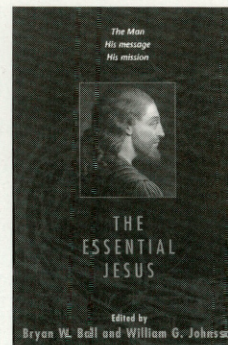


# The Need for a Jesus-Centered Faith

A Review of *The Essential Jesus: The Man, His Message, His Mission*, edited by Bryan W. Ball and William G. Johnsson. Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2002.

By Ronald L. Jolliffe



I was delighted to hear that the denomination was publishing *The Essential Jesus: The Man, His Message, His Mission*. Just released, it contains thirteen chapters written by twelve contributors, all of whom hold doctoral-level degrees. The authors are Adventist editors, scholars, educators, and administrators.

I wanted to love this book, and there are sections well worth reading. For example, Roy Adams's chapter on the compassion of Jesus encourages readers to replicate—rather than just affirm—the compassion of Jesus. Adams asks how one is softened by the compassion of Jesus when continuously bombarded by images of evil in the media. He begins a response with practical questions about Jesus.

Adams wonders what Jesus did for bedding, bathing, toilet needs, cleansing of hair and teeth, breakfast, clean clothes, laundry. He writes that, though it may be inappropriate to accept Jesus' lack of these necessities as a model for us today, nevertheless Jesus' example "certainly points up the obscenity of our natural and inordinate reach for the most comfortable and prestigious roles in the kingdom" (199). Adams urges replication of Jesus' life, which, in addition to its clearly spiritual concerns, was also committed to serving the social and physical needs of people, not only individually, but also in groups. In short, Adams calls for social action in the political order.

## A Book about Christ, Not about Jesus

I wanted all of this book to be about Jesus' teachings, for I believe concentrated attention upon them is an urgent need in current Adventist living. But the majority of this book is not about Jesus. Most chapters in this book deal with Christology (even if every chapter names Jesus in the title).

There is a distinction in scholarship between "Jesus" and "Christ" that can be explained by Peter's confession. When Jesus asked Peter, "Whom do you say I am?" Peter did not reply with the statement, "You are Jesus." That would be a fact, the kind of thing recorded in the census records in Bethlehem, knowable to all who cared to learn, regardless of their level of acquaintance with Jesus. But Peter's reply, "You are the Christ," was commended by Jesus as something that flesh and blood had not revealed to Peter: it was a belief statement.

This book would have provided a service to its readers had it explained this important distinction

between two scholarly disciplines. The first, Christology, considers doctrines about Christ, his pre-existence as the *Logos*, his virgin birth, his role as Savior, Mediator, returning Lord. These topics focus on what the Church teaches about who Christ is, what he did for people, and how to have a relationship with him.

The second discipline, Jesus Studies, focuses on Jesus' own words and deeds while he walked the earth, his parables, riddles, healings, and so forth, and the nature of the documents in the New Testament that speak about Jesus, especially the Gospels. As a Jesus scholar who works for a church that seems primarily interested in doctrinal concerns, I had hoped from the title that this book would make "Jesus" its focal point. But because the book primarily examines doctrines about Christ, it should have been titled *The Essential Christ*, especially when there is already a thoughtful book with the title *The Essential Jesus*, a book that takes Jesus' words so seriously that at times fewer than five or six of his words stand as the only words on an entire page.<sup>1</sup>

I am currently on sabbatical researching a reference work in Jesus scholarship during the day and reading this book in the evenings. I have been embarrassed that too many sections of the book seem eager to condemn Jesus

scholarship. Curiously, the chapters most vocal in their attacks on historical Jesus studies are the chapters devoted to Christological issues. Chapters on Christology should interact with the scholarly literature in Christology.

## The Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith

Although the book mentions the “Jesus of history” and the “Christ of faith,” it could do more to explain why this distinction is essential for Adventists to understand and even apply in their own witness. The need for this distinction is described in the Introduction: “The Jesus of our own imagination frequently rises to replace the Jesus of the Bible. How easy it is to create a Jesus to our liking!” (15). Jesus scholarship attempts to separate “faith” statements from “fact” statements in order to provide some controls on the creative imagination of faith, yet this book’s relentless attacks on scholarship seem willingly ignorant of what scholarship is.

Scholarship is a method, not a religion. Scholarship requires a neutral stance that allows no special privilege and brooks no special pleading.<sup>2</sup> Scholarship is not about the condemnation of faith, it is about the establishment of fact. It should be irrelevant whether a person, *when working as a scholar*, is or is not a believer. The scholar, for example, is not free to say, “I will carefully and objectively analyze the reliability of the factual history of the Koran, the holy book of Islam, but I will change my methods of research when I turn to the Bible and will accept every statement as true because I believe it is inspired by God.”

There is an excellent demonstration of a scholar at work on pages 44–47. In these pages, Nancy

Vyhmeister capably and clearly demonstrates the need for and use of the historical-critical method in her treatment of Josephus’s passages that make reference to Jesus. In her work she (rightly) removes every statement from this first-century historian about his faith in Jesus. She does her work as historian well.

Her critical work convincingly demonstrates that Josephus did not believe in Jesus, even though in the scribally emended text as it exists today Josephus has strong statements of belief in Jesus as the Christ. Her scholarly work does not make her an unbeliever or the enemy of faith. She is working as a scholar—not as a believer—in this analysis of a historical passage in a book. This kind of careful thinking is essential to all scholarship and needed by all denominations, but is not always evident in *The Essential Jesus*.

For example, at one point the book proclaims the “factual” nature of the virgin birth (87–88, 90) and states, “On the evidence of eyewitnesses and his own investigations, Luke tells us that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin, Mary” (94). These are belief statements, impossible to document as fact even if something good could come from doing so. There were no eyewitnesses to Mary’s conception (not even Mary herself), and Luke, decades later, had no way to make a personal investigation. What would he have looked for? I suppose that in an attempt to emphasize the importance of the virgin birth the author fell into the error of equating fact with truth.

## Facts and Truths

Facts are just facts; they require no belief stance. It is a fact that there was an actual city of Jerusalem in

Jesus’ own day. It is a fact that a person named Jesus died just outside the city of Jerusalem. Facts may be interesting, and even accurate, but one doesn’t stake one’s life on them. It is a fact that Jesus died on a cross. Muslims, Buddhists, and atheists know this fact. It is a truth that Jesus died on a cross to save the world.

Bryan Ball, one author in this book, makes this distinction nicely at one point when he says, “The incarnation is . . . one of the central truths of the Christian faith and a great mystery. It is no less true, no less significant, no less essential, because it is a mystery that transcends the limits of human understanding, commending itself to faith as well as to argument” (87).<sup>3</sup>

When scholarship concludes that something is not a historical fact, it does not necessarily argue that the event did not happen, but merely says that the event does not meet the criteria of historicity and therefore can only be accepted on faith. The term “historical Jesus” is a technical term that does not refer to “who Jesus actually was.” “Historical” specifically and distinctly refers to what can be demonstrated as certain without requiring one to first believe. A “historical” fact does not require a faith stance to be accepted. Jesus, as he actually was in the past, was much richer and far more complex than can ever be known by historical studies. A faithful stance toward Christ will always move far beyond what history can verify about Jesus, but it ought not be in direct violation of what can be demonstrated as historical.

Scholarship is a protective mechanism to help avoid the flights of fancy that are too frequently confused with faith.<sup>4</sup> Without the controls that the historical Jesus provides, there can be no method to

assess the validity of any claim about Jesus. Scholarship is the friend of faith and the enemy only of falsehood and deceit. It is not truth, it is a midwife of truth.

In places, this book attacks scholars and then proceeds to do what it attacked scholarship for doing. For example, the beginning of the chapter on “The Work and Words of Jesus” says,

For a long time students of Jesus have attempted to add to or subtract from the information about Jesus contained in these Gospels, . . . to get “behind” the New Testament to find the Historical Jesus.

What follows is based on my understanding that one cannot get “behind” the four Gospels, that they preserve Jesus as He existed in the memories of His closest followers, and that these memories give us the best access to the mighty work and words of Jesus. (124)

Later in the same chapter the same author says, “Jesus always used *Abba* in addressing God (sixteen times in the Gospels, see for example Mark 14:36).” However, a quick look in a concordance makes clear that in the Greek New Testament *Abba* (a transliterated Aramaic word for “father”) only appears once in the Gospels (at Mark 14:36) and twice more in Paul (Rom. 8:15 and Gal. 4:6). For the other references in the “sixteen” the author had to count something else, probably the Greek word for father (*pater*).

In other words, in the New Testament, Jesus called God *Abba* once, and the author believes it is possible to get “behind” the text and say the Greek word *pater* camouflages the other references. The author is getting “behind” the

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text to know more about Jesus than the text actually states.

My complaint is not with what the author does, but with his condemnation of others who try to get “behind” the text. Scholars must do all they can to get “behind” the text, otherwise the Scriptures become an endless list of puzzles. Why do women have to have their heads covered because of the angels (1 Cor. 11:10)? Are followers of Jesus really supposed to do everything the scribes and Pharisees teach (Matt. 23:1-3)? Did Jesus really declare “all foods clean” (Mark 7:19)? Should one always eat whatever food is provided (Luke 10:7; 1 Cor. 10:25)? Scholars must use all the information available from antiquity, epigraphic and material, and do everything possible to understand the text.<sup>5</sup>

One disappointing aspect of this book is that it rarely addresses the teachings of Jesus that most directly challenge contemporary North American Adventist viewpoints. Where are Jesus’ words that undermine the preeminence of

consumerism, or the need to advocate the justice that might make the need for gated communities obsolete? Where are the warnings of how honoring of dead prophets can be used abusively (Matt. 23:27-32)?

Where are warnings against the troublesome issues of hierarchy, in which some are considered to hold more authority simply because of office or position (Matt. 23:8-12)? Where are the words of Jesus that point out the confusion that comes from considering correct belief as more important than selfless living? What would it mean for Adventism to take seriously the statement of Jesus that practicing justice is even more important than tithing?

The reason I had hoped for a book about Jesus—instead of another book about Christ—is articulated by Harold Bloom, who has argued that American religion is gnostic, representing a complete dualistic division between the body and the soul. He claims that American religion assumes that what one “believes” in one’s head is the important thing about being religious, no matter how one lives. According to him, American religion equates a personal relationship with God with true religion.<sup>6</sup>

Much of this book could be used to prove that Bloom’s hypothesis is essentially accurate in describing popular Adventism. For a book about *The Essential Jesus*, there is too little interest in the practical teachings of Jesus that make a difference when one walks out of the church door on a Sabbath morning. However well the book is written, too much is devoted to stuff one only thinks about while sitting in church: Old Testament texts that predict the coming Messiah, the virgin birth, the mystery of the incarnation, the judgment and its heavenly account-

ing procedures, the applications of blood in the Most Holy Place of the heavenly temple, and so forth.

These are churchly doctrines about Christ—Christology—to be distinguished from the teachings of Jesus. Jesus taught things that make a difference in how you live when you walk out of the church on a Sabbath morning: “Feed the hungry”; “Call no person your spiritual authority”; “Watch the grass grow”; “Keep your prayers short”; “Love people who despise you.”

## Notes and References

1. See the book by John Dominic Crossan with the same main title, *The Essential Jesus: What Jesus Really Taught* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).
2. An example of special pleading in this book gives one of the proofs of Jesus’ divinity as the number martyrs who have

died for the faith. Although it is true that an inconsequential Jew could not have aroused the devotion of so many Christians, one must also recognize how many Palestinians—and how many Al Qaeda fighters—have been willing to die for their own causes. My argument is not to diminish the role of Jesus, but to help readers hear the special pleading that makes Christian witness sound duplicitous when it allows for itself what it does not allow for others.

3. The difference between “fact” and “faith” becomes clear when used on a different religion. To which category does the statement, “Mohammed lived in the sixth and seventh centuries of the Christian era” belong? Now try, “Mohammed is God’s Prophet.” The first is a statement of fact; the second is a statement of faith. These statements illustrate the difference between the “historical Mohammed” and the “Mohammed of faith.”

4. Careful Jesus scholarship is urgently needed in the interconnected world of the third millennium, when religion is such a divisive force in a heavily armed world. Christians need to be willing to apply to their own documents and traditions the same critical scholarship that they apply to the

religions of others. For example, Islam teaches that the Koran is verbally inspired and is exactly the same in today’s published text as it was when delivered to Mohammed. However, Koranic scholars disagree with this doctrine and can demonstrate that early manuscripts differ from the published versions. Islamic scholarship shows that the Islamic doctrine is not supported by the historical data. Christians face analogous issues.

5. The author should have depended not only on Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1973): 1:62-63; and Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1998), 5 (as noted on page 149), but also on the persuasive rebuttal to Jeremias by James Barr, “Abba Isn’t Daddy,” *JTS* 39 (1988): 28-47.

6. *The American Religion* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

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# A Gracious Exchange within the Historical Jesus Debate

Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright. *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*. San Francisco: Harper, 1999.

Reviewed by Gary Chartier

**T**he *Meaning of Jesus* is a dialogue between two New Testament scholars that focuses primarily, though not exclusively, on the historical figure of Jesus. The authors irenically articulate and defend their respective accounts of who Jesus was, what he did, how he understood himself, how he was born, why he died, what became of him after his death, what we can expect from him in the future, and what he means to us today. They also explain

how they believe we should reach historical conclusions about him. The book is a well-written and engaging introduction to the contemporary historical study

of Jesus by scholars who are both friends and fellow Christians.

To understand *The Meaning of Jesus* and its context, it may be useful to begin with an overview

of the development of modern Christian thinking about Jesus as a figure of history.

It is a commonplace that Jewish faith and Christian faith are historical, not only in the sense that they have developed over time, but also in the sense that they concern themselves with historical events. Jews and Christians have characteristically believed that God does things in history, that divine action changes both our understanding of the human situation and the human situation itself.

