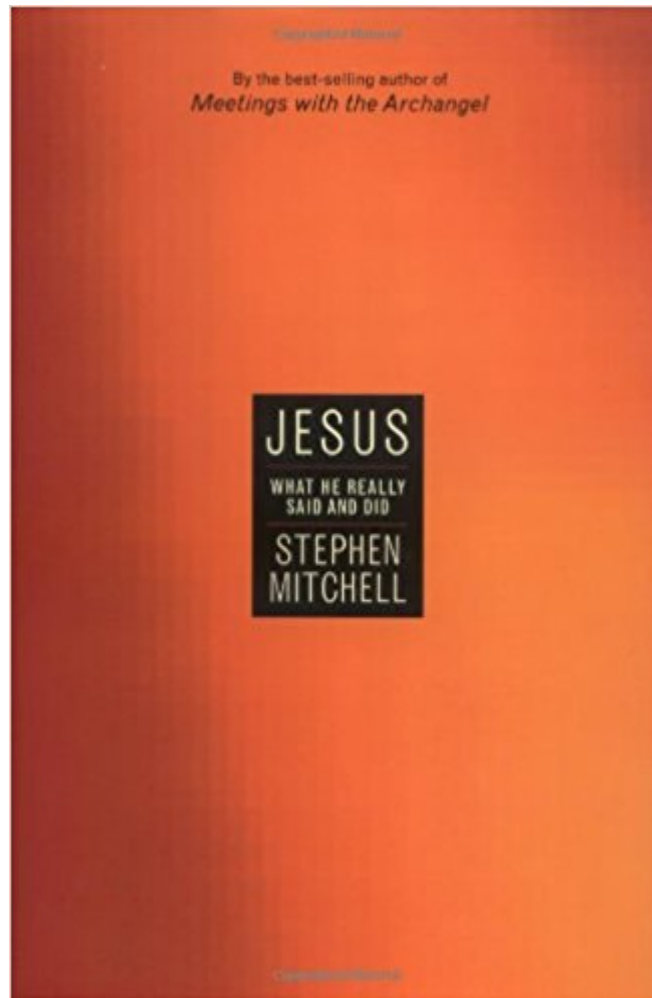




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Jesus: What He Really Said And Did



Synopsis

"The book you are about to read is a portrait of one of the most beautiful men who ever lived. He himself would probably not have considered himself beautiful or even special. He would have said that we are all beautiful, we are all special, because -- and he did say this -- we are all children of God. . . . "When you're able to look inside yourself deeply, you'll find that the teacher who taught Jesus will teach you."

Book Information

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Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

Customer Reviews

Mitchell taps into the questions of truth and faith so central to adolescence with this adaptation of his 1991 adult book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*. While his thesis that only some of the stories and only some of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are authentic will certainly engender discussion, readers from various traditions will identify with his doubts and his quests for answers. As a Jewish nine-year-old at a Protestant boarding school, the author recalls in his intimate introduction, he "didn't feel it was right to recite the [Lord's Prayer]," until an influential teacher told him that "the words of Jesus are for all people." This idea threads its way throughout the volume, as Mitchell draws parallels between Jesus and Buddha, Lao-Tzu and Sufi and Zen masters. The author's continuing struggle with biblical accounts of Jesus ("I didn't know if I believed the miracle stories, the walking on water, the loaves and fishes.... What I loved was his kindness and the beauty

of his words and feelings") led him to bring modern textual scholarship and his "spiritual intuition" to scrutinizing the Gospels for accuracy. The faithful will be relieved to see The Prodigal Son and The Good Samaritan touted as "deservedly the most famous and beloved of Jesus' parables

Gr. 8-12. Here's a book for teens with a different take on Christianity, boldly stated and without apology to the majority viewpoint. Mitchell, the author of the adult book *The Gospel According to Jesus* (1991), warns readers that those from traditional backgrounds may find this book "shocking and offensive." What arguments does he feel might disturb? For starters, that Jesus was born and remained a Jew throughout his life. That he never intended to begin a new religion. That Christians believe some things Jesus never would have believed, including that he died for anyone's sins. Drawing on his adult book, Mitchell examines the stories of the Gospels and the words of the New Testament with an eye to separating the wheat from the chaff, so to speak, attempting to pull Jesus' authentic words from later interpolations. Mitchell, who is a student of religion and a translator of sacred texts, offers an easily understood, thought-provoking journey through the Gospels and backs up his theses with scholarship. There's plenty here for religiously inclined young people to debate, but they may also feel a kinship with Mitchell and his search for religious truth that took several spiritual paths. One caveat: his plug for the self-help work of Byron Katie seems out of place and disingenuous as Mitchell wrote the introduction for her new book. Ilene CooperCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

I purchased this book expecting a fairly academic breakdown. I thought I'd find references to the work of historians, Biblical scholars, primary source documents, etc. Instead, what I got was a book full of one man's conjecture, bolstered only by a handful of poorly sourced footnotes. In the end, I learned nothing beyond what Stephen Mitchell's own opinion was. If you're hoping to decide for yourself, based on the evidence, whether or not Jesus and his claims were the real deal, look elsewhere. If you're a zen practitioner who would like to read an account that makes Jesus out to be a zen guru, this book may be written exclusively for you. It doesn't matter what you think of Jesus going in to this. If you're actually interested in critical analysis of his person, look elsewhere.

One of the editorial reviews of this book says: "his plug for the self-help work of Byron Katie seems out of place and disingenuous as Mitchell wrote the introduction for her new book." So let's clear that up right away: Stephen Mitchell is married to Byron Katie. His only "plug" for her work is a brief mention of some material available for free on her website, and it's offered as an alternative that

some people find more helpful than the meditative techniques Mitchell is discussing at that point in the text. There's nothing disingenuous going on here. Now on to the book itself. If you've read Mitchell's *The Gospel According to Jesus*, there won't be many surprises for you here. This book is a stripped-down, somewhat simplified version of that one; the text is part new, part used. The style is intended to be accessible to teenagers and young adults. Mitchell's translation of the "gospel" is included as well, and it's essentially the same text as before but with some rewriting (mostly paraphrasing). Mitchell admits in his 1991 book that he may have excluded some passages "whose light [he hadn't] been able to see," so the reader may wonder whether he's added anything since that time. Well, not much -- two or three short parables, a paraphrase of a line from the Gospel of the Nazoreans, and a couple of excerpts from the epistle of James. (I think this latter is an excellent choice; I think well of James and there's good reason to think the text is based closely on Jesus's oral teachings.) What's really new here is Mitchell's introduction, in which he tells us quite a bit about how he came to write a book about Jesus in the first place. This stuff will be of interest not only to the book's ostensible target readership but also to readers of his earlier Jesus book who want to know more about what motivated him. And among other things, he admits candidly that in selecting what he regards as the "authentic" sayings and acts of the historical Jesus, he's deliberately erring on the side of leaving things out rather than including too much. Despite some disagreements with some of his interpretations (e.g. his downplaying of the political importance of Jesus's teachings), I really like the positive features of his 1991 other book; in fact it was instrumental in getting me re-interested in the world's most famous Jewish spiritual teacher. But in my review of that book (which see), I gave it only three stars because of its questionable scholarship and its attitude of "spiritual one-upmanship" toward believing Christians (of whom, for the record, I am not one, so I'm not speaking here out of personal pique). This new book gets four stars because so much of that stuff has been toned down or omitted altogether. Oh, some of the problems are still there. The resurrection, for example, is still treated as a "legend" with no explanation about why it can't be regarded as historical. Sure, the gospels' post-resurrection stories can't be reconciled with one another (e.g. did the disciples return to the Galilee or remain in Jerusalem?), but that doesn't mean *nothing* happened. Jesus's being in some way "raised" doesn't commit anyone to a Christian theological understanding of the event. And if all Mitchell means is that Jesus's corpse didn't just get up and start walking around again -- well, I don't think that's what Christians believe either. And we're still suggesting that Jesus might have been illegitimate. For the record, folks: under Jewish law, *any* child born in wedlock is "legitimate," no matter who the biological father is. Sure, if people suspected that Joseph wasn't Jesus's father, there might well have been some unpleasant

talk. But that wouldn't make him "illegitimate

Stephen Mitchell has a special gift of sharing his enlightened vision with the world. This simplified version of The Gospel According To Jesus is a good book to have on hand as a gift.

a personal journey into Jesus and his teachings

Books like this tend to get either the love it or hate it treatment. There's very little in between. In "Jesus: What He Really Said and Did" author Stephen Mitchell uses his research, personal experience and spiritual soul searching to help convey a simple yet often missed message. While some of the details are likely to be a bit disturbing to some fundamentalist Christians, the bottom line of the book is something that is very hard to refute as that it is at the very basis of every major religion - love. Mitchell writes about his experiences with Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and Islam along with offering his personal insight into several accounts taken from the Bible itself. If the reader looks past the things that he or she finds debatable, considering they are not the key purpose and arguably not even of crucial importance in this book, he or she will surely be able to gain some interesting insight from this simple yet lesson-filled piece of literature.

It appears that many of the disappointed reviewers have overlooked the fact that this is YA lit, not adult lit. Where others see watered-down or overly-cautious language, I see accessible, age-appropriate language that takes teen sensibilities into account. No doubt many will disagree with Mitchell's views of the historical Jesus, but it's difficult, if not impossible, to say who is really 100% right on that score, so I'm not going to critique him as a historian, nor even as a theologian. I'm simply going to say that the book is well-written and that it fills a huge gap in any YA collection, because it is one of the only books available to teens which offers a perspective on Jesus of Nazareth that is neither hostile nor superstitious. I, for one, found it refreshing.

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