

## “Evaluating-Gospel 2”

By: Doug Warren

### Would the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?

It seems like every Easter there is a new claim that tells us we need to readdress what we know about Jesus. Normally it's an archaeological discovery that later turns out to be something different than originally hyped. This year it is the double whammy of *The Da Vinci Code* being released as a major motion picture and the “rediscovery” of *The Gospel of Judas*. While some simply dismiss these unfounded allegations against the biblical portrait of Jesus, I believe it is worthwhile to address issues these two events raise. Far too often our view of Jesus is picked up with no real consideration of what we are thinking or where it has come from. I will focus on the specifics of *The Da Vinci Code* next month. For now, let's consider one portrait of Jesus presented in the Bible. Since I have spent the better part of the last year studying Matthew's account I will use it as an example, but similar things could be investigated concerning Mark, Luke, and John.

#### The Gospel According to Matthew

The Biblical biography of Jesus found in *The Gospel of Matthew* is far from objective. His purpose was to demonstrate that Jesus was in fact God's Son (or, Messiah) who came to set His people free from sin and death.

To say that this book has a clear agenda does not in itself call its historical accuracy into question. Rather it helps to recognize its authenticity. We see this in well-written biographies today. Biographical authors normally have a strong opinion about their subject and yet are still able to present historical material factually and honestly. To have an opinion means that the author is human and believes that the subject of their biography is important; in this case, important enough to change one's life.

There are three main sections to Matthew's record. First, he sets forth the credentials Jesus possessed to support his claim of kingship. Second, he records five pairs of narrative/discourse to demonstrate how Jesus' actions and words established his kingdom on earth. Third, he recounts the death and resurrection of Jesus according to his own predictions and those of the prophets who had come before him. Christ's commissioning of his followers at the end only makes sense given this context of his rule and reign over his kingdom. The entire book fits together as an integrated whole to tell the story of Jesus, not as dispassionate history, but so that the readers might repent of their treason against the only true King and willingly follow him.

#### Two Different Questions: Authenticity and Accuracy

This is precisely why questions about Jesus are so intriguing. It is not just a question of having an opinion about him. It may change your life. So before you make a decision about this you want to know if this is real or not. There are two primary issues involved in evaluating the gospel.

The first is a question of authenticity—is it what Matthew really wrote? This is strictly a matter of determining if the copies we have today are substantively the same as what was originally written. Tests for authenticity are applied to all works of antiquity (not just religious texts). Notice that a document may be authentic and also false. If what we have is a reliable copy of

what was falsely written we still don't have a clue what really happened. That is where the other issue comes in—is it accurate?

The second question is evaluating a document's accuracy—is what Matthew wrote true? There are two tests that help in getting to the bottom of this query. The internal test looks at whether the text is consistent with itself. In other words, does it contradict itself? And the external test investigates any corroborating or contradictory testimony from other sources about the same events.

To answer the first question, historians compare the various copies that have survived. Despite concerted efforts by emperors and religious leaders through hundreds of years, we have many complete and thousands of partial copies dating from as early as the second century. Furthermore, we also have quotes from the Gospel of Matthew in writings from second and third century authors. While there may be questions about a few words or phrases, the bulk of what we have today is substantially the same as what was originally written and distributed in the first century. The best historical information we have tells us in no uncertain terms that the text of Matthew's biography of Jesus has not been altered.

The second question (Is it internally and externally consistent?) has been posed by believers and skeptics alike by the thousands. Matthew has been evaluated on everything from its use of specific phrases to correlation to other histories such as Josephus, Eusebius, Irenaeus, as well as the other gospel writers (Mark, Luke, and John). While there remain some unanswered questions, every major issue of supposed inaccuracies leveled against Matthew through the years has been shown to be unfounded. The skepticism regarding Matthew's accuracy continues to come back not to issues of historicity, but discomfort over the claims his assertions make on the life of the reader.

When dealing with the biblical accounts we need to deal honestly with some preconceptions. What do you do with accounts of miracles? If the text seems consistent internally and externally in describing an event we are convinced is impossible, what do we do? I am reminded of the scene from *The Chronicles of Narnia* where Peter and Susan explain to the Professor the outrageous claims of Lucy and the mysterious land she discovered inside the wardrobe. Naturally they dismiss Lucy's story immediately because as Susan says, "Logically it's impossible." But as the Professor probes more deeply, Susan's assumption doesn't hold up quite so neatly. The Professor challenges them: "If she's not mad and she's not lying, then *logically*, we must assume she's telling the truth."

What of Matthew's claims that Jesus was not just a magnetic leader ruthlessly cut down by the establishment, but the very King of Kings who has come to establish his eternal kingdom? How do we evaluate it? Are we willing to admit that an investigation of Matthew's historicity is not driving our conclusion nearly as much as our desire to ignore it or find a convenient excuse like we might find in *Judas* or *Da Vinci*?

### **The "Other Gospels"**

Of course the four gospels contained in the Bible were not the only gospels written. There were several, including not only *The Gospel of Judas* of which we have heard much lately, but also *The Gospel of Thomas*, and others purportedly by Peter, Phillip, and Mary. None of these even come close to the level of authenticity or accuracy of the gospels contained in the Bible. Each of

these rival accounts was written much later and fails to provide either internal or external consistency.

What they have in common with one another is an unwillingness to admit what the biblical gospels all agree on—Jesus while being fully man was also fully God and came to do what only he could in setting his people free. In the end the key question in all this evaluation is this, “If Jesus really is who he said he is, are you willing to forsake all else and follow him?”