

Introduction to the New Testament History and Literature

Lecture 13: The Historical Jesus

Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rfst-152/lecture-13>

Overview

It is obvious that certain narratives in the New Testament contradict each other and cannot be woven into a historically coherent whole. How, then, do scholars construct who the “historical Jesus” was? There are several principles that historical Jesus researchers follow, which include considering data that 1) has multiple attestations and 2) is dissimilar to a text’s theological tendencies as more likely to be historical. Using the modern methods of historical research, it becomes possible to construct a “historical Jesus.”

1. Contradictory Accounts in the New Testament

[1] *Professor Dale Martin:* Okay, we’ve already talked about the problems of using these texts historically. If you remember, early in the semester we talked about Galatians 1 and 2, and Acts, and we tried to compare exactly when did Paul go where with regard to Jerusalem, Damascus, Antioch. And we saw that it’s very, very difficult to harmonize Galatians 1 and 2 with the account of Acts in Paul’s movements around Jerusalem. We’ve also got a lot of other situations where this would be very difficult. I mentioned the differences between Matthew and Luke as far as the birth narratives. Just to try to figure out how this would work, if you took the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke it would be very, very difficult to find out historically what happened. For example, if you just take Matthew, as I’ve said before, Jesus’ family seems to simply be in Bethlehem. It doesn’t say they’re from Galilee, it doesn’t say they’re originally from Nazareth, they’re just in Bethlehem, and they’re in Bethlehem well before Jesus is born because the wise men in the East see the star and it takes them enough time to travel from Persia, we’re supposed to understand from the narrative because they’re called Magi, and those are wise men from Persia, all the way to Jerusalem. They meet up with King Herod the Great, he gets his wise men to consult, they then find out they’re supposed to go to Bethlehem, they journey to

Bethlehem, and then they get there not long after Jesus is born.

[2] So according to Matthew, you don’t have any time actually in the narrative of Matthew for the whole moving from Nazareth to Bethlehem narrative that you get in the Gospel of Luke. You just don’t have time in Matthew, they’re just there. And then the angel appears to Joseph in a dream and says, Herod’s going to kill all the babies, so Joseph takes the family, they move to Egypt for a while. He gets another dream years later, how many years, who knows, saying that Herod the Great is now dead, so they go back—they start to go back to Bethlehem because it says that’s their home, right? They go back home, they’re going to go to Bethlehem. Instead they move to Galilee to avoid Herod’s son, who is at the time, according to Matthew, ruling in Judea. That’s the sort of narrative.

[3] You get to Luke and it’s very different. They’re from Nazareth, that’s sort of Mary’s hometown, Nazareth. All the pregnancy of Mary takes place with Mary in Nazareth. She even goes to Judea to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth, who is the mother of John the Baptist according to the Gospel of Luke, and then she goes back to Nazareth, and then it’s according to this census, the world census that they go to Bethlehem, and it’s while they’re in Bethlehem in the stable, because you don’t have a stable in Matthew, they’re just maybe in a home or according to a lot of traditions

Jesus was—there was a cave somewhere that Jesus was born in. It's in Luke that you get the whole story about—the Christmas story about the stable that Jesus is born in because there's no room in the inn. They stay in that area for a month, we know that because it says that they first have Jesus circumcised on the eighth day from his birth, and then the time of purification takes place, according to Leviticus, which is about a month long, they take Jesus to the presentation of the temple in Jerusalem. And it's after that, so a month or so after his birth that they then move back home to Nazareth.

[4] Now there's no way you can basically get these two narratives to fit together in any respectable historical way. Does that mean that nobody's ever tried to do it? No, of course you've got all kinds of very, very smart fundamentalists who believe that the New Testament has to be accurate in every historical and scientific detail or they believe then it can't be scripture. They will figure out some way to try to make sure that both these narratives can be fit together, but what I'm telling you is that no reputable historian will accept this because you just have to fudge the stuff too much; you have to fudge the data.

[5] What do we believe about the birth of Jesus? Most of us think we don't know anything about the birth of Jesus. All the Christmas stories are later tradition, probably the one thing most of us would say is that Jesus probably was from Nazareth, his family was simply from Nazareth because he's called Jesus of Nazareth. And the traditions that got him to Bethlehem for his birth are probably later pietistic traditions that Matthew and Luke later developed for different reasons, but to get Jesus born in Bethlehem for fulfillment of prophecy reasons. If you take the birth of Jesus in Luke and Matthew, it's—from a historical point of view it's impossible really to harmonize them without coming up with fantastic unbelievable conjugations of Jesus moving back and forth to Egypt and the holy family and all this sort of thing.

[6] We get lots of other kinds of things about this too. What are some obvious historical problems with the historical Jesus? Well one of the things is the trial of Jesus. There are different versions of the trial of Jesus in the Gospels. Unfortunately, basically most scholars will say that we don't really know

what happened at the trial of Jesus. We don't even know for sure whether there was any kind of official trial. It may have been that he was just arrested in the middle of the night, he was just then—they give him permission to be crucified and he was crucified the next day. That would be the sensible way of doing things. You didn't have to have—the Romans didn't need elaborate trials in order to crucify Jews who were rabble rousers in the first century, they did it all the time. If you look at some of the details of the trial notice how they're very different. Notice how they're very different.

[7] Mark 14, get your Bibles out. Today we are talking about the historical Jesus but I'm not just going to tell you what I believe or what scholars believe about the historical Jesus, I'm going to try to show you why scholars come up with ideas that we have, how we get there, what is our method for arriving at historical Jesus discussions. Look at Mark 14:53:

They took Jesus to the high priest and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled. Peter had followed him at a distance right into the courtyard of the high priest, and he was sitting with the guards warming himself at the fire. Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death but they found none. Many gave false testimony against him and their testimony did not agree. Some stood up and gave false testimony against him saying, "We have heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands and in three days I will build another not made with hands.'" But even on this point their testimony did not agree. Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?" But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus said, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven." [That's a quotation from Daniel, so Jesus basically just says, "I am," and then quotes Daniel.] The high priest accused him of blasphemy.

[8] Then look at chapter 15, beginning of chapter 15, "

As soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" He answered him, "You say so." Then the chief priest accused him of many things. Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you." But Jesus made no further reply so that Pilate was amazed.

- [9] Now notice all Jesus says at his trial, according to Mark, the oldest of our written testimonies, is "I am" and a quotation of scripture at one point, and then, "so you say," in the next trial before Pilate. Now compare that to what goes on in the Gospel of John. I mentioned this a bit in my lecture on the Gospel of John, how its narrative details are very different from the synoptic Gospels. One of the places where this is really different is the trial of Jesus. John 18:19, I'm not going to read all of this because it's just way too long, there's a part of—the interesting thing is that the trial of Jesus goes on for a long time in the Gospel of John.

The high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus answered, "I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught synagogues near the temple where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me?"

- [10] Already Jesus has said a ton more now than he has said in the other Gospels at his trial. Then he just keeps going on, he says more things:

When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus in the face saying, "Is that how you answer the high priest?" Jesus answered, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" Then Annas sent him down to Caiaphas the high priest.

- [11] So according to John, Annas and Caiaphas are kinfolk, and they're sort of both members of the high priestly family. You can go on and on. At verse 28 is the trial—they took Jesus to Pilate.

Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" They answered, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." The Jews answered, "We are not permitted."

- [12] It goes on, Pilate talks to Jesus,

"Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about it?" Pilate said, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus said, "My kingdom is—"

- [13] Jesus just has a whole conversation with Pilate which leads to that wonderfully quotable phrase that everybody knows about where finally Jesus talks about truth and Pilate says in a phrase that could be sincere or a lot of people answered as being cynical, "What is truth?" Very famous quotation from the Gospel of John. Then of course there's the whole passage, any of you seen the—"Jesus Christ Superstar," the play or the movie? There's a whole scene where Herod, this is actually the son of Herod the Great now, but there's a trial before Herod also in the Gospel of John, not really in Mark at all, but in the Gospel of John you get this whole trial before Herod. And according to "Jesus Christ Superstar" this is when Herod kind of dances around on this raft, and has showgirls, and they all do this, "so you are the Christ,/ you're the great Jesus Christ,/ prove to me that you're no fool,/ walk across my swimming pool," and all this sort of thing. There's a whole scene, and "Jesus Christ Superstar" the whole scene wouldn't be possible without the Gospel of John because it's not in the other Gospels. This is a famous scene.

- [14] All of that's different in John, so what's historical? How do scholars decide—you have these very, very different—was Jesus completely silent at his trial as it seems to be in the Gospel of Mark? Did he not offer any reasons for what he did, or did he have theological and philosophical discussions with Pilate about his message? What's historical? In that case, basically most historians are going to

say none of it is. None of the trial stuff can you be confident would be historical. For one thing, we just have these very varied differences but there's one very little interesting piece of evidence about this. According to all the Gospels where were the disciples after Jesus was arrested? Anybody remember? They vamoosed. The Gospels say the disciples ran away at the arrest of Jesus. So maybe according to some traditions—according to these traditions maybe Peter was there sort of in a courtyard, out removed from the trial. But none of the disciples of Jesus would have been allowed to be present at any trial whether it was with his high priest or Pilate, they wouldn't have been allowed in. These were peasants from Galilee, they're fishermen, they don't go walking into Pilate's headquarters, so who would have been there to report these different trial things?

[15] There are no stenographers in the ancient world sitting down taking notes of these trials. There are no court records, there are no journalists, nobody was there who later Christians had access to so that they could possibly have known what went on in the trial. According to most historians who just say, all of this trial stuff was very much made up by later Christians. Why? Because they figured you had to have a trial if you're going to have Jesus condemned and so they figured, well what would have taken place? These Gospel writers, or maybe they're using traditions that developed before them, they're using traditions that developed because people just say, well what would have happened at Jesus' trial? What's likely to have happened? Then they make up that likeliness and they put that into the story. Now so you've got a couple of different situations where we historians are very, very skeptical about some of the basic aspects of the Gospels' accounts as far as what they tell us about the historical Jesus. The birth narratives, we just throw up our hands. The trials before Pilate, nope probably none of it rises to the level of history.

2. *Finding History in the New Testament*

[16] This leads to a couple of different problems. The first one I'm going to talk about is, so what? And I'm saying this because once critical scholars start talking about the historical Jesus, we immediately start stepping

into sand traps. On the one hand we have good Christian people who are a bit afraid that if you start questioning the historical reliability of the Gospels then you're going to undermine every aspect of Christian faith. If the birth narratives are not as they say they are in the Gospels, then how can you trust any of it to be true? If none of it is true, how do you even know that Jesus actually even existed? Or even if he did exist how do you know that he wasn't a liar or a magician, or just a bum? How do you—and if that's true, why have faith? Why not just give up the whole thing? On the one hand, you've got Christians who are very threatened by using typical historical tools on the Gospels and the very question of the historical Jesus.

[17] On the other hand, we have just as many people who are anti-Christian and they want to grab onto this and say, aha, notice how reputable scholars like Dale Martin, Woolsey Professor of Religious Studies at Yale University, points out that not everything in the Gospels is reliably history. Well that means it's all a bunch of bunk, and every Christian in the world is basing their faith on things that are known by scholars to be lies. Well that's not exactly right either is it? But on both sides you get some people who say—who grab onto any sort of idea that historians would say these are the discrepancies in the Gospels, or these are places where we don't have historical evidence to back us up and they want to run with that precisely in order to impugn the faith of Christians.

[18] So scholars have to be very careful. What we basically want to say—there was actually one or two scholars in the nineteenth century, reputable scholars, Bruno Bauer was one of them, a German scholar who denied that Jesus ever existed. He just said it was all—even the person of Jesus was a myth created by the church. You'll find every once in a while somebody on the web, or the internet, or something or in some crazy blog, saying that Jesus never existed, but reputable historical scholars all admit that Jesus of Nazareth existed. There was a guy back there, Jesus of Nazareth. There's just too much evidence that he existed and it's just not controvertible when it comes to reliable historical evidence. That's a big difference from saying, yes, we believe he existed and there are some things we think we can say about him, to accepting all of the Gospel materials as reliable. Scholars basically

are caught in the middle of saying we believe there was a Jesus of Nazareth, we believe we might even be able to say some things as historians about who he was, what he said, what he did, why he may have been executed, and that sort of thing. That means we have to use critical historical tools to analyze these faith-based texts, these theological texts, what are indeed, in some cases, mythological texts. We read theological texts to try to figure out what we could say historically.

[19] That leads to the other issue. I keep saying “the historical Jesus” because a whole lot of people have the idea that once I give you the historical Jesus then you’ve got the real Jesus. You’ve got Jesus as he really was and so therefore Jesus as he really is. Now the problem with that is that theologians and I can put on my historical hat most of the time, because I actually have a job as a historian. I don’t really have a job as a theologian so I kind of call myself sometimes an amateur theologian.

[20] If I want to put on my amateur theologian hat, I can make a case for you why the historical Jesus is not a very good foundation for Christian faith. It’s not reliable as a foundation of Christian faith, it’s not sufficient as a foundation for Christian faith. The theological Jesus, the Jesus of Christian confession is not the historical Jesus. The Jesus of theological confession is the Jesus that matches what the church has traditionally believed about Jesus. For example, Jesus that matches the creeds, a Jesus that matches Christian confessions, so one of the most important things for Christian confession, for example, is—would you lose your faith if you believed that Jesus wasn’t born in Bethlehem but was rather born in Nazareth? Probably most Christians would say, well, no that’s not really that important. What’s the most central thing for most Christians of the Christian faith? Do you believe that somehow God was in Jesus Christ reconciling the world to himself, to quote the Apostle Paul, or do you believe that Jesus Christ is divine? Do you believe that Jesus is God? Do you believe that Jesus is God incarnate, God in the flesh? That’s a fundamental aspect of Christian faith for most Christians.

[21] Notice that’s not something that historians can pronounce about one way or another. There’s no possible way that I practicing history by the

normal historiographical tools of history could tell you whether God was in Jesus Christ, is there? I mean just think about it, how would I test that? How would I figure it out? What would count as a positive proof? What would count as a non-controvertible negative truth? There’s no such thing. When I’m talking about the historical Jesus I have to get over several hurdles. One of the hurdles is trying to show you that the historical Jesus is a construction made by historians practicing the typical trade of modern historians. It’s just like, for example, if I say what’s the historical Socrates? We don’t have direct access to Socrates either, right? Socrates left no writings. All we know about Socrates are mainly the things that either Plato, his disciple, said about him or Xenophon another of his disciples said about him and a few other things. You know what? Plato and Xenophon don’t give the same picture of Socrates, so figuring out what this—who is the historical Socrates is also a difficult historical question that historians debate about. That’s the one thing is just using typical historical data.

[22] For example, if I say, we’re going to talk about George Washington and we’re going to talk about the George Washington of history, the George Washington that historians will come up with, that’s a different George Washington than say, let’s talk about the George Washington of popular American piety. The George Washington of popular American piety threw a dollar across the Potomac. No historian believes that George Washington threw a dollar across the Potomac, at least not at Mt. Vernon. If you’ve been to Mt. Vernon you know that’s a super human feat. In popular American piety, George Washington as a little boy chopped down the cherry tree and when his father got onto him he said, I cannot tell a lie father, it is I. That’s a George Washington, it’s the George Washington of American popular tradition, and it’s important to know that about George Washington. No historian believes that George Washington as a child actually chopped down the cherry tree and that happened, and mainly because we actually found the preacher who made up the story for a sermon. It made a good sermon point. Remember my motto, what’s the motto of the class? De omnibus dubitandum, especially when you’re listening to preachers or professors. The historical Jesus is not the same

thing as the theological Jesus, so that's one point to remember.

[23] Another—this is another theoretical issue and this is very confusing for some people when you first start thinking about it. We often use the word “history” in two different ways in common English. We often use the word history to refer simply to stuff in the past. For example, the Civil War is historical. That just means it happened in the past. That's one way we use the word “history” but it's kind of a sloppy way, because if I want to say the history of the Civil War, I'm not really talking in that case of the whole Civil War, right? A historical account of the Civil War is something—is a narrative that will be constructed by a historian to represent a story about whatever happened in the past, but it can't replicate the past, right? In order to replicate the Civil War you would have to actually have the full four years—wasn't it four years? However long the Civil War took to fight you would have to have that amount of time because every tiny detail, every action, every person, every word, every letter, everything anybody said all—every tiny battle, every ant that crawled over a decomposing corpse is part of the past of the Civil War. That's not the history of the Civil War, that's the Civil War as it occurred in the past.

[24] The history of the Civil War is an account of whatever happened in the past that a historian constructs and then tells you. When we use the word “history” in that more professional sense, we're not talking about the past, we're talking about an account of the past. Often philosophers of history like to separate these two words out, and they'll use the word “past” for the event that occurred in the past. They'll use the word “history” for an account of the event that occurred in the past. Now notice what that means. Histories are accessible to us, right? You can go to the store and buy a history of the Civil War, you can buy a history of George Washington, and you can buy a history of Jesus Christ. Does the history of the Civil War that you buy in the store give you the Civil War? No, it gives you an account of the Civil War. The actual Civil War is radically inaccessible to you. It's inaccessible, you can't get it. Think about this, how would you actually recover the actual past of the Civil War? How would you do it? Let's say you can't travel in time like in TV, let's just say

that hypothetically. Does the Civil War exist somewhere in space where the light that emitted from it is still flying off in the universe somewhere? If you could faster, than the speed of light, fly out to that thing you could actually experience the Civil War as it actually happened. Well maybe theoretically, but for any of us sitting here in this room, that's not possible is it? In other words, this is a radical thought to some people, but the past no longer exists for you and me, it's radically gone. The past is non-existent when it comes to our experiences of it. All we can experience are different accounts of the past. We can experience different constructions of the past. We cannot experience the past itself. It's gone; it's lost to us forever.

[25] That means the historical Jesus, as Jesus actually existed in history, is inaccessible to you. You will not find him, you cannot find him, you will never find him. What you can do is using the trades—the tricks of the trade of modern historiography, you can play by the rules of modern historiography and you can construct a historical Jesus. That means a Jesus of Nazareth constructed using the same kinds of historical tools as historians would use to construct the historical George Washington, the historical Socrates, the historical Plato, the historical Abraham Lincoln. That's a construction though. Those theoretical points are very important because when I talk about the historical Jesus you cannot think, like most popular people think, that what I'm talking about is the real Jesus, the Jesus as he really was, or certainly not the Jesus of Christian faith. What I'm giving you is an account of Jesus that modern historians construct using the typical tools of modern historiography. That's a lot of theoretical philosophy of history stuff that I tried to boil down in straightforward language. Is there any questions or comments about that before I go on? All that stuff is necessary, though, because people, especially when they turn to objects of faith, that you start asking historical questions, people's minds start turning into mud.

3. Methods of Historical Jesus Research

[26] All right, now let's just jump right in, what could we say about the historical Jesus as historians? Today I can't give you the whole thing. If you want the whole thing, all the

answers to life—well I won't give you cooking recipes and that kind of thing, but if you want all the answers to historical Jesus stuff as it comes from the expert, moi, you can take my seminar in the fall that I'll be teaching on the historical Jesus; a whole semester just on the historical Jesus question, so I'll do that in the fall. I'm going to give you the next twenty minutes a little version of sort of the results, I'll show you some of the results that we—that I would say about the historical Jesus and I would also say that Bart Ehrman, the author of your textbook, will agree with most of this in his chapter in your textbook. If you want more of that, Bart Ehrman has a book on the historical Jesus called—I think it's called, *Jesus of Nazareth or Apocalyptic Prophet of a New Millennium*. It's also published by Oxford Press and its several years old, but he and I agree to a great extent about this sort of thing. If you want more of this you can look at Bart's book and it'll pretty much agree with a lot of the stuff that I'm going to say, or you can take my seminar next fall. Here are some things that I think we can agree about, most historians might agree about, the historical Jesus and then I'll tell you how we got there. We're going to talk about first some results and then some methodology.

[27] First, the sign on the cross, does anybody remember what the sign on the cross when Jesus is crucified says? Pardon?

[28] *Student*: [Inaudible]

[29] *Professor Dale Martin*: Say it again.

[30] *Student*: [Inaudible]

[31] *Professor Dale Martin*: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. Anybody else?

[32] *Student*: [Inaudible]

[33] *Professor Dale Martin*: What did you say?

[34] *Student*: [Inaudible]

[35] *Professor Dale Martin*: Not “here lies” but there's one verse that says “this is Jesus of Nazareth,” and it's because the four different Gospels have slightly different wording but they all have something version of “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,” which is of course why you sometimes see this

abbreviated from the Latin, right? If you've seen it in churches, INRI, have you ever seen that on a cross or something like that in a church? Jesus of Nazareth in Latin, rex King Iudaeorum of the Jews. Notice how though it's slightly different. Let's look—if you've got your Bibles it's Mark 15:26, if you've got a parallel version, I'm going to be looking at Throckmorton because it has the synoptic parallels, it's Throckmorton paragraph 249, but somebody put your finger on Mark 15:26. It's also Matthew 27:37, it's also Luke 23:38, and it's also John 19:19. Now in Mark 15:26 it says, “The inscription of the charge against him read the King of the Jews,” that's it. Then it goes on about other stuff. Look over right next to it on Matthew, it says, “Over his head they put the charge against him said, ‘This is Jesus, the King of the Jews,’” so it's slightly different. Luke 23:38, there it is, “There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews,’” and who has the John version? John 19:19, did anybody put their finger on John 19:19? “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,” and doesn't it say in John that it was in different languages or an I—

[36] *Student*: [Inaudible]

[37] *Professor Dale Martin*: That's right; Hebrew, Latin, and Greek in the Gospel of John, so that's what we've got. One of the things that most scholars will say is, we think that's historical. Why do we think it's historical? Well, for one thing, it comes from at least two independent sources, right? What are the two independent sources that it comes from? It's in all four Gospels but all four Gospels aren't independent sources are they? Why? Because we believe that Matthew and Luke used Mark, so if Matthew and Luke copied it from Mark, that makes Mark one source. Did the author of John use the Gospel of Mark? Not according to the theory we're using in this class. Some people might say yes, some scholars might say yes, but in this class we're going on the theory that the Gospel of John probably didn't use Mark as one of his sources. You've got the Gospel of John as one source for this; you've got the Gospel of Mark as another source for this, so you have two of what scholars are willing to treat as independent sources, which both have this nice little piece of data, this data right there.

- [38] Now the other thing is that—might be interesting for you to know, “King of the Jews” is not a Christological title that early Christians used about Jesus. Remember in the Gospels we’ve seen a lot of different titles for Jesus. He’s the teacher, he’s the Son of God, he’s the Messiah, he’s the Holy one of Israel we just saw. He was a lot of things, and these things are obviously things—early Christians call him Lord, they called him Son of God, but they didn’t call him King of the Jews. It was one of the titles of Jesus that apparently the earliest followers of Jesus didn’t latch onto. So we don’t see it in the letters of Paul and we don’t see it elsewhere in the Gospels. So what scholars have said is, look, this thing King of the Jews doesn’t look like a Christological confessional title that Christians made up and then put into the Gospel. It goes against the tendency of the Christian writers themselves because it’s not one of their titles. If it had said, “This is Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord of heaven and earth,” then scholars would say, well that sounds like a Christian confession. But saying, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,” doesn’t sound like a Christian confession so it goes against the tendency of the writers themselves and then we say, well maybe then it’s historical, maybe it’s a little glimpse of history sitting in there, so that’s one thing. The sign on the cross, most scholars say that’s historical. Now I’ll talk about why that’s important; it’s a very small detail but it could be very important. Yes sir?
- [39] *Student:* [Inaudible]
- [40] *Professor Dale Martin:* It could have, exactly. In other words in the—the questions was, didn’t this come from the mocking terms in the trial? That’s exactly right. The Christians, if you notice, it’s the people who are mocking Jesus who call him King of the Jews and so why—this is not something that the Christians writers want to invent and then put in the story. That supports that point, so that is a nice little detail.
- [41] One other thing that scholars often say may well be historical: Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. Why would scholars say this is historical? Well there’s not complete agreement about how it happened. The Gospel of John doesn’t exactly tell you about the baptism of Jesus by John but it has Jesus and his disciples, also baptized in the Jordan, and it has Jesus very much connected to John the Baptist in the beginning of its Gospel. The other Gospels do have Jesus baptized by John, but notice how the story goes along. All of the writers who have Jesus baptized by John the Baptist, they have Jesus come to John the Baptist and they say I want to be baptized, and John the Baptist says, oh no I shouldn’t baptize you, you’re the big kahuna, you’re bigger than I am. I’m not worthy to untie your sandals, so I should be baptized by you, you shouldn’t—I shouldn’t be baptizing you and Jesus says, no, no, no, it’s okay baptize me and so he does it and then you have the confession and the voice from heaven and that sort of thing.
- [42] Notice what’s going on here. The Gospel writers are very concerned because they know that it could be interpreted that John baptizing Jesus makes John superior to Jesus and makes Jesus a disciple of John. And they’re not comfortable with that because of course they believed Jesus is the Messiah and so he’s therefore superior to John the Baptist, and John the Baptist was just a prophet or a precursor to Jesus. The story is told to play down this baptism a bit and make Jesus come out as insisting on the baptism, wanting to do it for the right kinds of reasons but not making Jesus a disciple of John. And also this tradition about the baptism of Jesus is in different sources in different ways. Again, scholars say, the baptism of John the Baptist baptizing Jesus doesn’t look like something early Christians would make up. In fact, you can even see that they try to tone down its implications. It’s not something they’re likely to make up, it kind of goes against their tradition of raising Jesus up completely, and therefore, it may be historical. Notice what we’ve got then. We’ve got two very small details that a lot of scholars would say probably are historical because they seemed to be witnessed by more than one source and they also seem to go against the theological tendency of the documents in which they’re found. And they frame the Gospel of Jesus. The baptism of Jesus, the beginning of his ministry, and the charge on the cross at the end of his ministry, and now I’m going to back up. Those two events, let’s just say I’m going to argue that those two are certain historical events in the life of Jesus, and then we’ll fill in some of the other details later.
- [43] Right now let’s talk about method, how did I get here? First method, first little rule, and this is something that a lot of people use when they

do historical Jesus research. It took all of the twentieth century for people kind of to develop these rules and to spell them out in scholarship but this is kind of where we are now. The first rule, multiple attestation, that means when you have more than one independent source that has a saying or an event about Jesus, you tend to give it a little more weight. Now of course what are independent sources? If you have something in both Matthew and Luke that doesn't count as two independent sources, right? Because both Matthew and Luke could have gotten it from Mark or they could have gotten it from Q, but if you have something in Mark and you have something in John, well those are two independent sources. If you also have something in the Gospel of Thomas then most of us scholars would say, well some people say the Gospel of Thomas may have known the other Gospels, but most of us would say, we're going to treat him as an independent source because he's not verbatim quoting the other Gospels most of the time. If you have an event or a saying that occurs in Mark and John, and Q, and Thomas those are three [correction: four] independent sources.

[44] What if it also occurs in Paul, Paul's letters? There's another independent source. As we'll see there are some places where Paul gives us a little clue about something. Then obviously you can take Q as being one of those sources, so if something is in both Matthew and Luke but it's not in Mark then you can say it's in Q, and sometimes people would even say you have one form of parable that seems to have occurred in Q and you have a different form of that parable that seems to have occurred in Mark. Then you can say, okay we have this one parable in two independent sources, one is Q and one is Mark, but that's kind of complicated because of course the very definition of what's in Q is something that's in both Matthew and Luke but not in Mark, usually. If something is in more than one source it fits this criterion. Now remember criteria is the plural, criterion is the singular.

[45] Let me illustrate this again. One of the things is the sign on the cross, the divorce sayings is another situation. According to Mark 10 and Matthew 19 you have this saying, "What God has joined together let no man put asunder," and then you have a few other sayings. Clearly Jesus, in this passage, is teaching no divorce for his disciples, no divorce at all, period,

none, against the rule to get divorced. Then Matthew 5:32 has a parallel with Luke 16:18 which makes it look like a Q source and that has this wording, "Every man who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman who has been divorced by her husband commits adultery." In other words, there's another teaching on divorce here, both of which forbid—it also forbids divorce and remarriage, but it's not the same wording as in Mark, so scholars say, that looks like a Q saying on divorce in which Jesus still forbids divorce and remarriage but it's not the same wording as the Mark saying, so we have two separate sayings and different wordings, but they both have Jesus forbidding divorce, at least divorce and remarriage; one in Q, one in Mark, two independent sources.

[46] It's really neat then when we find Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 says this, so this is Paul, a quotation from Paul, "To those who are married I command," that is Paul and then he says, "Not I but the Lord." Paul even knows he's quoting a saying of the Lord Jesus, so he goes onto say, "That the woman must not separate from her husband, if indeed she does separate let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband, and a man must not put away his wife." Now most of us believe that's Paul's wording because you can tell the way he's kind of fudging around with some of the details of the saying. At least Paul gives a witness that he knows of an anti-divorce saying by Jesus also. Three separate independent witnesses that Jesus taught against divorce. One from Mark that Matthew copies, one from Q that both Matthew and Luke have, and one from Paul, so that passes the multiple attestation rule.

[47] It also passes the next rule, which is dissimilarity. When you find something in a source, the early Christian source, that seems to go against the very inclinations of that source, or of early Christianity, it's more likely to be historical. Something that swims against the tide of early Christian expectation. Now why does the—divorce saying is multiply attest—it also passes the dissimilarity thing because almost all of these authors, except for Mark, they both seem to know that Jesus prohibited divorce entirely but then they go on to modify the rule a bit because I mean let's face it people get divorced, early Christians got divorced. So Paul says, well you're not

supposed to get divorced, but if you do get divorced then you should do this. The very writers who pass on an anti-divorce saying also fudged the saying just a bit, which shows that the saying is more radical than their own ethics are. In other words, the anti-divorce saying is dissimilar to the very practices of these early Christians. It's more radical than they are themselves practicing and that's a clue that the saying itself goes back to the historical Jesus, according to this method. Dissimilarity is any kind of thing that doesn't fit early Christian tendencies.

[48] The sign on the cross, I already talked about that, it wasn't a confession of Jesus. The baptism of John, it's not something they likely would have invented. There's another one, the swords at Jesus' arrest, and according to Mark 14:47 and it's followed by Matthew and Luke, somebody had a sword at Jesus' arrest in the garden, and somebody used it. According to the different traditions it was Peter, according to John and somebody made—the others don't name, somebody whacked off the high—the ear of the high priest's slave, but there are these different stories about somebody in Jesus' entourage was armed and in some of the sources—one of the sources there are two of them—or there were two swords—others say one sword. Now I think this is historical. Why? Because all the Gospel writers want to go out of their way to say Jesus was not mounting a violent revolution. He was not a criminal, this was not an armed rebellion, he is completely innocent of any political charge of insurrection. But if Jesus' disciples were armed with swords at his arrest, in the middle of the night, at the Passover in Jerusalem, that's insurrection, folks. The Romans did not allow Jews just to go around in the middle of the night in gardens carrying swords. For a Jew to be armed, at the Passover, an especially dangerous time, that the Romans were really worried about, for a Jew to be armed following around a guy who some people were saying was the King of the Jews, you can be arrested for that, you can be crucified for that. I don't think early Christians invented it. I think some of these early Christians knew that at least one and possibly more of Jesus' disciples were armed at his arrest. Why do I think that? Because it's not something they would have invented. In fact, it goes against their tendency.

[49] There's another passage, Mark 10:18 which is also in Luke 18:19. You may have come across this, the man comes and asks Jesus about what should I do to have eternal life, what's the good thing for me to do, and Jesus says, why do you ask me about the good, there's no one good but God. Now, apparently, Mark writing that didn't have a theological hiccup but now let me—I'm a good Episcopalian. Why should you ask Jesus about the good, God's the only who is good. Sound weird? If Jesus is actually God then you wouldn't say it like that. In other words, this sounds like Jesus himself is denying that he's God. Don't ask me about the good, the only one who knows about good is God, and Jesus goes and answers the question. I think this saying was actually—something like this was said by the historical Jesus. Why? Because early followers of Jesus believed Jesus was God in some sense. I don't think this is something they would invent. It goes against their confession. It goes against their theology, so it's one of these cases where it's dissimilar to their faith, and therefore, we tend to give it a higher grade when it comes to historicity.

[50] A couple of other criteria are a bit weaker, these are the two strongest [multiple attestation, dissimilarity]. Social coherence. This is when you say—when you use something that is either anachronistic and it doesn't look like it would fit in with the life of Jesus or it does fit very well with the life of Jesus. If I decide, for example, on lots of different other sayings that I've decided are historical because of these other reasons, and then something looks like it—a saying of Jesus looks like it's apocalyptic and I've already established that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet, then I'm going to say well it coheres with the social situation of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet in Galilee.

[51] Or take a negative example, in Matthew 18 there are a lot of rules about what you should do in the church, the very word "church" is used. Almost all of us scholars would say a lot of that stuff in Matthew 18 about the church, the church rules, the church leadership, that's not historical. Why? Because the church didn't exist in Jesus' lifetime. Jesus sounds like he's giving rules about a constitution for a church but we think that's anachronistic. The church is something that developed after Jesus' death when his followers came to believe that he had been raised from the dead and then they should

continue doing things in his name. In Jesus' own lifetime, traveling around Galilee, talking about—now when you have the church you should meet on Sundays, I think for Easter you should wear white—Jesus didn't do this sort of thing. All of that stuff in Matthew 18 that looks very much like later church life, we believe was read back into the life of Jesus by the author of Matthew or other people. Then the last thing is, the last criterion is rather weak, it's called the criterion of coherence. This basically just says, if you've established something as being historical about Jesus by these other stronger criteria, and then something else seems to cohere with it, then you can kind of throw it in the pot. It's a very loose kind of criterion to use for historical purposes. Now—so where are we? That's the methodology.

4. *Who Was the Historical Jesus?*

[52] If we're going to come up with some basic ideas about Jesus here's where I would say I would end up with. There's some of this that's very controversial. I would say, though, that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet, an apocalyptic Jewish prophet. One of the reasons is that Jesus' life was framed by two apocalyptic events. If Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, and John the Baptist seems clearly to have been preaching some kind of apocalyptic message about the coming kingdom, that means I think, that Jesus was originally a follower of John the Baptist, although the later Gospel writers will play that down. If Jesus was a follower of an apocalyptic Jewish prophet I think that, at least the beginning of his own ministry, was wreathed in that apocalyptic Jewish prophecy kind of world, and he was executed on a charge of sedition as being the King of the Jews, against the law. Only the Roman senate got to make kings, and if Jesus was going around claiming—and I'm not saying he was claiming, but if other people were claiming that he was the King of the Jews, the only way to understand that I think in this situation is that he believed that he was going to be the Messiah that would come at the end of time and overthrow the Romans. So his death was also apocalyptic.

[53] The temple incident, we could talk about that, did Jesus go in and throw the money changers

out and cleanse the temple as it said? I think that's historical. It goes against the tendency of the Gospels to portray Jesus as violent and confrontational in that last week. I think he therefore did it. What did it mean? I think it—this is more debatable, I think it was a prophecy meant to enact what he saw would be the coming future destruction of the temple by God and some kind of apocalyptic event at the end of time. I think Jesus was therefore a lower class Jewish peasant who spoke mainly Aramaic. I think he had a group of disciples of twelve, I won't go into some of these, but I think he actually did form twelve of his disciples to be an inner core group. I think even that's apocalyptic. Why would he have twelve disciples? Why did he choose the number twelve? Because there were twelve tribes of Israel that would be reconstituted at the end of time according to Jewish expectation. I think there are also women that were part of his inner circle, and this is because women later in early Christianity were marginalized from leadership positions, but there's all kinds of evidence from the resurrection narratives, to the presence of Mary Magdalene, to other women that they were part of his inner circle of disciples. I think that he never taught the end of the Jewish law but I think he did teach what was something of a liberalizing version of the Jewish law. In other words, that the ethical treatment of your fellow human beings counted as more important than actual details of observing the Jewish law, such as keeping kosher, washing your hands, keeping the Sabbath.

[54] Did Jesus think he was the Messiah? I think this is a really big problem. I don't know. There seem to be places where he makes no open claim to Messiahship in his ministry, except in the Gospel of John remember. So the Gospel of John actually we tend to treat that as less historically reliable in these things because it looks very much more like Christian theological confession. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus doesn't make open claims to being the Messiah. On the other hand, he was executed for being King of the Jews. The Romans at least thought he was claiming to be the Messiah, or they thought that other people were claiming that about him. What he thought himself is very difficult. One of the things, though, and I think we can say for sure, and this is where I'll end today. Jesus, himself, I

believe, never saw himself as the founder of Christianity. He didn't think about himself as starting a new religion. I believe he saw himself as preparing the people of Israel to make them ready for the apocalyptic in-breaking of God that was to happen at the end of time, or at the end of our time, and the setting up of a new time of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Israel that would incorporate the whole world. The way I would

do this is Jesus was an apocalyptic Jewish prophet who was executed because the Romans at least believed that he or his disciples were making dangerous claims that he was the King of the Jews. That's all you get on the historical Jesus, sorry. Next time we start on Paul. See you next time.

[end of transcript]