

What Jesus Didn't Say



an interview with author Gerd Lüdemann

The Fourth R: What led you to write a book focusing exclusively on sayings that cannot credibly be assigned to Jesus?

Gerd Lüdemann: First, because many of these sayings have played a central role in defining Christianity and are therefore widely cited and taken at face value, they tend to be thought immune to critical analysis. Second, it needs to be iterated and reiterated that the inauthentic sayings greatly outnumber the authentic ones—if only to remind people that much of the New Testament record is fiction. Third, while the criteria for authenticity have become reasonably familiar to many, the arguments against authenticity have been neither clearly canvassed nor stringently applied. In short, these inauthentic sayings have been unduly neglected, and I thought it was high time to take a careful look at the subject.

4R: To what degree did this book grow out of *Jesus After 2000 Years*, the book you published in 2001 that was essentially your personal version of *The Five Gospels*?

GL: In that volume, as the subtitle indicates, my primary aim was to determine “what Jesus really said and did.” Indirectly, I suppose, the present book is to some degree the other side of the coin, inasmuch as it focuses on what he did *not* say.

4R: Another question along the same line: What role, if any, did your later volume, *Intolerance and the Gospel* play in your decision to examine what Jesus didn't say?

GL: Indeed the one did, though indirectly, lead to the other. In that study of the pseudonymous and pseudepigraphical epistles I identified a great many false sayings that early Christian writers used against one another in order to establish their authority or that of other church leaders. Therefore, it was a natural sequel to take a separate look at the false sayings found in the gospels as well as their settings.

4R: Once the idea for this book began to take shape in your mind, did working on it require a good deal of further study and research, or did the text more or less write itself?

GL: In the big book (*Jesus After 2000 Years*) I had pretty much determined the extent of the false sayings. But then I had to rethink and rewrite most of the text because the false sayings deserved a study in their own right and a special look into their settings.

4R: Why do you think it is important to demonstrate something that most scholars and well-informed non-specialists are already pretty certain of—namely, that Jesus didn't really say most of the things that are attributed to him?

GL: Demonstrating the degree of authorial invention uncovers the considerable amount of forgery to be found in the texts of the New Testament, and thus undermines the almost unlimited authority that is commonly accorded them. In doing gospel studies we should always be suspicious, remembering that the text in front of us has gone through the hands of “Christian authors” who, supposedly inspired by the Holy Spirit, edited and falsified large parts of the four gospels. Only by subjecting their work to strict canons of historical criticism will we be able to catch a few glimpses of the real Jesus.

4R: It seems to me that this new book is an integral part of your ongoing work. Do you agree?

GL: Indeed I do.

4R: How would you characterize that work, then? What is at the center of it—or to use a favorite metaphor of yours, what is the golden thread that runs through it? Is it perhaps the business of applying the historical-critical method to Scriptural exegesis?

GL: I would add only one word to that: it the business of *fully* applying the historical-critical method to Scriptural exegesis.

4R: That being so, it would seem as if you and the Jesus Seminar are pretty much on the same page: like *The Fourth R* you are trying to promote religious literacy; and as previously noted, your *Jesus After 2000 Years* is a close parallel to *The Five Gospels*.

GL: Yes, and even before I joined Westar, I was very grateful and excited when in 1994 I found out that a group of New Testament scholars in North America was both asking and producing honest answers to the same questions that I have been asking since my student days. Now, after more than a decade as a Fellow, after having Polebridge publish several of my books, and especially since I have retired to Nashville, I feel even more at home.

4R: To what degree did you consciously adopt a contentious attitude when in 1998 you placed your “Letter to Jesus” at the beginning of *The Great Deception*? Is it perhaps significant that the subtitle of that book—*What Jesus Really Said and Did*—seems to have an echo in your present title.

GL: My purpose in placing the letter to Jesus at the beginning of my book was to underline the point that, within a few decades of Jesus’ death, the New Testament traditions had already falsified his original voice. In my letter I confronted “Jesus” with this deplorable fact and explained why, in view of this, no thinking person could remain a traditional Christian. Because of their lack of accurate information, their different audiences, and their diverse personal theological agendas, Paul and the several evangelists created a number of different “Jesuses” as well as often conflicting versions of his message.

Along this line, let me note two other things. First, in the course of writing the present book I discovered that the number of invented sayings is greater than I had previously recognized, and that in them we encounter a Christianity that “spins” and distorts whatever does not fit the preconceived mold. I fear it is an uncritical commitment to belief in the risen Christ that has unfortunately lifted the faith tradition out of the human world to which it belongs. Second, this new book of mine undertakes, for what I believe is the first time, to emphasize the full extent of New Testament invention by pointing to the last book of the Bible as yet another source of fictitious sayings attributed to Jesus—or rather to the risen Christ. Heretofore the existence of inauthentic sayings has been deduced from the contents of the gospels, together with structural and rhetorical considerations. Now we can see that the first three chapters of Revelation further certify what scholars have long concluded: that the invention of sayings to be put into Jesus’ mouth went on for some while after the gospels had been written.

4R: That letter to Jesus, as it turned out, led to a hornet’s nest of professional and personal problems for you. Could

you describe them briefly and comment on how they affected your career?

GL: The University of Göttingen at first attempted to fire me, arguing that one who professed such “heretical” views was unfit to teach students preparing for the ministry. When my status as a tenured professor raised legal barriers to that, and the expressed outrage of a number of scholars—not least among them Bob Funk and many Westar Fellows—resulted in an embarrassment to the university, I was demoted from my chair in Theology of the New Testament to that of History and Literature of Early Christianity and stripped of my right to supervise dissertations. Further, since my new chair did not carry with it an approved curriculum, nobody would be interested in studying with me because they would not earn academic credit. The result was that all my doctoral students (nine gifted scholars) left me in order to look elsewhere for a suitable advisor. Equally painful, I was professionally isolated, and since the local and national German newspapers covered the case in great detail, my wife was shunned and our four children, three of whom attended school in Göttingen and one studied law, were all but ostracized. Things got so bad that one of our daughters was told to go home and tell me that I should “shut up.”

4R: In short, the University of Göttingen tried with some success to marginalize you and your work, and I suppose that had something to do with your decision to retire to Nashville, where you formerly lived and taught.

GL: I am sad to say that you are quite correct. I will never completely understand why a great University with a long-standing and prestigious reputation like that of Göttingen would give in to the demands of the Lutheran church of Hannover.

4R: To what degree did your bad experience with the University’s insistence on the appearance of religious orthodoxy sour you on Christianity and lead you to focus on exposing its scriptural and doctrinal flaws?

GL: I must confess that I suddenly sensed hypocrisy springing up everywhere, with most of it based on orthodox doctrines that my colleagues themselves knew had long been shown to be false. I concluded that we need a second enlightenment, a commitment to a search for truth that has not decided in advance the results that it will discover. To this effort I mean to dedicate my career in retirement. **4R**

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