

The Quest

Rev. Dr. Judith E Wright

12/7/25

I have long wondered, and perhaps you have, too,
about who Jesus of Nazareth really was.

As we enter into this holy holiday season
it seems like a good time to ponder “Who was Jesus, really?”
And, in truth, in our New Testament class here at UUSL
we have been recently studying
about the scholarship available on the Jesus of history.

So, I want to share with you this morning some recent findings
about the quest for the historical Jesus.

Importantly I want to stress that this quest
does not negate in any way one’s faith in Jesus –
whatever beliefs and faith we may hold about Him.

Moving beyond how Jesus is portrayed
by the almost 2.6 billion Christians around the world
who profess faith in him today,

I want us to search for the historical evidence of Jesus,
not based on faith, but on serious biblical scholarship.

When we look at the vast array of different portrayals of Jesus-
across time since the 1st century Palestine up to today,
how can we get behind the myriad versions of Jesus to see

what he was really like as a human being?

One approach scholars have used is by looking for sources solely within the first one hundred years after his death. What was written about him then?

Within this time frame, three primary sources have emerged:

Pagan, Jewish, and Christian.

Most of our sources from the past are literary, that is, they are texts written by authors who describe Jesus' life.

But such literary sources are not necessarily reliable.

They were written decades after Jesus' life.

Unfortunately, literary accounts of Jesus

within one hundred years following his death,

are most likely not derive from direct, lived, experiences with him.

Such accounts, literary accounts, are not from eyewitnesses,

but by authors reporting what they have learned from oral traditions or what they themselves created as expressions of their Christian faith,

and the Christian traditions that had arisen in the early Church.

While many of us may have a picture of Jesus being well-known during his lifetime, - perhaps from our childhood or from movies about Jesus, or books we've read, - his life was not well known at all in ancient times.

Dr. Bart Ehrman, biblical scholar, author of *The New Testament, A Historical Account*, writes: *Given the effect that Jesus has had on history ever since his death, one might expect that his life made an enormous impact on the society of his day. – like a comet striking the earth.*

***But if the historical record is any indication, Jesus scarcely made an impact at all, - less like a comet striking the earth than a stone being thrown into the ocean.*¹**

For example, Pagan sources provide us with very little knowledge of the life of Jesus.

Out of the vast amount of pagan material available to us today, only two pagan sources are known that mention Jesus at all.

In 112 AD, Pliny the Younger, the Roman governor of what today is modern Turkey mentions a group who are followers of “Christ, whom they worship as a God.”²

And the Roman historian Tacitus gives a lengthier reference in his history of Rome,

where he describes the Emperor Nero scapegoating Christians for the fires in Rome.

Tacitus writes of Christians as “the hated of the human race.”

He relates that Christians were followers of “Christ” who he notes was crucified under Pontius Pilate.

That’s it for Pagan sources.

Within Jewish sources, the main source is Flavius Josephus, a Jewish aristocrat who was a general against the Roman troops during the Roman seizure on the Temple in Jerusalem (66-70 AD).

Josephus made a suicide pact with his troops, who agreed they would draw lots to see who would commit suicide next.

Josephus drew one of the two last lots.

He did not commit suicide, but persuaded the other man as well to surrender to the Romans.

¹ The Great Courses. Bart D. Erhman. *The New Testament*. Course Guide. Chantilly, Virginia: The Teaching Company, 2000, p. 58.

² Letter 10 to Emperor Trajan

He was taken to Rome, where he then became a famous court historian under Emperor Vespasian. He wrote a lengthy account of the Jewish Wars, and about 20 years later, a 20-volume work on the history of Jews, called *Jewish Antiquities*.

Jesus is not mentioned in *The Jewish Wars*, but he is mentioned in *Jewish Antiquities*.

One reference tells us that Jesus was called messiah by some, and that he had a brother named James.

In a lengthier account³, Josephus writes that Jesus “was known to be a wise man who did spectacular deeds and had a following among both Jews and Greeks.”

This reference also says that Jesus was brought up on charges by the Jewish leaders, appeared before Pontius Pilate, and his followers formed a community that continued to thrive.”

This second entry by Josephus may have been altered during the Middle Ages by a Christian scribe, so it may or may not be the authentic writing of Josephus.

Our third and best sources for uncovering the life of Jesus, the man, are the Christian Gospels in the New Testament.

The Gospels outside of the New Testament were written too late, and often are filled with legendary material. ⁴

The writings of Paul are not helpful, as well,

³ Book XVIII of Antiquities.

⁴ Gospels of Peter and Thomas

as they are concerned more about faith in Jesus' death and resurrection, than in telling us about who Jesus was as a man.

It's interesting to know that there have been four periods in the quest of scholars in their search for the historical Jesus. The first period was before 1778, when the Four Gospels were interpreted solely to support faith and doctrine. There was no distinction made between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history.

Then, came the Enlightenment which provided the intellectual search for a serious study of the Four Gospels.

Almost simultaneously, there arose an interest in deeper study of the Four Gospels and a separate search for the historical Jesus. Thus, arose the Old Quest period (1778-1905).

These scholars did not look for Jesus the man in the traditional creeds, nor in faith in the Four Gospels.

They sought to understand both the religion and personality of Jesus himself. Within this period Jesus was seen not so much as savior, but as a teacher and example of goodness.

This period stressed not so much faith in but the faith of Jesus as he taught the ancient command to love God and one's neighbor.

The numerous, varied theological and philosophical writings of this Old Quest period ended with the writing of Albert Schweitzer's book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 1906.

This third period is called No Quest.

Schweitzer claimed that the Old Quest writers had remade Jesus into the likeness of their own philosophical and theological ideas.

Schweitzer also argued that there was a discontinuity between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history.

During this period of No Quest, some scholars stated that

There was no longer any reason to continue to search for the Jesus of history.

This no quest attitude stemmed from a *growing realization that it may be methodologically impossible to write a life of Jesus*

*and theologically unnecessary to base Christian faith on the results of historical research.*⁵

Some even denied that a historical figure of Jesus ever lived.

Others felt it was impossible to write an accurate biography of Jesus.

The nature of faith was all that was needed.

This period of No Quest ended in 1953 with the advent of the fourth Period, the New Quest, which continues to this present day.

The scholar Ernest Kaseman in 1953 challenged the No Quest stance, by arguing that there was not a discontinuity between Christ and Jesus, but a continuity – Jesus as man and as Christ were connected to one another.

These scholars believe that it is *methodically possible within limits to reach certain historical conclusions about Jesus, especially about his message.*⁶

*They also believe that it is theologically necessary to seek these historical conclusions as a reminder to Christian faith that Jesus its Lord was indeed human.*⁷

⁵ Tatum, p. 73

⁶ Tatum, p.75

⁷ Ibid,

**These modern scholars see the Gospels as faith documents,
not biographical stories of the life of Jesus.**

**They developed certain principles or criteria
to apply to scripture to discern whether or not
a piece of scripture is an authentic teaching of Jesus.**

What are some of the criteria?

**First, scholars seek to have writings about the historical Jesus
be found in more than one source, and such sources
are independent of each other.**

Such sources are more likely to be authentic.

**For example, stories of Jesus being with John the Baptist
are found in a number of independent sources.**

**And Jesus is said to have brothers, including James, in different, independent
sources.**

Jesus tells parables and likens the Kingdom of God to seeds

In the Gospel of Mark, Q and the Gospel of Thomas.

**Jesus is said to have been put on trial and crucified in a number of independent
texts as well.⁸**

**This criteria of at least two independent sources can not
be used to show what is inaccurate.**

**For example, the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes and the Parable of the good
Samaritan occur only in one source that we know of today.**

This does not prove that Jesus did not say these teachings.

It proves that we can not say with some accuracy that he did.

⁸ Mark, John, the Gospel of Peter, Josephus, and Tacitus.

A second criteria developed by biblical scholars in the New Quest maintains that traditions ascribed to Jesus in the Four Gospels that do not appear to advance the vested interests of Christians who were writing the stories about Jesus also may be authentic tellings of the historical Jesus.

For example, the tradition of Jesus as a carpenter is possibility because of his low status. A Jewish Messiah was not supposed to be of low status.

Another example of this criteria is that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, whom many would consider inferior to Jesus.

How could the disciple spiritually baptize the master?

Thus, this is also most likely true.

The crucifixion is another example. In ancient times crucifixion meant that the person crucified was a criminal. How could the Messiah be a criminal? Thus, most likely Jesus was indeed crucified as a criminal.

A third criteria established by biblical scholars is that of contextual credibility,

A writing has to be historically accurate to 1st century Palestine Judaism.

With this criteria, we can rule out The Gospel of Thomas as being the authentic sayings of Jesus

because it was written in the 2nd century and is Gnostic in content.

Importantly for those scholars who believe that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet, who believed in a dualistic world view of the forces of good and evil, this third criteria is very important in establishing their viewpoint.

So, what does this quest for the historical Jesus say

to us today as Unitarian Universalists?

Some of us have a profound faith in Jesus as both God and human.

I suspect others of us do not require belief in Jesus as divine savior.

Yet many of us find inspiration in his life and teachings.

Additionally, the stories in the Gospels are filled with miracles performed by Jesus.

We cannot prove these stories are true or not.

**But what we can say is a true miracle is that a tiny band
of believers in ancient Jewish Palestine began the religion of Christianity
that miraculously took hold, and today is a major world religion.**

**And we can also say that given the scholarship of the New Quest
we have gained a closer picture of who the man Jesus was.**

**As we move through this season of Advent
towards celebrating the birth of Jesus,
let us be grateful for all who have worked to uncover for us
Jesus, the man, whose story most likely is one
that teaches us all to love what is Holy, to love our neighbor as ourselves, to
resist what is harmful, and to help those in need.**

Peace and love to you.

