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Teaching Jesus in Public Schools: A Proposed Draft of Guidelines

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As Americans seek coexistence in this theologically diverse society, public schools are a special epicenter of potential conflict. Teachers must strike that crucial balance between acting as public employees within the Constitution's Establishment Clause requirements while also giving their students the intellectual tools to explore and maximize their Free Exercise Clause rights.

The goal of this document is to spark a conversation about how best to cover one of the most sensitive topics that divide Americans: Jesus. It proposes answers to the following questions:

- *Can a history class study Jesus?*
- *Did the Jews fail to recognize Jesus as the messiah?*
- *Who was Peter?*
- *Is there proof that Jesus existed?*
- *Did the Jews kill Jesus?*
- *Who was Paul?*
- *What are the historical sources of information about Jesus?*
- *Is Mel Gibson's movie an accurate historical dramatization of Jesus?*
- *Should the Shroud of Turin be discussed?*
- *Is it appropriate to read New Testament texts?*
- *Is The Da Vinci Code a useful source of information about Jesus?*
- *Should the Gospel of Judas be discussed?*
- *What can we conclude about Jesus?*
- *Did Jesus actually die on the cross?*
- *Was Jesus ever in America?*
- *How can Jesus be studied neutrally if he is so closely tied to supernatural events?*
- *How should the Christmas account be taught?*
- *How does the Book of Revelation fit into a study of Jesus?*
- *Would it be best just to say that Jesus preached a message of love?*
- *Who was Mary?*

People reading this should come up with their own ideas and improvements. The answers below are there to encourage modification, revision, and, hopefully, further conversation. Before proceeding, however, a few quick comments are in order.

First, schools teach findings of the academic disciplines, especially as studied in the Western academy. Everything discussed below is based on a consensus among scholars. Having said that, though, it is important to keep in mind that scholarship exists in both religious institutions and public/non-

theological private universities. This document considers academic consensus to be not just agreement within one or the other but between the two.

Second, this document anticipates a depth of study that, as a practical matter, most teachers will never face. However, just in the course of students' inquisitiveness, more detailed questions may arise. This document's goal is to prepare for both typical and atypical classroom scenarios. It can also serve as a guide to any teacher planning more detailed instruction.

Finally, this document does not try to allocate particular content to particular classes or grade levels. A younger student may have a more complicated question, and an older student may require more remedial teaching. Likewise, while one would expect these issues to arise mostly in a history class, they may appear elsewhere. Thus this document strives for applicability in any instructional setting.

1. CAN A HISTORY CLASS STUDY JESUS?

Yes. Jesus of Nazareth was a historical figure who lived at a particular time and place, so historians and history students can study him to the extent that there is historical evidence available.

2. IS THERE PROOF THAT JESUS EXISTED?

The concept of “proof” is a technical one and properly belongs within specific academic disciplines, especially mathematics. Historians by definition live after the events they are studying and must rely on certain tools such as textual and archeological evidence to make conclusions about the past. Sometimes, historians will come to very strong conclusions about the factuality of past events based on this evidence. However, such conclusions are not really analogous to deriving a formal proof.

In the case of Jesus, most historians in the Western academy who have studied him feel quite comfortable believing that he existed. Even those who argue that we do not know much about him will still believe he existed on the basis of later historical events. For instance, documents surviving from 50-60 CE (about twenty to thirty years after Jesus’ lifetime) provide robust evidence that communities of people in various parts of the Roman Empire revered Jesus. Most historians agree that such groups’ existence would be inexplicable without a real person named Jesus having also existed. Furthermore, there is textual evidence for the existence of people like James, a close relative of Jesus, and some of Jesus’ companions, like John son of Zebedee and Simon Peter.

3. WHAT ARE THE HISTORICAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT JESUS?

Traditionally, Christians have considered four accounts of Jesus’ life to be scripture, and these are the so-called Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.¹ Western historians also generally believe that these four texts form the basis of historical evidence about Jesus. However, there is extensive debate about the extent to which these texts are reliable: views range from them being superb pieces of evidence to them being predominantly erroneous. There is also additional information in surviving early Christian correspondence, much of which comprises the remainder of the New Testament. Here too historians debate the accuracy of specific letters. Some have also argued that a few non-New Testament texts, such as the Gospel of Thomas, contain a degree of usable evidence about Jesus.

4. IS IT APPROPRIATE TO READ NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS?

If the teacher intends to cover Jesus in summary and only utilize secondary sources (textbooks, etc.), then this question need not be answered. However, if a more in-depth study is planned, the teacher will almost invariably need to use primary sources, and given the fact that (as discussed above) the bulk of historically useful primary sources for Jesus are also in the New Testament, then these texts would likely be assigned. There is nothing *per se* wrong with this since any text can be used for legitimate historical research regardless of whether a religion has adopted it as scripture.

5. WHAT CAN WE CONCLUDE ABOUT JESUS?

Historians differ widely in their understandings of Jesus’ life. However, the following points enjoy a wide array of support.

¹ They are “so-called” because, as with many other texts through history, they do not have a title in today’s sense. Rather there are traditions which attribute these four authors to these texts, and historically people have used those names as shorthand references for the texts themselves. However, there is disagreement about whether these four people actually wrote the texts.

- He was a Jew and lived in a Jewish culture that was politically controlled by and, to some extent, influenced by Roman society.
- He lived at least for awhile in Nazareth, a small town in the Roman province of Galilee (modern day northern Israel).
- At least near the end of his life, he spent time traveling, likely within Galilee but perhaps elsewhere as well. In the course of his travels, he engaged in public speaking and promoted some kind of a theological message.
- He had some followers, some of whom appear to have also been his traveling companions.
- While away from his home base of Galilee c. 30 CE, he was arrested and sentenced to death during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which was in the Roman province of Judea (modern day southern Israel).

This is certainly a very skeletal outline, but historians start to differ considerably on issues of greater detail. The following questions could receive significantly divergent answers depending on which historian is asked.

- Did he believe that the end times were near, and, if so, what specifically did he think would happen?
- What was his attitude toward the Roman control of his homeland?
- To which of the known 1st Century Jewish branches (the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, etc.) was he most closely aligned?
- To what extent did he adopt Greco-Roman philosophy/theology?
- Did he see himself as having a supernatural role? If so, of what type: as a prophet, or as someone triggering the end times, or as an incarnation of God, or as something else?
- Did he feel that he had the power to perform miracles, and, if so, what did he think was the purpose of that power?
- What did he believe about the local socio-economic environment?
- What were his views on gender?

These are all open questions and should probably be left for collegiate-level coursework unless the teacher intends to devote a substantial amount of time to studying Jesus.

6. HOW CAN JESUS BE STUDIED NEUTRALLY IF HE IS SO CLOSELY TIED TO SUPERNATURAL EVENTS?

This is an important question and has bearing far beyond just the study of Jesus. In the course of research, historians regularly must review texts that purport to be describing various supernatural phenomena. They differ among themselves about how best to approach these cases.

Some commit themselves to what is often called “methodological naturalism,” which is the practice of only making findings that presuppose natural causes. These historians, when reading a description of a supernatural event, either will conclude that it actually had a natural explanation of some type or will just refrain from making a conclusion on the grounds that such issues fall outside the formal discipline of history. Other historians reject methodological naturalism and study purported supernatural and purported natural events in much the same way because they see both as equally spatiotemporal and thus equally able to be researched historically. Such historians thus feel that it can be appropriate to conclude that a particular purported supernatural event either was or was not actually supernatural.

However, as a practical matter, a teacher need not reach a verdict on the merits of methodological naturalism before teaching about Jesus. This is because historians are not in consensus about any of the supernatural events in the early texts of Jesus' life (his birth, miracles, transfiguration, resurrection, ascension, etc.). On any particular one of these, some historians believe in it; some disbelieve or feel it had a natural explanation; and others refrain from answering on the grounds of methodological naturalism. Thus a teacher can simply say that different people have come to different views on these issues and then perhaps briefly lay out the three main conclusions that a budding historian can draw: (a) a particular supernatural event did not happen, (b) a particular supernatural event did happen, or (c) such a question cannot be answered using historical research methods.

7. WOULD IT BE BEST JUST TO SAY THAT JESUS PREACHED A MESSAGE OF LOVE?

No. There are some who believe that Jesus preached a message of fairly generic love and good will toward humanity. Regardless of the merits of this view historically, it should not be seen as a compromise position when teaching students. Other historians believe that Jesus' views were actually quite violent and based on the belief that a period of great destruction at the end times was imminent. Almost any comment about the substance of Jesus' beliefs and teachings begins to tread onto controversial territory among historians. The image of Jesus as a widely-acceptable loving person may or may not be historically accurate, but any summary statement from a teacher to that effect would constitute an overly definitive conclusion about disputed historical questions.

8. DID THE JEWS FAIL TO RECOGNIZE JESUS AS THE MESSIAH?

This is a complicated question that must be answered in parts. First, the word "messiah" roughly means "the anointed one" and refers to someone who is appointed for a special purpose. Today, we refer to the term "messianism" as the belief that a particular person will come in the future and have significant supernatural impact on the world (perhaps by ending it, transforming it, or restoring it to a former perfection). As a general proposition, various religions at various times have embraced forms of messianism.

During Jesus' day, some but not all Jews were messianists. However, views varied considerably about what the messiah would be like and what the messiah would be sent to accomplish. The belief was also not at all synonymous with considering the messiah to be an incarnation of God. In some models, the messiah was much more akin to a prophet or a "judge" (a warrior prophet from the Hebrew tradition).

Obviously, the question above presupposes certain conclusions about whether Jesus actually was the messiah, and while individual historians can conclude that he actually was, there is by no means a consensus among scholars on this point. There is not even a consensus about what Jesus' public statements and behaviors were, so historians debate what grounds people around him would have even had for believing or disbelieving in him as a messiah (or even having the idea cross their minds in the first place).

Finally, historians differ about the extent to which Jesus was famous. As a public speaker, he would have had some degree of local name recognition, but for Jews living beyond the east coast of the Mediterranean, most may never have heard of him during his lifetime and thus would have neither accepted nor rejected him.

9. DID THE JEWS KILL JESUS?

This is another complicated question that must be answered within a correct factual context. The Roman Empire existed as a collection of provincial territories with Rome as its epicenter. Provincial

governments varied in form considerably, and during Jesus' lifetime, the Emperor would customize the local governments based on local needs.

For instance, throughout Jesus' lifetime, we know that a quasi-indigenous strongman named Herod Antipas ruled Jesus' home province of Galilee with the Emperor's blessing. However, in Judea, where Jesus was arrested and condemned to death, the government was rather different. About twenty-five years before, Rome had tried to use the same model as in Galilee by recognizing Herod Archelaus, another quasi-indigenous strongman (who happened to be Antipas's brother), as leader. However, local unrest had been too high, so Augustus Caesar fired Archelaus and placed the province under much more direct Roman control. A Roman official would move out to the province, maintain discipline for a few years, and then be replaced. These officials had no permanent ties to the local population and would have enjoyed only limited popular legitimacy. Meanwhile, the Jews in the Judean capital of Jerusalem simultaneously maintained their own indigenous leaders through a system of temple priests and a governing body of elders called the Sanhedrin.

The relative roles and power of the Roman provincial official and the indigenous Jewish leaders is a subject of research and debate among historians and was probably rather ambiguous and nuanced even at the time. The Roman official would want to maintain firm control while also leaving as minimal a footprint as possible so that local resentment would not boil into insurrection. Meanwhile, the indigenous leaders would want to carve out as much local autonomy as possible while remaining in the Roman official's good graces. It was in this very sensitive environment that Jesus was arrested.

Thus, at one level, the question asked above is a legitimate technical question: given that we know that Jesus was sentenced to death in Judea, was this the will of the provincial authority (the Romans) or the indigenous authority (the Jews)? At a superficial level, the answer is the Romans because surely Jesus would not have been sentenced over the active objections of the Roman official at the time (Pontius Pilate) since he outranked the Jewish leaders. However, this does not answer the more substantive question: was Jesus sentenced by the Roman leadership's unilateral action, or did the Jewish leadership initiate the sentence with the Roman leadership's passive permission and logistical support? Historians have come to differing conclusions about this, and any proper discussion by a teacher would need to include a rather lengthy review of evidence about the Judean governance structure, the criminal justice system, and particular pieces of data we have about Jesus' specific circumstances. More likely, a teacher would want to defer such an inquiry for collegiate-level study.

However, there is of course a much more salient question at issue: are ethnic Jews as a whole culpable for Jesus' sentencing? To some extent, this notion comes from the Gospel of Matthew's account in which Pontius Pilate asks a crowd of Jews in Jerusalem about whether Jesus should be executed, and they reply "His blood be on us and on our children!" (27:25) implying that they wanted to assume moral responsibility for the sentence.² Historians debate the accuracy of this episode, but regardless of whether it actually occurred, most historians today would accept a series of important facts that put it in context:

- As discussed previously, many Jews would not have known about Jesus at all. Even those who did would mostly not have been involved in Jesus' arrest and sentence given that it likely occurred rather abruptly while he was far away from home.

² This quotation comes from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

- If it is true that the Roman leaders were only secondarily involved in Jesus' sentence, it still would ultimately have been the decision of the Jewish leaders rather than the general population, and even then it would have been just the Judean leaders in Jerusalem.
- The reasons for Jesus' arrest are the subject of extensive debate among historians. If he was condemned primarily at the Jewish leaders' initiative, it was not necessarily on a charge of heresy for being a false messiah. This may have been the case, but historians have explored other options as well. For instance, there is some evidence that Jesus caused a public disturbance in the temple shortly before his arrest, which might have prompted the Jewish leaders to liquidate him because they feared he could trigger insurrection, thereby focusing Rome's ire on them. Regardless, the question of the Jewish leadership's motivation is open to historical review and debate.
- All useable textual sources agree that Jesus and many of his early followers were Jews, so any Jewish support for Jesus' execution would have occurred alongside of some Jewish opposition to it.

10. IS MEL GIBSON'S MOVIE AN ACCURATE HISTORICAL DRAMATIZATION OF JESUS?

That movie, *Passion of the Christ*, depicts a particular historical reconstruction of Jesus' final days that especially tends to enjoy support within parts of Roman Catholic Christianity. However, other historians have come to differing views about various pieces of that reconstruction. Use of this or any other popular film would probably be counterproductive unless it occurred as a small piece to an extensive and in-depth historical study of Jesus.

11. IS THE DA VINCI CODE A USEFUL SOURCE OF INFORMATION ABOUT JESUS?

No. That book is a novel and largely detached from any real historical research. Many books and movies contain references to actual historical figures, but this does not guarantee that any of the information presented in them is correct.

12. DID JESUS ACTUALLY DIE ON THE CROSS?

At different times in history, some have believed that what looked to eyewitnesses like Jesus being crucified was actually something else. For instance, Docetic Christianity (an early and largely no longer existent branch of the religion) embraced the idea that since Jesus was God, he was not actually manifest in a physical body but rather projected an illusionary body. As a result, he only appeared to be physically executed. Many Muslims, meanwhile, argue that Jesus ascended directly to heaven before he was to be executed and that eyewitnesses were tricked because someone else was crucified in his place. Statements that Jesus was removed from the cross prior to being fully dead and then faked his own resurrection appearances also sporadically appear in recent conspiracy-based accounts of Christianity.

It is difficult for the historian to respond to such arguments. The earliest textual sources do not discuss such a possibility, but this is not necessarily a counterargument given that these beliefs tend to presuppose the inaccuracy of eyewitnesses' testimony. 1st Century historians thus are likely of little direct help in evaluating this question to the extent that it hinges on either a purely theological discussion of Jesus' attributes as a supernatural being or on much later revelation about Jesus that gives additional information unavailable from the textual evidence.

13. HOW SHOULD THE CHRISTMAS ACCOUNT BE TAUGHT?

Only in an in-depth study of Jesus should this issue be addressed. The earliest texts that discuss Jesus' birth are the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and there is almost no consensus among historians about

anything related to these accounts. Views range from them being specific and fairly accurate historical reports to them being pure mythology. Not even the city of Jesus' birth is a point that garners consensus since some historians argue for Bethlehem and others for Nazareth. Perhaps the one point about which everyone does agree is the death of Herod the Great and his replacement as leader of Judea by his son Herod Archelaus. This transition is pivotal to the Gospel of Matthew's account and occurred in 4 BCE.

14. WHO WAS MARY?

Most historians would likely agree with the basic proposition that Jesus had a mother named Mary. Beyond that, views begin to diverge rather quickly. This is especially true about questions regarding her sexual practices both before and after Jesus' birth. Some historians, for instance, argue that James (Jesus' close relative who is mentioned in some 1st Century texts) should best be understood as Jesus' at least half brother and Mary's biological son. Other historians would also argue that there is no reason to believe that Jesus was conceived through anything other than conventional sexual intercourse. As a result, almost anything that a teacher presents about Mary would go beyond the bounds of general academic consensus.

15. WHO WAS PETER?

This historical figure variously called Peter, Simon Peter, or Cephas will play an important role in any in-depth historical study of Jesus although, like Jesus himself, much debate revolves around reconstructing Peter's life. In general, the following points would be safe:

- He was a Jew and probably came from Galilee.
- He was a follower and traveling companion of Jesus.
- In the aftermath of Jesus' death, he had experiences that led him to believe that Jesus had returned from death and was playing some sort of a supernatural role.
- As the movement of Jesus' followers spread through the Roman Empire after Jesus' death, he was a leading figure within at least some of those communities.
- At least at one point after Jesus' death, he and Paul had disagreements about the degree to which the followers of Jesus should follow Mosaic (Jewish) law.
- He was probably dead by 70 CE although historians would not agree on any of the specific circumstances.

This of course leaves much about Peter unanswered. Perhaps the most controversial issue surrounding him is whether he founded the community of Jesus' followers in the city of Rome. This has a variety of theological implications related to him being considered the first pope. However, on this issue especially, one will find no historical consensus. Also, there are two short letters in the New Testament purporting to be his. Historians debate whether either is authentic.

16. WHO WAS PAUL?

Any study of Paul would be a welcome relief for a teacher because he is by far the figure from early Christianity about whom historians agree the most. In large part, this is because he is the earliest person to have writing survive that today historians widely accept as authentic. The New Testament contains thirteen letters that purport to be by him, and of these, historians agree that seven are truly his: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. Any teacher would be on safe ground to quote from any of these texts and represent them as Paul's real correspondence from c. 50-60 CE. Teachers, however, should refrain from assuming the authenticity of

the other six (Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus) since this is a subject of debate among historians.

To the extent that a teacher assigns Paul's letters as primary source readings, the teacher should encourage students to reach their own conclusions about their contents. Some of the positions that Paul took are very complicated and theologically technical, so historians do debate among themselves how best to interpret his intentions and underlying meaning.

17. SHOULD THE SHROUD OF TURIN BE DISCUSSED?

The Shroud of Turin is a physical artifact and, roughly speaking, is a sheet that contains blood stains taking the shape of a person who had been wrapped within it. Some have argued that it is the sheet that contained Jesus at the moment of his resurrection although others believe it to be a fake dating to over one thousand years later. A teacher should not voluntarily raise this issue. However, given that the Shroud garners some coverage in the media and Hollywood, students may ask about it. A teacher should say that while there has been formal forensic study of the artifact, in reality it does not play a role in most 1st Century historians' research into Jesus.

18. SHOULD THE GOSPEL OF JUDAS BE DISCUSSED?

The Gospel of Judas has garnered a sizable amount of press coverage due to its fairly recent discovery in the 1970s and its English translation release to the public in 2005 and 2006. As a result, some students may have questions about it.

The text must be understood in its own historical context. The term "pseudepigraphy" refers to writing that purports to have an author (because either the person's name is listed or it is a first-person narrative that would have to be coming from that specific person) but was actually written by someone else. An individual's motivation for writing pseudepigraphy can vary and range from simple fraud to production of a text comparable to writing within today's historical fiction genre. This practice was common during the three hundred or so years after Jesus, and many works survive that purport to be from Jesus' followers and even Jesus himself. This can be unsettling to a person studying Jesus for the first time, but in reality historians disagree about the authenticity of only a small percentage of texts pertaining to Jesus. Most are widely seen as either authentic or pseudepigraphical.

Historians immediately understood the Gospel of Judas to be pseudepigraphy, probably from the 2nd Century. It has no relationship to its purported author, Judas Iscariot, and has no evidentiary value for studying the life of Jesus. Historians researching the phenomenon of pseudepigraphy in the 2nd Century may find the text significant for their work, but that is a quite different issue.

19. WAS JESUS EVER IN AMERICA?

If a student asks a question like this, it is probably in reference to the Book of Mormon. The Latter Day Saints (sometimes referred to as the LDS or the Mormons) believe that through supernatural means, Joseph Smith (1805-1844) received a collection of ancient documents chronicling the history of a civilization somewhere in the Western Hemisphere. These documents, which collectively comprise the Book of Mormon, record that Jesus appeared to that civilization in the 1st Century CE shortly after his resurrection in Jerusalem.

Historians study the Book of Mormon and debate its authenticity. However, because the evidentiary review needed for this work is so distinct, it is, as a practical matter, researched separately from other

study of Jesus' life. Any teacher who explores these issues should be prepared to devote the appropriate time necessary to handle this new body of material.

20. HOW DOES THE BOOK OF REVELATION FIT INTO A STUDY OF JESUS?

The text called the Book of Revelation, sometimes also known as the Apocalypse of John, was likely written c. 65-100 CE and purports to be written by a nonspecifically-identified individual named John. Christians have traditionally classified this text as scripture. Because it enjoys prominence in popular culture beyond that of most other early Christian writings, some students may be interested in discussing it.

If classroom time is limited, a teacher should consider exploration of this text as a low priority. The document comes from a distinct apocalyptic genre, and its abundance of strong imagery and allusion requires in-depth study. A cursory reader may walk away more confused than enlightened. As a result, teachers should either devote appropriate time to the subject or just tell inquiring students that the issue is too technical for proper coverage in the class.

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