

THE HISTORICAL JESUS

Dr David C.F. Wright

Jesus was a real character in history.

What the historians know about Jesus is from books written about Him a few decades after His death. In the main, these are the Gospels and epistles of the New Testament but not exclusively so. There is plenty of secular and contemporary evidence.

What is definitely known is that one Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the Roman authorities in Judea about AD 30 and that He has become one of the most famous figures in all human history. He created a new faith and therefore is a theological figure. He is represented as a miracle worker and that He died as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Whatever one thinks of Jesus, and the Christian church that has grown up as a result of His life and teaching, He is a real historical person just as was, for example, Alexander the Great.

Concerning Jesus, apart from the Gospels in the New Testament, and, as we have said, there are other contemporary and secular documents which shed light on the life of Jesus and do not portray Him as a hero or as God.

The Gospels were originally written in Greek but Jesus probably taught in Aramaic. Therefore we start with a translation of what Jesus said and, from one point of view, we have to accept that there is a possibility that He was misquoted or misrepresented. Furthermore, if a biographer is writing about a great man he will almost certainly write at least a few things that some admirers will not like. The New Testament does not do this since it presents Jesus as the sinless Son of God.

Because of the importance of Jesus, people want to know more about Him than about any other famous figure. Added to this is the fact that virtually all of us have our own views of Jesus and therefore approach the subject with preconceived ideas.

The ethical teaching of Jesus has drawn praise from almost all quarters and has been described as the summary of true religion in the thinking of some great and famous men. Thomas Jefferson said that Jesus's 'system of morality was the most benevolent and sublime probably that has ever been taught.' Sir Winston Churchill regarded the Sermon on the Mount as the 'last word in ethics.' Yet Charles Dickens was scathing about the Christian Church. In his books, *Hard Times* and *Little Dorritt* he complains about Sunday and the character Mr Gradgrind thought that 'the Good Samaritan was a Bad Economist.'

Historians and secular evidence are agreed that the following facts of the life of Jesus are beyond dispute. He was born circa 4 BC near the time of the death of Herod the Great; He spent His childhood and early adult years in Nazareth; He was baptised by John the Baptist; He called disciples; He was a teacher proclaiming the Kingdom of God; He went to Jerusalem for the Passover in AD 30; He was arrested and interrogated by the Jewish authorities and executed on the orders of the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate.

To this list historians add a short list of equally secure facts about the consequences of Jesus's death. The disciples at first fled; they saw Him after His death (although not all historians will commit themselves to say in what sense) and the disciples formed a community that sought to win others to faith in Jesus as Saviour.

As to the birth of Jesus we do know, of course, that it happened. We also know from Josephus, with the added support of an ancient inscription, that Rome did take a census of people living in the Holy Land. The date of this varies slightly but that is a detail which does not alter the fact. Doubts have been expressed about the story of Herod's slaughter of male children since it is not confirmed by Josephus, but had he done so in his writings he would have been in serious trouble with the authorities. What we do know is that Herod was

ruthless and did kill people whom he regarded as a threat to his throne including his 'favourite' wife and their two sons plus another son by another wife. The flight into Egypt, and return, speak of the exodus, and Jesus's forty days being tempted in the wilderness present a parallel with the Hebrews' forty years wandering in the wilderness. The suggestion that these are contrived parallels with Moses and his time bear no credibility. Jesus did not carry stone tablets down a mountain; He did not marry as Moses did; Jesus did not rely on a brother, as Moses relied upon Aaron; Jesus did not live for 120 years and die out of sight.

Flavius Josephus was born of an aristocratic priestly Jewish family about seven years after Jesus's crucifixion. He was very well educated in Biblical law and history. In fact he wrote a vast history called the Antiquities of the Jews. He also wrote a defence of Judaism. He was never a supporter of Jesus or a convert to Christianity. In his Antiquities, he writes about Jesus and about John the Baptist. He states that Jesus was the Messiah, that He taught the truth and that after His death He was restored to life. Sceptics will say that this was inserted by Christian scribes at a later date but the suggestion of such an invention is not credible for surely such scribes would have inserted other details about Jesus to emphasise Him. The fact that there is little in Josephus about Jesus indicates it is the untouched work of a dedicated Jew. It must also be remembered that Josephus's religious views make him unbiased about Jesus.

There is more in Josephus about John the Baptist than Jesus. It is certain that Antipas executed John because his preaching could have lead to an insurrection and he feared for the safety of his realm. It was also fear that prevented Josephus writing about the slaughter of the innocents.

But the Baptist is not described in the Gospels as a miracle worker whereas Jesus is. And it is in this area, and that of His Divinity that cause people to question Him. Sceptics refer to His miracles as either myth or magic; that the healing miracles concern conditions that were largely psychosomatic as in the cases of Pentecostal and charismatic hearings of today; that the nature miracles are all easily explained such as Jesus walking on the water was really His walking on land with His feet covered by a sea mist!

Of course, there were magicians in the time of Jesus as well as others who claimed miraculous powers. Josephus refers to one Honi who prayed for rain and sometimes was 'successful'. A lot of magic practised at the time was negative. There was black magic. And all magic is trickery and deception.

As to miracles Cicero and scientists put it this way, "Nothing happens that cannot happen." The scientist and the sceptic always demand a rational explanation and this, in itself, nullifies faith. Faith is the evidence of things not seen writes the anonymous writer to the Hebrews. But the theory of evolution cannot be proved; the Big Bang theory that the worlds came into being by an explosion of gases in space does not explain the origin of the gases. And I have heard scientists say that how they came about does not really matter. The evolutionist does not know. But he accepts it by faith albeit not a religious faith.

If the miracles of Jesus are not to be believed then He, or those who wrote about them, are frauds, and the appellation that Jesus is the Son of God is fictitious. But if it could be proved that He died, was buried and rose again from the dead then that would verify and give credence to His miraculous acts. The whole of the New Testament states the truth of the resurrection as does the secular Josephus. And what is remarkable is that no evidence has ever been produced that even hints at the resurrection of Christ not having happened.

There is also some evidence from the Roman, Suetonius (AD 65-135), in his book The Twelve Caesars. He writes about Christians in the reign of the Emperor Claudius (AD 41-54) and states, "He (Claudius) drove the Jews out of Rome who were rioting because of Christ." The writer Orosius mentions that this took place in the ninth year of Claudius's reign. That means that within twenty years of the crucifixion there were Christians in Rome, the very hub of Roman administration. There is, in the Acts of the Apostles, an amazing corroboration of this Roman evidence (Acts 18.2).

But to the secular evidence

1. There is the evidence of Publius Lentulus (ruler of Judea) to the Roman Emperor Tiberias
2. There is the report from the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate to Tiberias.
3. There is the evidence in the letter of Pilate's wife
4. There are the records of the last occurrences in the life of Christ.
5. There is the evidence of Roman historians such as Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Gaius, Suetonius, and many others. None of these were Christians.
6. There is the evidence of Josephus, already referred to.
7. There are the secular records of the cover-up by the chief priests who demanded that the tomb be sealed and when Jesus rose from the dead a guard came to the High Priest and they paid for his silence.
8. There is the evidence of all Christians being put to death so as to eliminate eye witnesses to the death and resurrection of Christ as set out in contemporary secular records.
9. There is the evidence of the martyr Polycarp who knew the apostle John and of whom the Roman historian Tertullian wrote.
10. There is the evidence of Clement of Rome who knew the apostle Peter.
11. There is the evidence of Ignatius of Antioch who also knew Peter.
12. The first gospel dates from about 70AD, forty years after the resurrection and before the establishment of the church which happened in 312 AD
13. The other persecution of Christians was instigated by Nero who blamed Christians for the burning of Rome to add further credence to the policy of eliminating all Christians.
14. The suicide of Pilate, who was blamed for not controlling the facts of the resurrection, is, probably, why he committed suicide.

Now as to further evidence

There is no way Jesus could have survived crucifixion so the theories of His being drugged or swooning is ridiculous.

If any Roman soldier allowed a prisoner to escape or survive this was punishable by death under Roman law.

The secular records show that the legs of Jesus were not broken because He was dead already. The breaking of the legs was performed if it was taking too long for a prisoner to die. The thrusting of the spear into His side was often performed on victims to indicate to all around that the victim was dead.

How could Jesus as a corpse escape from the tomb?

Would 3000 Jews, within two months of the resurrection, declare Christ was risen from the dead and put their own lives at risk if this was a fraud or a hoax? This also applies to other contemporary Christians many of whom went to their death peacefully because they knew the truth of the resurrection and eternal life.

The Roman persecution of Christians did not destroy Christianity. In the two thousand years of Christianity

it has survived despite having had probably more martyrs than any other faith or cause.

Roman authors primarily dealt with the history of Rome. The major source of information about Roman history during this time was Tacitus, who writes about Pilate and says that it was he who had Christ crucified. Notice he does not say Jesus but Christ, thus identifying Him as the Saviour. The major Jewish writers, Josephus and Philo discuss Pilate, and do so in unflattering terms. Therefore there exists evidence in secular records of Jesus who was crucified under Pontius Pilate.

As to the Gospels the general acceptance is that they were not written until some forty years after the crucifixion. There is no indication that a diary was kept at the time of the life of Jesus. Even if such a journal had been kept it would still be subject to the same critical assessment as would any oral tradition. After the resurrection, the disciples were so busy preaching and taken up with the sensational events and consequences of the life of Christ that they may not have written anything down. Furthermore they took the words of Jesus that He was soon coming again to be an event not too distant in the future and possibly in their own lifetimes. But after the martyrdom of some of the original disciples it may have been felt urgent to record details about Jesus from eyewitnesses while they were still alive. As the Gospels were written at different dates and without collusion there may be revisions or minor differences but such differences do not challenge the basic and important facts about Jesus. There is much debate concerning the Nativity Star, chronology and alleged contradictions which objections only serve to corrode historical facts.

It does not really matter historically in what year Jesus was born; nor what was the Nativity Star; nor where He lived nor when He died; what matters are the facts of His life, not detail or speculation.

It does not matter who wrote the Gospels. Present evidence indicates that they remained untitled until the second half of the second century. There is no real evidence that the disciples Matthew, Mark and Luke are the authors of the Gospels that bear their respective names. It is generally accepted by historians and scholars, however, that the additional apocryphal gospels are legendary.

Great men like Brutus, Caesar, Pompey and Antony lived much of their lives in the blaze of publicity and were associated with men of letters who sometimes wrote about them and at the time. This apparently was not the case with Jesus. Had it been so there might well have been greater clarity in the Gospels and less problems with the context. For example, in Matthew 5.44 Jesus said, 'Love your enemies.' Did Jesus mean the Roman soldiers who had occupied the land of the Jews, and that if one of them hit you on the cheek you turn the other one? Or did He mean the enemy was some other group of people or everybody in general?

However interesting that is, the thrust of the Gospels is that Jesus is the Christ, the Saviour, and this follows on from the Old Testament. God called Abraham. God gave the Hebrews the law through Moses, established Israel as a kingdom in the time of Saul and David, which kingdom split into two namely Israel and Judah, owing to the oppressive and selfish policies of evil Solomon. God punished these nations for disobedience to His commands and yet promised to raise up a Saviour, the Messiah, the Christ. Again sceptics will assert that the Gospel writers inserted Jewish prophetic scriptures into the Gospels to add weight to the claim that Jesus was the Messiah. On the other hand, if the resurrection can be proved then the Old Testament quotes being applied to Christ have irrefutable significance. And if the miracle of the resurrection is proved then the other miracles of Christ are believable.

As we have said, there are other extant Christian writings which are not in the canon of the New Testament. Polycarp knew the apostle John and other contemporaries of Jesus. He wrote an epistle to the church at Philippi and mentions Paul's letter to that church and shows knowledge of, at least, seven other epistles of Paul. That he personally knew people who had witnessed the death of Jesus and who also saw Him after His resurrection validates both his testimony and the facts themselves. That Polycarp suffered martyrdom with courage can best be explained by his personal belief in the resurrection and life after death. Irenaeus was a pupil of Polycarp and wrote two important works *Against All Heresies* and *In Proof of the Apostolic Teaching* in which he bears witness to practically the whole of the New Testament. Justin Martyr was a Samaritan

philosopher born about seventy years after the crucifixion of Christ. He embraced Christianity on the grounds of reason and by personal observation of Christians and their steadfastness. Tatian came from Assyria and wrote Harmony of, the Four Gospels, a work of unique evidential value. He died in AD 172. So within 150 years of the death and resurrection of Christ there is ample written evidence to support the essential facts of Christian doctrine.

But we do not have to consider even 150 years since within 25 years of the resurrection of Christ it was accepted in places as far removed from one another as Jerusalem, Galatia, Corinth and Rome. Everywhere it was accepted as historical fact and this belief was based upon the testimony of many eyewitnesses. After all, no one expected Jesus to rise from the dead. Had they thought that they would not have embalmed His Body.

But the historical fact of His resurrection is often rejected because it is not scientific. Science states that as there is no rational explanation for the resurrection it must, therefore, be false. But what is science to judge? Science can be false. For example in 1912 in Sussex the Piltdown Man was discovered and science excitingly proclaimed it as the missing link between anthropoid apes and man, to support their theory of evolution and dispel the notion of God as Creator of life. Later, in 1954, this was found to be a human cranium and the jawbone of an orang-utan. Science was wrong. In the late 1950s Germany produced a sedative called thalidomide which was scientifically proved to be safe. Pregnant mothers who took the drug gave birth to deformed and limbless children and science was again proved to be seriously wrong.

The experience of countless Christians over two millennia cannot be deemed scientific but to those Christians their experience and knowledge is an infallible proof in addition to the evidence as set out here.

© Copyright - David C.F. Wright, 1988

This article must not be copied in part or the whole without first obtaining the written authority of the author. Nor is it to be stored in any mechanical or retrieval system.