble (\$17.56 US), Kingbooks (\$17.56 US) and Mercer University Press, 6316 Peake Road, Macon, Georgia 31210-3960.

Scripture scholars were challenged to find one passage in the four Gospels giving clear evidence of a date later than 50 A.D.

The Dates of the Gospels

by G. H. Duggan SM

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the *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* (May, 1997):45-50.

When were the Gospels written? Or, to frame the question more precisely, when had the Gospels arrived at the state in which we now have them? The present text, we have reason to believe, was preceded by earlier drafts. If that is so, we could not say that the Gospel of St. Mark was written in 45, as we can say, for example, that Second Corinthians was written in 55 or 56.

If we accept the Gospels as the inspired word of God, does it really matter, one might ask, when they were written? In the days when everyone accepted the traditional dating,¹ one could perhaps have dismissed the question as unimportant. But those days are long gone. Ever since Reimarus (1694-1768) sought to convict the evangelists of conscious fraud and innumerable contradictions, his rationalist followers have put the writing of the Gospels late, in order to lessen their value as sources of reliable information about the life of Christ and his teaching.

D.F. Strauss (1808-1874), in his *Life of Jesus*, (published in 1835-6), anticipated Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) in holding that the Gospels, although they contain some historical facts, were mainly mythology and were written late in the 2nd century. Similarly F.C. Baur (1792-1860), an Hegelian rationalist, held that the Gospels were written between 130 and 170. But Strauss, in the words of Giuseppe Ricciotti, “honestly confessed that his theory would collapse if the Gospels were composed during the first century.”² If they were so early, there would not be enough time for the myths to develop. Moreover, it is plain that, the nearer a document is to the facts it narrates, the more likely it is that it will be factually accurate, just as an entry in a diary is more likely to be accurate than memoirs written

forty or fifty years afterwards. John A.T. Robinson was therefore justified when he ended his book *Redating the New Testament* with the words: “Dates remain disturbingly fundamental data.”³

The current dating of the four Gospels, accepted by the biblical establishment, which includes scholars of every persuasion, is: Mark 65-70; Matthew and Luke in the 80s; John in the 90s.⁴ For much of this late dating there is little real evidence. This point was made by C.H. Dodd, arguably the greatest English-speaking biblical scholar of the century. In a letter that serves as an appendix to Robinson’s book *Redating the New Testament*, Dodd wrote: “I should agree with you that much of the late dating is quite arbitrary, even wanton, the offspring not of any argument that can be presented, but rather of the critic’s prejudice that, if he appears to assent to the traditional position of the early church, he will be thought no better than a stick-in-the-mud.”⁵

Many years earlier the same point was made by C.C. Torrey, professor of Semitic Languages at Yale from 1900 to 1932. He wrote: “I challenged my NT colleagues to designate *one* passage from any one of the four Gospels giving clear evidence of a date later than 50 A.D..... The challenge was not met, nor will it be, for there is no such passage.”⁶

In 1976, the eminent New Testament scholar, John A.T. Robinson, “put a cat among the pigeons” with his book *Redating the New Testament*, published by SCM Press. He maintained that there are no real grounds for putting any of the NT books later than 70 A.D. His main argument is that there is no clear reference in any of them to the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple which occurred on September 26th of that year.

¹ The traditional dating is given in the Douay-Rheims-Challoner version in its introduction to the Gospels: Matthew about 36; Mark about 40; Luke about 54; John about 93.

² Ricciotti, *The Life of Christ* (E.T. Alba I. Zizzamia), Bruce, Milwaukee, 1944, p. 186.

³ *Redating the New Testament*, SCM Press, London, 1976, p. 358.

⁴ Thus in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1989, D.J. Harrington puts Mark before 70; B.T. Viviani, O.P., puts Matthew between 80 and 90; R.J. Karris, O.F.M., puts Luke 80-85; PHEME Perkins puts John in the 90s.

⁵ *Redating the New Testament*, p. 360.

⁶ Quoted in J. Wenhham, *Redating Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, p. 299 note 2.

This cataclysmic event brought to an end the sacrificial worship that was the center of the Jewish religion and it should have merited a mention in the NT books if they were written afterwards. In particular, one would have expected to find a reference to the event in the Epistle to the Hebrews, for it would have greatly strengthened the author's argument that the Temple worship was now obsolete.

Robinson dated the composition of Matthew from 40 to 60, using dots to indicate the traditions behind the text, dashes to indicate a first draft, and a continuous line to indicate writing and rewriting. Similarly, he dated Mark from 45 to 60, Luke from 55 to 62, and John from 40 to 65.

Robinson's book was the first comprehensive treatment of the dating of the NT books since Harnack's *Chronologie des altchristlichen Litteratur*, published in 1897. It is a genuine work of scholarship by a man thoroughly versed in the NT text and the literature bearing on it. But it was not welcomed by the biblical establishment, and it was not refuted, but ignored. "German New Testament scholars," Carsten Thiede has written, "all but ignored *Redating the New Testament*, and not until 1986, ten years later, did Robinson's work appear in Germany, when a Catholic and an Evangelical publishing house joined forces to have it translated and put into print."

In 1987, the Franciscan Herald Press published *The Birth of the Synoptics* by Jean Carmignac, a scholar who for some years was a member of the team working on the Dead Sea Scrolls. He tells us he would have preferred "Twenty Years of Work on the Formation of the Synoptic Gospels" as a title for the book, but the publishers ruled this out as too long.

Carmignac is sure that Matthew and Mark were originally written in Hebrew. This would not have been the classical Hebrew of the Old Testament, nor that of the Mishnah (c. 200 A.D.) but an intermediate form of the language, such as the Qumran sectaries were using in the 1st century A.D.

Papias, the Bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor, who died about 130 A.D., tells us that Matthew wrote his Gospel in Hebrew, and Carmignac has made a good case for holding that the same is true of Mark. He found that this compelled him to put the composition of these Gospels much earlier than the dates proposed by the biblical establishment. He writes: "'I increasingly came to realize the consequences of my work.... The latest dates that can be admitted for Mark (and the *Collection of Discourses*) is 50, and around 55 for the *Completed Mark*; around 55-60 for Matthew; between 58 and 60 for Luke. But the earliest dates are clearly more probable: Mark around 42; *Completed Mark* around 45; (Hebrew) Matthew around 50; (Greek) Luke a little after 50."⁸

On page 87 he sets out the provisional results (some certain, some probable, others possible) of his twenty years' research and remarks that his conclusions almost square with those of J.W. Wenham.

In 1992, Hodder and Stoughton published *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke* by John Wenham, the author of a well-known grammar of New Testament Greek. Born in 1913, he is an Anglican scholar who has spent his life in academic and pastoral work. He tells us that his attention was drawn to the Synoptic Problem in 1937, when he read Dom John Chapman's book *Matthew, Mark and Luke*. He has been grappling with the problem ever since and in this book he offers his solution of the problem; but his main concern is the dates of the Synoptics.

Wenham's book received high praise from Michael Green, the editor of the series *I Believe*, which includes works by such well-known scholars as I. Howard Marshall and the late George Eldon Ladd. The book, Green writes, "is full of careful research, respect for evidence, brilliant inspiration and fearless judgement. It is a book no New Testament scholar will be able to neglect."

Green may be too optimistic. Wenham will probably get the same treatment as Robinson: not a detailed refutation, but dismissed as not worthy of serious consideration.

Wenham puts the first draft of Matthew before 42. For twelve years (30-42) the Apostles had remained in Jerusalem, constituting, in words of the Swedish scholar B. Gerhardsson, a kind of Christian Sanhedrin, hoping to win over the Jewish people to faith in Christ. Matthew's Gospel, written in Hebrew, would have had an apologetic purpose, endeavouring to convince the Jews, by citing various Old Testament texts, that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of David and the long-awaited Messiah.

The persecution of the Church in 42 by Herod Agrippa I, in which the Apostle James suffered martyrdom, put an end to those hopes. Peter, miraculously freed from prison, went, we are told "to another place" (Acts 12:17). There are grounds for thinking that this "other place" was Rome, where there was a big Jewish community and where he would be out of reach of Herod Agrippa. There, using Matthew's text, and amplifying it with personal reminiscences, he preached the gospel. When Agrippa died in 44, Peter was able to return to Palestine. After his departure from Rome, Mark produced the first draft of his Gospel, based on Peter's preaching.

Luke was in Phillipi from 49 to 55, and it was during this time that he produced the first draft of his Gospel, beginning with our present chapter 3, which records the

⁷ C.P. Thiede and M. d'Ancona, *The Jesus Papyrus*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1996, p. 45.

⁸ J. Carmignac, *The Birth of the Synoptics*, (E.T. Michael J. Wrenn) Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago, 1987, pp. 6, 61.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 99 note 29.

preaching of John the Baptist.¹⁰ It was to this Gospel, Origen explained, that St. Paul was referring when, writing to the Corinthians in 56, he described Luke as “the brother whose fame in the gospel has gone through all the churches” (2 Cor. 8:18).

We know that Luke was in Palestine when Paul was in custody in Caesarea (58-59). He would have been able to move round Galilee, interviewing people who had known the Holy Family, and probably making the acquaintance of a draft in the Hebrew of the Infancy Narrative, and so gathering material for the first two chapters of the present Gospel. In the finished text he introduced this and the rest of the Gospel with the prologue in which he assures Theophilus that he intends to write history.

There are no grounds for putting Luke’s Gospel in the early 80s as R.F. Karris does,¹¹ or, with Joseph Fitzmyer, placing it as “not earlier than 80-85.”¹²

The date of Luke’s Gospel is closely connected with that of Acts, its companion volume, for if Acts is early, then Luke will be earlier still. In 1896, Harnack put Acts between 79 and 93, but by 1911 he had come to the conclusion that “it is the highest degree probable” that Acts is to be dated before 62. If Luke does not mention the outcome of the trial of Paul, it is, Harnack argued, because he did not know, for when Luke wrote, the trial had not yet taken place.

C.J. Hemer, in his magisterial work, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, which was published posthumously in 1989, gives fifteen general indications, of varying weight but cumulative in their force, which point to a date before 70. Indeed, many of these point to a date before 65, the year in which the Neroian persecution of the Church began.¹³

In 1996, Weidenfeld and Nicholson published *The Jesus Papyrus* by Carsten Peter Thiede and Matthew d’Ancona. Thiede is Director of the Institute for Basic Epistemological Research in Paderborn, Germany, and a member of the International Papyrological Association. Matthew d’Ancona is a journalist and Deputy Editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, a London newspaper.

The book is about several papyrus fragments, and in particular three found in Luxor, Egypt, which contain passages from the Gospel of St. Matthew, and one found in Qumran, which contains twenty letters from the Gospel of St. Mark.

The three Luxor fragments - the Jesus papyrus - came into the possession of the Reverend Charles Huleatt, the Anglican chaplain in that city, who sent them in 1901 to Magdalen College, Oxford, where he

had graduated in 1888. They did not attract scholarly attention until 1953, when Colin H. Roberts examined them. He dated them as belonging to the late 2nd century. Then in 1994, they came to the notice of C.P. Thiede, who suspected that they might be much older than Roberts thought. Examining them with a confocal laser scanning microscope, and comparing them with the script in a document dated July 24, 66, he came to the conclusion that the fragments should be dated as belonging to the middle of the first century.

The Qumran fragment is small - 3.3 cm 2.3 cm - an area that is slightly larger than a postage stamp. It contains twenty letters, on five lines, ten of the letters being damaged. It is fragment no. 5 from Cave 7 and it is designated 7Q5. A similar fragment from the same Cave - 7Q2 - has one more letter - twenty-one as against twenty, on five lines. The identification of this fragment as Baruch (or the Letter of Jeremiah) 6:43-44 has never been disputed.

In 1972 Fr. José O’Callaghan, S.J., a Spanish papyrologist, declared that the words on 7Q5 were from the Gospel of St. Mark: 6:52-53. This identification was widely questioned, but many papyrologists rallied to his support, and there are good reasons for thinking that O’Callaghan was right. Thiede writes: “In 1994, the last word on this particular identification seemed to have been uttered by one of the great papyrologists of our time, Orsolina Montevicchi, Honorary President of the International Papyrological Association. She summarized the results in a single unequivocal sentence: ‘I do not think there can be any doubt about the identification of 7Q5.’”¹⁴ This implies that St. Mark’s Gospel was in being some time before the monastery at Qumran was destroyed by the Romans in 68.

Those who object that texts of the Gospels could not have reached such out of the way places as Luxor or Qumran as early as the 60s of the first century do not realize how efficient the means of communication were in the Empire at that time. Luxor was even then a famous tourist attraction, and, with favourable winds a letter from Rome could reach Alexandria in three days - at least as quickly as an airmail letter in 1996. Nor was Qumran far from Jerusalem, and we know that the monks took a lively interest in the religious and intellectual movements of the time.

New Testament scholars dealing with the Synoptic Gospels will obviously have to take more notice of the findings of the papyrologists than they have so far been prepared to do, however painful it may be to discard received opinions.

¹⁰ Robinson suggests that this may be the case, *op. cit.* p. 282 note 142.

¹¹ R.J. Karris, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 670.

¹² Richard Dillon and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Prentice-Hall International, London, 1968, Vol. 2, p. 165.

¹³ J. Wenham, *op. cit.*, pp. 225-226.

¹⁴ C.P. Thiede and M. d’Ancona, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

When was St. John's Gospel written?

That John, the son of Zebedee, and one of the Apostles, wrote the Gospel that bears his name, was established long ago, on the basis of external and internal evidence, by B.F. Westcott and M.J. Lagrange, O.P., and their view, though not universally accepted, has not really been shaken.

St. Irenaeus, writing in 180, tells us that John lived until the reign of the Emperor Trajan, which began in 98. From this some have inferred that John wrote his Gospel in the 90s. But this inference is obviously fallacious. The majority of modern scholars do indeed date the Gospel in the 90s, but a growing number put it earlier, and Robinson mentions seventeen, including P. Gardner-Smith, R.M. Grant and Leon Morris, who favour a date before 70. To them we could add Klaus Berger, of Heidelberg, who puts it in 66. Robinson decisively refutes the arguments brought forward by Raymond Brown and others to establish a later date, viz. the manner of referring to "the Jews," and the reference to excommunication in chapter 9.¹⁵ He adds: "There is nothing in the Gospel that suggests or presupposes that the Temple is already destroyed or that Jerusalem is in ruins - signs of which calamity are inescapably present in any Jewish or Christian literature that can with any certainty be dated to the period 70-100."¹⁶

Robinson also points out that John, when describing the cure of the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda, tells us that this pool "is surrounded by five porticos, or covered colonnades" (5:2). Since these porticos were destroyed in 70, John's use of the present tense - "is" - seems to imply that the porticos were still in being when he wrote: "Too much weight," he admits, "must not be put on this - though it is the only present tense in the context; and elsewhere (4:6; 11:18; 18:1; 19:41), John assimilates his topographical description to the tense of the narrative."¹⁷

This article will have served its purpose if it has encouraged the reader to consider seriously the evidence for an early date for the Gospels, refusing to be overawed by such statements as that "the majority of modern biblical scholars hold" or that "there is now a

consensus among modern biblical scholars" that the Gospels are to be dated from 65 to 90 A.D.

The account I have given of the writing of the Synoptic Gospels is categorical in style, but it is presented only as a likely scenario. However, it would seem to be more likely than one based on the assumption that among the Jews, a literate people it was thirty years or more before anyone wrote a connected account of the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.

"I do not wish," C.S. Lewis once said to a group of divinity students, "to reduce the skeptical element in your minds. I am only suggesting that it need not be reserved exclusively for the New Testament and the Creeds. Try doubting something else."¹⁸ This something else, I suggest could include the widely accepted view that the Gospels were written late.

It will be easier to do this if the reader is acquainted with the judgement of the eminent jurist, Sir Norman Anderson, who describes himself as "an academic from another discipline who has browsed widely in the writings of contemporary theologians and biblical scholars." At times, he is, he tells us, "astonished by the way in which they handle their evidence, by the presuppositions and *a priori* convictions with which some of them clearly (and even, on occasion, on their own admission) approach the documents concerned, and by the positively staggering assurance with which they make categorical pronouncements on points which are, on any showing, open to question, and on which equally competent colleagues take a diametrically opposite view."¹⁹

Reverend George H. Duggan, SM, is a New Zealander. After earning his S.T.D. at the Angelicum in Rome, he taught philosophy for fifteen years at the Marist seminary, Greenmeadows, and then was rector in turn of a university hall of residence and Marist tertianship. He is now living in retirement at St. Patrick's College, Silverstream. He is author of *Evolution and Philosophy* (1949), *Hans Kung and Reunion* (1964), *Teilhardism and the Faith* (1968), and *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* (1987). His last article in HPR appeared in October 1992.

¹⁵ Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 272-285.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

¹⁸ "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism" in *Christian Reflections*, Geoffrey Bles, London, 1967, p. 164.

¹⁹ *A Lawyer Among Theologians*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1973, p. 15.

Appendix A

Books from ColCom Press, 20 Tui Grove, Pahia Ph. 09-402-8071

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