



## Bare Bones Jesus

*The Gospel of Jesus according to the Jesus Seminar*

Robert W. Funk & the Jesus Seminar

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Recently, I read *The Gospel of Jesus, according to the Jesus Seminar* which is a compilation of those parts of the five gospels (the Synoptics + John + Thomas) that the scholars of the Jesus Seminar consider is undoubtedly or probably close to being an authentic account of the historical Jesus.

*The Gospel of Jesus* is a slim volume. If one discounts the Introduction and appendices, the record of the words and actions of Jesus takes up less than forty pages. In the text there is almost no detail, no emotional language, no supernatural events, and no beauty of phraseology. There are also very few details about people or places. Rather the text provides a spare record of events and the sayings of Jesus. If the traditional gospels, with their embellishments regarding places, activities and people, are characterised as the good news *about* Jesus, then the Gospel of Jesus might be characterised as the good news *brought by* Jesus. Yet, paradoxically, there is little in this gospel to inspire, to move, or to engender an affective response. Certainly there is wisdom, but it is wisdom presented in sparse, epigrammatic form. This Galilean sage of twenty centuries ago whose actions and teachings are recorded here is an austere figure – just bare bones with no hint of flesh. The text conveys nothing of the impact the teaching of Jesus made on his listeners and followers – there is no hint of the charismatic sage who transformed people's lives by proclaiming his vision of a new and better way of living.

Yet reading *The Gospel of Jesus* has had a profound effect on me.

Previously I had been rather sniffy about the traditional gospel stories. I regarded their obvious inventions and embellishments, the large number of supernaturalist elements, and the contradictions between the gospel accounts, as most off-putting. But, contrariwise, I have been dismayed by the spareness, and dryness of the text of *The Gospel of Jesus*.

It is at this point that my own experience provided me with an insight. My first husband told wonderful stories about his childhood and life as a young man, and these became a precious part of our family lore. We always intended to write them down 'one day', and so preserve them for our children and grandchildren. But we never got around to it. Then, suddenly, he found that he was terminally ill and the need to preserve his stories became urgent. During the last months of his life he recorded many of them on tape, and I was able to transcribe and edit them so that, shortly before he died, he was able to present copies of his 'Yarns' to his children and grandchildren. Without these stories having been recorded, all but the sketchiest

outline of them would have been lost, and any attempt by me and our daughters to record what we remembered of them would have resulted in only the sketchiest of remembered snatches. Or, worse still, what if we hadn't been able to do this but then, many years further on, our grandchildren had tried to record what they remembered of what their parents had told them of their grandfather's stories? It would have been inevitable that, in either case, any such recording would have resulted in only the bare, dry bones of the stories, shorn of the personality and the 'voice' of the original storyteller.

And this is exactly the situation faced by the Evangelists when they began writing, at the earliest, a generation after the death of Jesus. If we accept that the text of *The Gospel of Jesus* is as near as it is possible to get to an authentic record of those actions and sayings of Jesus which were preserved by the proto-Christian community, then we may also accept that this text represents all the 'facts' that the writers of the traditional gospels had to work with. Yet they recognised that, if the teachings of Jesus were to be presented in a way that could inspire future generations, they needed to be 'fleshed out' – to have a richness of detail and importance added to the stories, and a personality created for the original storyteller.

And this is, I believe, exactly what was done, firstly within the oral tradition itself, and then by those who wrote the gospel stories. It is widely acknowledged that the writer of John's gospel departed markedly from what we can be confident are Jesus' actual words and themes, while the authors of Mark, Matthew and Luke attempted to remain closer to the tenor and the meaning of the message of Jesus. But they also needed to invent a huge amount of detail to fill in the cavernous lacunae in the stories. And when, in addition, one factors in the needs to focus the narrative towards the particular audience each of the gospel writers was addressing, it is not surprising that the gospels vary so widely in what is included, in the details ascribed to the stories, and in the overall mood of the writing.

So I now approach the traditional gospel accounts of the life of Jesus much more sympathetically. Certainly we need not accept them as literal accounts, but we can regard them as genuine attempts to preserve and pass on not only the actions and words of wisdom – particularly the parables and aphorisms – of Jesus, but also to clothe those sparse bones in narratives to create a personality appropriate to the remarkable human being who proclaimed a new vision for humanity 2000 years ago.

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