WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE?
Program 45
Jesus and the Authority of the Bible
by Ernest O'Neill

We had a visitor from outer space. That is, we have had a human being who has left the earth, gone out into space, way beyond where our space shots have reached, and has actually come back to tell us what is out there. Muhammad hasn't done that. Buddha hasn't done that. Confucius has not. Zoroaster hasn't. They all died like ordinary men.

However, this man died apparently like an ordinary man, then left the earth. Three days later, He came back and lived for over a month, and ate and slept with His friends in such a way that they knew He was not a ghost, but was actually a whole human being. That's the man that can tell us what this world is about, what the purpose of our lives is, and why we are alive and what the meaning of life is.

Therefore, it is very important that we know that that man really did exist. One of the reasons we can be so sure that He existed is because of the reliability of the historians who wrote about Him in the first century. They were men who have made an impression of honesty and integrity on all generations. They were men who died for the very thing they wrote about, so much did they believe in it.

They were men who were surrounded by other eye-witnesses who read their accounts of the events of this man's life and therefore, could contradict it if it had been wrong. The question we're dealing with is, "Can we be sure that what we have is what they wrote?" In other words, if this man is Jesus and the men that wrote about Him are people like Peter, John and Mark and

Paul, can we be sure what we have in our Bible is what they wrote?

That's one of the difficulties we have with Caesar's "Gallic Wars". Caesar wrote the history of the Gallic Wars about 50 B.C., but the earliest manuscript we have of those Gallic Wars is 900 A.D. That's about 1,000 years later. Now anybody could have changed that original manuscript and substituted theirs for it. In fact, ten or twelve or twenty people could have done it over a period of 1,000 years. That's what enables a myth to be created: the passage of time.

How can we be sure that what we have in our Bible is what they actually wrote? Well, there are two important factors that influence the reliability of the transmission of any history. One is the age of the manuscript. The nearer you can get to the original writing, the more likely you are to have exactly what they wrote.

So, even though Plato wrote his Republic in 400 B.C., the nearest we can get to his manuscript is one that we have of 900 A.D. That's 1300 years after he wrote the manuscript. That's a long time. So, one of the important factors in being sure that you have what the original writers wrote is the age of the manuscript that you have in your possession; what is the most ancient manuscript that you can find of this history?

The other factor is the number of manuscripts. Say there is a mistake in one manuscript. Well, if you have three manuscripts, then you can compare one against the other two. If you have twenty-five manuscripts, you can compare one against the other twenty-four. If you have 1,000 manuscripts, you can compare one against the other thousand.

You have a better chance of being able to eliminate any mistakes that the copyist made in copying from one manuscript to another

which was the habit of course, of the ancient scribes because of the lack of durability in the material they used to write on. Well, you can see in the ancient writers like Plato, Caesar, Pliny, Livy and Thucydides, you're rather limited.

Usually your most ancient manuscript is at least 1,000 years later than the original writing. Usually you're dealing with not more than seven manuscripts in the case of Plato's "Republic" or at the most, twenty in the case of Livy's history. So, you're usually dealing with relatively few manuscripts and relatively late manuscripts, usually 1,000 years after the person wrote the book.

Yet, we don't question when we read Plato, Tacitus, Caesar, Livy, Pliny, Thucydides, Lucretius, Euripides or Aristotle that we are reading exactly what they wrote. We don't question that seven to twenty manuscripts is good enough for us. Even if they're 1,000 years after the book was originally written, yet we can be sure that what we have is what they wrote.

What is the situation with the New Testament? Is it as good as that? It is beyond that, beyond that in every way. How many manuscripts do we have of the New Testament? We have 4,000! Over 4,000 Greek manuscripts, i.e., manuscripts that were written before 1,000 A.D. Over 4,000 of them. So, if there is a mistake in one, we can compare it against 3,999 others.

We have a magnificent opportunity to be sure that almost every dot and every comma, almost the spelling of every word is exactly the way Mark originally wrote it, or Luke originally wrote it, or Matthew, or Paul or John or James.

But what is the age of these manuscripts? Are they as near as, say, Livy's manuscript is to his writing, maybe 1,000 years? Or as

Plato's is to his, maybe 1200 years? What is the oldest manuscript we have of the New Testament?

Believe it or not, if you go to the Manchester University library, you will find part of the gospel of John that is dated (hold your breath) not 1,000 years after John wrote the book -- not 900 years; not 800 years, like Pliny; not 800 years like Suetonius; not 1500 years like Euripides; not even 400 years; not 300 years; not 200 years, but 130 years after John wrote the gospel, the historical record of Jesus' life. We have a piece of manuscript in the University Library at Manchester dated 130 A.D.

Do we have any others? Yes. If you go to the British Museum, on one side you will see the Codex Alexandrinus, and on the other side, you will see the Codex Sinaiticus manuscripts that are dated about 350 and 400 A.D., a bare 350 or 400 years after the New Testament was written. We have 4,000 other manuscripts of similar age to reinforce in us the conviction that when we read the New Testament account of Jesus' life we are reading what the first century eye-witnesses actually wrote.

Indeed, if you reject the manuscript evidence for the New Testament, you have to reject belief in Julius Caesar, Plato, Suetonius, Homer or in any of the great leaders of the past. You have to say that black is white. You have to say that history does not exist. You have to do that if you reject the reliability of the New Testament history of Jesus' life.

It is surpassing every other history of those days. It is more reliable than any other history of an ancient figure. It is reinforced not only by the reliability of the original writers, but it is reinforced a thousand fold by the exceptional manuscript evidence that we have. We have over 4,000 ancient manuscripts of which the earliest is a bare twenty-five or thirty years after John wrote the first historical record called the Gospel of John.

Can you believe that Jesus is a historical figure? If you don't believe He is a historical figure, you don't believe in history. His historicity is more clearly established than any other figure of His time. Yes, Jesus lived, spoke and died. He got up from being dead in the same way that history said He did.