



Who Was Jesus? Pope Benedict's Answer

With 'Jesus of Nazareth,' Pope Benedict XVI fights back against 'the dictatorship of relativism' by showing the world his vision of the definitive truth of Christ.

By Lisa Miller
Newsweek

May 21, 2007 issue - Who was Jesus, really? It has become acceptable, even fashionable, lately to speak of the Christian Lord in casual terms, as though he were an acquaintance with a mysterious past. Pope Benedict's trip to Brazil last week revived an old retelling of the Christian story in which Jesus is cast as a social revolutionary determined to overthrow the established order. The massive success of "The Da Vinci Code" reflected the hunger of millions to see Jesus as a regular person—a man with a wife and a child, a popular teacher whose true life story was subverted by the corporate self-interest of the early church. A look at any best-seller list reveals a thriving subcategory of readable scholarly and pseudo-scholarly books about the "real" Jesus: he was, they claim, a sage, a mystic, a rabbi, a boyfriend. He was a father, a pacifist, an ascetic, a prophet. In some parts of the Christian world, the aspects of Jesus' story that most strain credibility—the virgin birth and the physical resurrection—have become optional to faith.

One can almost hear Pope Benedict XVI roaring with frustration at this multiplicity of interpretations. Benedict, a theologian by training with an expertise in dogma, has been fierce in his condemnation of the creep of Western secularism, and the promiscuity of recent Jesus scholarship must seem to him another symptom of the same disease, all ill-founded and subjective claims. "We are building a dictatorship of relativism," he declared at the beginning of the 2005 enclave that elected him pope, "that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires." Benedict's answer to secularism is Christ, and this week the American publisher Doubleday releases "Jesus of Nazareth," Benedict's portrait of his Lord. It is an orthodox biography—one that acknowledges the role of analytical scholarship while in fact leaving little room for a critical interpretation of Scripture. This approach is not surprising, given Benedict's job description, but in a world where Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and other proponents of secularism credit belief in Jesus as one of the sources of the world's ills, Benedict offers an unvarnished opposing view: belief in Jesus, he says, is the only thing that will save the world.

And so, in a way, in the big bookstores and Amazon.com rankings, the ancient war between believers and nonbelievers begins anew. Liberal Catholics worry that, in spite of assurances to the contrary, Benedict is writing an "official" biography, and they have cause for concern. Benedict has been notoriously disapproving of unauthorized views of Jesus; he helped John Paul II crush the liberation theologians in Central America in the 1980s and more recently suspended an American priest for writing a book about Jesus that he said did not give sufficient credence to the resurrection. But for orthodox Christian believers, Benedict's book is a gift—a series of homilies on the New Testament by a masterful Scriptural exegete. In NEWSWEEK's exclusive excerpt, the pope explicates Jesus' baptism by John—a story that appears in all four Gospel accounts and that modern historians believe is at least partially grounded in fact. Benedict starts by describing the social and historical backdrop of the time, and the common use of ritual ablutions among first-century Jews. His picture of John the Baptist reflects the scholarly consensus in most respects; the Baptist was an ascetic who likely spent time with the Essenes, a group of Jews who lived in the desert awaiting the imminent arrival of the Messiah.

(Benedict is notably silent, though, on the Baptist as an apocalyptic preacher and on the probability that Jesus also believed that the world was about to end in flames. In a discussion elsewhere in "Jesus of Nazareth," Benedict goes to lengths to show that when Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is at hand," he didn't mean the apocalypse. What he meant, the pope writes, is that "God is acting now—this is the hour when God is showing himself in history as its Lord." This interpretation may be profound and in keeping with Benedict's Christ-centered message; it is not, many scholars would say, historically accurate.)

In one of the excerpt's most affecting scenes, Benedict describes the hordes of sinners he imagines standing on the banks of the Jordan River waiting for baptism. Jesus waits among them. Morphing from historian to pastor, Benedict asks the question that so many Sunday-school teachers have asked before him: as the Son of God, why would Jesus need to be purified? "The real novelty is the fact that he—Jesus—wants to be baptized, that he blends into the gray mass of sinners waiting on the banks of the Jordan," writes Benedict.

"Baptism itself was a confession of sins and the attempt to put off an old, failed life and to receive a new one. Is that something Jesus could do?"

With that, the senior theologian steps in, the man whose job for two decades was to defend Catholic doctrine to the world. Jesus' descent into the water is a symbolic foreshadowing, Benedict explains, of his death and resurrection—and the resurrection he promises to all his followers. In the ancient Middle East, water represents death; it also represents life. With his baptism, "Jesus loaded the burden of all mankind's guilt upon his shoulders; he bore it down into the depths of the Jordan," Benedict writes. "He inaugurated his public activity by stepping into the place of sinners. His inaugural gesture is an anticipation of the Cross. He is, as it were, the true Jonah who said to the crew of the ship, 'Take me and throw me into the sea'."

What of the next part of the story? The part where Jesus rises from the water, the heavens part, the Spirit descends on his shoulders (in the shape of a dove) and God's voice says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased." Does Benedict believe, as the fundamentalists do, that this literally happened? George Weigel, the theologian and papal biographer, imagines that something very important happened that day—what, exactly, he does not know. Benedict is asking readers to see Scripture as inspired but not dictated by God, Weigel explains, and to see the New Testament narrators as real people grappling with "the extreme limitations of the describable." For Benedict, the starting point is faith.

"Jesus of Nazareth," then, will not bring unbelievers into the fold, but courting skeptics has never been Benedict's priority. Nor will his portrait join the lengthy list of Jesus biographies so eagerly consumed by the non-orthodox—the progressive Protestants and "cafeteria Catholics" who seek the truth about Jesus in noncanonical places like the Gnostic Gospels. Moderates may take "Jesus of Nazareth" as something of a corrective to fundamentalism because it sees the Bible as "true" without insisting on its being factual. Mostly, though, "Jesus of Nazareth" will please a small group of Christians who are able simultaneously to hold post-Enlightenment ideas about the value of rationality and scientific inquiry together with the conviction that the events described in the Gospels are real. "This is about things that happened," explains N. T. Wright, the Anglican Bishop of Durham who is perhaps the world's leading New Testament scholar. "It's not just about ideas, or people's imaginations. These are things that actually happened. If they didn't happen, you might still have interesting ideas, but it wouldn't be Christianity at the end of the day."

Faith may actually be the most productive approach to finding truth in Scripture; the historical method has so far gleaned very little in the way of facts. Jesus left no diaries, and he had no contemporary Boswell. The best accounts of his life, the Gospel stories, were written at least 30 years after his death by men who believed he was God; other corroborating evidence of his life is scanty at best. For more than 1,500 years, no one even thought to seek the "truth" about Jesus. For Christians, Jesus was the truth.

The Enlightenment saw the revolutionary beginnings of the 300-year quest for the historical Jesus. For the first time, scholars began to look at the Bible critically, as a series of stories written by time-bound people with biases and agendas of their own. Thomas Jefferson announced that the "true" sayings of Jesus were as easily distinguishable "as diamonds in a dunghill," and set to work in the evenings sorting them out. Nineteenth- and 20th-century scholars tried to unearth the facts of Jesus' life by studying the first-century Roman-Jewish world. New Testament stories were true, they decided, if they "fit" into the first-century context. Stories were also true, the scholars said, if they didn't fit at all—if they so strained credibility that no sane and pious narrator would include them unless he had to.

Using these and other more conventional methods of verification, scholars came up with a few spindly facts about the man so many people call Christ. Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew, ministered in Judea sometime between 28 and 33. He was baptized; a member of his own band betrayed him. He was charged with a political crime: the Romans put KING OF THE JEWS on his cross. He was buried and followers said he appeared to them after his death. No one saw him rise again, though there are reports his tomb was empty. "We learned from the search for the historical Jesus that the search for the historical Jesus is not going to take us very far," says Alan Segal, professor of religion at Barnard College.

Nevertheless, in the last 30 years the speed and intensity of that search has escalated—starting with the Jesus Seminar, a group of scholars who, like Jefferson, tried to weed the authentic sayings of Jesus from the inauthentic and ending most recently with the largely discredited "discovery" of Jesus' family tomb in a Jerusalem suburb. Archeology is the new frontier—untold dollars are being spent digging in Israel, looking for evidence of Jesus and his times. Not all these efforts can be said to be futile: while the search for the historical Jesus has given us very little about Jesus, it has given us a rich picture of the world in which he

lived, a multicultural world of elites and peasants, of tyranny and impulses for freedom, a world where people struggled to balance their instincts for assimilation against their own religious roots—a world, in other words, very much like our own. Benedict's portrait may contribute little to our historical understanding of Jesus, but what he does give is a window into his own, passionate and uncompromising faith, a faith that faces constant challenge in the world of ideas. Let the battles begin.

With Julie Scelfo

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