

EFFORTS TO DISPROVE THE BIBLICAL JESUS

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Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, “Tell them, ‘His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.’ And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will appease him and make you secure.” So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day (Matt 28:11-15).

Trying to disprove the biblical Jesus is nothing new. Matthew recorded that immediately after the news broke in Jerusalem that Jesus’ body was missing, Jewish leaders formulated a story to invalidate the resurrection. Could the biblical account be a conspiracy cover-up by Jesus’ disciples? Could the account, in Matthew 28:11-15, be a later insertion by church fathers to promote Jesus’ resurrection, knowing full well that He did not rise? Or was the early church simply deceived by following an early tradition begun by Jesus’ early followers? Such questions have prompted numerous scholars throughout the centuries to continue to search for Jesus’ bones, hoping that one day something will be uncovered.

For a long time now past theologians and philosophers have continued formulating theories that seek to explain other ways of understanding the biblical Jesus who they strip from His religious garb. This trend continues in the present as the media, numerous movements, and a plethora of published manuscripts have sought to redefine the historical and biblical Jesus with a no-frills Jesus who was but a mere man without special powers or mission. It seems that every Easter in the last five years, new books, with old ideas nevertheless, surface with one goal: *disprove the biblical Jesus*.

This article will briefly surface each of these past and present approaches and show that upon further inspection they have led folks further from the truth instead of bringing one closer to understanding the biblical Jesus. By understanding these approaches, believers will be better prepared to judge where these “new” trends originate and thereby see them for what they are: *efforts to disprove the biblical Jesus*.¹

¹ Since few have time to read all of the volumes that hinder for the most part instead of help the uninformed, part of this author’s intent is to aid the pastor, student, and teacher to reach conclusions without having to spend hours reading all these volumes. Hence, such aid will allow one to be better prepared to make an informed decision when it comes to “new” trends. In a

PAST EFFORTS TO DISPROVE THE BIBLICAL JESUS

Though many have tried to redefine the biblical Jesus during the first 1,500 years after His life, the real “explosion” came after the Reformation.² This explosion came in ten new philosophical approaches to the Bible that evolved through time. These ten are inductivism, materialism, rationalism, deism, skepticism, agnosticism, romanticism, idealism, evolution, and existentialism.³ Today numerous books draw directly from one or more of these philosophies that seek to redefine the biblical Jesus and at times go beyond that and create their own radical theories.

Inductivism. Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626), a lawyer, orator, writer, philosopher, and scientist, became Lord Chancellor in England in 1618 and published his magnum opus *Novum Organum* in 1620.⁴ Basically in this work Bacon postulated that experiment and experience are the bases for discovering truth, which became known as the *inductive* method. Obviously this view resulted in separating science from faith, which would later lead to a mythological understanding of Scripture and perhaps influencing the writings of David F. Strauss and Rudolf Bultmann.⁵ Under this new system, science is in conflict with Scripture. The inductive method is not wrong, for

modified way, parts of this article appears in René A. López, *The Jesus Family Tomb Examined: Did Jesus Rise Physically?* (Springfield, MO: 21st Century Press, 2008), 253-67.

² F. David Farnell succinctly noted this very thing through the anti-supernatural philosophical bias that has always existed. He wrote, “Philosophical opposition to the supernatural is not new. Paul encountered such in Athens (Acts 17:16-34), for his biblical worldview included the resurrection of the material body, but that of his philosophical listeners had no room for the supernatural. Philosophy’s clash with Christianity in the New Testament appears in Colossians, 1 John, 2 Peter, Jude, and Revelation 2–3. It emerged early in the post-Apostolic church and continued through the Middle Ages. It was not until the Reformation corrected hermeneutical abuses of philosophy that a resolution of the problem surfaced. But just after a hundred years after the Reformers, philosophy reasserted itself to haunt the church” (“Philosophical and Theological Bent of Historical Criticism,” in *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship*, eds. Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998], 85). See also, Norman L. Geisler, “Inductivism, Materialism, and the Rationalism: Bacon, Hobbes, and Spinoza,” in *Biblical Errancy: An Analysis of Its Philosophical Roots*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 11-19. By noting the helpfulness of Farnell’s essay in this section it does not mean this author completely endorses all the chapters in the *Jesus Crisis*.

³ These are not exhaustive but are the ten major philosophical systems foundational to Thomas Hobbes, “Leviathan,” in *Great Books of the Western World*, 60 vols., ed. Robert M. Hutchins et al. (Chicago: William Benton, 1952). Usually historical criticism is opposed to an orthodox view of the Bible. These views are thoroughly explained by Farnell, “Philosophical and Theological Bent,” 85-131.

⁴ See Francis Bacon, “Novum Organum,” in *Great Books of the Western World*, 30:133-34.

⁵ Farnell, “Philosophical and Theological Bent,” 121.

how else does one examine facts but to test them? Instead of interpreting science to oppose Scripture, one should understand both as working harmoniously with each other. But under this new system, science sits in judgment of Scripture and is the exclusive arbiter of truth, and it accepts Scripture as a valid judge only on spiritual matters.

Materialism. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) worked for Francis Bacon for a while and became the promoter of materialism as explained in his work *Leviathan*.⁶ He said all reality consists of matter and the visual, and that the spiritual realm is nonexistent. Going one step further than Bacon, Hobbes ultimately ended in diminishing the Scriptures' relevancy and authority for everyone. Hence Farnell correctly concluded, "Reason now ascends the throne"⁷ in a total sense.

Rationalism. Baruch de Spinoza (1632-1677), who was Jewish born, was expelled from the synagogue for his heretical views.⁸ Repulsive to Jews and Christians alike, Spinoza was described at times as a "hideous atheist." In reality he was a "rationalistic pantheist,"⁹ which is not technically the same thing. Rationalism interprets all things through reason, not experience, as the primary means to understanding. Natural science is an a priori system by which to measure all truth, and truth is discovered through mathematical equations. This philosophy led to the Enlightenment period. However, unlike many philosophers of that period (e.g. Descartes and Leibniz), Spinoza believed God was in all things (pantheism). Therefore one could not have a loving personal relationship with such a God since He is part of the essence of all creation. Thus Spinoza's system defined "religion as 'the Mind's intellectual love of God.'"¹⁰ Such ideas obviously reveal why he was not popular with Jews and Christians since it contradicts Scripture that teaches God is not like a man nor are His thoughts as those of man (Numb 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Isa 55:8-9)

Deism. Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648), whose ideas were later advanced by Charles Blount (1654-93), believed that God is separate from creation but that He does not intimately interact with it. Like other philosophical movements, Deists reject any claims to supernatural revelation since God does not reveal Himself in any way other than through creation. Thus

⁶ Hobbes, "Leviathan," 41-49.

⁷ Farnell, "Philosophical and Theological Bent," 89.

⁸ Benedict de Spinoza, "Biographical Note, Benedict de Spinoza," in *Great Books of the Western World*, 31:354.

⁹ Colin Brown, *Christianity and Western Thought* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 185-86. These terms are noted by Farnell, "Philosophical and Theological Bent," 89.

¹⁰ Farnell, "Philosophical and Theological Bent," 89.

natural law, rejecting all forms of miracles, reigns supreme¹¹ and runs counter to Jewish and Christian thought.

Skepticism. David Hume (1711-76), though influenced by the three major Enlightenment philosophies of rationalism, deism, and empiricism that preceded him, went beyond them to postulate that all reality exists in the mind and is perceived through the five senses.¹² He influenced many future theologians such as David F. Strauss (1808-74), F. E. D. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Ernst Renan (1823-92) and Adolph Harnack (1851-1930). As Farnell wrote of Hume, “We perceive the data of our senses, but cannot know that there is anything beyond. In Hume’s thought, one could not even prove the existence of the human self.”¹³

Agnosticism. Influenced by Hume’s system, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) went beyond it in trying to synthesize the philosophy of empiricism and rationalism into one system: agnosticism. Nothing, he said, is knowable for sure. Kant distinguished external experience and reality as something existing outside of self, apart from one’s internal mechanism that subjectively interprets this reality based on personal bias. Thus the receptor of the mind processes external experiences it perceives, according to its own mechanism. That is, “the mind does not perceive these things as they actually are in themselves, for the mind reshapes what it perceives. . . . In other words, the mind conditions (perhaps better ‘colors’) everything that it encounters. . . . One can know only what appears (*phenomenal*), not what really is (*noumenal*). The thing-in-itself is unknowable.”¹⁴ Such statements are self-defeating and nonsensical, because if the proposition (nothing is knowable) were true, it predicates something that can be known. But how can it be known when the very statement negates what it purports to know? All religious people who believe God communicates through supernatural revelation reject such a system (including *skepticism*) because it denies the foundation by which a system can be validated and believed, namely, *that God communicates knowable truth based on people’s ability to perceive it for what it really is.*

¹¹ Ibid., 94. Men like Matthew Tindal (1655-1733), John Toland (1670-1722), Anthony Collins (1676-1729), and others also followed this system of thought.

¹² Ernest C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 612. David Hume stated, “The idea of substance as well as that of a mode, is nothing but a collection of simple ideas, that are united by the imagination, and have a particular name assigned them, by which we are able to recall, either to ourselves or others, that collection” (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner [New York: Penguin, 1969], 63).

¹³ Farnell, “Philosophical and Theological Bent,” 97, 99. John Locke (1632-1704), George Berkeley (1685-1753), and others also followed the same system.

¹⁴ Ibid., 100; cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Vasilis Politis (New York: Everyman, 1993), 30-68; Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 96.

Romanticism. F. E. D. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is the person most identified with this movement.¹⁵ In response to the intellectual and unemotional philosophy derived from the Enlightenment, Romanticism emphasized feelings, sensualism, fantasy, experience, the individual over the universal, and freedom of expression against the order and the controlled. Farnell summarized the incompatibility between Romanticism, the Bible, and the Jesus of Scripture:

In summary, for Schleiermacher the Bible may not be propositional authoritative revelation or historically accurate, but it still conveyed religious “experience” relevant to people. He did not speak about the Jesus of history but about the Christ of faith and about the search for the “historical Jesus.” In terms of historical-critical interpretation, “what it means to me in my present situation” (namely, eisegesis and application) was more important for Schleiermacher than the original meaning of Scripture (exegesis and interpretation).¹⁶

Idealism (transcendentalism). G. W. Hegel (1770-1831) was the most influential advocate who promoted *absolute idealism*, which states that mental and spiritual values are more essential to life than matter.¹⁷ Idealism became “the opposite of realism—the view that things exist independently of being perceived—and of naturalism that explains the mind and spiritual values via materialism. . . . In other words, history, nature, and thought are aspects of the Absolute Spirit coming to self-consciousness.”¹⁸ How that happens seems to be mystical. Again, it is impossible to know the historical-biblical Jesus in this system apart from a reconstruction of the available data, but Hegel and its followers eliminated all miracles and advocated that virtue is the ultimate end of religion that enters the mind by means of the Spirit in mystical form.

Evolution. Charles Darwin (1809-82) popularized this philosophy through two major works, *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871).¹⁹ However, he was not the originator of the evolutionary theory since the naturalistic philosophies espoused by him existed long before him.²⁰

¹⁵ Other promoters of this view include Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78), Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832), Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) and Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843).

¹⁶ Farnell, “Philosophical and Theological Bent,” 103, 106.

¹⁷ Proponents of this philosophy also include Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) and Friedrich W. J. von Schelling (1775-1854).

¹⁸ Farnell, “Philosophical and Theological Bent,” 107.

¹⁹ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection; or, the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life* (n.p.: n.p., 1859; reprint, New York: J. A. Hill, 1904); Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: J. Murray, 1871).

²⁰ Farnell correctly acknowledged the origins of Darwinian thought. “To a large extent, the hypothesis of evolution resulted from a presupposition exclusion of God and religion from science and stemmed from the philosophies prevalent immediately before and during the Enlightenment (for example deism, agnosticism, uniformitarianism—“the present is the key to the past and”—and atheism” (“Philosophical and Theological Bent,” 110). For a more detailed

Evolution ignores God in assessing reality and asserting that everything that exists (i.e. matter) stems from a natural process that arose by chance and evolves from a simple form of life to a more complex organism. This system has permeated the scientific community. However, it has also influenced theological thought by rejecting the Mosaic authorship of the first five books of the Bible and interpreting a gradual development of biblical revelation that stems from the simple to the more complex.²¹

The evolutionary view resulted in rejecting the uniqueness of monotheism (one God), supernatural revelation, and ultimately the biblical Jesus. Hence Wilhelm Bousset (1865-1920) advocated that biblical concepts evolved and were based on ideas stemming from other religions (e.g. Egyptian, Babylonian, mystery religions, and other ancient myths).²² However, this system contradicts the second law of thermodynamics, which states that all things go from a state of order to disorder. Also evolutionary philosophy ends in a system that believes—without evidence—that all matter appeared out of nothing by chance. The mathematical possibility of this occurring is staggering and is hard to accept. Indeed, it takes more faith to believe in that system than in a system that holds that all design must have a Designer.

Existentialism. Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) is considered the father of existentialism. Unfortunately, defining existentialism is not easy because others like “Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) represent the theistic branch. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976,

discussion, see John C. Hutchinson, “Darwin’s Evolutionary Theory and 19th-Century Natural Theology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (July—September 1995): 334-54.

²¹ This is known as the Documentary Hypothesis theory in which scholars seek to determine how the Scriptures were formulated by determining how different terms and phrases were employed and who wrote them. Evolutionary theology, however, ultimately led to the well-known form-critical analysis of the New Testament popularized by Karl L. Schmidt (1891-1956), Martin Dibelius (1883-1947), and Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976). Form-critical analysis espouses that the Christian community gradually developed the four Gospel accounts from the simplest form—including oral accounts—to a more complex written account.

²² See Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970). Conceptual parallels appear in a number of pagan religions with that of Christianity. However, many of these parallels are not identical; neither is Christianity dependent on their religious neighbors for their theology. Indeed, in many cases (e.g. the mystery religions) it can be shown that the opposite is true. For a thorough and excellent treatment showing similarities and distinctions between pagan and Christian religion and thereby demonstrating Christianity’s uniqueness, see Gregory A. Boyd, *Jesus Under Siege* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1995), 43-62, and J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss the Real Jesus and Mislead Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 219-62.

and Albert Camus (1913-1960) represent the atheistic branch.”²³ Kierkegaard believed that biblical truths are attained through subjective means, and he disregarded objective means as a path of arriving at religious truth. This, however, does not mean he did not believe in objective truth but that this form of it could not aid one in becoming a person of faith. Therefore Kierkegaard wrote, “And so I say to myself: I choose; that historical fact means so much to me that I decide to stake my whole life upon it. . . . That is called risking; and without risk faith is an impossibility.”²⁴ His paradoxical position describes where his views end in regard to the historicity of the Bible and Christ: “Kierkegaard never denied that Christianity was objectively or historically true, but he felt that the results of historical research are uncertain. Though asserting his personal belief in the historicity of the Bible and Christ, he maintained that objective truth is not essential to Christianity.”²⁵ Perhaps he believed this way since faith was a step beyond historical facts that could not be proven absolutely. However, to believe in something absolutely one does not need to touch or study it in a laboratory. Many people believed George Washington existed and was the first president of the United States, but no one alive saw or touched him in an absolute way. Historical evidence exists that proves this. Part of the problem occurs when many fail to differentiate between the distinctive senses of “history.”

One can appreciate Kierkegaard’s fervor for having faith and desiring to experience a personal relationship with God and/or Christ. Yet how can one enter into such a relationship or experience Christ apart from the only objective means (the Bible) that conveys that truth? The contradiction is obvious.

RECENT EFFORTS TO DISPROVE THE BIBLICAL JESUS

All of these philosophical thoughts have somehow influenced contemporary writers. Today many of these movements and authors directly seek to redefine the biblical Jesus by posing radical theories with meager evidence to support them. These include the (1) *Jesus Seminar* movement; (2) the *National Geographic* television program about the *Gospel of Judas* that supposedly clarifies the relationship between Jesus and Judas, who was wrongly accused of

²³ For a thorough discussion of these views, see Frederick Copleston, *Contemporary Philosophy, Studies of Logical Positivism and Existentialism* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1972), 148-200, as cited in Farnell, “Philosophical and Theological Bent,” 113-14.

²⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. and ed. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 185.

²⁵ Farnell, “Philosophical and Theological Bent,” 115. For more on these issues, see Kierkegaard, *Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, 109 and, Paul R. Sponheim, *Kierkegaard on Christ and Christian Coherence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 173-264.

betraying Jesus; (3) Bart Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus*; (4) James D. Tabor's *The Jesus Dynasty*; and, (5) Michael Baigent's *The Jesus Papers*.²⁶

The Jesus Seminar began in 1985 with its founder and chairman Robert Funk along with a group of more than seventy liberal New Testament scholars.²⁷ Its purpose was to determine which words of Jesus in the Gospels were actually His. As a result of a vote from these scholars, using colored beads, they decided which were the authentic words of Jesus. Each of the beads had a color that meant something. For example, *red*: "That's Jesus," *pink*: "Sure sounds like Jesus," *gray*: "Well, maybe," and *black*: "There's been some mistake."²⁸ Ultimately this resulted in publishing a volume *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, which concluded that 82 percent of what Jesus supposedly said was not authentic, 18 percent was somewhat doubtful, and only 2 percent of what the New Testament Gospels record were what Jesus actually said.²⁹ Furthermore the Seminar did not regard the New Testament as superior to any other literature of the church or other writings of the day (the Gospel of Thomas is the fifth Gospel as noted in the book title).³⁰ The Seminar used seven rules called "pillars" in deciding what to accept as

²⁶ Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005); James D. Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family and the Birth of Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); Michael Baigent, *The Jesus Papers: Exposing the Greatest Cover-up in History* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006). Though not as recent as these other contemporary works intent on redefining the historical and biblical Jesus, there are numerous others including: Earl Doherty, *Challenging the Verdict* (Ottawa: Age of Reason, 2001); John D. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 1994); Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Burton L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 1993); M. Baigent and R. Leigh, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception* (New York: Summit, 1992); John D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); H. Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990); Burton L. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); M. Baigent, R. Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (New York: Dell, 1983); Ron Cameron, *The Other Gospels: Non-Canonical Texts* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982); H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament II: History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982); J. M. Robinson and H. Koster, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

²⁷ See note 31 for a better idea of how many scholars are involved. The *Jesus Seminar* gives the misguided impression that the majority of scholars agree with them. Actually it is just the opposite.

²⁸ Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, eds. R. Funk and J. V. Hills (New York: MacMillian, 1993), 37.

²⁹ Boyd, *Jesus Under Siege*, 88.

³⁰ See *ibid.*, 24; Funk, Hoover, and Seminar, *Five Gospels*, 1-36, acknowledge this same conclusion.

authentic. While all seven pillars have numerous logical flaws and have been thoroughly evaluated elsewhere,³¹ two of these rules will be answered to demonstrate the unscholarly, biased, and flawed system of these scholars.³²

How can modern scholars existing more than two thousand years after Jesus be better judges in determining Jesus' authentic words than Jesus' contemporaries who wrote the Gospels? Efforts made by contemporary scholarship that seek to better understand the ancient world are good. But to dismiss early witnesses as easily as the Seminar does is severely problematic. Furthermore, the church fathers, who lived just one to two hundred years after Jesus, testified to the authenticity and authorship of the four Gospels. Unless solid evidence appears to contradict this, one should not dismiss their testimony.

Jesus Seminar scholars reverse the criteria in how to judge the authenticity of a historical document. They assert that *the Gospels are unhistorical until proven otherwise*. That is like saying in the jurisprudence system that a person is guilty until proven innocent. If one used these criteria, he would be left doubting the majority of all historical documents now possessed. Hence on both of these issues Gregory A. Boyd concluded:

These twentieth-century scholars imagine that they are in a better position to compose the Bible than was the early church of the second and third centuries. If that strikes you as a bit presumptuous, you are not alone. After all, the early church knew all of this

³¹ Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 39-50; Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 46-51; Craig L. Blomberg, "Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?," in *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, eds. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 19-22.

³² Clearly the *Jesus Seminar* gives the impression by the constant use of the word "scholar" that anyone disagreeing with their conclusion is unscholarly. However, the opposite is true. "As a matter of fact, a great many scholars, from a wide variety of persuasions, disagree with elements of this highly controversial list of 'pillars.'" Furthermore the *Seminar* also gives the impression that they represent the majority of scholars but they do not. "Indeed, the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar participants are usually representative only of the left-most fringe of the New Testament scholarship" (Boyd, *Jesus Under Siege*, 89-91). Hence, "Sometimes, for example, the phrase 'some two hundred scholars' has occurred. To someone unacquainted with the immensity and complexity of higher education in America, two hundred scholars may seem an impressively large number. In fact, however, it is a very small number when placed against the number of New Testament scholars alone who are involved in the work of SBL (at least half of the 6, 900 members of the organization), let alone the thousands more with substantial scholarly training in the New Testament who for personal or ideological reasons do not take part in the society's activities. And even the number *two hundred* is somewhat misleading, since it includes all of those who were part of the Seminar's proceedings in any fashion—by receiving its mailings, for example, or reading its reports" (Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* [San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996], 2). See also pages 1-27 for another thorough analysis of the *Jesus Seminar* movement and its founders.

literature well, and was in a much better position than we are to know who wrote it and to judge its accuracy. . . . And despite the presumptuous claims of the Jesus Seminar, most historical scholars argue that the burden of proof should generally lie with the historian who wants to argue that what an ancient document is reporting is *not* true. A historian, in other words, must generally prove that an ancient account is *wrong*, not that what an ancient document reports is *right*.³³

The discovery of the *Gospel of Judas* was made public on Thursday, 6 April 2006, when the National Geographic Society held a press conference at its headquarters in Washington, DC. This was a little more than a year before *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* was aired on the Discovery Channel on 4 March 2007. In a packed room of more than one hundred news personnel the society announced the discovery of the *Gospel of Judas*. Three days later on Sunday, 9 April 2006, a two-hour documentary on the National Geographic channel was televised. Why all the hype? This new document not only asserted that Judas Iscariot was Jesus' best disciple, who was taught by Him in private more than the others,³⁴ but it also revealed that Jesus urged Judas to betray Him so that Jesus could exit the flesh (physical body) and enter the spirit realm.³⁵

While the document is authentic (i.e. it was written around the fourth-century AD and is not a contemporary forgery), numerous facts argue against its being a book authorized by the apostles. *First*, the church fathers never mentioned such a book. *Second*, this Gospel is written in Coptic, whereas Greek is the language of all four canonical Gospels recorded in the first century AD. This betrays a late date—to which all scholars agree—and one of the reasons why it could not have been approved by the apostles. *Third*, the *Gospel of Judas* followed a practice called “pseudonymity” (falsely attributing a name to a document that was actually written by someone else). Obviously this was done in order to gain acceptance by the public. *Fourth*, the *Gospel of Judas* sounds like a document with a similar name that Irenaeus, around AD 180, condemned.³⁶ If this is the same document, then this work was already

³³ Boyd, *Jesus Under Siege*, 24-25, 91 (italics original).

³⁴ Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, 242, acknowledged this as well.

³⁵ See Ben Witherington III, *What Have They Done with Jesus? Beyond Strange Theories and Bad History—Why We Can Trust the Bible* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 7, also saw this dichotomy of flesh and spirit. Evans explained the details involving the discovery: “At the best investigators can determine, a leather-bound codex (or ancient book), whose pages consist of papyrus, was discovered in the late 1970s perhaps in 1978, in Egypt, perhaps in cave. For the next five years the codex, written in the Coptic language [Egyptian language written in Greek letters], was passed around the Egyptian antiquities market. In 1983 Stephen Emmel, a Coptic scholar, . . . concluded that the codex was genuine (that is, not a forgery) and that it probably dated to the fourth century. Subsequent scientific test confirmed Emmel’s educated guess” (*Fabricating Jesus*, 240). The *Gospel of Judas* actually appears in pages 33-58 in the book (Codex Tchacos) that contains three other tractates.

³⁶ Irenaeus wrote, “They [the Gnostics] declare that Judas the traitor was thoroughly acquainted with these things [i.e., that Cain and others derived their being from above and did not

condemned by the late second-century AD. While the document can illuminate the church's historical context when Gnosticism flourished, it contributes nothing to understanding more about Jesus or Judas since this document does not date to the first century AD. As Ben Witherington III concluded, "To say otherwise is an argument entirely from silence, not from hard evidence."³⁷

Misquoting Jesus was written by Bart D. Ehrman in 2005. In this work, he reiterated much of the material of an earlier work of his, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (1993).³⁸ Basically Ehrman believes humans corrupted the text of the Scriptures. He wrote, "The Bible began to appear to me as a very human book."³⁹ He believes that errors in the extant copies of the Scriptures discredit the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. Though there are only copies, the function of textual criticism is to compare the 5,700 complete New Testament copies available, plus over 10,000 more copies in Latin, and more than one million quotations from church fathers to arrive at a very precise reading of the original documents.⁴⁰

Ehrman asserted that more than minor differences exist.⁴¹ For example, he cited 1 John 5:7b, which has an alternative reading based on a scribal alteration of the text.⁴² However, one can readily arrive at the original reading—when more than one reading appears—by simply doing some comparisons. Furthermore, contrary to Ehrman, in such places where alternative readings occur *no major doctrines are at stake*. Hence Witherington said, "There is a reason that both Ehrman's mentor in text criticism and mine, Bruce Metzger, has said that there is nothing in these variants that really challenges any Christian belief: they don't. I would like to add that other experts in text criticism, such as Gordon Fee, have been equally emphatic about

suffer injury], that he alone, knowing the truth as no others did, accomplished the mystery of the betrayal; by him all things, both earthly and heavenly, were thus thrown into confusion. They produce a fictitious history of this kind, which they style the *Gospel of Judas*" (*Against Heresies* 1.XXXI.1).

³⁷ Witherington, *What Have They Done with Jesus?*, 8.

³⁸ Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace also noted, "These criticisms were made of his earlier major work, *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, from which *Misquoting Jesus* has drawn extensively. Yet, the conclusions that he put forth there are still stated here without recognition of some of the severe criticisms of his work the first go-around" (*Reinventing Jesus*, 112). For a complete bibliography of both of Ehrman's books, see note 25. See also chapter 10 where Bart D. Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus* was examined.

³⁹ Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 11.

⁴⁰ This topic was discussed in chapter 10. For answers to a similar argument, see Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 65-73, 275.

⁴¹ Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 208.

⁴² See Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 113-14.

the flawed nature of Ehrman's analysis of the significance of such textual variants."⁴³

In *The Jesus Dynasty* James D. Tabor sought to define the historical Jesus by postulating that Jesus' true royal dynasty continued through James, his brother, and not Paul (hence the book's title). Tabor claimed that Paul, not James, elevated Jesus to divinity.⁴⁴ Tabor used an inconsistent criterion in interpreting passages by choosing those that support his premise, ignoring those that do not, and superimposing his own meaning on others.⁴⁵

Tabor occupies a faculty position at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and is a trained theologian (with an interest in archaeology) who received his Ph.D. degree from the University of Chicago. Tabor has interesting and helpful archaeological information. His book was well written and easy to read. As Witherington wrote, "Absent from this study are wild theories about Gnostic gospels being our earliest and best sources about the life of Jesus. . . . Equally refreshing is Tabor's willingness to take serious the historical data not just in the synoptics but also in the Gospel of John."⁴⁶ However, this author shares the same concern as that of Evans who wrote, "I worry about nonexperts who read it and fail to see how tenuous some of the speculation and conclusions are."⁴⁷ Interestingly, though Tabor differed from Baigent and Brown on numerous points,⁴⁸ all three of them claimed that twenty-first-century theories

⁴³ Witherington, *What Have They Done with Jesus?*, 7. Since Ehrman studied in two locations—which teach the approach explained here—Evans was baffled by Ehrman's position and concluded: "I must admit that I am puzzled by all this. If not at Moody Bible Institute, then surely at Wheaton College, Ehrman must have become acquainted with a great number of textual variants in the biblical manuscripts. No student can earn a degree in Bible and not know this. Yet Bible students are not defecting in droves. I am also puzzled by Ehrman's line of reasoning. For the sake of argument, let's suppose that the scribal errors in the Bible manuscripts really do disprove verbal inspiration and inerrancy, so that the Bible really should be viewed as a *human book* and not as *God's words*. Would we lose everything as a result? No. Moderate and liberal Christians have held essentially this view for a century or more. The real issue centers on what God accomplished in Jesus of Nazareth" (*Fabricating Jesus*, 27-28). For more on Ehrman's position see *ibid.*, 28-33, and Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 110-17. See also chapter 10 that discusses Ehrman's position further.

⁴⁴ Tabor, *Jesus Dynasty*, 273-74.

⁴⁵ Others have also noticed Tabor's dubious approach (Witherington, *What Have They Done with Jesus?*, 299-300; Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, 217-20).

⁴⁶ Witherington, *What Have They Done with Jesus?*, 293.

⁴⁷ Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, 217.

⁴⁸ Contrary to Baigent and Brown, Tabor admitted that Jesus could not have faked His death. He believes this event has biblical and historical support. Citing Mark 16:6; Matthew 28:1-7; and Luke 24:2-5, he concluded, "None of these theories appear to have any basis whatsoever in reliable historical sources. I think we need have no doubt that given Jesus' execution by Roman crucifixion he was truly *dead* and that his temporary place of burial was discovered to be empty shortly thereafter" (Tabor, *Jesus Dynasty*, 229-30, italics original). Of course, Tabor's citing the biblical account of the Resurrection does not mean he interpreted it as Jesus rising

are closer to the truth than the New Testament records written in the first century AD.

Since Tabor began with a premise that discounted the supernatural, many of Jesus' miracles were explained by natural means.⁴⁹ For example, he argued that Jesus could not have been born of a virgin since virgins do not bear children.⁵⁰ And Jesus could not have risen physically from the dead since dead people do not rise bodily. Tabor simply followed a philosophical bias called "uniformitarianism" (the present is the key to the past).⁵¹ His method of research to validate a biblical account is extremely flawed. Here are some examples. John the Baptist was also one of two Messiahs.⁵² But this position clearly contradicts the Baptist's own admission in John 1:20, "I am not the Christ." Tabor, however, failed to mention this text. This is not surprising since Tabor viewed numerous accounts in John's Gospel (especially accounts in chapters 1 and 3) as having been altered later by Christians.⁵³ When presenting evidence why Matthew's name appears in the Talpoit tomb along with Jesus' bones and therefore belonging to Jesus' family, Tabor accepted Luke's account as evidence that Mary's genealogy merged with the line of Levi, thereby showing how a person named Matthew could appear in Jesus' family tomb.⁵⁴ This shows how selective and inconsistent were his methods, and how his bias permeated the entire book. He repeatedly accepted one reading of a New Testament text above another without explanation.

While denying the virgin birth Tabor also believes Mary became illegitimately pregnant by a Roman soldier named Pantera, and that she ultimately had sex with not one but three men.⁵⁵ Part of Tabor's supposed evidence comes from a second-century philosopher named Celsus who wrote against Christianity, whose work *Contra Celsum*, was quoted in various places in a rebuttal by Origen, a church father of the third century AD. He also believes a tombstone inscription bearing the name Pantera discovered in 1859 in Bingerbrück, Germany, may possibly be the father of Jesus who at one time lived in Sidon. Hence he believes Mark 7:24 suggests why Jesus secretly visited that city ("And He entered a house and wanted no one to know it"). He also supported this by noting that some church fathers⁵⁶ accepted the point

physically. Instead he believes Jesus' body was moved to the city Tsfat outside of Galilee (ibid., 233-38).

⁴⁹Witherington also made the same observation (*What Have They Done with Jesus?* 293-295).

⁵⁰Tabor, *Jesus Dynasty*, 59.

⁵¹See note 19.

⁵²Tabor, *Jesus Dynasty*, 137, 243.

⁵³Ibid., 43, 135, 140.

⁵⁴Ibid., 56-57.

⁵⁵Ibid., 64-72, 76-77.

⁵⁶Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 78.VII.5; Epiphanius (AD 315-403).

about Pantera. Evans, however, said, “Tabor thinks this supports the historicity of the tradition. Otherwise, why would the church fathers such as Epiphanius take it so seriously? But Epiphanius and later Christian writers are simply trying to fend off slur, and to do so they throw out various proposals, some having more merit than the allegations themselves.” Indeed, Evans correctly concluded that one cannot allege from fourth-century rebuttals that an earlier tradition for Pantera proposed by Celsus existed other than the time that Celsus himself lived (in the second century AD).⁵⁷ Tabor has presented no archaeological evidence whatsoever to link Pantera to Jesus. Discovering a Roman tombstone and proposing various outlandish theories does not qualify as credible evidence. These are highly improbable views that go against all the enormous weight of evidence that tilt the scale in the other direction. Tabor also believes in a *spiritual* rather than a *physical* resurrection,⁵⁸ similar to what *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* documentary and *The Jesus Family Tomb* book claim.⁵⁹

Tabor accepted the premise of the *Jesus Seminar* (without mentioning it) that equally recognizes the second-century Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* as equal to or perhaps better than the other Gospels.⁶⁰ He suggested that there is a “cryptic” clue in Saying 105 that echoes Jesus’ illegitimate birth: “One who knows his father and his mother will be called *the son of a whore*.”⁶¹ It has been acknowledged by numerous scholars that the *Gospel of Thomas* was written too late (in the second half of the second-century AD) to give a clear picture of Jesus, is replete with mystic and condemned Gnostic teachings, and was never accepted as an apostolic Gospel, as the first four hundred years of church tradition clearly demonstrates.⁶² To be fair, however, Tabor did not believe all Gnostic accounts are equally valid since he considered the “Infancy Gospel” and other manuscripts that purport to have Jesus’ lost years as late and legendary (second to fourth centuries AD) and as being entertaining other than informative.⁶³ Tabor’s book has helpful archaeological information, but he

⁵⁷ Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, 218.

⁵⁸ Tabor, *Jesus Dynasty*, 230-37.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 232. Interestingly, Tabor seemed to admit this. “In Judaism to claim that someone has been ‘raised from the dead’ is not the same as to claim that one has died and exists as a spirit or soul in the heavenly world. What the gospels claim about Jesus is that the tomb was empty, and that his dead body was revived.... He was not a phantom or a ghost, though he does seem to ‘materialize’ abruptly, and at times is first unrecognized, then suddenly recognized by those who saw him. But Paul seems to be willing to use the term ‘resurrection’ to refer to something akin to an apparition or vision” (*ibid.*).

⁶⁰ Concerning the *Gospel of Thomas*, he said: “It is clearly the most precious lost Christian document discovered in the last two thousand years” (*ibid.*, 63).

⁶¹ *Ibid.* (*italics original*).

⁶² Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims about Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Da Vinci* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 96-109.

⁶³ Tabor, *Jesus Dynasty*, 86. However, he contradicted himself since he accepted the prior quotation from the *Gospel of Thomas* as a valid historical reference that he thought

failed miserably as a theologian-lawyer who presented a very weak case. Many of his theories are more than speculative and biased; they are unsubstantiated and incredible.

The Jesus Papers appears as Michael Baigent's latest book similar to his conspiracy-fraught tomes of the *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (1983) and *The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception* (1992). Baigent holds a M.A. degree in mysticism from the University of Kent in England. He claimed that Jesus survived the crucifixion and wrote a set of letters in AD 45 denying His deity. Baigent said these letters were buried for two thousand years and were finally unearthed in 1960 from a cellar in a house in Jerusalem. Baigent professed to have seen these letters that are lost today.⁶⁴ "What evidence does he have?" one may ask.

Baigent alleged that a number of people saw the letters, but he has not produced any evidence of such individuals. Why should anyone believe Baigent's story? Baigent admitted he does not read Aramaic.⁶⁵ However, he wanted everyone to believe that he knows for certain what the letters said. The only way he could know the contents of the letters is to have them translated. And if they were translated, how would he know if the translators were lying since only a few people were able to examine the contents of these alleged letters?

It is impossible for any papyrus letter to survive two thousand years in a cellar of a house in Jerusalem, as Evans correctly noted. "I might also mention that Baigent neglects to mention that archaeologists and papyrologists will tell you that no papyrus (plural: papyri) can survive buried in the ground, in Jerusalem, for two thousand years. The only papyrus documents that have survived from antiquity have been found in climates, such as the area surrounding the Dead Sea and the sands of Egypt. No ancient papyri have been found in Jerusalem itself. Jerusalem receives rainfall every year; papyri buried in the ground, beneath houses or wherever decompose quickly. So whatever Baigent saw, they were not ancient papyri found beneath somebody's house in Jerusalem, and they were not letters Jesus wrote."⁶⁶

If the other points are detrimental to Baigent's case, this last point entirely negates the bizarre assertion that Pilate conspired with Jesus to fake the crucifixion.⁶⁷ Why? It is because, as Witherington explained, "Baigent's work . . . requires that [he] explain away all the evidence we have from Paul (our earlier New Testament writer), from the canonical gospels, from Josephus, and

illuminated Jesus' illegitimate birth. He also accepted late traditions in other places as well (ibid., 64-72, 233-38). A similar observation was made by Witherington, *What Have They Done with Jesus?*, 230.

⁶⁴ Baigent, *Jesus Papers*, 269-70.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 269, 271.

⁶⁶ Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, 216.

⁶⁷ Baigent, *Jesus Papers*, 126-32.

from Roman sources (such as Tacitus and the later Suetonius) that Jesus suffered the extreme penalty and died from crucifixion under and at the hands of Pontius Pilate.” Hence, “Not many people are taking seriously Baigent’s attempts at revisionist history. It goes against every shred of first-century evidence, Christian or otherwise, that we have about Jesus’s [*sic*] demise.”⁶⁸

The Lost Tomb of Jesus documentary and *The Jesus Family Tomb (JFT)* book were two recent attempts made to disprove that Jesus rose physically. In 1980, a family tomb was discovered in Talpiot, a suburb of Jerusalem, where Jesus’ name appears with five other biblical names related to Him in one way or another. On 26 February 2007, a major press release given by two well-known figures in the film industry claimed to have possibly discovered the lost family tomb of Jesus of Nazareth. Oscar-winning James Cameron (of the *Titanic* [1997] and director and producer of other blockbusters like *The Terminator*, *True Lies* [1984], *Aliens* [1986], *The Abyss* [1989], *Terminator 2* [1991]) and Emmy-winning Simcha Jacobovici together produced a documentary claiming Jesus’ family tomb was found.⁶⁹ This aired—not only nationally but also worldwide—on the Discovery Channel on Sunday, 4 March 2007, at primetime. The documentary drew millions of viewers. Also related to the documentary a (now *New York Times* best seller) book by Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino entitled *The Jesus Family Tomb: The Discovery, the Investigation, and the Evidence That Could Change History* was published by HarperSanFrancisco on 1 March 2007. Since then a year has passed. They have now renamed the subtitle, revised, and updated the book by adding comments by Jacobovici and answers to objections by James D. Tabor.⁷⁰

This news, however, does not surprise scholars—though it may shock the uniformed public—since this was yesterday’s news newly repackaged by savvy men. Since the Jesus family tomb was found in Talpiot, Jerusalem, in 1980 there was clearly no attempted cover-up, as they had implied, since media coverage and publications soon followed the discovery. Clearly the inscription name *Mariamne* does not refer to Mary Magdalene but to another Mary of the first century. Almost all scholars unanimously disagree with the documentary and book that this ossuary contained the bones of Mary Magdalene. Indeed, there are two better readings of this inscription that were not disclosed by the

⁶⁸ Witherington, *What Have They Done with Jesus?*, 7.

⁶⁹ James D. Tabor (of the *Jesus Dynasty* book) is a trained theologian on faculty at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte who also advised the team on historical and theological matters. Charles R. Pellegrino (a bestselling author of *Her Name, Titanic*) is a paleobiologist and documentary filmmaker who also aided Cameron and Jacobovici.

⁷⁰ Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb: The Evidence Behind the Discovery No One Wanted to Find* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007), 213–34. A thorough response to Tabor’s answers to objection are addressed in Appendix B of López, *Jesus Family Tomb Examined: Did Jesus Rise Physically?*, 269–75.

Jesus Family Tomb advocates. *Mariamne e Mara* could refer to the same person containing two names. Mara is a contraction for Martha and could be the second name.⁷¹ Steven J. Pfaan interpreted this inscription as two names belonging to two separate women. It was common to place the remains of more than one person in an ossuary.⁷² By this piece of their puzzle crumbling, the rest of their premise falls apart since all other pieces hinges on this one.

DNA testing disproving motherly kinship between the *Jesus son of Joseph* ossuary and the *Mariamne* ossuary does not prove anything since no other DNA testing was done to compare *Mariamne* with other ossuaries. Even more bizarre is considering that Jesus was married since no evidence exists to validate such a claim. Other possibilities concerning the DNA were not considered regarding the Jesus and *Mariamne* ossuaries, which hinder the documentary theory. *Mariamne* could be this Jesus' half-sister, cousin, or a beloved servant who was interred in the family tomb.

The tenth ossuary was never "missing." Since Amos Kloner documented the ossuary as plain and non-inscribed, they treated it like other plain ossuaries by placing it outside the courtyard of the Israel Antiquities Authority and together with other plain ossuaries. Furthermore the statistical analysis is only as good as the assumption behind the formulas used to create it. That is, if one piece of the formula fails, it all falls apart. According to the *Jesus Family Tomb* proponents, *Mariamne* has to be Mary Magdalene. *Jesus son of Joseph* has to be Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus had to be married and fathered a son named Judah. Jose has to be Jesus' brother. Mary had to be His mother. Unfortunately for them, once other information was disclosed it showed the improbability of their hypothesis.

Judaism and the early Christian church also exhibited the common expectation of a future bodily resurrection. Hence the Gospel accounts that mention Jesus' resurrection should not be understood as speaking of a spiritual resurrection, especially when the Gospels record that Jesus ate and was touched by people. Interpreting Jesus' resurrection as spiritual misreads the very point Paul made in 1 Corinthians 15:44. Once *The Jesus Family Tomb* theory becomes exposed to careful scrutiny all Bible students will discover where the real conspiracy lies.

⁷¹ Amos Kloner, "A Tomb with Inscribed Ossuaries in East Talpiyot, Jerusalem," *Atiqot* 29 (1996): 17; Levy Yitzhak Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel*, eds. Ayala Sussmann and Peter Schertz (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 1994), 222-23.

⁷² Stephen J. Pfann, "Interview by Darrell L. Bock of Stephen J. Pfann to Help Identify Inscriptions" [online] (accessed 4 April 2007) available from <http://media.bible.org/mp3/bock/profpfann030807.mp3>.

CONCLUSION

The historical quest to disprove the biblical Jesus and search for His bones that started two thousand years ago continues to thrive today. Although many have tried redefining Jesus as He appears in the first-century AD as attested in the New Testament documents, the real increase of this attempt came after the Reformation, as seen in the ten philosophical approaches discussed earlier (inductivism, materialism, rationalism, deism, skepticism, agnosticism, romanticism, idealism, evolution, and existentialism). A number of books today have adopted one or more of these philosophies and sought to redefine the biblical Jesus through bizarre and radical theories void of any scholarly evidence. This is the current context and atmosphere where pastors, Bible students, professors, and families are being exposed. That is why now, more than ever, one must be prepared by discerning the *efforts to disprove the biblical Jesus*.