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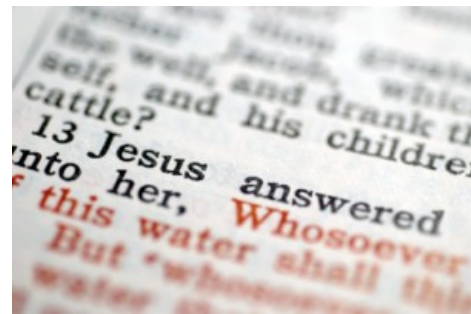
Do We Really Know Jesus? Adam Gopnik and the Gospels

The Christian faith stands or falls on the truthfulness of the four Gospels. There is no way around this fact. Our choice is nothing less than between the Jesus who merely fascinates and the Jesus who saves.

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This much is clear — Jesus Christ just will not be ignored. Even the most secularized classes, those whom Friedrich Schleiermacher called the “cultured despisers of religion,” cannot leave Jesus alone. Not even *The New Yorker*.

The latest edition of *The New Yorker* includes a review essay by Adam Gopnik in which he considers several recent books dealing with the historical Jesus, but also with the larger issue of what we can actually know about Jesus and why it matters.



Gopnik, raised in the context of secular Judaism, tells his readers that “the people who read and study the Gospels for a living” are “nearly certain” that the Gospels cannot be trusted as history. Evidently, he has been taking a serious look at the strange world of academic New Testament scholarship, where the liberal academy has virtually jettisoned any notion that the Bible was divinely inspired. Instead, they assume the Bible should be considered nothing more than a very influential example of ancient Near Eastern literature.

Indeed, as represented by groups such as the “Jesus Seminar,” the academic consensus among the secularized scholars is that the New Testament should be assumed to be propaganda offered by the earliest Christians. The approach of the Jesus Seminar was once considered radical. Now, its basic methodology has been assumed by liberal seminaries and divinity schools. The Jesus Seminar famously voted with colored beads on statements of Jesus from the Gospels, arguing that these statements ranged from very likely actually said by Jesus (red bead) to not at all likely said by Jesus (black bead).

The newer critics of the Bible generally do not use colored beads, but they employ the same assumptions about the New Testament in general and the four Gospels in particular. They are assertively certain that Jesus did not say much of anything that is attributed to him in the Gospels. In other words, their “red letter” edition of the New Testament uses very little red ink.

Gopnik understands exactly what is going on:

This curious criterion governs historical criticism of Gospel texts: the more improbable or “difficult” an episode or remark is, the likelier it is to be a true record, on the assumption that you would edit out all the weird stuff if you could, and keep it in only because the tradition is so strong that it can’t plausibly be excluded. If Jesus says something nice, then someone is probably saying it for him; if he says something nasty, then probably he really did.

Albert Schweitzer described the tendency of such scholars to look into the well of history and see their own faces. Perhaps we should not be surprised that postmodern academics look at the Gospels and find their way to a Jesus who acts and sounds remarkably like — take a guess — a postmodern academic.

Gopnik has written an elegant and substantial essay, and he covers a great deal of ground. Along the way, he draws from recent works by Diarmaid MacCulloch, Paul Johnson, Paul Verhoeven, Bart Ehrman, L. Michael White, John

Dominic Crossan, Philip Pullman, and Philip Jenkins.

MacCulloch writes as an historian who is no longer a believing Christian. Paul Verhoeven, Hollywood director of movies like *RoboCop*, *Total Recall*, and *Basic Instinct*, has just written a book that is right out of the Jesus Seminar pattern. Bart Ehrman and John Dominic Crossan may well be the two most influential scholars of recent years whose passion appears to be stripping the New Testament of any supernaturalism. It may be that Marcus Borg should be added to Ehrman and Crossan to make a trio of the most influential Gospel critics.

Philip Pullman, known for the “His Dark Materials” trilogy and his ardent atheism, has taken his own shot at retelling the Gospels. Philip Jenkins joins those arguing that the church’s confessional formula about Jesus was established at Nicaea in the year 325 in the service of imperial politics, not theology. Among those mentioned by Gopnik, only Paul Johnson writes as a believer — in his case as a traditionalist Roman Catholic.

Gopnik brings his own expertise as an author to his essay. He sees what many of the authors he considers also see — that the Gospels are richly textured literature embedded with many surprises. As he notes, in the four Gospels, “Jesus’ morality has a brash, sidewise indifference to conventional ideas of goodness. His pet style blends the epigrammatic with the enigmatic.” Further, “There is a wild gaiety about Jesus’ moral teachings that still leaps off the page.”

So, who was Jesus? “Jesus clearly isn’t a hedonist or an epicurean, but he clearly isn’t an ascetic, either: he feeds the multitudes rather than instructing them how to go without.” That is a powerful and revealing assessment — and one that fits the actual words of the Gospels.

But, in the end, it is clear that Gopnik sides with the skeptics. He seems to read the Gospels in the same vein as Crossan and Ehrman, and to read church history like MacCulloch and Jenkins. He also likes at least some of what he finds in Philip Pullman and Paul Verhoeven. The Jesus he finds in the Gospels is not the Son of God or Savior. He remains, nonetheless, fascinated by the figure of Jesus. He likes the path taken by “open-minded theologians,” who see the Gospels as offering “an antique mystery in a story open only as the tomb is open, with a mystery left inside, never to be entirely explored or explained.”

Believing Christians will read Adam Gopnik’s essay with a mixture of interest and grief. If nothing else, his essay (along with almost all the books he mentions) reveals where we must go if we surrender the divine inspiration of the New Testament. Once we deny that the Bible is inspired by God, totally true, and to be trusted in every way, we are left with the Bible as nothing more than a literary project. Thus, the Bible is reduced to a fascinating example of ancient Near Eastern literature. The Gospels are reduced to mutually-dependent literary inventions, and Paul’s writings are easily dismissed as the rantings of a sexually-repressed man fueled by a convert’s zeal. If those characterizations ring familiar, you must feel right at home at the meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature.

The postmodern reduction of the Bible leaves us with no real knowledge of Jesus. Philip Pullman’s version is just as likely as Paul Johnson’s — just make your choice.

In other words, Adam Gopnik’s essay is a brilliant reminder of why our presuppositions about the Bible are so important. If we try to read the Bible as just an ancient book, we have no real knowledge of Jesus — just an open-ended mystery. If, on the other hand, the Bible is truly the Word of God, we *do* know who Jesus is and what that can mean for us — nothing less than the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting.

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I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Adam Gopnik, “[What Did Jesus Do? Reading and Unreading the Gospels](#),” *The New Yorker*, May 24, 2010.

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