



Looking Again at Jesus



for the First Time!

Alfred J. Poirier

**LOOKING AGAIN AT JESUS
FOR THE FIRST TIME**

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If you were totally unaware of the major religious and philosophical leaders, and one day stumbled upon a brief biographical sketch of each of their lives -- how would they compare? Of course, you would notice the obvious differences: the times in which they lived, their manner of life, and the substance of each one's message.

But would any one of these leaders stand out from the rest? Would there be one peculiar feature that would catch a careful eye's attention? Yes, there would. The "odd one out" would be Jesus of Nazareth. And the peculiar feature of his life was its brevity.

Compared to all the rest, Jesus is surprisingly younger. Buddha lived to be 80 years old (563--483 BC). Confucius, 72 years (551--479 BC). Socrates, 70 years (469--399 BC). Mohammed, 62 years (570--632 AD). Marx 65 years (1818--1883 AD).

And Jesus? Jesus lived only 33 years. (4 BC--30 AD). All the rest outlived Jesus by 30 to 50 years.

But even more telling than the length of their lives is the length of their careers. Liken them to a college professor, we'd find that both Buddha and Confucius taught for 50 years. Socrates taught for around 35-40 years. Mohammed's career was a bit less-- some 25 years. Karl Marx was active for 35 years.

And how long did Jesus teach? -- A mere three years! In comparison, these other leaders taught their doctrines between 22 to 47 years!

Now who can come upon these facts and at least not be puzzled by the extreme brevity of Jesus ministry? It is this brevity of life and work that stands in marked contrast to the great influence he has wielded in history. Who was this carpenter from northern Palestine, living in the first century, who taught for only three years, was crucified as a threat and enemy to the Roman Empire, yet whose life and teaching dramatically changed the face of the world -- extending over 2,000 years and whose followers now number close to a billion adherents?

Surely it makes one ask: "Who is this Jesus of Nazareth?"

However, there still remain many who hold a curious conviction about Jesus. Jesus is thought by them to have been a good man, a very good man. Some would even admit that he was the best and wisest of all--the kind of person you'd love to spend an afternoon with listening to--each word a pearl of priceless truth. But in the end, Jesus is *just like all the rest*.

Now, I say this is a *curious* conviction because of those who knew Jesus best, this was the one belief of him they never held. In the historical accounts written about Jesus, we find people very perplexed by him: "*Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he say, 'I came down from heaven'?*" (John 6:42).

A good man? A very wise man? But we must ask ourselves: Are carpenters in the habit of telling others that they came down from heaven? Or, do they typically remind others that they have authority to forgive sin?

So unlike a typical man is Jesus that his own family initially thought he was mad! *"When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind'" (Mark 3.21).*

Others held an even worse opinion of him. The religious leaders in Jesus' day did not think Jesus was mad, but bad. *"He is possessed by Beelzebub (the Devil)!" (Mark 3.22).*

According to their professional and spiritual assessment, Jesus was not a wise man, or a good man, but a bad man, possessed by evil.

Of course, there was one other judgment made of Jesus by many. These people came from many walks of life: preachers and prostitutes, businessmen and religious zealots. These people all came to confess that Jesus was neither a lunatic, -- as his family initially did -- nor a liar, --as the religious leaders did, but the Son of God and the Savior of the world.

But the opinion of Jesus as merely a very good man, comparable to the great religious and philosophical men of the ages, is still held tenaciously by many. And yet it is this assessment of Jesus that holds the least appeal when confronted with an accurate portrait of Jesus. Such a portrait should give

careful attention to his own words and claims and compare them with those to whom he is so frequently compared to--Buddha, Confucius, Socrates, Mohammed, and Marx.

JESUS TEACHES HIMSELF

Unlike the world's religious leaders or philosophers, Jesus put himself at the center of his teaching. Where the other religious leaders were self-effacing, Jesus was self-advancing.

The other leaders were aware of their insights but also keenly aware of their ignorance. Part of why we consider them not only wise men but good men, is their ability to confess their limitations.

Socrates is said to be a great man. Why? Because he said, he *knew* that he knew nothing.

Buddha, when asked about God and the afterlife, rebuked his disciples as asking a foolish question. He admitted he knew nothing at all about either and would dare speculate on the subjects. He felt it was enough to deal with this world.

Mohammed emphasized that he was a mere pen in the hand of Allah. He claimed to be merely the mouthpiece of Allah -- a mere channel, or conduit, of Allah's revelation. Mohammed pointed not to himself but to the Koran.

At best each of these men saw themselves as "discovering or uncovering" the truth. Buddha referred to himself as *Tathagata*, which means, "one who has found the truth." (*Tatha*=truth +

agata=come, arrived). But what Jesus claims regarding the truth is extraordinary. He doesn't call himself "*Tathagata*," that is, *one who has found the truth*. Instead Jesus says "***Ego eimi...hae alaetheia.***" "***I am... the truth..., (John 14.6).***"

Unlike the others, Jesus does not say that he brings enlightenment. Rather, he says he is *the light* which enlightens! *John 8:12, When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*

Unlike the other teachers, he does not say that his teaching will help one cope with life, or even better their lives, he says that *he is the resurrection and the life!*

John 11:25-26, Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Where the others called for us to be ultimately devoted and loyal to the Truth, Jesus demands ultimate loyalty to Himself. He claims that our eternal destiny depends upon our having him as our supreme love. Hear his words in all of their raw power: *Matthew 10:37 "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."*

These are shocking words, particularly from a religious teacher. It is hard to imagine other such teachers saying such

radical things. For example, Confucius taught that people must respect each other according to their status. He showed how a father or mother, brother or sister, should each be treated and respected by the others.

But here comes a carpenter from Nazareth who claims ultimate loyalty and devotion from everybody. Jesus demanded that every human loyalty must take second place to the supreme loyalty we must render to him.

And it is this pointing to himself that distinguishes Jesus so clearly from all the rest of this world's religious teachers. If there was one message Jesus taught it was *himself*.

Think about this a moment. When teachers or philosophers speak with insight, our typical response is, "Yes, that's right. I never saw that before." The light dawns on us and we recognize that their perspective reveals a truth in a remarkable, compelling, or clarifying way. These wise teachers grab our attention to see old things in new ways.

But when Jesus taught, people didn't respond in this typical fashion. Instead of saying, "That's right," they said, "What kind of man says things like that?"

At the center of all the world religions is a message. If you take away Buddha, you still have Buddhism. Take away Mohammed and you still have Islam. Take away Socrates, or Confucius, or Marx and nothing substantial is diminished with respect to their teachings, their ideas or insights. Their philosophy

remains unchanged.

But at the center of Christianity is a person. Take away Jesus and you have no Christianity at all, for Christianity is not so much about moral or philosophical teachings as it is about a *relationship* with a person-- who claimed things about himself that no one would ever claim about themselves. He claimed that he was the Messiah. And he not only made the claim, but backed it up by putting himself to the test.

JESUS PUTS HIMSELF TO THE TEST

Jesus not only preached himself, he taught that he was the fulfillment of prophecies. The people of his day, though not entirely able to understand Jesus' amazing claims, were often shaken by what he said. The incidents are recorded for us in the Gospels. You need little imagination to picture what the headlines might have read if they would have had newspapers.

Home Town Boy Returns and Preaches; Town Responds by Trying to Throw Him Off a Cliff! *Luke 4.16ff*

Carpenter from Nazareth Claims All the Old Testament Prophecies of Yahweh are Fulfilled in Him! *Matthew 5.17*

Former Carpenter, Turned Itinerant Preacher and Miracle Worker, Rebukes the Nation's Religious Authorities for Failing to See That the Whole of Holy Scripture Refers to Him! *John 5.46-47*

It is not hard to see why the religious leaders wanted to kill Jesus. His claims sounded blasphemous because he equated himself with God. And he never indicated these claims should be taken any other way.

Neither Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, Socrates, or Marx ever asserted that their actions were in fulfillment of prior prophecies. But Jesus did. In this way, Jesus put the truth of his teaching to the test unparalleled by any other teacher for its verification.

Some background is in order here. Within the writings of the great religious leaders and philosophers, prophecy concerning future events is noticeably absent.

The most important biblical prophecies concern the coming Savior (Messiah). It is this set of prophecies which Jesus said his birth, life, death and resurrection fulfilled. And fulfill them he did!

A professor named Peter Stoner (formerly of Westmont College) wondered what the probability might be of these Old Testament prophecies being fulfilled in one man.¹ Out of approximately 300 prophecies concerning the coming and character of God's Messiah, he chose eight and calculated that the probability of their being fulfilled in one man was 1 in 10^{17} power.²

The eight prophecies predicted that the Messiah would be: 1) born in Bethlehem, Micah 5.2; 2) preceded by a Messenger,

Isaiah 40.3; 3) enter Jerusalem on a donkey, Zech. 9.9; 4) be betrayed by a friend, Ps. 41.9; 5) sold for thirty pieces of silver, Zechariah 11.12; 6) sold with money that later was used to purchase the Potter's field, Zech. 11.13b; 7) was silent before his accusers, Isa.53.7; 8) would meet his death by having his hands and feet pierced, Ps. 22.16, while being crucified with thieves, Isaiah 53.6-7. The probability according to Stoner that these eight prophecies might be fulfilled in one man is 1 in 10^{17} power.

As you can imagine, this is a big number. One in ten to the seventeenth power means placing seventeen zeros after the number one -- 100,000,000,000,000,000. Now a number of that magnitude is too difficult for us to grasp. Professor Stoner knew this and came up with a way to help us picture it.

Take the county you live in and cover every inch of it with silver dollars. Then mark one of those dollars with an "x." Now mix the whole lot of silver dollars. Next, ask someone to walk blind-folded over your county and at some point to stop, stoop down and pick up a single silver dollar. What chance do you think they would have in picking the silver dollar with the "x" marked on it? Unlikely, you say? Improbable? Nearly impossible?

Well, the problem is that your county is not large enough to contain 10^{17} power of silver dollars. Now choose an entire state. How about Iowa or New York or Montana? Are any of these states large enough? No, says Stoner, none of these would qualify.

To find a place big enough you'd have to go to the largest state in the lower forty-eight -- Texas. And even Texas is too small! Stoner said that you would have to cover every inch of Texas *two feet high* with silver dollars before you'd have reached ten to the seventeenth power.

What, then, would you say the chances are for you to find, on your first pick, that one, single, "x" marked silver dollar hidden in that two-foot high, Texas-wide pile? Stoner says your chances of finding that marked silver dollar would be the same chance these eight prophecies had in being fulfilled by one man--the Messiah.

If these are the odds for eight prophecies being fulfilled in one man, what do you think the odds are for 350 Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Messiah?

Do you get a feel for what all this means? Jesus, by claiming to be the Messiah, the one who fulfills all these prophecies, subjected himself and his ministry to an incredible test.

Buddha, Confucius, Socrates, Mohammed and Marx all referred to the past but they never claimed to be a fulfillment of past prophecies in the way or to the extent Jesus did.

JESUS ASSUMED THE ROLE OF GOD

One day a lame man was brought to Jesus in the midst of a great crowd of people. Lowered by his friends through the roof, the lame man found himself right in front of Jesus. Given what we know of the great teachers of the world, we might predict their

responses.

Buddha would have told the man that he was just paying for some bad karma -- a moral debt someone incurs for his actions. Confucius would have urged the man to accept his lot in life. Socrates would have lectured on the matter of human tragedy. And Mohammed would have probed to see if there was some sin in the person's life.

But Jesus' reaction is different. He announces: "*Your sins are forgiven.*"

The religious leaders who heard this question speak for all of us...Who alone can forgive your sins? Do you see what Jesus' words imply? He is speaking as if he were God, for only God can forgive our sins. Yet, Jesus says quite matter-of-factly to the man, "*Your sins are forgiven.*"

We all know how forgiveness works. I step on your toe and you forgive me. I steal your money, and you can forgive me. But if I step on Bob's toe, it is Bob who must forgive me. Not you. You can't forgive me, only Bob.

Yet, this is what Jesus did. Without any hesitation, he forgave people the sins they had committed against others, without ever consulting those "others" whom they had injured. In fact, he acts as if *he is the chief person offended*. The only explanation that makes sense is that Jesus was God, or at least thought himself to be God. The ministers of Jesus day understood this: "*The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to*

themselves, 'Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?'" (Luke 5:21)

This is most important to understand. Today many so-called scholars deny that Jesus ever claimed he was God. Yet, the gospels are replete with such claims, both implicit and explicit. And the gospels are also replete with Jesus' detractors understanding him to be making such a claim. For when it came to them eventually condemning Jesus to death, the reason they give is that Jesus was guilty of blasphemy--a man claiming to be God.

A few quotes from the Gospel of John makes clear how Jesus equates our attitude to him with our attitude to God.

--to know him was to know God

Then they asked him, "Where is your father?" "You do not know me or my Father," Jesus replied. "If you knew me, you would know my Father also." (John 8.19)

--to see him was to see God.

Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14.9)

--to believe him was to believe God.

Then Jesus cried out, "When a man believes in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me." (John 12.44)

--to hate him was to hate God.

"He who hates me hates my Father as well." (John 15.23)

--to honor him was to honor God.

"...that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him." (John 5.23)

WHY JESUS' OPPONENTS CRUCIFIED HIM

With such claims as these, it is a wonder that so many people forget why Jesus was crucified. It was because the religious authorities said he blasphemed...not because he was some good moral teacher that was a little anti-establishment (like Socrates).

So we find these incidents recorded:

During Jesus' Ministry

*John 5:18 For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, **making himself equal with God.***

*John 10:33 "We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, **because you, a mere man, claim to be God.**"*

At Jesus' Trial

*John 19:7 The Jews insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, **because he claimed to be the Son of God.**"*

Mark 14:61 But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?"

Mark 14:62 "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Mark 14:63 The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked.

*Mark 14:64 "**You have heard the blasphemy.** What do you think?" They all condemned him as worthy of death.*

JESUS CLAIMED TO BE GOD

You might ask: What's so unusual about Jesus claiming to be God? Didn't all the other religious leaders make a similar claim? The answer is: No!

None of the great religious teachers or philosophers ever claimed to be God. Oh, they made a number of claims: that they were Enlightened; or, God's prophet; or that they discovered some truth (about some aspect of life). But claiming to be God? Never! NEVER. None of them except one--Jesus Christ.

WHY JESUS' CLAIM TO BE GOD IS SO UNEXPECTED

But Jesus' claim is not merely unique in the fact that he *alone* of all truly great men claimed to be God, but the uniqueness also stems from *where* we find such a man making such a claim.

If anyone was to make such a claim, where would be the likeliest place for such a claim to be made? From India, of course; not Palestine. We should expect it from the rich fertile imaginations of the pantheists or polytheists along the banks of the Ganges, not from the monotheists of the river Jordan.

Among pantheists, anyone might say, "I am a part of God, I am one with God, I am God." And there would be nothing at all odd or jarring about such a statement--as he would be expressing (if he were a pantheist among pantheists) what everyone else also claimed about themselves. His words would be as startling as the man who would cry out in a crowd "I am a human being."

But this is not what Jesus said. What we find in the New Testament is something jarring. If there is one major tenet of faith in Judaism it is this: There is one God and man is not God. Both God and man may meet in all sorts of ways, as when God

appeared in a human shape to Abraham in his house. But Abraham never said afterward, "I am God."

God met uniquely with Moses, face to face, and showed Moses his great glory and left Moses with a face shining. But Moses never came away from that holy and awesome meeting with God saying, "I am God."

But Jesus comes upon the scene and says something more than "I and the Father are one." He says, "***Before Abraham was, I am.***"

That is the enigma of Christ. That is how he stands out from the other great religious leaders. None of them ever claimed to be God. If any of them would be a likely candidate, it would have been Buddha not Jesus. Buddha was born a Hindu. The whole tenor of Hinduism allows a man to speak such. But surprisingly Buddha not only didn't claim he was God, or even a god, but stated emphatically that he didn't know anything about God.

But Jesus did. He said God was his Father. And that he and the Father were one. Do you see now why we can't really speak of Jesus as being the founder of Christianity?

Mohammed was the first Muslim. Buddha the first Buddhist. They were the first kind or type of many to follow. But Jesus Christ was not the first Christian. He is God. He is the one whom Christians worship as the Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity.

WILL THE REAL MESSIAH STAND UP!

At this point we can expect to hear the argument which goes something like this. Alright, Jesus claimed to be the Messiah. Even God. But so did many in the first century. Jesus is just *one among many* who claimed to be the Messiah. This argument would have us not take the claims of Jesus seriously because he is just like others who claimed to be the Messiah. Sadly, this idea gains initial and superficial acceptance out of ignorance than insight.

Sure, there were many messianic claimants in the first century in Judea. But no one ever responds by asking the most obvious question which I shall now ask you: "Who were they? Who were these other messianic claimants just like Jesus?"

Are you having a difficult time remembering those *others* said to be just like Jesus? Exactly. Do you now see my point? You can't think of any because none of them really are like Jesus. They made very little impact. Their names are obscure. They have fallen in the ash-heap of history.

Such should expose the folly of the remark that "Jesus was just another first century claimant to being the Messiah." But just in case you still are trying to think of "just another Messiah" let me give you one.

His name was Simon, Simon Bar Kokba. He lived almost exactly 100 years after Jesus. He was a Jew. And he claimed he was the Messiah.

Choking from the repressive reign of Emperor Hadrian, the Jews in 132 AD rose up in what has been called the Second Great Jewish Revolt. In their struggle against the Roman Empire one man in particular stood above the rest--he was called Simon Ben Koseba ("prince of Israel"). He became known for his military prowess and soon declared to his countrymen "I am the Messiah." If any man could have had a lasting following surely it was he. How many followers did Jesus have? The high end is about 120 at the time of his death. Ben-Koseba had hundreds of thousands of followers who rallied behind him. Some put his followers at 500,000.

Jesus' followers were mostly fishermen, and women. Ben-Koseba? His followers were armed and ready to fight. Each of those 500,000 armed with a sword. As for Jesus' fishermen disciples, when one did wield the sword Jesus told him to put it away.

And what kind of support did Jesus get from the religious and political authorities? None. He was rejected and sentenced to death by the Jewish leaders. On the other hand, Ben-Koseba had the greatest Rabbi of the time, Rabbi Akiba, who confirmed that he was truly the Messiah. Rabbi Akiba called him *Bar-Kokba* ("star of Israel" a reference to the Messianic prophecy of Num. 24.17).

If there was a man who should have won the day, who do you think you would have bet upon? Jesus and his 120 fishermen and

women or Bar-Kokba's 500,000 armed men?

The outcome? Three years later in 135 AD the "messiah" was slain, more than 500,000 Jews were dead, and Jerusalem became the pagan city Aelia Capitolina.

When Bar-Koseba had more power, more people, and greater confirmation by the religious authorities, what made the difference so that his following fell out in a year and the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth continued?

CONCLUSION

Today I have sought to make just one point. That you cannot take Jesus for just another great teacher. His life, his words, his actions, all converge to give us the strong impression that *no man has ever spoken like this man*.

There is no comparison. His words, his teaching, and his works all make the most outrageous claim upon everyone who hears his voice. And with that claim comes an equally great moral challenge.

We began our inquiry by noting a little peculiarity -- the brevity of Jesus' life and ministry. It may have seemed as insignificant as a mouse kicking up dust in the distance. But we have found that *that* initial minor disturbance on the plains of history is no mouse but more on the order of an elephant--charging at us! We began asking: What are we to

make of Jesus? We conclude knowing that the real question is:
What will Jesus make of us?

This is no ordinary teacher, or philosopher, or founder of a new religion. He, this man, speaks and acts like God. And for only one good reason: He is God! If Jesus is God, then he commands more than just intellectual assent. If Jesus is God, then he is also the Lord. All that he says to us we are obligated to do. He calls us to repent ("Turn away from your sin; stop living for yourself.") and we must turn from our sin. We must ask him for forgiveness because our sin is in fact against God.

If we do, we can be assured of his assurance of forgiveness and promise of eternal life. For he says in John 5.24 **"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."** Since Jesus is the Son of God, his words abide forever. Since he has risen from the dead, he is alive and these words are a living promise. So what will you say in response to this? Won't you turn to Christ this day? Won't you humble yourself before him and follow him for who he is --the Lord of lords, the Son of God?

Listen again to what Jesus said (Matthew 7:24-27):

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the

winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.

But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

Won't you put Jesus' words into practice? Again, he promises: "If you say you have no sin, the truth is not in you. But if you confess your sin, Jesus is just and faithful to forgive you of your sin and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness." He alone can save you.

Let me conclude with one final anecdote. Alister E. McGrath, of Oxford University, relates how at the time of the French Revolution a whole series of new religions came into being, each with its own special teacher. None, however, were able to capture the popular imagination. They attracted few followers and all ended up collapsing after a few months or years.

In desperation, one of the inventors of one of these new religions asked the famous French Statesman, Talleyrand, how he could get his religion to grow. Talleyrand is supposed to have replied, "I suggest that you get yourself crucified and then rise again on the third day." ³

If you have any questions, or would want to know more about how Jesus can save you from your sin and the coming judgment, and grant you a new life, making you right with God and one of his children, write us at the address below. We'd love to share with you the amazing grace of our Mighty God.

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Endnotes:

1. cited in Josh McDowell's book *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, (San Bernadino: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972) p. 175 taken from Peter W. Stoner's *Science Speaks: An Evaluation of Certain Christian Evidences*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1963) p. 100-107.
2. *ibid.* Compare these prophecies with their fulfillment: #1: Micah 5:2 (Born at Bethlehem) with Matthew 2:5-6; #2: Isaiah 40:3 (Preceded by a Messenger) with Matthew 3:3; #3: Zechariah 9:9 (Enter Jerusalem on a donkey) with Matthew 21:5; John 12:15; #4 Psalm 41:9 (Betrayed by a Friend) with Matthew 10:4; Matthew 27:9-10; 26:15; #6 Zechariah 11:13b (Money thrown in the temple, price of the Potter's field) with Matthew 27:9-10; #7: Isaiah 53:7 (Silent before Accusers) with Matthew 27:12-19; Acts 8:32-35; #8: Psalm 22:16 (Hands and Feet Pierced) with John 19:34; 20:25; and Isaiah 53:6-7 (Crucified with Thieves) with Luke 23:32-33; Matthew 27:38.
3. Alister E. McGrath, *Explaining Your Faith: Without Losing Your Friends*, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1989) p. 31

