Introduction to Synoptic Gospels

Good morning! This is a recording of my Synoptic Gospels course taught a number of times at Biblical Theological Seminary in the suburbs of Philadelphia. Lord willing, we are going to try and cover about twelve big topics here. We are going to start with “The Historical Jesus”—looking a little bit at theological views of Jesus, and then allegedly historical views of Jesus, looking at some of the pictures of Jesus suggested by deism, rationalism, idealism, romanticism, skepticism. Then we’ll take a look at the present situation regarding Jesus, with some more popular books that have come out in the last generation. And then probably a short look at the Jesus Seminar, and come back and make a summary on liberal views of Jesus and such. That’s our big first topic of about twelve.

Then we’re going to take some time to look at the Jewish background to the New Testament, some of the ancient sources, and Daniel’s over-view of the Intertestament Period; and then the rule of the Persians and the Greeks, followed by the Hasmoneans and the Romans. We will think a little bit of Messianic expectation at the time of Jesus. Then go beyond the ministry of Jesus to look at the end of the Jewish state and then what happened after the fall of Jerusalem.

Then we’re going to do one of our three looks at exegesis, starting with an introduction to exegesis, and think a little bit about how we interpret narratives in the Gospels. Then we'll look at Matthew 2 at the visit of the wise men. Then we will come back to what I think of as our background type of work and look at authorship and date of the Synoptic Gospels. Then we’ll look at another passage: We will look at how to interpret parables and look at the Jesus parable of the marriage banquet in Matthew 22.

For our sixth topic we’ll be looking at the Gospels as literary works. For the seventh, we’ll look at the synoptic problem and then at the geography of
Palestine, both the land as a whole and Jerusalem specifically. The geography is pretty similar for Palestine over the whole period, but obviously Jerusalem is somewhat different. We’ll look at some political features as well. Then we’ll look at—I guess we’re looking at four biblical accounts here—we’ll look at how to interpret miracle accounts and look at the incident with the demons and the pigs, Mark 5: 1-20.

Then we want to think a little bit about biblical theology of the Synoptics, looking especially at what Jesus has to say about the Kingdom. Then as our fourth passage we want to look at how to interpret controversy accounts and look at the incident in Luke 11 where Jesus is accused of being, what should we say, empowered by Beelzebub.

Finally, we want to close our discussion by looking at form criticism and redaction criticism. So that’s our scheme if you like; Lord willing, we will try to carry that out.

**The Historical Jesus**

So, let’s jump in here and have a look at our first topic, which we call: “The Historical Jesus.” Now, unless you’ve lived a very sheltered life, you’re aware that people have enormously diverse views about Jesus. Some of these are motivated by their religious or world view, and others claim to be honestly grappling with historical data. Well, we’re going to give a quick view of some influential modern views.

We’re going to start out with basically religious views. The biblical data—and for this you really have to have read it and studied it yourself. Anybody can do that; it will take some time, but the biblical data point to Jesus who is somehow fully God and fully human. And we are not going to go into a discussion on that; that’s theology. Some stuff will come up, obviously, in our discussion of the Synoptic Gospels. The other religious alternatives could be divided into two big categories. One of them is that Jesus is only human, not God in any real sense. The
other one is that Jesus is divine in some sense, but not in the biblical sense of being “one person of the Triune God,” and fully God and fully man.

**Jesus was only human and not God in any real sense**

**Atheism**

So, a very quick view of the first of these: Jesus was only human, not God in any real sense. We start with a remark or two about atheism. Obviously, in atheism the view is there’s no God, so Jesus can’t very well be God in any sense then. So Jesus was at best only human, and many atheists claim that Jesus was fictional, that he never existed at all. In fact, this idea of the “fictional Jesus” was at one time the standard Communist view. I don’t know where they stand now on that question.

**Islam**

A second view of a rather different sort, but still under “only human and not God in any real sense,” is that of Islam. Islam does believe in God though it is strictly monotheistic, not Trinitarian. They believe that Jesus was a true prophet, that he was actually born of a virgin (which they don’t claim for any of the other prophets), that he worked miracles, which they don’t claim even for Mohammed—the Koran doesn’t claim for Mohammed, although some of the Hadiths do. They claim that Jesus will one day return to reign as Messiah, but he’s not God. As I said, Allah is strictly one, and he has no son. They also claim, there’s probably some dispute on this, but this is a general reading of the Koran, that Jesus did not die on the cross, but rather he was snatched to heaven and a substitute was put in his place. So that’s a quick tour of Islam, and a lot more could be said on any of these.

**Old Liberalism**

We move to two ideas that has grown more directly out of Christianity, and the first of these is what I call “Old Liberalism.” This is the form of liberalism rising out of Christendom back in the, probably already starting in the early 1700s, but then gaining some steam by the late 1700s, and then running through the
1800s and through the twentieth century even. Basically, all liberalism believes that the Gospels contain a great deal of legendary material because “miracles don’t happen.” Well, that’s pretty straightforward—if miracles don’t happen, the Gospels have lots of miracles so they can’t be very reliable. So their claim is, God does exist. God only worked providentially through Jesus, but somehow people misunderstood him and he was deified by the early Gentile Christians. He was some sort of ethical teacher, as perhaps the commonest view of old liberalism. And that he had more of God in him than others did. I believe it was Harry Emerson Fosdick who said that, “Jesus was Divine, but so was my mother” (something of that sort). Jesus died on the cross as an example, but his Resurrection was only a spiritual resurrection. Even Karl Barth was once asked by Carl Henry, I believe, “If a newspaper reporter had been at the tomb Easter morning, would he have anything to report?” And Barth would not answer that directly.

**Neo-Orthodoxy**

We move on to a development out of old liberalism, which has often been called Neo-Orthodoxy, and that’s got a wide range of views as well. At one time Bultmann was even thought to be Neo-Orthodox, although later on that generally was dropped. Similar view of the Gospels to old liberalism; that is that miracle don’t happen and such. But Neo-Orthodoxy feels that the Jesus of history is not nearly as important as the Christ of faith. So you tend to get this two level kind of approach to things, and a Christian should be interested in the Christ of faith rather than in the Jesus of history.

This seems to be an attempt to rescue, if you like, religious value, while accepting this so called “scientific history” in which miracles do not occur. So that’s a very whirlwind view of four different approaches to the idea that Jesus is only human but not God in any real sense.
Jesus Is Divine in Some Sense but Not In the Biblical Sense

Jehovah Witnesses

A second sort of category is that Jesus is divine in some sense but not in the Biblical sense. And here we look first of all at Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Jehovah’s Witnesses believe in God that works miracles, etc., though God is more like the God of Islam in the sense that he’s strictly one. So Jesus is a small “g” god if you like. In one of the suggestions, and I don’t always see official pronouncements on at the present, Jesus is some sort of a reincarnation you might say—they don’t use that term—of the Archangel Michael. Michael was taken out of existence, but his life force was put into Jesus then as he was created, if you like, and that by this Archangel Michael, that’s the way in which the Jehovah God had created all things. He was God’s agent in creation. So they are trying to handle some of the Biblical passages that picture Jesus as God’s agent in creation. So, Jesus in Jehovah Witness’ view is not Almighty God, and he is not to be worshipped. He was born of a virgin, he worked miracles, and he died on the cross, but for some reason they have his body dissolving in the tomb; but he’s one day going to return to set up an earthly kingdom for his faithful witnesses, Jehovah’s Witnesses. So we have a version of Jesus that is divine in some sense but not in the biblical sense.

Mormonism

Mormonism: I’ll try and avoid getting carried away on Mormonism here, which I’ve done a fair bit of work on their historical background. But the Book of Mormon is fairly orthodox, more or less Trinitarian in its view of Jesus; Jesus is viewed as virgin born, the Messiah, the miracle worker, and rose from the dead. But they have some later scriptures; they have the work called The Pearl of Great Price and another work called The Doctrines and Covenants. According to these later scriptures, the teaching of Mormonism is that humans can become gods like Jesus did, and like the Father did. The Father was once man. Jesus was merely a man at the time he was on earth, though he was unusual in that he was the
firstborn spiritual son of his father and his spiritual mother in heaven. He was sent from heaven when Mary conceived, and since his ascension, he has become a god. His death however only saves us from original sin, and we have to do most of the rest of the work to be satisfactory to God and to enter into the highest level of heaven.

**The New Age Movement**

I list a third category here under Jesus was God in some sense but not in the biblical sense: the New Age movement. The New Age movement is a very diverse group of views that are characterized, if you like, by a mixture of western attitudes towards personality and that sort of thing, with elements that come from Hinduism and Buddhism, typically reincarnation. Generally, Jesus is viewed as one of the great, but usually not the greatest, of what they call the ascended masters, ones who have through their spiritual effort and enlightenment have risen far above the level of most humans. You, too, in the New Age movement can become a god by one or more techniques, which differ from guru to guru. The term “Christ” in the New Age movement is typically used for a level of spiritual enlightenment and was not an office held uniquely by Jesus. I have a little PowerPoint on our IBRI website called “Jesus in New Age,” which sketches the views of Jesus by two of the new age teachers, Edgar Casey and Benjamin Creme.

So that’s a kind of quick tour of what we might call various religious views; that does not cover the whole spectrum but does give you an idea of the diversity that exists there.

**Allegedly Historical Views**

We want to think next about what we might call “allegedly historical views.” In the past 200 years, there have been numerous attempts to produce a “real, historical” Jesus who is allegedly quite different than the person pictured in the Gospels. These attempts regularly assume that miracles do not occur—they wouldn’t have to do that, but that’s a characteristic of this whole run—because they have been disproved by science in some way. So that the Gospels, as I
mentioned before, filled as they are with miracles, cannot be reliable. Proponents of such views accept some of the Gospel material and reject the rest, and they differ on which they accept and which they reject, though they agree in rejecting miracles.

We’re going to give some examples here that are characteristic of various philosophical movements over the past 200 years since before 1800. Albert Schweitzer in his book written just after 1900, called *The Quest of Historical Jesus*, discusses over a hundred such liberal biographies of Christ, if you like. I remember myself when I first read this, which was a long time ago, that when you read the first chapter it’s kind of scary. You say, “Wow, what if Jesus were really like this,” but after you’ve read 50 or 75 of them, you say, “These guys are all shooting in the dark!” They have thrown out something that is crucial to Christianity, and then they basically are floundering around after that in spite of the fact that these people are intelligent and many of them very considerable scholars.

Well, we’re going to have a look, and we’ll classify each one of these sort of tentatively under a philosophical view, although the guys who are doing this are not philosophers; but they basically held to some sort of philosophy of the sort.

**Deism**

So we start with Deism first of all. Deism sees God as the creator but, He’s sort of the "Creator-watchmaker." He puts together the universe, but then he doesn’t mess with it after that. He’s one that doesn’t intervene in human affairs. Just as it would be rather gosh for a watchmaker to keep opening up the back of a watch and fiddling with the stuff inside, so deists think that it would be very gosh of a God who kept, or keeps, doing miracles in the universe. I guess they don’t consider the possibility that the universe might not be a watch, but might be something like a guitar, or a violin, or an interactive game in which it’s designed for the player, if you like, who is also the maker in this case, to intervene to do various things with this particular tool: the universe.
Well, back to our topic; we want to think a little bit about Herman Samuel Reimarus and his book which was actually a collection of fragments; his whole book that he had prepared was never published. The book is called the *Wolfenbüttel Fragments* and was published from 1774 to 1778. It was not published until after Reimarus died, and it was published in fragments and perhaps the whole thing would’ve eventually been published except for the reaction to the fragments that were published. The two that we would be interested in there are the ones that deal with Jesus, and one of these fragments is called “Concerning the Story of the Resurrection”, and the other one is called “The Aims of Jesus and His Disciples.” According to Reimarus, Jesus claimed to be a Jewish-type messiah, that is one who is going to come, rescue Israel from their political oppressors, bring them back to God and that sort of thing. And so, he then, Jesus thought he was this according to Reimarus, and so we made an attempt to do this but he made no attempt to found a new religion. He did, according to Reimarus, do some psychosomatic healings. You’ll find that a lot of the early liberals at least believe that Jesus was able to do the kind of healings that I suppose non-Christians think that charismatics can do, or something of that sort: that they’re not miraculous, but that they’re some kind of psychosomatic, or hypnotic, or something of that sort, of healings.

Well, Jesus tried to start a revolt against Rome but failed, and so he was put to death as a revolutionary. However, after his death, his disciples realized that he had failed, but they had gotten out of the habit of working, and as everyone who is not a pastor knows, pastors don’t do anything but crank out a 30 minute sermon or a 15 minute sermon once a week, and so it’s a pretty cushy life; and so these disciples, having gotten out of the habit of working, decided to start a new religion. And so they stole Jesus’ body from the tomb, claimed he had risen from the dead, and claimed he had sent them out to preach this new religion. So they invented a new eschatology in which the Messiah would come back a second time.
Well, the publication of Reimarus’ material created a sensation and destroyed his reputation and his family and discouraged any further publication of the fragments. So that was Reimarus. However, Reimarus had an effect besides the sensation: Reimarus’ work opened for later liberal reconstructions, but which were less drastic in general. It also set a precedent for ignoring the Epistles in the New Testament, the Epistles of Paul and Peter and John, of emphasizing Jesus’ end times teaching, his eschatological teaching, which Reimarus’ and most liberals really do not like, and of claiming that much of the material in the Gospels was either the creation of the Apostles or the later church, rather than going back to Jesus. So that’s Deism and Reimarus’ “Wolfenbüttel Fragments.”

**Exploring Rationalism vs. Revelation; Does Moral Truth Truly Count?**

**Heinrich Paulus**

We move on about fifty years to Rationalism, and Rationalism is a worldview that thinks that revelation is unnecessary because moral truth is what really counts as it’s eternal, and it can be deduced by good reasoning. That you don’t really have to look too much around the world to see how things are, you can look inside your mind and see how things are. The idea had been around since Greco-Roman philosophers, and had been revived, if you like, even in the 1600’s, but was coming on strong now in the early 1800’s.

We want to look here at Heinrich Paulus, unlike Reimarus, Heinrich Paulus wrote a work; *Leben Jesu, (Life of Jesus.*) Leben Jesu is German. He wrote a sympathetic life of Christ, okay? So, he was attracted to Jesus, and at least liked his version of Jesus. And so, we see with Paulus what is perhaps more typical of what I mentioned as theological liberalism earlier. That is, Jesus was a great moral teacher of unusual insight and ability. Most of what Paulus taught has been forgotten today. The main impact of Paulus’ work was his rationalistic treatment of miracles. Namely, he claimed the miracles really did happen, but they weren’t
miraculous. They were misunderstood, non-supernatural events, and the disciples, or the people in the crowd, thought they were miraculous.

So, Jesus really did heal people, but it was by some unknown spiritual power, which worked on the nervous system, something like hypnosis or ESP, or something of that sort. Jesus, according to Paulus, also used natural medicine and diet, rather like today’s holistic healers and health food people.

Jesus’ nature miracles are obviously tougher to explain. Paulus suggested these following sorts of things varied from one to the other. Jesus walking on the water: he was really walking on the shore, or walking on a sand bar, and so when Peter steps out of the boat, he doesn’t step on the sand bar and naturally he goes in and et cetera. So that’s basically the problem there.

How about Jesus feeding the five thousand? Well, it turns out that about 2500 of them had quite substantial lunches hidden under their cloaks, but when this little boy brings out his loaves and fishes, that shames all the other people, and they bring theirs out and they share with them, and there’s plenty for everybody.

What about Jesus’ transfiguration? Well, you remember the disciples were about half-asleep when this happened. And they’re up on the top of the mountain, and the sun is rising and it happens they’re on the west side on the top of the mountain. Jesus is right on the top of the mountain and the sun is coming up behind him, and so it illuminates his hair and his clothes, et cetera. And so he shines like that, and these two distinguished guys from Jerusalem, they mistake as Moses and Elijah; so that’s the transfiguration.

As for the resurrection of Lazarus and the others, Jesus recognized they were in a coma, and somehow managed to wake them up. Jesus’ own resurrection was rather similar in that. He did not die on the cross, according to Paulus, but he went into a coma. The cool tomb and the aromatic spices revived him. The earthquake conveniently rolled the stone away, and Jesus appeared to his disciples for a while. But in fact, he was very badly damaged by the crucifixion, and so he later left them to die. His final departure, he walks up the hill, into the clouds and
they think it’s an ascension. Well, that is Paulus: what we might call a rationalistic view of miracles.

The importance of Paulus’ work was to spread such liberal views into what we would call Christian circles. So, deism had been rather distinct from Christianity. That’s not to say that there weren’t professing Christians who weren’t actually deists, but now you begin to get this more rationalistic view of things in Christian circles, and you begin to get a liberalizing version of Christianity. That is, people who claim sympathy for Jesus, but still reject the miracles. Paulus did not lose his job, as presumably Reimarus would have if he had been still alive, or lose his prestige over the book, as in fact Reimarus did.

His rationalizing approach to miracles, though fairly quickly ridiculed even by liberals, is still used by them in some cases. So, occasionally we will see a Sunday school lesson on the feeding of the five thousand in a liberal Sunday school book, and it will be about sharing. Well, there’s a little something about sharing there but that is surely not the major point of the actual miracle.

**Idealism**

So, deism and rationalism. Now we turn to idealism, and idealism is, of course, used in a very broad way in popular speech today, but in philosophical circles, it is a type of a worldview. It is the idea that mind, or ideas, is the basic reality rather than matter. For instance, the cult we call Christian Science believes that matter doesn’t really exist, that it is mind that is operating and that therefore if your mind can be enlightened in the right way, that will overcome your diseases because diseases are basically an illusion.

Well, we’re going to look at David Friedrich Strauß and his work also called, *Leben Jesu, (Life of Jesus)*, published in 1835, only seven years after Paulus’ work. According to Strauß, the entire life of Jesus has been colored by mythological interpretation: and not just his birth and resurrection as had been
suggested by some of the slightly earlier liberals. Strauß defines “myth” here, as a “timeless religious truth, clothed in historical form.” So it is things that actually didn’t happen in history, but for teaching purposes, they are structured in a historical form. So kind of parabolic, if you like; something of that sort. And Strauß claimed that this historical form was often produced by using legendary materials. So to Strauß, the religious idea expressed in the life of Jesus is what is true, but the events didn’t really happen.

For example, the deity of Christ is not historical truth, according to Strauß, but rather it is the higher idea, the highest idea, ever conceived by man. That is, the unity of godhood, and manhood: that man and god are really the same, and that the deity of Christ is used as a mythical way of expressing this. That we are all divine brings us back to Harry Emerson Fosdick in his “My Mother was Divine,” et cetera.

In Leben Jesu, Strauß attacks both the orthodox and the rationalistic ideas of Jesus, especially mocking Paulus’ explanations that miracles which, of course, are not hard to mock as you’ve already seen. Yet Strauß produces few positive explanations of his own for the historical events. Probably because he was not greatly concerned with what actually happened. He is an idealist; history is not what matters. You see some of this already back in Plato, where he is concerned about ideas, and not about events in history.

Strauß’ book was met with rather strong reaction in his day because it was both anti-Christian, and anti-rationalistic. However, it laid the groundwork for Bultmann in the twentieth century whom we’ll say a bit about further on, and a de-mythologizing school of Bultmann’s time.

Strauß also posed three problems, problem areas we could say, which have continued to dominate liberal studies of Jesus to this very day. One of these is the problem of miracle versus myth. Strauß, in liberal circles, virtually ended the liberal acceptance of miracles in the Gospel account as historical. Only the healing accounts are accepted by some liberals today who say that Jesus did some
psychosomatic healing, as faith healers still do. Strauß raised this whole question of the Jesus of history versus the Christ of faith.

Strauß separated historical truth from religious value, and he favored a Christ of faith approach. Not all liberals have done that; some have gone in the other direction. We will find out what the real Jesus of history was like, and have the same religion as he did, or at least gain some ideas from him, or something of that sort.

A third area is the distinction between the gospel of John and the Synoptics. Strauß established a widespread rejection of John, the Gospel of John, by attacking its reliability more effectively than Reimarus had done earlier. So, that is idealism.

Next, Romanticism. Romanticism is a reaction against rationalism’s emphasis on reason and logic. For Romanticism, emotions and intuition give insight which you cannot obtain through reason. So we’ll stop there, and pick up after a short while.

**Romanticism, a Reaction against Rationalism Focusing on the Emphasis of Reason and Logic**

We’re going to look here at Romanticism, a reaction against rationalism with emphasis on reason and logic. For Romanticism emotions and intuition give insights, which you can obtain through reason. As Ernest Renan sees it (and he’s the one to look at and his *Life of Jesus*, but in French *la Vie de Jesus*) as he sees it the Gospel picture of Jesus doesn’t make sense with the miraculous removed, so he sorts the material into three different phases in Jesus’ life. He sees Jesus as an ethical teacher first of all, then a revolutionary, then a martyr. Renan claimed that all three phases of this, all three of these views, ethical teacher, revolutionary and martyr were historical, but they got mixed together somehow in the Gospel accounts where they were mixed up chronologically, but he claimed that each facet was a distinct period in Jesus’ life.
First of all he says Jesus was an ethical teacher. Jesus begins as an optimistic pleasant ethical teacher who learned to preach from John the Baptist. He returns to Galilee as a gentle teacher of love, attracts a devoted following of young men and women, plus a large group of charmed Galileans. He does no miracles except for some psycho-semantic healings. When he goes to Jerusalem, he finds that the rabbis will not accept him.

As a result, we enter phase two: he becomes a revolutionary and campaigns to get rid of the rabbis. He begins doing fake miracles to attract a larger following. Soon, Jesus realizes that his movement does not have enough popular support to beat the rabbis and that he cannot continue to stage miracles indefinitely without being discovered.

So we enter phase three where he decides he is going to throw off earthly ambitions and become a martyr. Before his death he starts a religious movement so the teachings will be preserved. He institutes the simple ceremonies of baptism and the Lord’s Supper to give unity to the group, and he chooses his leaders that he calls the apostles, and he allows himself to be caught and dies on the cross. His strategy works. In fact, it works better than he expected because Mary Magdalene has a hallucination that Jesus is alive. That is Renan’s life of Jesus.

Renan’s work is important for spreading liberal reconstructions of Jesus’ life to the popular, educated audiences because the previous books had all been written as rather technical works and particularly spread it into Catholicism, so we begin to see the beginning of liberal Catholicism about this time. Renan opened the door to the idea that reliability can be judged by aesthetics. God can’t be that way because I don’t like it, it isn’t beautiful enough; and that idea has not gone away. His idea that the chronological framework of the gospels is untrustworthy will be picked up later in form criticism.

We come to the last of our tour then before we get to the present situation, and that is the philosophical view we call Skepticism. Skeptics are doubters to a greater degree than the positions above, feeling it’s impossible to reconstruct the
life of Jesus. We are going to look at William Wrede and his work, which we’ll stick with the English title *Messianic Secret* published in 1901, so just a couple years before Schweitzer’s *Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Wrede reacts against the reconstructions that were popular at that time, somewhat like those sketched above, arguing that much in these pictures is obtained by reading between the lines and ignoring what Jesus had to say about the Second Coming: judgment, hell, and such, which modern theological liberalism tends to do as well. Wrede does not attempt to sketch a full scale life of Jesus but tries to solve a single problem. That problem is if Jesus never claimed to be Messiah as theological liberalism thought, why did he keep telling people to keep this a secret. If Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, why did he keep telling people to keep this a secret? Wrede’s answer is that Mark invented the Messianic secret because Jesus never claimed to be the Messiah; but Mark and his circle thought that he was. Wrede comes to believe that Mark’s whole narrative framework is unreliable—that only some of the individual stories and sayings in his gospel really happened.

At this point in our narrative of liberal lives of Jesus, notice that the liberals have now thrown out all the Gospels. John is late, Matthew and Luke build on Mark, and Mark is unreliable. We’ll come back and discuss the Matthew and Luke building on Mark when we get to discuss our synoptic problem. This deep skepticism toward the Gospel accounts led the application of form criticism to the life of Christ by Rudolf Bultmann and others beginning about 1920 and thereafter brought a stop to the writing of scholarly liberal lives of Christ until about 1950. *Quest for the Historical Jesus* resumed in the 1950s, the so-called second quest by liberals who were dissatisfied with a particular form of extreme skepticism advocated by Bultmann, and we’re now generally thought to be in the phase called the third quest. (I will not follow that up in great detail).

What I would like to look at is what we can call the present situation, and here we’re going to sketch a number of things going on, but the present situation is characterized by considerable diversity. Renan made an observation back when he
wrote his life of Jesus that Jesus, once you remove the miracles, doesn’t make sense; and so he started sorting various characteristics of Jesus into these three categories: the ethical teacher, the revolutionary, and the martyr, and so basically claimed there had been a chronological mix up. It is true that once the miraculous is excluded from Jesus’ ministry, his personal life doesn’t make sense, and a variety of possibilities can be imagined. Modern theories are often simply various combinations of previously noticed possibilities.

We’re going to give here another fast sketch of some of the views advocated since World War II. We’ll call these the post-Bultmanians: Schonfield’s, The Passover Plot, John Marco Allegro's Sacred Mushroom and the Cross, and Morton Smith's The Secret Gospel and Jesus the Magician; and then we’ll have a little bit to say about the Jesus Seminar.

Post- Boltmanian is a term for former students of Rudolf Bultmann, especially Gunther Bornkamm, Hans Conzelmann, Ernst Fuchs, Ernst Kasemann, (and those all sounded very German) and James M. Robinson, an American. Bornkamm was the only one of these who actually wrote a life of Christ, entitled Jesus of Nazareth, published in 1960 in the English translation. The others, however, wrote encyclopedia articles or journal articles. All are anti-supernatural, but all of them feel Bultmann went too far in his skepticism. They have more interest in history than he did, and they feel that the New Testament material gives us at least a feeling for what people thought about Jesus. In their own historical methodology, although still very skeptical, they ignore the Gospel of John; they use the Synoptics. They pick out the authentic incidences and sayings of Jesus using what they call a "method of dissonance." What’s that? We'll take an example: Jesus himself was a Jew. His followers were Christians. Thus, any features of Jesus’ reported teachings, which looked "Jewish," might go back to the Jews rather than to Jesus, okay? Any material which looks "Christian," may go back to the early Christians rather than to Jesus. Only that which is incomparable with both Judaism and Christianity likely goes back to Jesus.
Does Dissonance Have a Problem as a Methodology?

So we examine this material to get Jesus’ self-understanding. Well, that’s a very minimalist approach to Jesus, but strangely enough, it does turn out some interesting results. I mentioned here that dissonance does have a problem as a methodology. Take Martin Luther: Martin Luther was a Catholic; his followers were Lutheran. So you throw away anything with Martin Luther that looks Catholic, and you get rid of all traditional Orthodox theology; and you throw away anything else that looks Lutheran, and you wind up with probably the Bondage of the Will, or something of that sort. But even that looks kind of Augustinian Catholic, if you like, so what do you do?

Well, let’s look at some results from what the post-Bultmanians got: They did deduce some interesting results, which don’t fit the liberal model very well. Take for instance Jesus’ view of himself. Kasemann thought that there was a very distinct atmosphere on this question in the New Testament: that Jesus thought of himself as divinely and uniquely inspired, and that he was a "greater" than a prophet. Jesus, in fact, says Kasemann, made Messianic claims. Well, a lot of liberals do not want to go that way.

Ernst Fuchs, thinking of Jesus’ view of himself, said, “Jesus claimed that he could forgive sins.” What kind of person can forgive sins? Well, you remember the remark of the Jews when they heard Jesus say something like that. Then we think about Jesus’ teachings, Kasemann concludes Jesus’ main messages are, “God has come to give men what they don’t deserve and to set them free from bondage.” So we picture grace and redemption and Jesus’ message according to Kasemann.

For Hans Conzelmann, Jesus spoke of a future kingdom, which in some sense is confronting us right now. That’s rather interesting because when I was taking a New Testament course at Duke, not a conservative course, the big point
was made, “You got two elements that you see in the Gospel that are inconsistent: future kingdom, present kingdom.” But here Conzelmann says that “They’re both there; they’re both in Jesus.” So this point was regularly lost in older realism, which typically sets these two elements in contradiction. Whereas Christians in recent years have come to think in terms of the “already” and “not yet” as what’s going on there, and there is that real tension that really turns out to be a major feature of Christian theology.

For Jesus’ conduct Ernst Fuchs says, “Jesus’ actions show us that he submitted to God, yet he claims a unique authority seen, for instance, in his cleansing of the temple”. He also showed great graciousness to outcasts. Contrast Jesus’ attitude with the Pharisees’ attitude.

Well, that’s a quick tour of those, and these results seem rather minimal, but they’re striking. They suggest that Jesus is much more than liberals have granted and that they should reconsider their skepticism.

Well, we move on from the post-Bultmanians to look at Hugh Schonfield’s, The Passover Plot, 1966. Hugh Schonfield was a liberal, British Jew who worked on the “International Dead Sea Scroll Committee.” Apparently he had accepted the claims of Jesus at one point earlier in his career, but later gave it up. So he was apparently some sort of early Messianic Jew at one point. He is quite familiar with Evangelical interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. And if other liberals are familiar with that, they either just scorn it or they don’t take it into account at all, but Schonfield does. According to Schonfield, Jesus’ ministry is an elaborate plot to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies regarding the Messiah, especially his death and resurrection. In Schonfield’s view, Jesus, convinced that he is the Messiah, gathers disciples but avoids claiming publicly to be the Messiah for his own safety. Notice there, Schonfield has a nice explanation for the Messianic Secret. It’s not safe to claim to be the Messiah too early. There might be some other reasons as well, but that shows us that Wrede has built way too much on his Messianic Secret sort of thing. Eventually, however, Jesus is rejected in
Galilee and realizes that he has to die and rise again in order to fulfill Old Testament prophecy; probably thinking of Psalm 22 or Isaiah 53. Jesus decides however, to fake his death rather than trust God for his resurrection. He constructs a plot, using several assistants who are only in on part of the plot, so they don’t know for sure what the other people are doing or even who the other people are. Lazarus’ death and resurrection is faked to build tension with the authorities. The colt, for the triumphal entry, is arranged, forcing the Jewish authorities to take action to avoid a revolt. Jesus controls the timing of his arrest so they won’t find him until a certain point, so that he will only be crucified for a few hours. And then when he is being crucified for the few hours, he shouts the code words, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani,” and an assistant runs out with a sponge that drugs him and Jesus goes into a coma. Well, that’s how Schonfield is headed.

Schonfield then believes that the plot, almost perfect, is ruined by the spear thrust of the Roman soldier. Jesus is taken down from the cross by Joseph of Arimathea, and an unnamed conspirator whom we’ll call “X.” That night, Jesus is removed from the tomb, taken to another place, and revived. He gives “X” a message to carry to the disciples. Message: tell them to meet me in Galilee. But, after “X” leaves, Jesus dies and “X” is trying to deliver the message but apparently does not realize that Jesus is dead. “X” tries to tell the women at the tomb the next morning, but they think that he is an angel. He tries to tell some disciples on the road to Emmaus, but they mistake him for Jesus. The confusion continues. In the appearances where Jesus was not immediately recognized, they are treated as those of “X.” The clear and solid appearances are made up by the church later.

Well, Schonfield’s story reflects the influence of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls with some emphasis on the Messianic expectations about that time. In fact, the Dead Sea Scrolls give us a lot of information in that direction that we hadn’t have before. And it gives us a renewed appreciation for the Gospel of John as a source. It’s peculiar in the daring treatment of Old Testament prophecies; it has the classic features of what we call a plot theory.
So that leads us to an aside for a moment on plot theories. A plot theory claims that some set of historical events can better be explained not by the stated, or surface, motivations etc., but by an unstated, secret, hidden plot. Some examples are the claim that Kennedy was killed by the CIA, or Lincoln was killed by the radical Republicans, or that Nine-Eleven disasters were actually staged by the US government. Plots clearly occurred in human history, okay? But plot theories face serious methodological problems. First, the better the plan, the more hidden it was and is, therefore the less useful our data is. The perfect plot does not fit the data at all. Therefore it is possible to construct far more plots than could actually happen. So that the chance of any one plot being true is really very, very small. It’s impossible to prove a plot theory right or wrong before the last judgment. And it’s very dangerous to hang one’s worldview on a particular plot theory.

Let’s have a look at John Marco Allegro, “The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross,” 1970. John Marco Allegro was a professor at the University of Manchester in England and another British representative of the International Dead Sea Scroll team. You wonder about this team, huh? This book ruined his academic reputation. If you think that Schonfield has a plot theory, Allegro has a “super plot theory.” More radical that Bultmann or Schonfield. Why? Well, Jesus never existed. Christianity never existed. Judaism never existed. Well, at least in this part of the first century.

**Exploring the Theories of the Super-Secret Mushroom Fertility Cult and the Seven Pillars of Scholarly Wisdom**

Their [Jews and Christians] books and teachings are all expressions of code words used to disguise a super-secret mushroom fertility cult—a sex drug cult; a sort of thing that was popular in the seventies. Judaism and Christianity do not appear to be such now because the secrets were lost under persecution, and the
front organizations continued and developed on their own. Allegro tries to prove his position by etymology—the derivation of words. He tries to prove that the Old Testament and New Testament are filled with secret codes relating to hallucinogenic mushrooms and sexual orgies. He uses Latin, Greek, Arabic, Persian, Syriac, Hebrew, Aramaic, Sanskrit, Ugaritic, Acadian and Samaritan enough to snow all but the best linguists. That’s John M. Allegro the Sacred Mushroom and the Cross.

Morton Smith wrote The Secret Gospel, 1973, and Jesus the Magician, 1978. Morton Smith was professor of ancient history at Columbia University. He earlier studied in Israel during the Second World War, got a Ph.D. at Hebrew University, and then later got a Th.D. at Harvard. Smith claims he discovered in 1958 at the Mar Saba Greek Orthodox Monastery in Israel a letter from Clement of Alexandria (who flourished about 200 A.D.) which, however, had been copied in the back of a Greek book published in the 1700s, which [the letter] was in the blank pages in the back. The book with letter, if it ever existed, has disappeared. For the text of the letter see pages 14-17 of Morton’s Smith's Secret Gospel. The letter answers some charges made by an agnostic group called the Carpocrations who had a different version of the Gospel of Mark which included lewd materials used to justify their sexual immorality.

Clement says he has a secret, longer version of Mark himself not including the lewd material which the Carpocrations stole and corrupted for their libertine group. Smith sides with the Carpocrations and claimed that Jesus really is a libertine Gnostic magician and that this explains his miracles, his personal claims to deity, his secrecy, and statements about the law: namely, that men are not responsible to the law in any way.

If this is a fraud, this is not a clumsy fraud. Clement was interested in these topics. The letter resembles Clement’s style. If it is forgery, the writer knew at
least as much as Morton Smith, which is an interesting clue. That has led to the suggestion that Morton Smith, in fact, invented all of this and made sure that the manuscript did not survive to have its ink examined or anything of that sort.

You might say nobody would do things like this, would they? Well, we have a verified case in relation to Mormonism. I’m not thinking of Joseph Smith back in the 1840’s, though I think that probably is that, but a recent guy if you do a Google search on recent Mormon fraud, fraudulent Mormon manuscript, you can see some material in that direction.

We will take a fairly quick look at the Jesus Seminar that has made a lot of public splash in the last ten or fifteen years. The Jesus Seminar is a group of radical New Testament researchers who have been meeting for twenty years or so to produce a scholarly presentation on Jesus that in their view will blow traditional Christianity out of the water. They have been given extensive public media; extensive media publicity every time they meet which while it was going on about every six months.

In 1993 they presented their first book length production. This was the book edited by Robert Funk, Roy Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar called *The Five Gospels, the Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, (New York, Macmillan, 1993). I want to give you a little sketch on where they are coming from and the results they obtained. Then that will close our discussion here of liberal lives of Christ if you like.

In the early part of their book, pages two through five, they give the Seven Pillars of Scholarly Wisdom that these beliefs, or teachings, on which their whole thing rests. The first one is the Jesus of History vs. the Christ of Faith. Big difference between the Christ people believe in and the Jesus of History. The second one is the Jesus of Synoptic vs. the Jesus of John. They are claiming to opt for the Jesus of History and the Jesus of Synoptics. The third claim is the Priority
of Mark: that the Gospel of Mark was written first. Fourth is the existence of Q. We will come back and discuss this with the Synoptic Problem, but it’s [Q] alleged document that contains teachings and partly sayings of Jesus, and that it was used by Mathew and Luke along with Mark. So Mark and Q were combined together in slightly different ways by Mathew and Luke to make their Gospels.

The fifth pillar, if you like, is the Eschatological vs. the Non-Eschatological Jesus. Which is the real Jesus?

Two others: Six, Oral Culture vs. Print Culture: so they are going to make a big deal of oral transmission of the Gospel material before it is written down. We will discuss that in our discussion of form criticism.

Then number seven: a skeptical principle, the Gospels are assumed non-historical unless proved otherwise. Well, we don’t have time machines, OK, but that’s a somewhat strange way to approach historical documents if we do that. In general, you usually don’t know anything about history. But it has a great deal to do with what we mentioned earlier: the rejection of the miraculuous. And if the miraculous cannot occur, then the Gospels can’t very well be reliable.

They [Jesus Seminar] then give a whole bunch of rules of written evidence and rules of oral evidence, and I’ll read them for you; but we will not discuss them anywhere here. Rules of written evidence—clustering and contexting: the Evangelists frequently group things in parables and clusters that did not originate with Jesus, so the idea [is] that they have reshuffled this material. Second, the Evangelists frequently relocate sayings and parables or invent new narrative context for them. Then the revision and commentary, [which is] number three. Evangelists frequently expand sayings or parables or provide them with an interpretive overlay or comment.

Fourth, the Evangelists often revise or edit sayings to make them conform to their own individual language, style or viewpoint. False Attribution is number
five: words borrowed from the fund of common lore or the Greek scriptures are often put on the lips of Jesus. Sixth, the Evangelists frequently attribute their own statements to Jesus, [like] difficult sayings. Seventh, hard saying are frequently softened in the process of transmissions to adapt them to the conditions of daily living. Eighth, variations and difficult sayings often betray the struggle of the early Christian community to interpret or adapt sayings to its own situation.

And then four of them: Christianizing Jesus. Nineth, sayings or parables expressed in Christian language are the creation of the Evangelists or their Christian predecessors; you remember the Jewish-Christian situation with the sayings of Jesus. Tenth, sayings or parables that contrast with the language or viewpoint of the Gospel in which they are imbedded reflect older tradition, but not necessarily traditions that originate with Jesus. Eleventh, the Christian community develops apologetic statements to defend the claims and sometimes attributes such statements to Jesus. Twelfth, sayings and narratives that reflect knowledge of events that took place after Jesus’ death are creations Evangelist or oral tradition before them, no fulfilled prophesy is really what we are getting there.

**Rules of Oral Evidence from the Gospels to Jesus**

1. Only sayings and parables that can be traced back to the oral period, 30-50 C.E., can possibly have originated with Jesus.
2. Sayings and parables that are tested in two or more independent sources are older than the sources in which they are imbedded.
3. Sayings or parables that are tested in two different contexts probably circulated independently at an earlier time.
4. The same, or similar, content attested in two or more different forms has had a life of its own and, therefore, may stem from an old tradition.
5. Unwritten tradition that is captured by the written gospels, relatively late may preserve very old tradition.

Orality and Memory

6. The oral memory best retained sayings and anecdotes that are short, provocative, memorable, and often repeated.

7. The most frequently recorded words of Jesus in the surviving gospels take the form of aphorisms and parables.

8. The earliest layer of gospel tradition is made up of simple aphorisms and parables that circulated by word of mouth prior to the written gospels.

9. Jesus’ disciples remembered the core, or gist, of the sayings of the parables, not his precise words, except in rare cases. They did a big section on the Storyteller’s license.

10. To express what Jesus imagined, [or] is imagined to have said on particular occasions, Jesus says to them, “Let’s cross to the other side.”

11. To sum up the message of Jesus to Mark, as Mark understands it, the time is up; God’s imperial rule is closing in. Change your ways and put your trust in the Good News. To forecast the outcome of his own gospel story, and to sum up the gospel then being proclaimed in his community, Mark has Jesus say, “The son of Adam is being turned over to his enemies, and they will end up killing him, and three days after he is killed he will rise.”

13. To express Mark’s own view of the disciples and others, Mark has Jesus say to the frightened disciples after the squall has died down, “Why are you so cowardly? You still don’t trust, do you?”

14. Since Mark links trust with the cure of the sick, he has Jesus say to a woman he has just cured, “Daughter, your trust has just cured you.” Jesus’ remark is understood by Mark’s narrative aside, "He was unable to perform a single miracle there, except that he did cure a few by laying hands on them," though he was always shocked by the lack of trust.
To justify the later practice of fasting, in spite of the fact that Jesus and his first disciples did not fast, the days will come when the groom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. To elicit the right confession, Mark has Jesus ask, “What are the people saying about me?” A little later in the conversation, he asks, “What about you? Who do you say I am?” And then Peter responds, “You are the Anointed,” which is what Christians are supposed to say.

Distinctive discourse: Jesus’ characteristic talk was distinctive; it can usually be distinguished from common lore; otherwise, it is futile to search for the authentic words of Jesus.

18. Jesus’ parables and sayings cut against the social and religious grain.
19. Jesus’ sayings and parables surprise and shock; they characteristically call for reversal roles, or frustrate ordinary, everyday expectations.
20. Jesus’ sayings and parables are often characterized by exaggeration, humor and paradox.
21. Jesus’ images are concrete and vivid; his sayings and parables customarily metaphorical, and without explicit application.
22. Then that laconic sage--the sage of few words. Jesus does not, as a rule, initiate dialogue or debate, nor does he offer to cure people.
23. Jesus rarely makes pronouncements or speaks about himself in the first person.
24. Jesus makes no claim to be the anointed Messiah.

Well that’s some of the approaches that you see in the Jesus Seminar. A little about the results: in the book The Five Gospels, the words of Jesus are printed in colors. And they use red for: Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it; pink: Jesus probably said something like this; gray: Jesus did not say this, but the idea originated, [or what] it contained, are close to his own; and black: Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective, or content, of a later, or a different, tradition.

Well, results: An index of red- and pink-letter sayings list the sayings scoring in the pink or red on this thing. I have a little discussion here of how they
do the scoring. They basically took marbles, and each of them had a red, pink, gray, and black marble, and they passed a basket around, and you put in the one for the particular saying they were voting on. So, an index of red or pink sayings lists the 90 sayings that scored in the red or pink, if you like, with detailed votes on their various versions in the different gospels; this is page 549-553 in *The Five Gospels*. According to Mark on page five, 82% of the words ascribed to Jesus in the Gospels were actually not spoken by him; [they are] black or gray if you like. So only 18% of the words spoken by Jesus in the Gospels are admitted to be his according the Jesus Seminar. In Mark, only one saying is viewed as authentic red. What’s that? “Pay to the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and to God what belongs to God.” Not many even come into the pink. In John, only one saying even makes it pink, “A prophet gets no respect in his own, on his own turf,” John 4:44. These are their own translations, so they have kind of a racy, Brooklyn sound to them or something. The gospel of Thomas is rated ahead of John, ahead of both of these, both John and Mark, with several reds and a fair bit of pink, about comparable to Matthew and Luke.
