



## Jesus Christ in History

The question of whether or not Jesus existed has often been raised throughout European history. On British television in 1984, for example, G. A. Wells, a professor of German at Birbeck College, London, expressed doubts about Jesus' existence. In a series of three programs entitled *Jesus: The Evidence*, he argued on the basis of the writings of Paul that the Jesus of the gospels is a fiction. While Wells admitted Paul's existence and the authenticity of several of his letters, he claimed that Paul revealed no details of Jesus' earthly life. Paul appears to be ignorant of the place where Jesus was born and lived, as well as of his movements and his public ministry. Nor did he record any of Jesus' parables or miracles. Wells pointed out Paul's own admission that he never knew the human Jesus. He was silent regarding the historical Jesus, for the Jesus of the gospels never existed.<sup>1</sup>

### I

To judge the validity of these charges, which is based on the so-called "silence of Paul," described above, we too must turn to the sources on which the charge is based. Paul's letters belong to the earliest writings in the New Testament. Did Paul imagine Jesus? Let us see what Paul himself reveals to us about his knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth.

Paul, or Saul, was born in Tarsus, Cilicia, but was "brought up in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel" to be trained as a Pharisee (Acts 22:3). It is usually assumed that his father or grandfather was from Judea. As one who lived and studied in Jerusalem, Paul was well acquainted with the religious and political life of Judaism in his time and surely must have heard about Jesus. The Pharisees were critical of Jesus for associating with "sinners" and for holding a "relaxed" attitude toward the law and the rules of purity. When the Christian Church came into existence, immediately after the death and resurrection of Christ, Paul persecuted this Jewish-Christian group. He knew some of its leaders, with whom he entered into many heated disputes regarding the role and the claims of the "prophet" from Nazareth. Thus in the period before his conversion, Paul knew Christ "in a fleshly way." It was during this period that he understood Jesus "from a human point of view," as a false Messiah who undermined traditional beliefs which Paul regarded as approved by God (2 Cor 5:16).

Paul was called and converted to Christianity about three years after the death of Jesus. After he had met the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul joined the Christian community there and learned more about Jesus. He spent fifteen days with Peter (Cephas in Aramaic) and the other apostles in Jerusalem. These men must have told Paul even more about what they had seen and heard while they accompanied Jesus during his ministry in Galilee and Judea. Undoubtedly they told him all they knew about Jesus: how he had lived, taught, died and was raised up. This was the historical record of the early Church, a memory based on vivid accounts of eyewitnesses. This exposure to the living oral tradition must have confirmed in Paul the conviction he acquired on the road to Damascus: namely, that his previous understanding of Jesus of Nazareth was utterly incorrect. Jesus was not one among many false pretenders to the title of messiah, but the true Messiah of God. Far from denying the human existence of Jesus, Paul now affirmed it.<sup>2</sup>

When we ask why Paul did not speak more fully about the concrete details of Jesus' life, we

confront first of all the question of his purpose. His epistles were written primarily for pastoral reasons. In them, he never had to recount the facts that he had learned about the Jesus of history. But we learn a great deal about Jesus from these occasional letters, written to answer the questions raised by the Christian communities of the Hellenistic world. We learn about the Jewish origins of Jesus (Rom 9:4-5), that he came from the line of David (Rom 1:3), and that he was "born of woman, born under the law" (Gal 4:4). We learn of the Last Supper which Christ celebrated with the Twelve on the eve of his death and his betrayal (1 Cor 11:23ff)- His death, burial, resurrection and post-resurrection appearances are presented as well attested facts (1 Cor 15). Paul calls the Christian message the "word of the cross", and the core of his preaching was "Christ crucified" (1 Cor 1:18, 23). This shows that Paul preached the historical Jesus, not only the resurrected Lord (2 Cor 11:4). He was familiar with the teachings and instructions of Jesus (1 Cor 7:10), and, when the issue at hand demanded it, he readily referred to them (1 Cor 10:27; see Lk 10:8). There are echoes of the Sermon on the Mount in Rom 2:14 (Mt 5:44); 12:17 (Mt 5:39); and 14:10 (Mt 7:1). The apostle to the Gentiles was acquainted with Jesus' life of humiliation and perfect obedience (Phil 2:7-8). Some suggest on the basis of 2 Cor 8:9 ("For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich") that the story of the life of Jesus was given, "at least its general outline," in the Church's instruction to new members.<sup>3</sup>

Paul was acquainted with and used images from Jesus' parables as well. Although the apostle could have known the metaphors of sowing and harvesting from the Hebrew Scripture or from rabbinic literature, he still depended upon Jesus' use of these metaphors. Harold Reisenfeld argues that there is a strong link between Jn 12:24 ("Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit") and 1 Cor 15:36 ("What you sow does not come to life unless it dies"). The expression "unless it dies" is essential to both texts, since both bind death and the new life inextricably together. In John the phrase points to Christ, whereas in Paul it refers to the destiny of Christians. "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile" (1 Cor 15:17). Christ's resurrection was of primary importance for Paul. To establish this in the minds of his audience, he adapted the saying of Jesus and applied it to the death and resurrection of Christians. Reisenfeld, who offers a detailed analysis of Paul's "grain of wheat" imagery in the context of his interpretation of 1 Cor 15, concludes that Jesus' saying in Jn 12:24f was faithfully transmitted and was already known to Paul "in basically the same form" which was later recorded in John.<sup>4</sup>

Paul would never have been able to write some of the most inspiring passages in his letters "unless the historical portrait of Jesus, as it appears in his words, his deeds, and his suffering were the living background and primary foundation" of his theological insights.<sup>5</sup> The historical image of Christ, as well as his glory revealed on the road to Damascus, were constantly present to Paul. He knew no division between the historical Jesus and the glorified Lord. From the eyewitnesses of the life and suffering of Jesus, and from the witnesses of his resurrection, Paul received knowledge about the historical Jesus. Only through them and from them could Paul know Jesus. The testimony they rendered to Christ is incorporated in the gospels, which are the only source for our knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth. There is no other way to communicate historical facts except by bearing witness to them. Out of this witness the gospels emerged.

Efforts to separate Paul from the "historical" Jesus and from the authors of the gospels contradict the record as it has been transmitted to us. We know from Acts and from his own writings that he was constantly in touch with the disciples and with those to whom the gospels are attributed. Mark and Luke were in his company (Acts 13, 15-16; Col 4:10ff). Mark knew Peter and Paul (Acts 12, 1 Pet 5:13), and Luke was with Paul and James in Jerusalem (Acts 16:10ff, 20:5-21:17). The so-called "we" sections in Acts, where the narrative is written in the first person plural instead of the third person, indicate that Luke was with Paul at the time of

his last visit to Jerusalem, where Paul again met James. The earliest Christian documents confirm that the apostles, including Paul and the future evangelists, shared the knowledge of common traditions relating to Jesus. All these contacts and personal relationships are mentioned "in a matter-of-fact and incidental fashion without apologetic purpose and have a high degree of historical probability," observes E. Earle Ellis.<sup>6</sup>

## II

Non-Christian sources, both Jewish and Roman, attest as well to the reality of the historical Jesus. The Jewish historian Josephus (37-ca. 100), who was born in Jerusalem, refers to Jesus, Pilate, John the Baptist, James, "the Lord's Brother," (Gal 1:19) and other disciples. It is true that *The Jewish War*, the history of the bloody conflicts between Judea and Rome from 66 to 73, mentions Pilate but not Jesus. We may surmise that this omission reflects Josephus' caution. Taken prisoner in 67, Josephus was given his freedom when Vespasian became emperor in 69. He knew the Roman sensitivity to messianic stirrings in Palestine, and most probably for this reason he kept silence about events which would antagonize the Romans. But the earliest Jewish testimony to Jesus appears in another work of Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, written about twenty years later. Here Josephus mentions Christ. Most scholars agree that statements in the passage that have reached us have been supplemented by later Christian interpolations, such as that the man Jesus appeared, "if indeed one ought to call him a man." Other additions include: "He was the Messiah...he appeared alive again on the third day." In 1972, however, Schlomo Pines of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem announced the discovery of perhaps the earliest version of *Antiquities* 18:63f, in an early Christian Arabic manuscript, where the text runs as follows: "His disciples reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive; accordingly he was, perhaps, the Messiah."<sup>7</sup> Josephus apparently revealed some of his knowledge of Christian origins at the end of his life. Another passage, also in chapter 18, describes Jesus as a "wise man" and as "a doer of wonderful deeds," whom Pilate condemned to the cross "on the indictment of the leading men among us." Josephus also reveals intimate knowledge of political intrigues in first-century Palestine.<sup>8</sup> He reports that after the death of the Roman procurator Festus in 62, who was mentioned in the Book of Acts (25-26), and before the arrival of his successor Albinus, "Ananias called the Sanhedrin together, brought before it James, the brother of Jesus who was called Christ, and certain others...and he caused them to be stoned." However fragmentary the evidence, there is no doubt that Josephus knew of Jesus' existence.

The Talmud, a collection (c 200 A.D.) of various rabbinical traditions, also attests to Jesus' historical life, although in a polemical manner intended to contradict the claims of the first-century written Christian tradition. According to this body of writings, Jesus of Nazareth used magic to perform his miracles. He beguiled the people of Israel and led them astray. He was tried as a deceiver and was crucified on the evening of Pesah (Passover), which happened to fall on the Sabbath. At the time of his death he was thirty-three years old. He had a group of disciples, five of whom are mentioned.

The most important text comes from the Talmudic tractate Sanhedrin (43):

On the eve of Passover they hanged Yeshu [of Nazareth] and the herald went before him for forty days, saying, "[Yeshu of Nazareth] is going forth to be stoned in that he hath practiced sorcery and beguiled and led astray Israel. Let everyone knowing aught in his defense come and plead for him." But they found naught in his defence and hanged him on the eve of Passover.

In the opinion of J. Klausner, the statement about the herald "has an obvious 'tendency,' and it is difficult to think it is historical."<sup>10</sup>

The importance of these rabbinic references is threefold. First, they attest to the existence of Jesus, even while casting doubt on his message. Their arguments against the miracles of Jesus are essentially the same as those used by the scribes in the gospels: "And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He is possessed by Beelzebub, and by the prince of demons he casts out the demons'" (Mk 3:22 and parallel passages). Second, they attest that the Temple authorities tried him before Pilate, who condemned him to death. Third, the rabbinical

account supports the chronology of the Gospel of John, which assumes that in the year of Jesus' crucifixion the Passover fell on the Sabbath (Jn 19:31). Thus, among earliest accounts, both the Jewish historian Josephus and the Talmud confirm Jesus' historical existence.<sup>11</sup>

### III

The earliest extant Roman reference to Jesus' existence comes from Pliny the Younger, who was governor of the province of Pontus and Bithynia. He wrote the emperor Trajan in 112 to report that on certain days the Christians came together and "sang hymns to Christ as to a god." The Roman historian Suetonius, who composed *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* around 120, when discussing the reign of Claudius (41-54) reported that "the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus," and for this reason the emperor "expelled them from Rome" (Claudius 25.4). Suetonius used the Latinized form "Chrestus" instead of the Greek "Christos." Tertullian (160-220) wrote that the Roman rulers pronounced Christianus as Chrestianus (Apologeticus 3). Suetonius implies that the controversies between Jews and Christians had caused turmoil in Rome, and that a certain "Chrestus" was responsible. He also confirms what Luke wrote about Claudius' order that all Jews leave Rome (Acts 18:1-2).

Our third Roman source is the historian Tacitus (c. 55-117), who wrote in the *Annals* (c. 116) that the Emperor Nero accused Christians of setting Rome on fire in the year 66. Tacitus explained that the name Christiani came from Christ, who "was executed during the reign of Tiberius on the orders of the procurator Pontius Pilate" (*Annals* XV, 44). Of the Roman sources, this is the most precise and direct. Some scholars have suggested that Tacitus drew not only on hearsay but also on official Roman archives dealing with the trial and death of Jesus. The rulers of the provinces kept careful records of what was happening in their dominions and regularly informed the emperor of their activities. Pilate, who tried and condemned Jesus as a dangerous rebel, presumably sent Tiberius records mentioning the case of Jesus. Justin Martyr claimed that this occurred. These records have not come down to us, and we can only guess at what sources Tacitus used.

Thus, in discussing a modern challenge to the existence of Jesus, we must conclude that the historical sources and the evidence of Paul's epistles confirm the historical presence of Jesus. In the words of Peter on the day of Pentecost, Jesus was "attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourself know" (Acts 2:22). Since the gospels are the principal sources for the life and teaching of Jesus, we now turn to the evidence that they supply.

### IV

From the gospels we learn that Jesus "was born at Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King" (Mt 2:1), during the reign of Herod the Great, who died in 4 B.C. We learn as well that he was "the son of Mary" (Mk 6:3), that he was a Jew from Galilee, that he was baptized by John in the Jordan around 27 A.D., and that after his baptism he experienced trials or temptations in the wilderness. Capernaum was the center of his missionary activity in Galilee, and according to the Gospel of John, Jesus was active both in Galilee and in Jerusalem. At the beginning of his ministry he proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God and gathered a group of twelve disciples, the nucleus of the new Israel. During his public ministry, which lasted about three years, Jesus associated with sinners and outcasts. He was seen in the company of the despised, the poor, and women.

The gospels tell us that Jesus performed many "mighty works," or miracles, and that he taught in parables. He came into conflict with the Pharisees and the religious authorities in Jerusalem, for he challenged the oral traditions and on some occasions even the law of Moses. Above all, his "cleansing" of the Temple led directly to his arrest and his trials before the Jewish and Gentile authorities. The Jewish leaders accused him of the blasphemy of attributing divine authority to himself and of profaning the Holy Temple, both crimes punishable with death by stoning. Having lost the right to inflict capital punishment, the Temple authorities handed Jesus over to the Romans, and around 30 Pilate delivered him as "King of the Jews" to be crucified. The gospel narrative ends with an account of his resurrection following his death on the cross. His tomb was found empty and he appeared to his disciples.

As the gospels show, Jesus lived a human life and shared human experiences. Yet his demands upon those who would follow him far exceeded any that had been made by any other leader or prophet in the history of salvation as it is recorded in the Bible. He realized in his short historical existence the highest possible perfection of human life, and claimed unity with the Father. The intimate word *Abba* (Father), which he used as a form of address to God, expressed the heart of their relationship. It demonstrated that Jesus is God's son, who made God known and present. He practiced unlimited, non-judgmental love and goodness of God in his own life and ministry. He overcame evil by doing good. Jesus called concrete human beings to the new life which he so visibly exemplified and lived, not to a theory or an ideology.

The gospels give us a portrait of Jesus in which his history is reflected and interpreted. Each of our four canonical gospels has distinct characteristics. There are differences among them in reporting about what Jesus said and did and on what occasion. Yet the basic external data of his life and the most outstanding characteristics of his person are present in all of them.

*From: The Gospel Image of Christ by Veselin Kesich, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 1992*

1 Ian Wilson, *Jesus; The Evidence*, (London: Pan Books, 1984), p. 46ff., and James D. G. Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), p. 29.

2 This is the meaning of 2 Cor 5:16: "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer."

The biblical scholar marshals a number of facts and techniques when he considers this verse. First, he turns to the Greek text from which all modern translations have come, to see what was originally said. Then, he uses grammatical knowledge to clarify precisely the meanings of difficult expressions. In the passage we have just quoted, for example, we must understand the grammatical form of the expression "from a human point of view," as well as its literal meaning. Is Paul saying that we no longer regard Christ as "human," "in the flesh," or "humanly," "from the human point of view"? Grammatical analysis reveals that the expression in our text is adverbial, modifying the verb "to regard," and not an adjective referring to the noun, Christ. Therefore, it is the way we look at Christ, not his existence in the flesh, which is described here. If this is taken as an adjective, then the first part of the verse, "we regard or know no one according to flesh" or "in the flesh" would make no sense (see Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Becoming Human Together*, (The Pastoral Anthropology of St. Paul), Wilmington, DE, Michael Glazier, 1982, p.34). Even the preceding short passage, which directly concerns those who question Paul's knowledge of the historical Jesus, is an example of the approach that the reader of the Bible must use in order to understand the meaning of the text. He must search for what was actually said, the original context, and the relationship between the passage and the author's experience and his writing as a whole.

3 See for example John J. O'Rourke, "The Second Letter to the Corinthians," Jerome Biblical Commentary, 52:28.

4 See his *Gospel Tradition*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), pp. 171-186.

5 See the essay "Jesus, St John, and St Paul," in Anton Fridrichsen and others, *The Root of the Vine: Essays in Biblical Theology*, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953), pp. 50-52.

6 E. Earle Ellis, "Gospel Criticism—A Perspective on the State of the Art," *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien. Vorträge vom Tübingen Symposium 1982*, Peter Stuhlmacher, ed. (WUNT 28, Tübingen, 1983), p. 46.

7 Gaalyah Cornfield, *The Historical Jesus*, (New York: Macmillan, 1982), p. 184.

8 See C. K. Barren, *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*, revised edition (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 162ff.

9 Translated by Joseph Klausner in his *Jesus of Nazareth, His Life and Teaching*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1925), (PB, 1964), p. 27. This book was composed in Hebrew, and the translator informs us that this is probably the first time that a modern Hebrew book of any considerable size was translated into English. Klausner was born in Russia, studied in Germany, and came to Palestine in 1920. His book contains the most complete account of Jesus in the Rabbinic tradition.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 28. He also adds that the Talmud speaks of hanging in place of crucifixion, "since this horrible Roman form of death was only known to Jewish scholars from Roman trials, and not from the Jewish legal system."

11 The evidence from Jewish sources is well arranged and discussed in R. T. Herford, *Christianity in*

*Talmud and Midrash* (Clifton, NJ: Reference Book Publishers, 1966. Reprinted from the London edition of 1903). A convenient summary and evaluation of the references to Jesus in Rabbinic literature is given in Howard Clark Kee, *Jesus in History: An Approach to the Study of the Gospels* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), pp. 37-43.

There are several other references in the Talmud to Jesus, but they are of no value as testimony to his historicity. They are polemical in spirit and are the product of the bitter struggle between Judaism and Christianity in the early centuries.

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