

The Historicity of Jesus Christ

by Wayne Jackson, M.A.

F. Harrison wrote: “Some religions, both ancient and modern, require no historical basis, for they depend upon ideas rather than events. Christianity is not one of these” (1968, p. 11). The religion of Jesus Christ stands or falls upon the events of history. Did Jesus of Nazareth ever live? Are the New Testament data regarding Him reliable? This is a crucial issue.

In the nineteenth century, German historian Bruno Baur alleged that Jesus was the mental invention of a few second-century Christians who were influenced by Græco-Roman philosophy. More recently, an atheist associated with the Freedom From Religion Foundation argued that “the New Testament Jesus is a myth” (Barker, 1992, p. 378).

More careful scholars, however, have been forced to acknowledge the historicity of the Lord. German historian, Adolf Harnack (1851-1930), declared that Jesus was so imposing that He was “far beyond the power of men to invent” and that those who treat Him as a myth are bereft of “the capacity to distinguish between fiction and the documentary evidence...” (as quoted by Harrison, 1968, p. 3). Joseph Klausner, the famous Jewish scholar of Hebrew University (who did not accept Christ as the Son of God) conceded that Jesus lived and exerted a powerful influence, both in the first century and subsequent thereto (1989, pp. 17-62). Even rabid skeptics have had to bow bloody heads to the blows of solid historical evidence. Entertainer Steve Allen authored several bitter diatribes against the Bible. Nevertheless, he confessed: “My own belief is that he [Christ] did indeed live in the time of Augustus Caesar...” (1990, p. 229).

Several lines of evidence converge to establish the historical reality of the founder of the Christian religion: (1) the New Testament documents; (2) ancient Jewish sources; (3) Roman writings; (4) early antagonists of Christianity; (5) the testimony of the patristic writers; (6) the art of the Roman catacombs; and (7) the impact of Christianity in history.

THE NEW TESTAMENT DOCUMENTS

Christ’s existence is established clearly by the primary documents of the New Testament. Skeptical writers would dismiss these, but to do so is irresponsible since more than 5,000 Greek manuscripts, in whole or part, establish the body of New Testament literature (Metzger, 1968, p. 36). All of the New Testament had been completed within sixty years or so of Jesus’ death. Of those twenty-seven books, no less than ten were penned by personal companions of the Lord. And Paul, an eyewitness of the resurrected Savior, wrote thirteen or fourteen of the remainder.

Liberal scholars have tried to relegate New Testament books to the second-century A.D. (or later), and have suggested that these documents are productions of unknown authors in order to repudiate them as primary sources of historical information. It is interesting to note, however, that even some radical theologians have conceded the strong evidence for the early composition of the New Testament. For instance, John A.T. Robinson, a liberal theologian from England, has acknowledged that all of the New Testament books were written in the first century. He also has admitted that the book of James was penned by a brother of the Lord within two decades of Jesus’ death, that Paul authored all the books that bear his name, and that John, the apostle, wrote the fourth Gospel (1976). The New Testament contains irrefutable evidence of the existence of Jesus.

JEWISH TESTIMONY

The earliest non-Christian testimony to the Lord's existence is that of the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37-100). In *Antiquities of the Jews*, the historian twice referred to Jesus. In one passage he called Jesus "the Christ," referred to His "marvelous deeds," and alluded to His death and resurrection (18.3.3). Though some would dispute the genuineness of much of this reference, suggesting that it was embellished by an over-zealous Christian scribe, the passage, as it stands in all standard texts, can be defended (Jackson, 1991, pp. 29-30). In another place, Josephus commented on the trial of James, and identified Him as "the brother of Jesus, the so-called Christ" (20.9.1).

Additionally, the Jewish Babylonian Talmud took note of the Lord's existence. Collected into a final form in the fifth century A.D., it is derived from earlier materials, some of which originated in the first century. Its testimony to Jesus' existence is all the more valuable, as it is extremely hostile. It charges that Christ (Who is called Ben Pandera) was born out of wedlock after His mother had been seduced by a Roman soldier named Pandera or Panthera. Respected scholar Bruce Metzger has commented upon this appellation: "The defamatory account of his birth seems to reflect a knowledge of the Christian tradition that Jesus was the son of the virgin Mary, the Greek word for virgin, *parthenos*, being distorted into the name Pandera" (1965, p. 76). The Talmud also refers to Jesus' miracles as "magic," and records that He claimed to be God. It further mentions His execution on the eve of the Passover. Jewish testimony thus supports the New Testament position on the historical existence of Jesus.

ROMAN SOURCES

There are allusions to Christ in Roman times (see Bettenson, 1961, pp. 3-7).

Pliny, governor of Bithynia, wrote the Roman emperor Trajan (c. A.D. 112), asking for advice about how he should deal with Christians who made it a practice to meet on an appointed day to sing a hymn "to Christ as if to God" (Epist. X.96).

The Roman historian Tacitus, in his *Annals* (c. A.D. 115), referred to "Christus," who "was executed at the hands of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius" (XV.44).

Writing about A.D. 120, Suetonius, a popular Roman writer, declared that Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because they "were continually making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus" (Vita Claudii XXV.4). "Chrestus" is a corrupted form of Christos (Christ). Luke alluded to this situation in Acts 18:2.

ANTAGONISTS OF CHRISTIANITY

Another line of evidence establishing the historicity of Jesus is the fact that the earliest enemies of the Christian faith did not deny that Christ actually lived (see Hurst, 1897, 1:180-189).

Celsus, a pagan philosopher of the second century A.D., produced the oldest extant literary attack against Christianity. His *True Discourse* (c. A.D. 178) was a bitter assault upon Christ. Celsus argued that Jesus was born in low circumstances, being the illegitimate son of a soldier named Panthera (see above). As he grew, He announced Himself to be God, deceiving many. Celsus charged that Christ's own people killed Him, and that His resurrection was a deception. But Celsus never questioned the historicity of Jesus.

Lucian of Samosata (c. A.D. 115-200) was called "the Voltaire of Grecian literature." He wrote against Christianity more with patronizing contempt than volatile hostility. He said Christians worshipped the well-known "sophist" Who was crucified in Palestine because He introduced new mysteries. He never denied the existence of Jesus.

Porphyry of Tyre was born about A.D. 233, studied philosophy in Greece, and lived in Sicily where he wrote fifteen books against the Christian faith. In one of his books, "Life of Pythagoras," he contended that magicians of the pagan world exhibited greater powers than Christ. His argument was an inadvertent concession of Jesus' existence, and power.

THE PATRISTIC WRITERS

The Patristic writers authored significant works between the end of the first and eighth centuries A.D. These so-called "church fathers" (patres) produced volumes important to understanding the changes occurring in the Christian religion during the post-apostolic age, and testify profusely to the historical Christ (see Bettenson, 1956).

Polycarp (c. A.D. 69-155), for example, lived in the city of Smyrna in Asia Minor. He spoke passionately of Christ, and wrote against certain heretics of his day. Irenaeus (c. A.D. 130-200) said that Polycarp had personal association with the apostle John, and with others who "had seen the Lord" (Eusebius V.XX). He died a martyr, having served Jesus Christ for eighty-six years (suggesting that almost his entire life was dedicated to the Savior). The testimony of the "church fathers" certainly is more compelling than the trifling objections of biased critics who are twenty centuries removed from the facts.

THE ROMAN CATACOMBS

Beneath Rome there exists a maze of galleries that served, from the second to the fifth centuries A.D., as tombs (and secret places of worship during persecution) for early Christians. It has been estimated that there are some six hundred miles of these subterranean passages, representing 1,175,000 to 4,000,000 graves (Blaklock, 1970, p. 159). The catacomb vaults are filled with art work, which testifies to the deep faith in Christ that was embraced by legions in the capital of the Roman empire. Common among these inscriptions was the figure of a fish, frequently containing the word ichthus (Greek for "fish"; Boyd, 1969, p. 203). The letters, however, were an acrostic for the declaration, Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior. Did millions, living in the shadows of the first century, die for a "myth"? Such a theory makes no sense.

THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIANITY

Finally, the impact of the Christian movement is powerful testimony to the reality of its Founder. It is inconceivable that a non-existent figure could have generated a societal force as world-shaking as Christianity. There is no logical way to explain how the Christian system started, and grew so rapidly, except for the fact that adherents knew of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Christianity itself is a monument to the vibrant presence of the God's Son in history. The cause we espouse is not grounded in a wispy vapor of antiquity, but on unshakable historical facts.