

Biblical Apologetics

8. Was Jesus just a good moral teacher?

Let me begin with this well known quote from CS Lewis who was Professor of Mediaeval Literature at Cambridge.

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him: (I am ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.) That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sorts of things that Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher, He would either be a lunatic on the same level as a man who says he is a poached egg, or else he would be the devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either he was the son of God, or else a madman or something worse."

As you can see CS Lewis answer to the question was Jesus just a good moral teacher is NO.

Is he right? Where does the idea of Jesus as just a good moral teacher come from?

Well certainly in the West it gained currency from the enlightenment, which had its roots in Scotland, where men stopped believing in anything other than the natural world around us. Ghosts, ghouls and God were all in the same category – mere superstitions of a humanity still in its developmental infancy. The mind enlightened by the sciences, reason and rationality could see that.

So of course because there is nothing apart from the physical universe dead men do not rise hence for example in the 18th century writer Hermann Samuel Reimarus argued that the resurrection was nothing more than a cover up to explain the embarrassing and premature death of Jesus.

By the 19th century a Movement called 'The quest for the historical Jesus' was underway. The basic premise was of course the first century writers got it wrong 19th and 20th century writers would get it right.

All this rot about Jesus claiming to be the son of God and forgive sins. You see, my good man we now know that Jesus message was really just about the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.

Quite remarkably that fitted exactly with the popular 19th century thinking about the nature of the divine and his complete incapability to intervene in the natural order of the world he created. You see Jesus was really an early enlightenment thinker – preaching a gospel all about the civilisation of man and good morals and so on. That my friends is called retrospective historical imperialism and if you quote that in an exam is worth at least 3 marks in itself!

Since then we have been presented with Jesus as a freedom fighter, a hypnotist, a magic mushroom eater, a confused prophet and even an enthusiastic proponent of

political correctness.

The idea has been that if we can sift all the mythologising about Jesus eg supernatural activities then we will really get to the core of his message. But there is a problem there. Let me quote to you from Edmund Bentley's book - *Biography for beginners*:

*The art of biography
is different from geography
Geography is about maps
biography is about chaps*

Why am I quoting this little ditty. Well Bentley is pointing out that different genre require different tools for manufacture and study. So what genre are the gospels? Biography? They are more than that – they are written to to convince you about the identity and mission of Jesus.

Mark 1:1 *The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God*

John 20:31 *But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

There is a core of historical information but history and theology are intertwined inseparably.

The mistake of those who were on the quest for the historical Jesus is that they thought the material in the

gospel are raw data requiring interpretation but the reality is they are already the interpretation of the raw data. Jesus height, hair colour and so on are missed out. why? because the gospel writers are telling you what the main thing you need to know – that Jesus was the Son of God who brought forgiven and light and hope to a dark world. Everything is eclipsed in the light of his death and resurrection.

In order then to make an interpretation more information would be required, you would need a complete history but that is not available. Fanciful thinking such as the Da Vinci code require extra material from nearly 200 years later to start their hypothesis. The gospels cannot be read in any other way than they are. You must either accept them or not. They are either the truth or they are not. In the same way you cannot really say Jesus was just a good moral teacher – he was either the Son of God or a complete lunny!

part 2

Anthony Flew (Atheist at this point) told this parable
“Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says “Some gardener must tend this plot.” The other disagrees, “There is no gardener.” So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. “But perhaps he is an invisible gardener. “So they set up a barbed wire fence. They

electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how HG Wells' Invisible Man could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen). Bit no shrieks ever suggested that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wore ever betray an invisible climber. The blood hounds never give cry. Yet still the believer is not convinced. "bot there is a gardener, invisible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who come secretly to look after the garden which he loves." At last the sceptic despairs, "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all."

But the gardener has come – Jesus verifiable by the historical event of the resn and by his direct and indirect claims.

Direct and Indirect claims

“Unless the speaker is God, this is really so preposterous as the be comic. We can all understand how a man forgives offences against himself. you tread on my toe and I forgive you. you steal my money and I forgive you. But what should we make of a man, himself unrobbed and untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for standing on other men's toes or stealing other men's money? Asinine fatuity is the kindest description we should give of his conduct. Yet this is what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had

undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if he was the party chiefly concerned, the person chiefly offended in all offences. This makes sense only if he was the God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin. In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words would imply what I can only regard as silliness and conceit, unrivalled by any other character in history...I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him: 'i am ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I do not accept his claim to be God.' This is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sorts of things that Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher.” CS Lewis

Direct claims

Mark 14:61-64

Matt 27:43

Lk 20:41-44

Luke 21:27

John 8:57-59

John 10:30 (lit of the same substance)

Indirect claims

throughout ministry takes on the familiar attributes of yahweh and claims them for himself. Forgiver of sins, Light, the judge, the life, the truth

Either : liar, lunatic, legend, Lord (truth)

if not truth then one of other three

liar? few say this – can't claim great moral teacher if liar sincere but self deceived – lunatic? look at like no evidence abnormality or unbalanced

CS Lewis “ *The discrepancy between the depth of his moral teaching and the rampant megalomania which must lie behind His theological teaching unless he is indeed God has never satisfactorily been got over*”

Legend – ie exaggerations and words put in mouth and if hew alive would repudiate them. Problem is archeology. Albright – world famous archeologist says no reason to doubt any of gospels written after AD 70. Galatians written within 25 years. Myth does not develop in that time frame as many to discredit it.

But claiming to be God and being God completely different things. I can claim to be God but for Jesus contrast claims with character. Character sound. Sinless (Jn 8:46). most saints when get closer to God feel sin more acutely. Power over natural forces, raised the dead, lamed walk, blind see, leper healed, dumb speak. As someone once said, “*Christ moved history as only God could*”.

“*This Jesus of Nazareth, without money and arms, conquered more millions than Alexander, Caesar, Mohammed, and Napoleon; without science and learning, he shed more light on matters human and divine than all*

philosophers and scholars combined; without eloquence of schools, he spoke such words of life as were never spoken before or since and produced effects which lie beyond the reach of orator and poet; without writing a single line, he set more pens in motion, and furnished themes for more sermons, orations, discussions, learned volumes, works of art, and songs of praise than the whole army of great men of ancient and modern times”

The problem is not an intellectual one it is a moral one – it is not that a person cannot believe it is that they will not believe Jn 7:17 “*If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.*”

Jn 1:11 *He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. 12 Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent, [a] nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*

Reflection:

Video clip – who is the king of glory?
Overview of series affected us...