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How Would You Respond to the Current Mainstream View of the Historical Jesus?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how to respond to the current mainstream view of the historical Jesus and the allegations that Jesus just ripped off material from ancient religions that preceded him.

- * How would you respond to the current mainstream view of the historical Jesus?
- * How should I respond to the allegations that Jesus just ripped off material from ancient religions that preceded him?

Transcript

Welcome to Stand to Reason's hashtag STRS podcast. I'm Amy Hall, and I'm here with Greg Koukl today. Good morning, Amy.

Good morning, Greg. In the last episode, we were talking about Jesus, and so we're going to continue on questions about Jesus. Imagine how did he get in there? I have some more questions, so we're going to keep going on that.

Okay, so this first one comes from Mr. Speedy. How would you answer this? Current mainstream view is that Jesus was a real historical person. This historical view goes something like this.

Jesus was a countryside person, likely intelligent and charismatic, but uneducated and illiterate. He had Jewish apocalyptic beliefs continuous with many people of the day in his area, believing that the world was a bad place and that within his lifetime, God would come and write things. Likely he thought that he was the Messiah slash Christ slash anointed one who God would make king of this newly-riden physical world.

Well, when I'm faced with a question like that, I always ask myself or I should say the question that comes to mind about this and what I would ask them is where are you getting information about Jesus, all right? And I read this recently, something I wrote, and maybe it was in Street

Smarts, but I had to go back to it because I was talking to somebody about it. And it basically said, you can have any idea about Jesus you want, all right? But if what you do is disqualify as a legitimate source of historical information, the primary source historical documents that we have for the person of Jesus of Nazareth, then you, there is no Jesus for you to have an opinion about. He's an historical figure that's whose life is recorded in documentation that were written, well, let's just put it this way, the best, the most primitive documentation we have, that is the earliest and the most foundational and the most basic is Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Arguably, even liberal, many liberal scholars, it will place the writing of them in the in the first century, the end of the first century, maybe early second century, depending on who you talk to, but John A. T. Robinson, who's no conservative, thinks that everything in the New Testament was written and completed before 70 AD because there's no reference to the most climactic and dramatic event of that period. And that is the destruction of the temple, which by the way, which from apologetics perspective would play into the hands of Christians who could say, see what happened when you killed God's Messiah. You know, whether that's a sound way of reasoning or not for some people.

The point is they would have at least pointed that out, especially since Jesus predicted in Luke that the Gospel of Luke let the temple would be destroyed. And so, gee, if it was, they would have mentioned it, nobody mentions it. Why? Because it didn't happen.

Point being the best evidence is that the that the Gospels are for a century. Now, Gospel of Thomas, everybody says that second century. So it can't be Thomas.

It can't be an eyewitness. And it's not even really that historical is mostly theological, Gnostic theology too. In any event, and only like 17 other references that are made in extra biblical material about Jesus of Nazareth is corroborative of what Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John say.

So if somebody's going to give a characterization like you just read, the question I have is where, what are you grounding that characterization on? For example, well, if you think he was an historical man, based on what? Well, we have historical records. Oh, okay, let's go back to those historical records. They do not give any indication that this is an uneducated man.

We don't know what this formal education is, but he was brilliant. Even when according to this record, even when he was 12 years old, he was mystifying the intellects in Jerusalem. And then as he goes on, and when you read the way he reacts in response to different things, he's brilliant.

He never gets stuck. He never gets caught. He never gets trapped.

He switches the traps and traps the others who are trying to trap them. Now, this is a pretty bright guy. And if the gospels aren't historically sound, then whoever wrote them is pretty bright.

But if they're not historically sound, and that's the case somebody wants to make, then you're

not going to be able to come up with this description of who Jesus is, because there's only one source of reasonably reliable historical information about Jesus. And that source does not give this profile of Jesus of Nazareth. It gives a much more glowing profile.

Now, there are things in there that are consistent with it. And whether or not, and this is a matter of debate about how you understand these texts, Jesus thought that the apocalypse is going to happen very soon. That's another issue.

And they're certainly readings that seem to be that seems to be the case. But that's taking it's curiously in order to say, look, here's a guy who got it wrong, which is usually the way this information is offered. He thought he was going to come back soon, and he didn't spend 2000 years, no apocalypse.

You have to take the documents as historically accurate. If they're not historically reliable, you can't say that with any reliability that Jesus predicted a soon to come apocalypse. So this is the concern that I have.

Where are you getting your information? If we're going to get them from the primary source historical documents, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and even the secondary source historical documents from that period, they get a very consistent profile. And the profile is of a supernatural Jesus, who was brilliant, who mystified the crowds, and who who it seems not only miracles that were recorded there, but miraculous resurrection was the stimulus for the birth of the of the church and Christianity as we know it. And without those things happening, if you if you pull all of as some people want to do, yeah, there's historically reliable stuff in here, but nothing supernatural, you pull that out.

What you do is you end up not only undermining the the testimony of those texts, why would you say all of these things are false? It's because of the philosophy philosophical view people are bringing it to the text. And then they just like like, it's just Jefferson did, you know, pull out the things he didn't like. And that's Jefferson Bible, take all of miraculous.

You not only have an entirely different individual, but you don't have any kind of individual that would ever start a massive movement called Christianity that flourished in the midst of incredible persecution the first in the first century. So that doesn't make sense at all. So this is what I'm going to ask.

Where are you getting information? And why does this characterization not match the best historical information that we have about Jesus? Yeah, I was thinking, some of these things are obviously true. He thought he was the Messiah, Christ, anointed one. Okay, well, at least that somewhere we can start and have a conversation.

But I'm with you, Greg. I would ask, well, why should I think that is the correct view rather than these other documents view? And I think it does usually come down to a worldview and a view of the supernatural. And sometimes, and I don't see necessarily anything here, maybe some of

this would fall under this, but sometimes the way people decide what Jesus or who Jesus really was and what he really did, they do it based on what was common.

So most people in this case did this, therefore Jesus did this. If they were all illiterate, then Jesus was illiterate. If people who were crucified were buried in shallow graves, then Jesus was buried in the shallow grave.

John Dominic Cross in Z. You can't decide history based on probabilities, especially when you're talking about somebody who changed the whole world, some character who was so different that he caused the beginning of this movement that has completely changed the world. Plus, when you have evidence to the contrary here in the darkness themselves. Right.

So it's just what you need to do is ask why they think that and find out their reasoning behind why they're saying why they're rejecting certain things out of the Bible and they're saying certain things that aren't in the Bible. If it has to do with probabilities, that is not how you figure out a bigger than life character in the past by looking at what was common and saying he must have been the same as they were. And then I think you made this point to Greg, if he were just the way they're describing him here, it really is hard to understand how Christianity took off or why people followed him.

And maybe that's something you could ask. Why do you think people followed him? Why do you think a movement developed around him? And why do you think it still exists today and is spreading throughout the world and changed entire cultures? I'm just curious, how does someone like this do that? How do you see that happening? Well, there were lots of people in the century before Jesus century after that claimed to be the Messiah. And their names are, nobody knows, unless you're a story that you feel there's something like that.

But because they just disappeared, there's even a testimony that in the book of Acts as one of the Jewish leaders, maybe as Kamehliel, I'm not sure. But he said, look at these things happen. People come around and they don't go away.

And if they go away, then we don't have to worry about it. But if this is from God, you're not going to be able to get rid of it. And there's a modest amount of wisdom in that, certainly the point that these guys come and go, these guys come and go.

So the question, why did this one last 2000 years needs to be answered? Now, maybe people can answer it without any appeal to a supernatural Jesus. But I think that's going to be really hard. If it turns out that Jesus is this emaciated individual that is left after people excise all of the supernatural elements from Jesus' life.

And claims about himself? In fact, if the claims are still left there, like he was a Messiah or whatever, but he wasn't, then you've got the Lord, liar, lunatic kind of issue. Did he believe he was, but he wasn't? Did he know he was, but he wasn't? Is he crazy or is he a liar or what? So those are all legitimate concerns about these alternate characterizations of Jesus' life. They just

don't ring true with the historical evidence that we have.

And this is not to say that just because a religion lasts, that proves it's true. Obviously, that's not the case. But you still have to explain how it started and have a reason to think it would start.

Well, the point is just to put a sharper point on it is that if this Jesus is the way people characterize him to be, removing all those make him an itinerant preacher and who believed in social justice or whatever, then it becomes really hard to make sense out of the movement that followed. We are looking at the origins of this. And we have documentation of the origins, at least in some measure, people even this characterization is some appeal to some historical record.

So that's a fair question to ask of the case of Jesus. Yeah. So I think it's important to get back to the reason why they're rejecting those things.

If it turns out to be because of the supernaturalism, then they have to defend that worldview. Why should I think that's the true worldview? Now you've got to make a case for that. You can't just assume that that's obvious.

Okay, the next question, Greg, we had a similar one on the other show, but we didn't talk about this here. So I'm going to ask this question from Brian. How do we respond to the allegations that Jesus just ripped off material from ancient religions that preceded him? All right.

Well, I'm curious what specific things are those. Do they mean Jesus did this or people who fabricated Jesus did this? Okay, that's a distinction that needs to be made here. The question is ambiguous.

If Jesus did this, where do we have? Go to your things in there are things stolen from these pagan religions, some of them Greek, some of them Egyptian, you know, Adonis or Osiris or others like that. Well, we have primary source documentation of those particular religious views. It turns out there isn't a match up there.

You know, some people think, oh, born on December 31st. Oh, there it is in this other thing. Well, nobody who know, I'm sorry, just on the 25th, nobody who is serious about the historical material ever claims that Jesus is born on Christmas day, the 25th of December, that is part of our claim, our historical claim.

We don't know when he is and there's a speculation about timing and whatever, but that's just speculation. And so if this shows up somewhere else, or he had 12 disciples, you know, somebody else had 12 disciples. So they claim turns out many of these, you see these lists on the internet of, tell me who this describes.

Then they have all these ideas, all these qualifications that seem to fit Jesus. And they say, no, it's not Jesus. It's oh, serious, you know, well, it's not even true about a serious.

This is a big mistake that people made, they just trust these things that are going around on the internet. Going back to the primary source documentation, I got a number of books that do that. It turns out that this, that these, these details don't match up with the life of Jesus.

Okay. And the details that do seem to match up with the life of Jesus are coming from documents after Jesus' time, not before Jesus' time. So it looks like others have stolen from him rather than the other way around.

But the key here is to get here, tell me the details and then tell me where they were before Jesus' time. Where that isn't going to establish that the worse that Jesus stole from that. But at least that's your first step.

Is there a matchup? Then when if you can establish anything like a meaningful matchup of specific details of Jesus' life with any specific details of these ancient mythological deities, then the question has to be asked, did Jesus take or the disciples, whoever wrote about Jesus take it from those stories? Okay. And that's a whole other question. In the story of reality, I have this detail, I talk about a book that I actually have in my library called, well, it was originally called Futility.

And it was written like 1898 or 18, yeah, somewhere in there, 1890s. And it's about this, the biggest ship in the world that makes a transatlantic voyage between New York and Britain and basically hits a, there's lots of detail there, but it hits an iceberg and sinks and half the people die because there's none of boats. And by the way, this ship's name in this particular fictional story that was written in the 19th century, the other thing is the Titan.

Then it turns out, September, April 15, 2012, bam, I mean, 1912, sorry, I am all messed up on my days. Okay. Okay.

The Titanic sank and had this massive number of details that are precisely the same as in the book. The first is a fiction, the second isn't. Now, what you can't do is say, well, look at these facts do match between this alleged event in 1912 and this fiction that was written 20 years earlier.

Therefore, the event didn't happen. Oh, no, you got to determine whether the event happened based on its own historical merits. And this is a great illustration to show the fault with that approach.

You can't just look at past myths and find similarities, even if the similarities are profound and then dismiss the alleged historical accounts of Jesus and Nazareth. That's a second step, and you've got to show that the accounts are not historically reliable on their own merits. And then it's legitimate to say, wow, where did all this come from? If it has nothing, has no support as an historical document.

Oh, I know where it came from, came from all these other guys cobbling, cobbled together to make this Jesus the rising, dying and rising Messiah. Lewis talks about this problem, he calls it

bolverism. But basically he says, first you have to show that of a point of view as false before it's meaningful to ask why it's false.

But those who raise this issue are doing it in reverse. They're saying it's false, and here's where it came from, without even looking at the historical virtues of the documents that we received on the life of Jesus. So this complaint fails twice.

It doesn't take seriously the historical documents on their own merits. And secondly, even so, there's not a close fit between details of these ancient mythologies and the life of Jesus. And by the way, Jesus was, according to the record, a Torah observed a Jew.

These guys, the nation of Israel had a bad record for 1000 years of becoming eclectic with pagan religions, not at the beginning of the first century, way on the other side. So why would somebody try to convince that the rest of Jews who are totally hostile to paganism know, that this Jesus is their Messiah by grabbing all these details from pagan religions, presuming they were educated enough to know about those things and put all this together. I mean, this is bizarre on so many different levels.

And along those lines, what strikes me as so strange is that all you don't have to go to these other religions to understand where Jesus is coming from and what he's saying, because it follows directly from the entire Old Testament. It's within the worldview of the Jewish religion, not these other religions. There's a huge difference between those religions and how they've viewed God and how they've viewed reality.

And it makes perfect sense if you're looking at the story from beginning to end. You look at the sacrificial system, you look at the law, you look at the covenants that God made, you follow that all the way to Jesus, and you can understand everything about Jesus in light of everything that said. It doesn't come across as ad hoc or something, just jumping in there out of nowhere.

Comple together from some pagan religion. And by the way, our point here is not right now saying that Jesus was the Messiah and the counselor historically accurate. What we're showing now is that this attempt to undermine it is not going to work for a bunch of reasons.

You're going to have to do something else to undermine it. And if the accounts are historically reliable, and I think that's easy to demonstrate, characteristically at least, historians use Matthew Mark Luke and John as source material for the life of Jesus of Nazareth. And also for things that happened in the ancient Near East around that time.

Now they don't agree with all the supernatural. This is Bart Ehrman. People say, well, Jesus never existed.

He's not a real man. He says, yeah, there's no evidence. Bart Ehrman says, yes, there was.

I wrote a whole book about it. And he says, there's not an historian, there's not an academic voice in the field familiar with these things that holds that view of the myth, the Jesus mythicist

view, of which this is a version. Well, where did the myth come from? Oh, cobbling together, all these other things.

It's just nonsense. Well, thank you, Mr. Speedy and Brian. We appreciate getting your questions about Jesus.

And if you have a question, you can send it to us on X with the hashtag SDR. Ask or you can go to our website. That's at str.org. We look forward to hearing from you.

This is Amy Hall and Greg Cocle for Stand to Reason.