

Who do you say that I am?

Five studies for congregational use

on the mystery of Jesus Christ

by

Nigel Watson

Table of contents

Preface	Page 1
Foreword by the Rev. Professor Norman Young	Page 2
Study 1: Which Jesus?	Page 3
Study 2: Please give us a Jesus who is real!	Page 8
Study 3: A real human being and our Saviour	Page 13
Study 4: What do we really know about Jesus?	Page 17
Study 5: The Word became flesh	Page 22

Preface

These studies were written at the suggestion of the Rev. Dr. Noel Schultz. They can serve as no more than an introduction to a vast literature. Over recent years, there has been a spate of writing about the meaning of Jesus. By way of illustration, I cite two excellent (and lengthy) recent books on the subject: John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the historical Jesus* (Doubleday, 1991-94), the two volumes of which run to over 2,000 pages; and N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (SPCK, 1996), which runs to 741 pages.

One topic which I have not touched upon in these studies is the Resurrection. This is also a vast subject, which would call for another series of studies. However, I have published a booklet on this topic, *Easter Faith and Witness* (Desbooks, 1990), which may still be purchased from the publisher, P.O. Box 51, Northcote 3070.

Another topic which I have not been able to touch upon is the work of the Jesus Seminar. Readers who dip into the publications of this Seminar need to realise that these publications have drawn trenchant criticism from a number of eminent scholars. I am thinking particularly of the criticisms levelled against the Seminar by Eduard Schweizer, Luke Timothy Johnson, N. T. Wright and Leander Keck. I have attempted to survey this debate in an article in *Trinity Occasional Papers* (Vol. XVII, No. 1, July, 1998), 'The third quest for the historical Jesus and the Jesus Seminar'. Copies of this article may be had, upon request.

Some readers of these studies may be surprised to find probing questions side by side with poems and prayers, but I believe it is possible to combine questioning with reverence, criticism with faith.

I am grateful to my friend and long-time colleague, the Rev. Professor Norman Young, for writing the Foreword and suggesting some amendments to what I had written, and to Alexandra Sangster for once again designing the cover page.

I wish to dedicate these studies to all my former students in the United Faculty of Theology, Melbourne.

Nigel Watson.

Preface to the Release of These Studies On-line

The original print-run of these studies, first published in 2003, sold out, as did the reprint. As I do not intend to order a second reprint, I am now making the studies available on-line.

January, 2006

Foreword

‘Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and for ever.’ So the writer to the Hebrews affirmed. And for those who believe in Jesus, it is eternally true that in him God acted decisively to bring wholeness of life for all humanity. And yet how and why he lived the life he did and died the way he did, and what was involved in his resurrection have been understood in widely differing ways, right from the beginning.

In these studies, scholar and preacher Nigel Watson assures us that this variety is not to be deplored. On the contrary, we are encouraged to appreciate the integrity of the New Testament witness which has not censored out the diversity of either eye witness account or reflective interpretation. Here we are being guided to undertake the same kind of reflection in our own time. The world’s opportunities and challenges vary from culture to culture and generation to generation. Consequently, our faithful response to Christ in these contexts will vary accordingly.

With all the knowledge of a careful and open-minded scholar, the capacity to communicate of a skilled educator and lively preacher and the clarity of language we have come to expect from him, Nigel Watson guides those who use these studies to find Jesus Christ for themselves, today.

By setting out the range of possibilities that have been expounded by others, from New Testament times to the present, he gives the readers resources and freedom to explore, daring perhaps to go where they have never ventured before. But not just to titillate the mind. Consistently in view is the conviction that how we understand Jesus has the most profound implications for how we live in the present and face the future.

There is also, and perhaps most importantly, the recognition that in exploring freely and seeking a Jesus relevant for our own time, this must never degenerate into creating a Jesus for ourselves who neatly fits our experiences and conveniently reinforces our prejudices. With all the emphasis in these studies on a ‘really human’ Jesus, there remains the wonder and mystery of ‘one who comes from the side of God’, and offers us wholeness of life beyond what we can find in ourselves or from one another.

With all its variety, that remains a constant in the New Testament witness and provides our home base – the beginning and end of all our exploration.

Norman Young

Study 1 Which Jesus

I have given this study the title, 'Which Jesus?' because the more deeply I explore what people have thought and written about Jesus over the last 2,000 years, the more I am struck by the bewildering diversity of their images of him. We have countless pictures of Jesus. You find them not only in books on theology but in paintings, biographies, dramas and movies.

One scholar, Jaroslav Pelikan, has written a book called *Jesus through the Centuries* in which he gives a vivid picture of eighteen different ways in which Jesus has been pictured and believed in, and he comes nowhere near exhausting the possibilities.

To single out just a few of these images, there is Jesus the simple peasant, moving about the villages and lanes of Galilee, fascinating the common people by the charm of his words and the beauty of his character. That was the picture entertained by the 19th century French scholar, Renan.

There is Jesus the great moral teacher, proclaiming the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of mankind. That was the picture popularised around the end of the 19th century by the German theologian, Harnack.

There is the Jesus of Liberation theologians: the arch-rebel, the champion of the dispossessed and the marginalised, the unrelenting enemy of cant, hypocrisy and privilege.

There is the Jesus depicted by Denis Potter in the play he wrote for TV, some thirty years ago, *Son of Man*. Some people found Potter's Jesus offensive - no more than a scruffy little hippy - and yet the play struck a chord with many viewers. Potter's Jesus had a simplicity, a detachment, a freedom, an openness and a humanity that made him the embodiment of a pervasive contemporary ideal.

Then there is Jesus the feminist pioneer, 'Sophia Christ', who brought into being an unstructured community of equals.

There is the Jesus described by the leaders of the Jesus Seminar in the States, people like Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan and Robert Funk. Who is Jesus for them? He is several things but, above all, a wisdom teacher with a difference, a teacher of an alternative and subversive wisdom, generating a boundary-shattering social vision.

As G. K. Chesterton observed, seventy-seven years ago,

There must surely have been something not only mysterious but many-sided about Christ, if so many smaller Christs can be carved out of him.¹

For reflection and discussion: Can you think of other images of Jesus that people have entertained, besides the ones that have been mentioned? Which of the various images that I have sketched is closest to your picture of Jesus? (six minutes)

How come?

Faced with this diversity, you may well ask, 'How does it come about that different people picture Jesus in such radically different ways?' Here are some suggestions.

Diversity in the portraits

First, the Gospels themselves differ significantly in the way that they portray Jesus.

For reflection and discussion: Read Matthew 16: 13-20. Now read Mark 8: 27-31. How would you describe the response of Jesus to Peter's confession in Matthew? How would you describe his response in Mark? (*five minutes*)

When we compare the picture of Jesus that we find in the first three Gospels with the picture that we find in John, the differences are even more striking. A striking feature of St. John's Gospel is the series of 'I am' sayings:

I am the bread of life

I am the good shepherd

I am the true vine, and so on.

For reflection and discussion: Working in pairs, see how many more sayings of this pattern you can find in St. John's Gospel. Can you find any parallels to these 'I am' sayings in any of the first three Gospels? (six minutes)

What sort of records are these Gospels?

So far, we have touched on only a few of the differences between the four Gospels. In the light of these differences, you may well want to ask, 'What are we to make of these books? What sort of records are they?' Let me outline an answer that makes sense to me.

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (H & S, 1925) p. 229.

Reminiscences with a difference

I don't question, for a moment, that the Gospels contain an abundance of reliable memories of Jesus of Nazareth. I also believe, however, that each one of the Gospels is something much more complex than a collection of memories of Jesus.

Look up John 20: 30-31. Here John makes it perfectly clear that he is writing not just to satisfy our curiosity about Jesus but to win us to faith in him. His Gospel is 'an essay in persuasion'. He is telling about the past in order to do something to the reader in the present.

Memory and interpretation

Another way of describing the Gospels would be to say that they contain a blend of memory and interpretation. 'Memory' shouldn't require explanation. What do I mean by 'interpretation'? I mean that each of the evangelists has shaped his material in accordance with his own beliefs, literary skills and pastoral concerns.

Any serious work of history is a blend of reporting the facts, so far as they are known, and interpreting those facts. One of the greatest historians of the last century was a man called G. M. Trevelyan. Some of you have probably read his Social History of England, of which hundreds of thousands of copies were sold.

In a lecture he gave once to fellow-historians, Trevelyan raised the question whether the historian should just let the facts speak for themselves and replied, "But how far is it possible? Facts seldom speak for themselves clearly, if there is no comment."

The evangelists saw it as part of their task to interpret, and comment on, the story that they were telling.

For reflection and discussion: Each of the evangelists portrays Jesus as someone who reached out to people who were considered to be beyond the pale, but Luke gives special prominence to this side of his ministry. Can you think of examples? (six minutes)

The puzzle of St. John's Gospel

Is the balance between memory and interpretation more or less the same in each Gospel? Along with the great majority of scholars, I believe that in John the balance between memory and interpretation shifts perceptibly toward interpretation. That is the main reason why the differences between John and the other Gospels are so marked.

In allowing himself more freedom to interpret the traditions of the words and works of Jesus, John was probably aiming to make explicit what was merely implicit in those traditions.

Look up Matt. 11: 25-30. This passage, particularly v. 27, has a decidedly Johannine ring about it. Indeed, it has been described as 'a bolt from the Johannine sky'. It may well have served as a starting-point for John's discourses on the relationship between the Father and the Son. Nevertheless, we should be cautious about citing words of Jesus from the Fourth Gospel as if they represented the actual words of Jesus of Nazareth.

Artists or composers

It may be helpful, if we can think up some analogies. I find it helpful to think of the evangelists as being like artists who create a collage and, out of bits and pieces of material, produce a new work of art; or like composers who gather folk songs or sea shanties and weave them together into a new musical composition.

I have also found illuminating a comment by a scholar called A. B. Lord, who has made a special study of Russian folk songs and the way in which they have been passed on by folk singers from generation to generation. He has come to the conclusion that the process he is studying is 'not really one of conflict between preserver of tradition and creative artist; it is rather one of the preservation of tradition by the constant re-creation of it'.²

For reflection and discussion: I have compared the work of the evangelists to that of collage artists, composers of medleys and traditional folk singers. Do you find these comparisons helpful? (five minutes).

Reading from different locations

We began this study by reflecting on the bewildering diversity of images of Jesus that people have held over the last 2,000 years. I then suggested that this diversity is partly due to significant differences among the Gospels themselves. But it is also due to the way that different readers come to the Gospels from different vantage points, different social locations. Do not we ourselves find that, as our circumstances change, as we grow older, richer, poorer, wiser(?), different moments in the story of Jesus strike chords with us?

This has been an important emphasis in recent biblical study, and in wider literary studies generally, namely, that none of us reads a book, any book, in a vacuum but rather in a particular social location. That location influences, inevitably, the way we read the book in front of us.

² Quoted by Ernest Best in *Mark, the Gospel as Story* (T & T Clark, 1983) p. 13.

Listening together

If this is true, it surely follows that we all need to listen to one another, as we ponder the question, 'Who do you say that I am?' First World people need to listen to Third World people, and vice versa, ministers need to listen to lay people, and vice versa, men need to listen to women, and vice versa. The voice that we hear from the pages of the New Testament is a richer and more nuanced voice, when we listen for it side by side with our brothers and sisters.

A closing prayer

Healing, sovereign God,
overmatch our resistant ears
with your transforming speech.
Penetrate our jadedness and fatigue.
Touch our yearnings by your words.
Through our out-loudness, draw us closer to you.
We are ready to listen.
Amen.

From Walter Brueggemann, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggemann* (Fortress Press, 2003) p. 51.

