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INTRODUCTION

SEARCHING FOR THE REAL JESUS

Much of the history of Christianity has been devoted to domesticating Jesus, to reducing that elusive, enigmatic, paradoxical person to dimensions we can comprehend, understand, and convert to our own purposes. So far it hasn't worked.

Catholic priest Andrew Greeley¹

Can anybody show me the real Jesus?

from a song by Canadian rock band downhere²

At first glance, there was nothing unusual about Evergreen Cemetery in Oakland, California. There were the expected rows upon rows of grave markers, some festooned with flowers, others with small American flags hanging limp in the still winter air. I meandered through the property and soon came upon a gently sloping hillside—and there, standing sentry over a wide expanse of grass, was a solitary three-foot headstone. Its stunning inscription: “In Memory of the Victims of the Jonestown Tragedy.”

Beneath the ground were the remains of more than four hundred Californians who had followed the siren call of self-proclaimed messiah Jim Jones down to the jungles of South America to build a paradise of racial equality and harmony. Believing his creed of love and equal opportunity, beguiled by his charisma and eloquence, they put their complete faith in this magnetic visionary.

His most audacious boast: he was the reincarnation of Christ—the *real* Jesus.³

The pilgrims, intent on living out Jones's doctrine of peace and tolerance, arrived in a remote rainforest of Guyana, only to realize over time that he was building a hellish enclave of repression and violence. When a visiting U.S. congressman and a contingent of journalists threatened him with exposure, Jones ordered them ambushed and killed before they could leave on a private plane.

Then Jones issued his now-infamous command: all of his followers must drink cyanide-laced punch. Syringes were used to squirt the poison into the mouths of infants. Those who refused were shot. Soon more than nine hundred men, women, and children were in the contorted throes of death under the scorching sun, and Jones ended his own life with a bullet to the head.

The bodies of 409 victims, more than half of them babies and children, were shipped back to California in unadorned wooden caskets and buried at Evergreen Cemetery. In the nearly thirty years since the Jonestown tragedy, few have come to visit.

On this day, I stood in silence and reverence. As I shook my head at this senseless loss, one thought coursed through my mind: *Beliefs have very real consequences.*

These victims believed in Jones. They subscribed to his utopian vision. His dogma became their own. But ultimately the truth is this: Faith is only as good as the one in whom it's invested.

WHO IS JESUS?

Search for *Jesus* at Amazon.com and you'll find 175,986 books—and, yes, now one more. Google his name and in a blink of the eye you'll get 165 *million* references. Invite people to tell you who they think the *real* Jesus is—as Jon Meacham and Sally Quinn did at *Newsweek's* website “On Faith” just before Christmas in 2006—and you'll soon be buried in an avalanche of wildly disparate opinions, as these eye-opening excerpts demonstrate:

- “We don't know many historical facts concerning Jesus, but apparently he was a rabbi who was an example of compassion. Since then he has been exploited by Christians, particularly Americans.”
- “Jesus is real, in the sense that he exists for those who want him to exist.”
- “By today's standards, Jesus was a liberal.”
- “Jesus was one of a thousand Jews murdered by the Romans for threatening Roman rule.”
- “Jesus is my personal Higher Power. He helps me stay sober one day at a time.”
- “Jesus was Everyman. His name could have as well been Morris. Too bad he was in male form this time around. Better luck next time.”

- “I believe Jesus is the Son of God. I believe I am a Son of God.”
- “Even strict Christians consider Jesus the Son of God only in a symbolic way.”
- “Jesus was an enlightened being.”
- “Jesus is the Son of God who was born, died, and rose from the dead to save us from our sins. He lives today, and he will come to earth again.”
- “It’s not even obvious that Jesus was a historical figure. If he was, the legends around him—a Son of God who was born of a virgin, worked miracles, and rose from the dead—were common stories in the ancient Near East. The myths about Jesus are not even original.”
- “Jesus is about as ‘real’ as Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, or King Arthur.”
- “Jesus was a man who was nailed to a tree for saying how great it would be to be nice to people for a change.”
- “So who was Jesus? A highly moral person, much like Teresa of Calcutta. No less, but no more.”
- “Jesus was an apocalyptic preacher who thought God would intervene to save Israel from Roman rule and himself from death. God didn’t do either. Jesus died disappointed, and that’s that. Anything more is fantasy.”
- “Honestly—I don’t care about Jesus. Who or what he was, is, or isn’t doesn’t affect me.”
- “There is no separation or distinction between where God leaves off and where we begin. We are all One, all Divine, just like Jesus.”
- “Jesus was a man we should pity more than revile or worship. He suffered from what contemporary psychologists now know to be delusions of grandeur, bipolar disorder, and probably acute schizophrenia.”
- “Jesus is a fairy tale for grown-ups. Unfortunately, he’s a fairy tale that leads people to bomb clinics, despise women, denigrate reason, and embrace greed. Any behavior can be justified when you have Jesus as your eternal ‘Get out of Jail’ card.”
- “Who was Jesus? An apocalyptic prophet who bet wrong and died as a result. He should be ignored, not celebrated.”⁴

As you can see, after two thousand years there’s not exactly a consensus about the founder of Christianity.

“Everyone claims their Jesus is the ‘real one,’ the only authentic Christ unperverted by secular society or religious institutions,” said Chris Suellentrop, who writes for *Slate* and the *New York Times*. “The emergence of Jesus as a computer programmer in *The Matrix* shows how he can be reinvented for any age, even the future.”⁵

Jesus has been called an intellectual who spouted pithy aphorisms; a Mediterranean cynic leading a wandering band of proto-hippies; an androgynous feminist and ambassador of Sophia, the female embodiment of divine wisdom; a clever messianic pretender; a gay magician; a peasant revolutionary; and a Jewish Zen master. Asked one philosopher:

So who was Jesus? Was he a wandering *hasid*, or holy man, as Géza Vermès and A. N. Wilson propose? Was he a “peasant Jewish cynic,” as John Dominic Crossan alleges? Was he a magician who sought to lead Israel astray, as the Talmud holds? Was he a self-proclaimed prophet who died in disillusionment, as Albert Schweitzer maintained? Was he some first-century personage whose purported miracles and divinity were mere myths or fabrications by the early church—as David F. Strauss, Rudolf Bultmann, and John Hick suggest? Or was he, as the Gospels assert, “The Christ, the Son of the living God”?⁶

People who have searched for Jesus through history have often discovered exactly who they wanted to find in the first place. “In other words,” said Charlotte Allen in *The Human Christ*, “the liberal searchers found a liberal Jesus . . . the deists found a deist, the Romantics a Romantic, the existentialists an existentialist, and the liberationists a Jesus of class struggle.”⁷

Is it possible to find the *real* Jesus? That depends on how you answer a more foundational question: Are you willing to set aside your preconceptions and let the evidence take you wherever it will? And what about me—am *I* willing to do the same?

I had to honestly ask myself that question when I was an atheist and decided to investigate the identity of Jesus. And more recently, this time as a Christian, I had to face that issue squarely once again when I was confronted by six potent challenges that could undermine everything I had come to believe about him.

NOT SO FAST ...

If you had asked my opinion about Jesus when I was the legal editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, I would have given you an adamant answer: if he lived, he was undoubtedly a rabble-rousing prophet who found himself on the wrong side of the religious and political leaders of his day. Claims about his divinity clearly were manufactured by his followers long after his unfortunate demise. As an atheist, I ruled out any possibility of the virgin birth, miracles, the resurrection, or anything else supernatural.

It was my agnostic wife's conversion to Christianity and the ensuing positive changes in her character that prompted me to use my legal training and journalism experience to systematically search for the real Jesus. After nearly two years of studying ancient history and archaeology, I found the evidence leading me to the unexpected verdict that Jesus is the unique Son of God who authenticated his divinity by returning from the dead. It wasn't the outcome I was necessarily seeking, but it was the conclusion that I believe the evidence persuasively warranted.

For my book *The Case for Christ*, in which I retraced and expanded upon my original journey, I sat down with respected scholars with doctorates from Brandeis, Cambridge, Princeton, the University of Chicago, and elsewhere, peppering them with the tough questions that had vexed me as a skeptic. I walked away all the more persuaded that the cumulative evidence established the deity of Jesus in a clear and convincing way.⁸

But not so fast ...

That book was published in 1998. Since then the Jesus of historic Christianity has come under increasingly fierce attack. From college classrooms to bestselling books to the Internet, scholars and popular writers are seeking to debunk the traditional Christ. They're capturing the public's imagination with radical new portraits of Jesus that bear scant resemblance to the time-honored picture embraced by the church.

In 2003, Dan Brown's wildly successful novel *The Da Vinci Code* provided a flashpoint for the controversy, bringing jaw-dropping allegations about church history and Jesus' identity into the public's consciousness through an intoxicating brew of fact and fiction. But the issues go much deeper.

For many people, their first exposure to a different Jesus came with extensive news coverage of the Jesus Seminar, a group of highly skeptical professors who captivated the media's attention in the 1990s by using colored beads to vote on what Jesus really said. The group's conclusion: fewer than one in five sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels actually came from him. In the Lord's Prayer, the Seminar was confident only of the words "Our Father." There were similar results when the participants considered which deeds of Jesus were authentic.

What made the Jesus Seminar unique was that it bypassed the usual academic channels and instead enthusiastically took its findings directly to the public. "These scholars have suddenly become concerned—to the point of being almost evangelistic—with shaping public opinion about Jesus with their research," said one New Testament expert.⁹

They found a ready audience in many Americans who were receptive to a new Jesus. With the public's appetite whetted, publishers began pumping out scores of popular books touting various revisionist theories about the "real" Christ. At the same time, the Internet spawned a proliferation of websites and blogs that offer out-of-the-box speculation about the Nazarene. An equal-opportunity phenomenon, the World Wide Web doesn't discriminate between sober-minded scholars and delusional crackpots, leaving visitors without a reliable filter to determine what's trustworthy and what's not.

Meanwhile, college classrooms, increasingly dominated by liberal faculty members who grew up in the religiously suspicious 1960s, provided a fertile field for avant-garde beliefs about Jesus and Christianity. According to a landmark 2006 study by professors from Harvard and George Mason universities, the percentage of atheists and agnostics teaching at U.S. colleges is three times greater than in the population as a whole. More than half of college professors believe the Bible is "an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts," compared to less than one-fifth of the general population.¹⁰

In recent years, six major challenges to the traditional view of Jesus have emerged out of this milieu. They are among the most powerful and prevalent objections to creedal Christianity that are currently circulating in popular culture. These issues have left many Christians scratching their heads, unsure how to respond, and have confused

countless spiritual seekers about who Jesus is — or whether they can come to any solid conclusions about him at all.

As someone whose road to faith was paved with painstakingly researched facts and logic, I simply could not gloss over these allegations after repeatedly encountering them the last several years. They are too central to the identity of Jesus. I had no choice but to grant them their full weight and open myself to the possibility that they could legitimately undermine the traditional understanding of Christ. For the sake of my own intellectual integrity, I needed answers.

CHALLENGE #1

Scholars Are Uncovering a Radically Different Jesus in Ancient Documents Just as Credible as the Four Gospels

Several gospels unearthed in the twentieth century, which some experts date back to the dawning of Christianity, portray Jesus far differently than Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The Gospel of Thomas, discovered sixty years ago but only now becoming widely popular, and the Gospel of Judas, whose discovery was announced with much fanfare in 2006, are among the ancient manuscripts fueling a widespread interest in Gnosticism, a movement that its proponents claim is just as valid as mainstream Christianity.

Although Gnosticism is diverse, New Testament scholar N. T. Wright says Gnostics historically have held four basic ideas in common: the world is evil, it was the product of an evil creator, salvation consists of being rescued from it, and the rescue comes through secret knowledge, or *gnosis* in Greek.¹¹ Said Wright:

This special *gnosis* is arrived at through attaining knowledge about the true god, about the true origin of the wicked world, and not least about one's own true identity. . . . What is needed, in other words, is a "revealer" who will come from the realms beyond, from the pure upper spiritual world, to reveal to the chosen few that they have within themselves the spark of light, the divine identity hidden deep within.¹²

For many Gnostics, that revealer is Jesus of Nazareth, who in their view isn't the savior who died for the sins of the world but, rather, was the impartor of secret wisdom who divulged the truth about the divine nature within each of us. Thus, Gnostics aren't as interested in historical claims about Jesus as they are in the private

teachings that he supposedly passed along to his most trustworthy followers.

“Gnostic writers tend to view the virgin birth, the resurrection, and other elements of the Jesus story not as literal, historical events but as symbolic keys to a ‘higher’ understanding,” said journalist Jay Tolson in his *U.S. News and World Report* cover story, “In Search of the Real Jesus.”¹³

Tolson says that in Princeton religion professor Elaine Pagels’ portrayal of them,

the Gnostics come across as forerunners of modern spiritual seekers wary of institutional religion, literalism, and hidebound traditions. Free of sexism and paternalism and unburdened by an emphasis on guilt and sin, the Gnostics’ highly esoteric and intellectual approach to the sacred was one that even enlightened skeptics could embrace.¹⁴

Canada has already seen the birth of its first Gnostic church.¹⁵ In the United States, “there is a growing, if disconnected and unorganized, Gnostic movement,” said Richard Cimino and Don Lattin in their survey of American spirituality.¹⁶ Even if people don’t identify themselves as Gnostic, many are freely grafting certain aspects of Gnosticism into their own spirituality. The reason is these elements fit well with the American values of independence and individuality. Said Cimino and Lattin:

Today’s experiential spirituality shares with Gnosticism a need to know God personally without the intermediaries of church, congregation, priests, and scripture. The Gnostic factor can be found in the growth of occult and esoteric teachings and movements, where access to supernatural secrets are available through individual initiation and experience rather than through publicly revealed texts or doctrine.¹⁷

So which picture of Jesus is true: Is he the one-and-only Son of God who won salvation for humankind through his atoning death on the cross, or is he “an avatar or voice of the oversoul sent to teach humans to find the sacred spark within”?¹⁸ This isn’t a matter of merely adding some new brushstrokes or shading to the traditional portrait of Jesus; instead, it’s an entirely different canvas and a whole new likeness.

At the heart of this controversy is the reliability of the Gnostic gospels that have been uncovered over the past six decades, many of which were republished in 2007 as a new collection called *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*.¹⁹ Do they tell a more accurate story about Jesus than the church's official collection of documents that make up the New Testament? Do they support the claims that Gnosticism flourished in the first century when Christianity was being formed? More insidiously, has the church tried to suppress the inconvenient truths contained in the Gnostic texts? If I wanted to discover the "real" Jesus, I simply couldn't avoid this potentially explosive minefield of interrelated issues.

CHALLENGE #2

The Bible's Portrait of Jesus Can't Be Trusted Because the Church Tampered with the Text

While popular books point to the Gnostic gospels as revealing the "real" Jesus who has been suppressed by the church, the New Testament's portrayal of him has come under a withering assault by an evangelical-turned-agnostic who is recognized as one of the world's leading authorities on the transmission of the New Testament.

Bart D. Ehrman's surprise bestseller, the provocatively titled *Misquoting Jesus*, has shaken the faith of many Christians and planted seeds of skepticism in spiritual seekers by charging that the scribes who copied the New Testament through the centuries accidentally—and many times, *intentionally*—altered the manuscripts. "In some cases," Ehrman says, "the very meaning of the text is at stake."²⁰

How can the New Testament's accounts about Jesus be trusted if the manuscripts are pocked with 200,000 to perhaps 400,000 variants? Are essential teachings about Jesus in jeopardy—for instance, the Trinity and the resurrection? If the Bible contains even a single error, can any of it be trusted at all? What about the inauthentic passages that Ehrman says should never have been included in the Bible in the first place?

I knew that if I were to maintain confidence in the Jesus of the New Testament, these weren't matters that could be blithely swept aside. I would have to face Ehrman's masterfully written critique head-on.

CHALLENGE #3

New Explanations Have Refuted Jesus' Resurrection

Two recent *New York Times* bestselling books are only the latest in an escalating battle over the historicity of the resurrection—the

pivotal event that, according to Christians, authenticated the divinity of Jesus.

A new generation of aggressive atheists has fashioned fresh and potent objections to the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. At the same time, Muslim apologists, who know that undermining the resurrection casts doubt on all of Christianity, have been more and more outspoken about their belief that Jesus never died on the cross and therefore could not have conquered the grave as the New Testament claims.

In 2007, questions concerning the resurrection received widespread attention when an astounding 57 percent of Americans either saw or heard about a Discovery Channel documentary in which *Titanic* movie director James Cameron and film documentarian Simcha Jacobovici said archaeologists had discovered the tomb of Jesus and his family just south of the old city of Jerusalem.²¹ If they really had unearthed his “bone box,” or ossuary, then Jesus could not have returned bodily from the dead.

Nothing cuts to the core of Jesus’ identity like critiques of his resurrection. If the belief that he rose from the dead is a legend, a misunderstanding, or a deliberate falsehood perpetrated by his followers, then Jesus is quickly demoted from the Son of God to a failed prophet—or worse.

I could not claim to love truth and at the same time turn a blind eye toward the most serious charges against the resurrection. How strong—*really*—is the affirmative case that Jesus returned from the dead? Can the resurrection be established by using historical evidence that the vast majority of scholars in the field—including fair-minded skeptics—would accept as being true? And do any of the most current alternative theories finally succeed in putting Jesus back in his grave?

CHALLENGE #4

Christianity’s Beliefs about Jesus Were Copied from Pagan Religions

The argument is simple but powerful: a whole bevy of mythological characters were born of virgins, died violently, and were resurrected from the dead in antiquity, but nobody takes them seriously. So why should anyone give any credence to similar claims about Jesus that were obviously copied from these earlier pagan mystery religions?

This critique, popularized a century ago by German historians, has now returned with a vengeance, becoming one of the most ubiquitous objections to the historical understanding about Jesus. It has spread around the World Wide Web like a computer virus and been forcefully presented in numerous bestselling books, including one that received a prestigious award from a British newspaper.

The “parallels” appear stunning. According to proponents of this “copycat” theory, the pre-Christian god Mithras was born of a virgin in a cave on December 25, had twelve disciples, promised his followers immortality, initiated a communionlike meal, was hailed as the way, the truth, and the life, sacrificed himself for world peace, was buried in a tomb, and was resurrected on the third day.²² How could Christians possibly explain away such apparent plagiarism?

Were the supernatural qualities of Jesus merely ideas borrowed from ancient mythology and attached to the story of the Nazarene by his overzealous followers in the decades after his ignominious death? Is Jesus no more divine than Zeus? Are the reports of his resurrection no more credible than the fantastical tales of Osiris or Baal? No honest examination of the evidence for Jesus could avoid addressing the alarming theory that the followers of Jesus were nothing more than spiritual plagiarists.

CHALLENGE #5

Jesus Was an Imposter Who Failed to Fulfill the Messianic Prophecies

With its multimillion-dollar evangelistic campaign that targeted New York City, the organization Jews for Jesus put the issue squarely on the front burner of public debate in 2006: Is Jesus—or is he not—the Messiah whose coming was foretold in scores of ancient Jewish prophecies?

Counter-missionary organizations in the Jewish community quickly responded by claiming that Jesus never fulfilled those predictions and therefore cannot be the “anointed one” awaited by the Jewish people for millennia. He is, they charge, nothing less than a messianic failure because he never ushered in the world peace foretold by the prophets.

What are the real facts? What’s the best case that can be made for Jesus—and Jesus alone—matching the “fingerprint” of the long-anticipated Messiah? And are there any satisfying answers to the

sharp critiques that are being passionately argued by contemporary rabbis who reject Jesus as the Jewish Messiah? Without a doubt, these issues call the fundamental mission and credibility of Jesus and the Bible into question, and therefore they cannot in good conscience simply be glossed over.

CHALLENGE #6

People Should Be Free to Pick and Choose What to Believe about Jesus

We live in a circus-mirror culture of rampant relativism in which the very concept of truth has become pliable, history is treated with extreme skepticism, and Christianity's claim to being the only way to God is vehemently branded as the height of religious intolerance. For many postmodern people, the "real" Jesus has become whatever each individual wants him to be. Who is to say that anyone's concept of Christ is more valid than someone else's? Wouldn't that smack of the very kind of judgmentalism that Jesus himself deplored?

An increasing number of people are bypassing the dogma of traditional Christianity and creating their own belief system, rejecting tenets that seem hopelessly outdated, and accepting those that they feel are appropriate. The Jesus who emerges is generally kinder and gentler—or at least a lot more broadminded and tolerant—than the rigid and demanding version frequently found in the church. Most often, this customized Christ doesn't use the threat of hell to scare people into submission; rather, he's an affirming and loving companion who sees the good—and even the divine—in each of us.

Is the Jesus I discovered in my initial investigation merely the Jesus for me personally? Or are there objective truths about him that are binding on all people in all cultures? If history is only a matter of subjective interpretation, then can I know anything about him for sure? Is Christianity just one among many equally legitimate pathways to the divine? These questions are more than a product of idle curiosity: their answers could determine whether Jesus of Nazareth is still relevant to this and future generations.

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

I sat down for lunch with my wife at a restaurant in Irvine, California, and slid a yellow legal pad over for her to see. The six challenges

to Jesus were scrawled across the front page. Leslie glanced over them, squinting at times to make out my nearly illegible handwriting, and then looked up at me. She knew what this meant.

“You’re hitting the road again, aren’t you?” she asked.

“I have to,” I said. “I can’t ignore these objections. If any of them is true, it changes everything.”

Leslie wasn’t surprised. She was aware that I had been wrestling with some of these issues for a while. And after nearly thirty-five years of marriage, she knew that I was someone who had to pursue answers, regardless of the consequences.

My itinerary was already taking shape in my mind: for starters, I would need to book flights to Nova Scotia and Texas. I resolved to put the most probing questions to the most credible scholars I could find. At the conclusion, I was determined to reach whatever verdict was warranted by the hard evidence of history and the cool demands of reason.

Yes, I was looking for opinions, but they had to be backed up with convincing data and airtight logic — no rank speculation, no flights of faith. Like the investigations I undertook at the *Chicago Tribune*, I would have no patience for half-baked claims or unsupported assertions. There was too much hanging in the balance. As the Jonestown victims had chillingly reminded me, my faith is only as good as the one in whom it’s invested.

So why don’t you come along with me on this investigative adventure? After all, as Jesus himself cautioned, what you believe about him has very real consequences.²³ Let’s resolve at the outset to keep an open mind and follow the facts wherever they take us — even if it’s to a conclusion that challenges us on the very deepest levels.

In the end, we’ll discover together whether the Jesus of historic Christianity manages to emerge intact from the crucible of twenty-first-century skepticism.

CHALLENGE #1

“SCHOLARS ARE UNCOVERING A RADICALLY DIFFERENT JESUS IN ANCIENT DOCUMENTS JUST AS CREDIBLE AS THE FOUR GOSPELS”

For nineteen hundred years or so the canonical texts of the New Testament were the sole source of historically reliable knowledge concerning Jesus of Nazareth. In 1945, this circumstance changed.

Religion professor Stevan L. Davies¹

There's a very important historical point here, which is that in the last thirty years we have discovered real Gospels—hundreds of them—that are not the official Gospels, [but] that were part of the discussions in the early church.

Commentator Andrew Sullivan²

The rumor mill was churning. A political operative called one of my reporters with a tip that a candidate for Illinois governor had recently been detained by police after allegations that he had abused his wife. If this was true, the irony would be devastating: one of his responsibilities as the state's chief executive would be to oversee a network of shelters for battered women.

Since other news media had been alerted as well, I knew we had only a short period of time to nail down the story. I immediately assigned five reporters to pursue various angles of the investigation. We needed indisputable confirmation—preferably, a written document—before we could publish the story.

The reporters milked their sources. One of them came up with a time frame for the incident. Another got the name of the Chicago suburb

where it allegedly took place in a public parking lot. Still, we didn't have enough. The information was too vague and uncorroborated.

Finally, another reporter was able to obtain the key piece of evidence: a police report that described exactly what had happened. But there was a snag. Because no criminal charges had been filed, privacy laws dictated that all names on the report be blacked out. At first glance, it looked like there would be no way to link the candidate to the incident.

As the reporter studied the report more carefully, though, she discovered that the police had inadvertently failed to delete one reference to the person involved. Sure enough, it was the candidate's name. Still, his name was rather common. How could we be sure it was really him? Digging deeper in the report yielded the final clue: the suspect had bragged about being the mayor of a certain suburb—the same position held by the gubernatorial candidate. *Bingo!* A match.

In a dramatic confrontation in the newspaper's conference room, I peppered the candidate with questions about the incident. He steadfastly denied it ever occurred—until I handed him a copy of the police report. Faced with the indisputable evidence, he finally admitted the encounter with police. Within seventy-two hours he had withdrawn from the gubernatorial race.³

For both journalists and historians, documents can be invaluable in helping confirm what has transpired. Even so, detective work needs to be done to establish the authenticity and credibility of any written record. Who wrote it? Was this person in a position to know what happened? Was he or she motivated by prejudice or bias? Has the document been kept safe from tampering? How legible is it? Is it corroborated by other external facts? And are there competing documents that might be even more reliable or which might shed a whole new light on the matter?

That last question has come to the forefront in the quest to understand the historical Jesus in recent years. For centuries, scholars investigating what happened in the life of Jesus largely relied on the New Testament, especially Mark, Matthew, and Luke—which are the oldest of the four Gospels and are called the “Synoptics” because of their interrelationship—as well as the Gospel of John.

In modern times, however, archaeological discoveries have yielded a fascinating crop of other documents from ancient Palestine. Some of them paint a very different portrait of Jesus than the traditional pic-

ture found in the Bible, and they throw key theological beliefs into question. But can they really be trusted?

A DIFFERENT JESUS

In the years since my own investigation into Jesus, the focus on these “alternative gospels,” in both academic and popular books, has greatly intensified. In the 1990s, several Jesus Seminar participants and others, led by Robert J. Miller, published *The Complete Gospels*, which juxtaposed the New Testament gospels with sixteen other ancient texts.⁴

“Each of these gospel records offers fresh glimpses into the world of Jesus and his followers,” says the book.⁵ “All of the . . . texts in this volume are witnesses to early Jesus traditions. All of them contain traditions independent of the New Testament gospels.”⁶

To me, the implication was clear: these other gospels—with such names as the Gospel of Thomas, the Secret Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Peter, and the Gospel of Mary—were equal to the biblical accounts in terms of their historical significance and spiritual content. Indeed, said Philip Jenkins, professor of history and religious studies at Pennsylvania State University, “With so many hidden gospels now brought to light, it is now often claimed that the four gospels were simply four among many of roughly equal worth, and the alternative texts gave just as valid a picture of Jesus as the texts we have today.”⁷

The case for these other gospels has been bolstered by some scholars who date a few of them to as early as the first century, which is when Jesus’ ministry flourished and the four Gospels of the New Testament were written. That would mean they would contain very early—and therefore perhaps historically reliable—material.

For example, Karen L. King, professor of ecclesiastical history at Harvard Divinity School, said the Gospel of Mary may arguably have been written in the late first century.⁸ Contrary to the biblical Gospels, in this text Jesus teaches that “salvation is achieved by seeking the true spiritual nature of humanity within oneself and overcoming the entrapping material nature of the body and the world.”⁹ The disciples Peter and Andrew are depicted as “proud and ignorant men,” while the gospel “identifies the true apostolic witness” of Mary Magdalene.¹⁰ In other words, she has the same stature as the other apostles of Jesus.

As for the Gospel of Peter, which includes a bizarre passage about a talking cross and the risen Jesus with his head extending beyond

the clouds, scholars such as Arthur J. Dewey, associate professor of Theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati, date its early stage to the middle of the first century.¹¹

Then there's the incendiary Secret Gospel of Mark. Award-winning scholar Morton Smith of Columbia University, author of *Jesus the Magician* and other books, reported finding two and a half pages of this formerly unknown gospel in a monastery near Jerusalem in 1958. Scott G. Brown, who based his doctoral dissertation on the gospel, asserted in a 2005 book that it was penned by the same author who wrote the Gospel of Mark and was reserved only for those spiritually mature enough to handle it.¹²

The most shocking claim in that gospel is that Jesus conducted a secret initiation rite with a young man that, according to Smith, may have included “physical union.”¹³ Specifically, the text says that six days after Jesus raised a wealthy young man from the dead, “in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over his naked body. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God.”¹⁴

Another explosive text — purportedly written by Jesus himself on papyrus in his own native language of Aramaic — was described by Michael Baigent in his 2006 *New York Times* bestseller *The Jesus Papers*. Directly contradicting what Christianity has taught for two millennia, Jesus explicitly denies that he's the Son of God, clarifying instead that he only embodied God's spirit. According to Baigent, Jesus added that “everyone who felt similarly filled with the ‘spirit’ was also a ‘son of God.’”¹⁵

THE MYSTERY OF THOMAS

The darling of liberal scholarship, however, is the Gospel of Thomas, a collection of 114 “hidden” sayings attributed to Jesus. In its 1993 book *The Five Gospels*, the Jesus Seminar granted this text equal status to the New Testament.¹⁶ Thomas's first edition, according to *The Complete Gospels*, was written about AD 50, earlier than any of the biblical Gospels.¹⁷ *The Gnostic Bible*, edited by Willis Barnstone and Marvin Meyer, agrees with the early dating: “A version of this gospel may have been composed, most likely in Greek, as early as the middle of the first century, or somewhat later.”¹⁸

Elaine Pagels, professor of religion at Princeton University and author of *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, told me that she

dates Thomas’s composition to AD 80 or 90, which would be before many scholars date the Bible’s Gospel of John. “The scholars that I know see John and Thomas sharing a common tradition,” she said.

Yet the gospels of John and Thomas come to opposing conclusions concerning pivotal theological issues. “John says that we can experience God only through the divine light embodied in Jesus,” Pagels said. “But certain passages in Thomas’s gospel draw a quite different conclusion: that the divine light Jesus embodied is shared by humanity, since we are all made in the image of God.”¹⁹

The Thomas gospel describes Jesus not as the biblical redeemer, but as a wisdom figure who imparts secret teachings to the disciples who are mature enough to receive them. That’s consistent with the Gnostic belief that salvation comes through knowledge, not through Christ’s atonement for sin. “The salvation offered in the Gospel of Thomas is clearly at odds with the salvation (by grace through faith) offered in the New Testament,” said Ben Witherington III of Asbury Theological Seminary. In the Gnostic view, he said, “a person has to be worthy to receive Jesus’ secret wisdom.”²⁰

Contrary to the Bible, Jesus is quoted in Saying 14 of Thomas as telling his disciples: “If you fast, you will bring sin upon yourselves, and if you pray, you will be condemned, and if you give to charity, you will harm your spirits.” He is quoted in Saying 114 as teaching that “every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven.” The gospel also quotes Jesus in Saying 7 as offering this inscrutable insight: “Blessings on the lion if a human eats it, making the lion human. Foul is the human if a lion eats it, making the lion human.”²¹

“The Gospel of Thomas contains teaching venerated by ‘Thomas Christians,’ apparently an early group that ... thrived during the first century,” says Pagels.²² “We now begin to see that what we call Christianity ... actually represents only a small selection of specific sources, chosen from among dozens of others.... Why were these other writings excluded and banned as ‘heresy’? What made them so dangerous?”²³

That’s a good question. Were these alternative depictions of Jesus censored—even burned—because they dared to deviate from what was becoming the “orthodox” view of him? Was the first century a maelstrom of clashing doctrines and practices—all equally valid—with one dominant viewpoint eventually elbowing its way to prominence and brutally squelching the others?

This is the opinion of some scholars who talk in terms of early “Christianities” rather than Christianity. “With the council of Nicea in 325, the orthodox party solidified its hold on the Christian tradition,” says the Jesus Seminar, “and other wings of the Christian movement were choked off.”²⁴

All of this has profound implications for my personal quest to discover the real Jesus. Is it possible that my earlier conclusions about him have been unduly colored by New Testament accounts that in reality were only one perspective among many? Is the Bible’s theology merely the result of one politically connected group repressing other legitimate beliefs?

“We can probably say with some certainty that if some other side had won . . . there would have been no doctrine of Christ as both fully divine and human,” says agnostic professor Bart Ehrman of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.²⁵

Clearly, a lot is at stake. I need to have confidence that the *right* people used the *right* reasoning to choose the *right* documents in the ancient world. I need to know if there was any historical support for these alternative texts seeing Jesus in a different light. Surely the Jesus that emerges from many of these documents looks radically different from the Jesus of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Says Jenkins:

The hidden gospels have been used to provide scriptural warrant for sweeping new interpretations of Jesus, for interpreting theological statements in a purely symbolic and psychological sense, and for challenging dogmatic or legal rules on the basis of the believer’s subjective moral sense. Generally, the hidden gospels offer wonderful news for liberals, feminists, and radicals within the churches, who challenge what they view as outdated institutions and prejudices.²⁶

I needed to go wherever the evidence would take me. Knowing there are almost as many opinions as there are experts, I wanted to track down someone who has sterling credentials, who would be respected by both conservatives *and* liberals, and who, most importantly, could back up his insights with solid facts and reasoning.

That meant flying to Nova Scotia and driving to a quaint village to interview a highly regarded historian whose professional endorsers range from the orthodox N. T. Wright to such leftwing scholars as Marcus Borg and even Jesus Seminar cofounder John Dominic Cros-

san, the now-retired DePaul University professor who claims to have discovered a different Jesus among the once-lost texts of antiquity.

After driving more than an hour from my hotel in Halifax, I rang the doorbell at the colonial-style house of Craig A. Evans in a heavily wooded community near Acadia University, where he serves as a professor of New Testament.

INTERVIEW #1: CRAIG A. EVANS, PH.D.

Evans came to Acadia University in 2002 after spending more than twenty years as a professor at Trinity Western University, where he directed the graduate programs in biblical studies and founded the Dead Sea Scrolls Institute. He received his bachelor’s degree in history and philosophy from Claremont McKenna College, his master of divinity degree from Western Baptist Seminary, and a master’s degree and doctorate in biblical studies from Claremont Graduate University, which also has produced numerous members of the Jesus Seminar. In addition, he also has served as a visiting fellow at Princeton Theological Seminary.

He is a prolific writer known for his scholarly precision as well as his ability to pierce the fog of academia with uncharacteristic clarity. He is the author or editor of more than fifty books, including *Non-canonical Writings and New Testament Interpretation*; *Studying the Historical Jesus*; *Jesus and His Contemporaries*; *Eschatology, Messianism, and the Dead Sea Scrolls*; *Early Christian Interpretation of the Scriptures of Israel*; *Authenticating the Words of Jesus*; *The Missing Jesus: Rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament*; and *Ancient Texts for New Testament Studies*. He has lectured at Cambridge, Durham, Oxford, Yale, and other universities, as well as the Field Museum in Chicago and the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa.

For a decade, Evans served as editor-in-chief of the *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, and he is a member of the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas (SNTS), the Institute for Biblical Research, and the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies. He has been selected chairman of the Society of Biblical Literature’s Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity Section and the SNTS’s Gospels and Rabbinic Literature Seminar.

More recently Evans has been expanding his work into the popular arena. He has appeared as an expert on numerous television programs, including *Dateline NBC*, the History Channel, and the BBC,

and his excellent book *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels*, was published for a general audience in 2006.

Evans and his wife of thirty-two years, Ginny, opened their front door and invited me in. He was casually dressed in a short-sleeve striped shirt and dark slacks. His graying hair, parted neatly at the side, and his wire-rim glasses gave him a professorial air, while the tone and cadence of his voice sounded vaguely like commentator George Will. As we settled into chairs at his dining room table, I decided to ask him a series of background questions before we plunged into analyzing the legitimacy of the “alternative” gospels.²⁷

KINGDOM OF GOD, SON OF MAN

“Why are some scholars coming up with such unusual portraits of Jesus?” I asked, picking up a homemade chocolate-chip cookie from a tray that Ginny set down between us.

Evans thought for a moment. “One reason,” he replied, “is many of them lack training in the Semitic background of the New Testament.”

“Meaning . . .”

“Semitic training deals with Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, and various sources written in those languages, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls and early rabbinic writings. Very, very few New Testament scholars go beyond the Hebrew of the Old Testament, which is sort of a ‘baby Hebrew.’”

“How does this affect their scholarship?” I asked.

“Here’s the rub,” he said. “These scholars can read the Greek in which the New Testament is written, but Jesus didn’t speak Greek, except perhaps occasionally. Most of his teaching was in Aramaic, and his scriptures were in Hebrew or Aramaic paraphrases. Jesus and his world were very Semitic, yet most New Testament scholars lack adequate training in the very languages and literatures that reflect his world. Since they know Greek, they gravitate toward making comparisons between the Jesus of the Greek Gospels and various Greek philosophies and the Greco-Roman world. It’s easy to find parallels if you’re not worried about context or nuance.”

“So they’re reading a Greek influence into Jesus.”

“Exactly,” came his reply. “With few exceptions, the Jesus Seminar was not known for dealing with the Hebrew, Syriac, Aramaic, rabbinic literature, or the Dead Sea Scrolls. Here’s the result: they missed the meaning of Jesus’ central proclamation of the kingdom of God.”