

CHAPTER TWO

The Amazing Adventures of Joshua the Anointed

If Jesus died for my paltry sins, he overreacted.

—Matt Decatur

Marketing the Messiah

Thomas Jefferson once described the philosophy of Jesus as “the most sublime and benevolent” ever heard by man, and it’s hard to argue with that. Even snarky skeptics have to admit that Western Civilization has benefited from his wisdom.

Where we get into trouble, of course, is when certain folks (and you know who you are) take perfectly good ideas and harden them into dogmas that treat legends as history and metaphors as fact. As kids, we can gain insight from *Aesop’s Fables*. But as adults, do we really want to convince ourselves that a fox actually bitched about sour grapes? You don’t eradicate smallpox or land on the moon with that mentality.

Even worse is when the same folks who swear by every word of the Scripture manage to ignore so much of it. Attitudes completely at odds with what Jesus talked about somehow get his imprimatur. It’s false advertising and it has been going on for a couple thousand years now.

That’s not to say there isn’t plenty to learn from Scripture. We don’t want to throw the baby Jesus out with the holy bathwater. But when politically-active religion junkies use this stuff in an assault on history, science, personal freedom, and common sense, the rest of us need a little ammo to fire back. So, here it goes...

What’s in a Name?

As any Hollywood mogul knows, if you’re in the business of getting attention you need a marquee name. So, Dwane Johnson becomes The Rock and Stefani Germanotta becomes Lady Gaga. Even popes don’t use their birth names. The late John Paul II was born Karol Józef Wojtyła, which was

hard to spell and even harder to pronounce. From the earliest days, God's top pitchmen have known the importance of name recognition.

In the oldest manuscripts, the New Testament says Jesus of Nazareth was actually born *Yeshu*, which translates to "Joshua." This was a problem. For Jews, Joshua was already a household name. He fought the battle of Jericho under Moses. Well, just as the Screen Actors Guild won't allow two actors to join under the same name, Christian copyists wanted to distinguish the Hebrew Bible's Joshua from their new messiah. So, they translated the latter's name as Jesus. It's probably just as well. Mexico would lose some of its charm if it were full of guys named Josh.

As for Jesus' last name, it's not like his parents got mail addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Christ. Technically speaking, Jesus was *the* Christ—the English word for the Latin word for the Greek word for the Hebrew word for "messiah." It meant "the anointed one." Kings and holy men were anointed upon assuming office with oils poured onto their heads. As Israel's hoped-for warrior prince was re-imagined into a divine wonderworker, "the anointed one" became "The Anointed One." A messiah became *The Messiah*. You'd think the guy could walk on water.

Jesus and the Four Christs

Today, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are regarded by most as the official records of Jesus' life. Of the many versions of the Jesus story written in the early centuries, these are the only four that made it through the 400-year sifting process of popular acceptance and Church approval—giving us a narrow sliver of what Christianity once was. And each Gospel presents a distinct image of Jesus aimed at a specific audience. As mentioned, the writers never met him, and we have no independent account of the events of his life by non-Christians living at the time.

It also helps to remember that these authors were evangelists—religious door-to-door salesmen. They weren't writing newspaper reports of events they witnessed. They were scripting infomercials based on reports that came to them through word-of-mouth... eh, that is, Oral Tradition. (That sounds better than rumor.)

The Gospel of Mark—Jesus the Folk Healer

The most creative of the four Gospel writers was the man who produced his account first—the author of Mark. He wrote it around AD 70, but scholars don't know who he was or if he even lived in Palestine. Geographical errors in his stories suggest he didn't know the region all that well.

The year 70 was not a happy time in Jerusalem, to say the least. The Romans had ended a four-year Jewish rebellion by sacking the city and destroying the great Temple, thus ending Jewish control. It was a historic disaster. The Gospel of Mark may be a product of that event; a bit of hope in a dark time.

But the most remarkable thing about this book is how unremarkable Jesus is. It's the least fantastical of the Gospels. There's no miraculous birth story. Jesus does perform miracles, but in Mark he's mostly a wandering sage and healer from Nazareth.

As I said, Mark depends a lot on the *Septuagint*—specifically, passages from the books of *Psalms*, *Isaiah* and *Wisdom*. Mark also borrows ideas from Old Testament tales about Elijah and Elisha, a mentor-student pair of prophets whose stories included oldies but goodies like faith healing and raising the dead.

The intended audience for Mark was country bumpkins—the poor and uneducated. The folks who could really use a savior. Mark's Jesus worked like a down-to-earth folk healer; a man with the common touch. The kind of guy you'd like to have a beer with, or at least a water-to-wine cooler.

The Gospel of Matthew—Jesus the King

If Mark pitched to the country cousins, Matthew went for the city slickers. His account was meant to impress sophisticated urban Jews, and it wouldn't do to cast Jesus as an itinerant preacher with a bag of tricks. Matthew's readership cared about social rank, so Jesus had to be a king. To that end, Matt adds a preamble to Mark and opens by giving Jesus a royal bloodline stemming back to Abraham, David, and Solomon. Jesus is portrayed as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy—something educated Jews knew well. And Matthew doesn't shrink from taking verses out of context or bending their original meaning to come up with those fulfillments.

This Gospel is the most Jewish because it so frequently cites the Hebrew Bible. But it was also the favorite of the early Catholic Church. While Mark's account begins with Jesus' baptism, Matt does it one better by starting with his birth. It's the Gospel of Matthew that gives us the Star of Bethlehem story to establish Jesus as divine from the get-go.

The Gospel of Luke—Converting the Gentiles

The author of Luke was a physician and probably a converted Gentile. He was interested in promoting his faith to non-Jews. So, he doesn't try to tie Jesus to Hebrew Bible verses because Gentile audiences wouldn't know them. If Matthew's messiah was corned beef on rye, Luke's was ham on

white with mayo. And the author admits right up front that his entire Gospel is second-hand information.

If Matthew established that Jesus was special from day one, the author of Luke, writing years if not decades later, and also basing his story on Mark, had to show that Jesus was special *before* day one. Matthew started his Jesus genealogy with Abraham, so Luke begins with Adam. Luke also tells the story of angels announcing Jesus' birth, and of John the Baptist leaping for joy in his mother's womb when she meets up with the pregnant Mary.

Luke is also aimed at the pundits and opinion-makers of ancient Rome, so the book emphasizes Christ's relevance to current events, along with a concern for the poor, for women, and for everyone else. Luke was written sometime after AD 80, by which time Christians started concentrating on pagan recruits because most Jews seemed content with the religion they had.

The Gospel of John—Jesus the Cosmic Savior

Alright then. Mark begins with Jesus' baptism, Matthew with his birth, and Luke with a genealogy going back to Adam. The author of John tops this by making Jesus eternal—a cohort of God himself. “The uncreated Creator.” By John's time, around AD 100, the image of Jesus had evolved into ever more grand and mystical forms—from the roving healer of Galilee to God incarnate. Consequently, it was no longer his teachings you were supposed to obsess over—it was *him*. Jesus was now your be-all and end-all, soup-to-nuts, everything but the kitchen sink, plus the kitchen sink, plus the jacuzzi, the YMCA swimming pool, and the Mediterranean Sea. You couldn't dwell on him enough.

The Gospel of John begins by referring to Jesus as the *logos*—a Greek word meaning “the word.” But this term got saddled with many interpretations. Some saw the *logos* as the great ordering principle of the universe. For John that meant Jesus because, for him, Jesus was the governing force of the cosmos.

The Gospel of John is spiritual, abstract, and pretty woo-woo. You get the feeling the writer would have been comfortable sitting on the floor of a college dorm around 3 a.m., twisting up a fatty and having one of those conversations about how “the whole universe could be, like, a dust speck on the fingernail of some giant super-being. Or maybe everything is just vibrations in the... wait, what are we talkin' about? Oh, yeah. The universe.” That's kind of where John's head was at.

Among the Gospels, John is the odd man out. Because the first three Gospels are somewhat similar, they're called the Synoptic Gospels (*optic* = look, *syn* = alike), and they clash with John time and again. Example: the

Synoptic Gospels have Jesus on his mission for about a year before he's crucified, while John's author puts him on the road for three. John's Jesus makes several trips to Jerusalem, not just one as with the others. His Jesus is always in control and never expresses any doubt about who he is or what he's doing, unlike the more human Jesus in Mark. You could call John's account revisionist history, if any of this was actual history.

To his credit, the author of John does come up with many poetic passages, some so compelling that even sign painters at NASCAR rallies invoke them. The favorite is *John 3:16*...

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that
whoever believes in him shall not die but have eternal life.

It's a beautiful verse, and you can understand its appeal. But there's a lot more than this to the story of God's comeback tour.

While the Gospels are now the official accounts, there were originally many more Jesus stories kicking around the ancient world. One of the most popular was *The Infancy Gospel of James*, discovered in 1945, which claims Jesus was born in a cave. At the moment of birth, it says, the entire world froze—even birds hovered motionless in the air. Then a midwife rushed out of the cave and told a woman, Salome, that a virgin had just given birth. Dubious, Salome entered the cave and rather unceremoniously inserted her hand into Mary's vagina to see if this was true—and her hand was burned off! Yikes. These and other fascinating stories, including anecdotes of Jesus killing children, were purged from the authorized story collections, and you can kind of see why. They weren't great recruitment tools. But they did exist.

The New Testament

From the start, the Christian faith had to pull a neat trick. It was a very new take on some very old ideas. It sounds like every TV executive's dream—something fresh and new that's exactly like last year's hit. And, like a lot of what ends up in primetime, Christianity benefited from being a spin-off.

Virgin Birth

Every event in the life of Jesus was deemed so significant that it was given a formal title by the Church. The first such event is when the archangel Gabriel announces to the Virgin Mary that she's about to give birth to the Messiah. It's a moment aptly entitled *The Annunciation*.

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will
be called the Son of the Most High...and of his kingdom
there will be no end.” [Luke 1:31-33]

This is a high bar for any kid. But Mary isn't thrilled with the news despite being spared the hassle of picking out a baby name. At this point she's still only engaged to Joseph, and she's a virgin. Yet here's Gabriel already talking babies. What will everyone think? What will *Joseph* think? If your fiancée was a virgin and got pregnant, and told you it was a miracle, would you roll with that or would you go looking for this “Holy Spirit” guy with a shotgun?

Well, maybe there's more myth than fact to this virgin birth claim. It turns out the concept is borrowed, rather dubiously, from the Hebrew Bible. Matthew even points this out.

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel.” [Matt 1:23]

This quote comes from *Isaiah 7:14* in a story set around 725 BC, when the prophet Isaiah warns the king of Israel that, before this predicted child grows old enough to know good from evil, Israel will be wiped out by Assyria. It had nothing to do with predicting Jesus. The name Emmanuel is a good hint. What's more, the word translated from the Hebrew as “virgin” technically means “young woman.” The specific word for a virgin isn't used here. No virgin is prophesized so no miracle is necessary.

If you're a Catholic, there's also the question of why there was no equally prominent “Annunciation” for when Mary was born. According to Church lore, she was also the product of a virgin birth: The Immaculate Conception. Contrary to popular belief, the term refers to the conception of Mary, not Jesus. That event should have been a clue that something special was up with this family. But no big deal was made about it. Sounds more like myth than history, doesn't it?

There are several more problems with the virgin birth idea anyway. For one, it'll get you an “F” in biology. Second, it means that even abstinence is no guarantee against teenage pregnancy. Third, virgin birth is just a raw deal. The pain of childbirth without the joys of sex? Who thought this was a good idea? Probably not a woman.

What's more, Jewish tradition didn't require that the Messiah be born to a virgin at all. Impregnating mortal women was something Zeus did, not Yahweh. Jews expected a king to be sent *by* God. He wasn't supposed to *be* God. Again, we see the influence of Greek culture on Christianity. God is

imagined in human form and is born to a mortal woman. This may be one reason why the new religion didn't sit as well with devout Jews as it did with Gentiles. Christianity is, in many ways, a Greek religion.

The Annunciation raises yet another question. Why should God go through the machinations of being born into this world at all when, in the Hebrew Bible, he appeared as a human *three times* with no special fuss? He walked in Eden, lunched with Abraham before Sodom and Gomorrah got snuffed, and wrestled with Jacob in a cave before Jacob was renamed "Israel." Now, suddenly, God needs virgin births and angels and miracle stars and whatnot to make a grand entrance. Did he have an entourage plucking the blue M&Ms from his stash, too?

The orthodox explanation is that these earlier appearances were just that—appearances. God didn't come as a flesh-and-blood man the way he did as Jesus. How they know this is a mystery. But if God was only an image, it didn't stop him from sharing a veal lunch with Abraham. I'm not kidding. Check out *Genesis 18*.

God's Family Tree

To prove Jesus had a royal pedigree, both Matthew and Luke offer a genealogy of Christ's bloodline. But there are two problems here. First, Matthew and Luke's family lines don't match—they disagree on who Joseph's father was. Second, both genealogies end with Joseph, who wasn't the father of Jesus if you believe the virgin birth story. Jesus had none of Joseph's DNA, which makes the genealogies basically moot.

To get around this problem, folklore claims that Mary was also descended from the same noble bloodline as Joseph. But this is an add-on. Nobody saw fit to include it in the Bible.

The Road to Bethlehem

"But you Bethlehem of Judea shall be the birth place of the savior..."

[Micah 5:2]

Jesus' biographers have another predicament. Mark establishes that Jesus is from Nazareth, a city in the province of Galilee. But the Hebrew Bible never mentions Nazareth and instead requires that the Messiah be born in Bethlehem—the city of David—some seventy miles away. What to do?

Luke comes up with a solution. The author claims Emperor Augustus decided to take a census of the Roman Empire for the purpose of a tax and this required that everyone return to their place of birth to be counted.

The idea is nuts. Yes, the Romans did take the occasional census, but not at the time of Jesus' birth and certainly not with the requirement that everyone drag their tails back to their home town. That's insanely impractical; the roads would have been glutted and the entire economy disrupted. Not surprisingly, there are no records of such a mass migration. But it's a whopper that gets Joseph and a very pregnant Mary on the road to Bethlehem, so stop looking for evidence or common sense.