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Historical Evidence About Jesus Christ

Historical Reactions to Jesus

Throughout history many people have examined the evidence regarding the life of Jesus of Nazareth. To any unbiased observer who is willing to evaluate it without prejudice, the accumulated evidence regarding the Gospel record is truly overwhelming. As an example, Otto Betz, a respected scholar, stated in his book, *What Do We Know About Jesus?* that "No serious scholar has ventured to postulate the non-historicity of Jesus."

However, some writers have suggested that there is little historical evidence regarding the life of Jesus. For example, the writer Solomon Zeitlin wrote, "Even Paul's epistles have awakened the question, Does he speak of a real historical personage or of an ideal? The main sources for the historicity of Jesus, therefore, are the Gospels." However, Zeitlin then dismisses the Gospel historical accounts and concluded: "So we are right to assume that even the Gospels have no value as witnesses of the historicity of Jesus. The question therefore remains: Are there any historical proofs that Jesus of Nazareth ever existed?" Another critic Salomon Reinach has contemptuously declared that he refused, "to consider writings founded upon the memory of a collection of illiterates as historical evidence for Jesus." Scholars such as Zeitlin and Reinach also casually dismiss the strong extra-biblical historical evidence from both Pagan and Jewish sources that validates the Gospel accounts about Jesus. The real reason to reject the evidence is that it contradicts the opinion they tenaciously hold that rejects the Bible's accuracy. If liberal scholars applied the same arbitrary standard of rejection of all historical evidence to other ancient historical personages, such as Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great, they would be forced to reject all history as myth.

The famous German theologian Rudolf Bultmann has declared, "I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus." Incredibly Bultmann states, "the early Christian sources

show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary; and other sources about Jesus do not exist." (Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1958, p.8). However, the evidence in the details of events and conversation of Jesus by all four gospel writers demonstrates convincingly that Bultmann is wrong.

An example of the arbitrary rejection of historical evidence about Jesus by modern skeptical theologians is found in Bultmann's often stated theory of "double dissimilarity." This strange theory states that any Gospel saying of Jesus that can be found paralleled in either Christian and Jewish sources (First Century) must be rejected as "inauthentic" or "invented by Christian editors." The absurdity of this double dissimilarity argument can be demonstrated by imagining applying the same rejection of quotations to someone like Winston Churchill. This technique would require us to reject as inauthentic any quotation from Churchill that found any parallel in English literature or any statement that was quoted by Churchill's biographers or admirers. Bultmann's theory, if applied to other historical personages, would virtually eliminate historical study.

One of the key points missed by the agnostic and liberal critics of the literal Gospel record is that the Jews of the first century of the Christian era possessed a unique ability to remember and record the statements of Jesus of Nazareth that would be deemed almost impossible by modern readers. The ancient Jews of Israel had developed sophisticated memory techniques to remember every word of a discourse by their rabbi. Their ability to recount verbatim long speeches or teaching would astonish modern teachers and critics of the Gospel record. Over the centuries the religious leaders of Israel had developed advanced memory techniques to enable their students to remember in remarkable detail every single statement of their religious teachers. An example of this oral memory technique can be found in the specially trained Maori tribesmen of New Zealand can remember and recount for several days during annual festivals a verbal rendition of their 4,000 year old tribal history.

However, a careful unbiased analysis of the historical sources as demonstrated in this book will convince many readers that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah of both history and prophecy. In his book, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* historian F. F. Bruce wrote, "The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased

historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar."

President Abraham Lincoln was an agnostic until he reached the age of forty. Then he read Dr. James Smith's brilliant examination called *The Christian's Defence*, that established the historical reality of the events in Christ's life. The evidence from this book convinced Lincoln of the truth about Jesus, and he became a genuine Christian. "My doubts scattered to the winds and my reason became convinced by the arguments in support of the inspired and infallible authority of the Old and New Testaments." (Quoted in Sir Lionel Luckhoo's book, *Evidence Irrefutable Which Can Change Your Lives*).

In addition to the contemporary archaeologists, scholars, and historians, who confirm that Jesus Christ existed, there are also a number of ancient historians who have recorded excerpts and events from Jesus' life. These individuals often acted as secular historians, and although they did not accept Jesus as the Son of God, they did acknowledge his life, death, and teaching.

The scholar, John P. Meier, wrote about the historical evidence that has survived about Jesus of Nazareth in his recent book *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. "When we look for statements about Jesus from non canonical writings of the 1st or 2nd century A.D., we are at first disappointed by the lack of references. We have to remember that Jews and pagans of this period, if they were at all aware of a new religious phenomenon on the horizon, would be more aware of the nascent group called Christianity than of its putative founder Jesus. Some of these writers, at least, had direct or indirect contact with Christians; none of them had had contact with the Christ Christians worshiped. This simply reminds us that Jesus was a marginal Jew leading a marginal movement in a marginal province of a vast Roman Empire. The wonder is that any learned Jew or pagan would have known or referred to him at all in the 1st or early 2nd century. Surprisingly, there are a number of possible references to Jesus, though most are riddled with problems of authenticity and interpretation." (John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Volume 1).

A Jewish historian, Joseph Klausner, examined the historical record regarding Jesus in his book *Jesus of Nazareth* and concluded that "In his ethical code there is a sublimity, distinctiveness and originality in form unparalleled in any other Hebrew ethical code; neither is

there any parallel to the remarkable art of his parables" (Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, New York: Macmillan Company, 1926.). The great German philosopher and writer of the last century, Goethe, expressed his opinion of the Gospels. "I esteem the Gospels to be thoroughly genuine, for there shines forth from them the reflected splendour of a sublimity, proceeding from the person of Jesus Christ, of so divine a kind as only the divine could ever have manifested upon earth." (Goethe, *Conversations With Eckermann*, iii, 371).

The following pages will include a number of Roman and pagan historical manuscript records from the early centuries of this era about the life and influence of Jesus Christ; these documents have survived for almost two thousand years.

Cornelius Tacitus - Governor of Asia

Cornelius Tacitus was a Roman historian and governor of Asia [Turkey] in A.D. 112. He was a personal friend of the historian Pliny the Younger. In his *Annals*, written after AD 64, he referred to Emperor Nero's persecution of the Christians. This attack was caused by Nero's false accusation that the Christians had burned the city of Rome. This monstrous lie was intended to cover the truth that the evil emperor himself had ordered the capital set on fire. Tacitus wrote:

To suppress therefore the common rumour, Nero procured others to be accused, and inflicted exquisite punishments upon those people, who were in abhorrence for their crimes, and were commonly known as Christians. They had their denomination from Christus [Christ], who in the reign of Tiberius was put to death as a criminal by the procurator Pontius Pilate. This pernicious superstition, though checked for a while, broke out again, and spread, not only over Judea, the source of this evil, but reached the city [Rome] also. (*Annals of Imperial Rome*, XV 44).

Tacitus, as a Roman government official and historian with access to the government archives of Rome, confirmed many of the historical details in the Gospels, as well as the books of Acts and Romans. He confirmed that Jesus was executed as a criminal under the authority of Pontius Pilate (who ruled Judea under the reign of Emperor Tiberius). He also declared that the Christians, who began in Judea and were now spreading throughout the empire, derived their worship and religion from the person known as Christ. He verified the explosive growth of this new religion within 32

years of Jesus' crucifixion despite the fact that its founder suffered the death penalty as a criminal. Additionally, Tacitus confirms that the Christians were despised, hated, and falsely accused of crimes, yet they rapidly grew to become a "vast multitude" in Rome itself (Annals XV 44). The reason Tacitus and many other Romans hated the Christians is because of the Christians refusal to worship the pagan gods, and Emperor Nero himself.

Suetonius - Roman Historian

Caius Suetonius was the official historian of Rome during the reign of both Emperor Trajan and Adrian. He was also a friend of Pliny the Younger, and was referred to in several of Pliny's letters. Suetonius wrote a book on the Lives of the First Twelve Caesars. In the section on the Emperor Claudius (who ruled from AD 41 to 54) Suetonius referred to the Christians causing disturbances in Rome which led to their being banished from the city. Suetonius wrote about Claudius: "He banished the Jews from Rome, who were continually making disturbances, Chrestus being their leader." He identified the sect of Jewish Christians as being derived from "the instigation of Chrestus" which was his curious spelling of the name Christ (Life of Claudius 25.4, written in A.D. 125). This statement provides powerful evidence that there were a significant number of Christians living in Rome before A.D. 54, only two decades after Jesus. This passage confirms the statement of Luke (in the Book of Acts) about the exiling of the Jews from Rome during the reign of Claudius. The Apostle Paul found, "a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and came unto them" (Acts 18:2).

Suetonius also wrote about the persecution of Christians during the reign of Nero. "The Christians were punished; a sort of men of a new and magical superstition." His criticism of the early Church affirms that this was a "new" religion that had recently appeared (in confirmation of the Gospels and the book of Acts). Furthermore, his reference to "magical superstition" confirms that the Christians were known to produce miracles and healing. The new faith of Christianity was based on the resurrection of their Messiah Jesus of Nazareth which would certainly qualify as a "magical superstition" to a pagan Roman historian.

Pliny the Younger

Caius Plinius Secundus, known as Pliny the Younger, was born near Milan, Italy in A.D. 62. The historian Pliny, a close friend of Tacitus, served as a consul during the reign of emperor Trajan and was later appointed governor of the Roman provinces of Pontus and Bithynia [Turkey] in the period A.D. 101 to 110. He wrote to the emperor to request specific instructions about the interrogation of the Christians whom he was persecuting. In his Epistles X 96, he states that these Christian believers would not worship Emperor Trajan and would not curse their leader, Jesus Christ, even under extreme torture. Pliny wrote that the Christians were:

in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verse a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves to a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, adultery, never to falsify their word, not to deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up.

Pliny described the Christians as people who loved the truth at any cost. It is difficult to believe that these people would willingly die for Jesus Christ if they knew and believed it was a lie. The martyrdom of thousands of these Christians was based on the fact that they knew the truth of the statements in the Gospels about Jesus and were willing to die as martyrs rather than deny their faith in Jesus as the Son of God.

Lucian of Samosata

Lucian lived in Samosata in Syria during the reign of Emperor Adrian in the century following Christ. In the later years of his life he served as a government official in Alexandria, Egypt. In Lucian's book, *The Passing Peregrinus*, he wrote the history of a well known Greek traveller named Proteus who was forced to flee his country after several crimes; he traveled the world under the name Peregrinus. He met some followers of Jesus in the early Church. Lucian wrote,

At which time he learned the wonderful doctrine of the Christians, by conversing with their priests and scribes near Palestine... they spoke of him as a god, and took him for a lawgiver, and honored him with the title of master... They still worship that great man who was crucified in Palestine, because he introduced into the world this new religion... Moreover their first lawgiver has taught them, that they are all brethren, when once they turned, and renounced the gods

of the Greeks, and worship that master of theirs who was crucified, and engage to live according to his laws.

Lucian has provided an independent confirmation of numerous historical facts that are mentioned in the Gospels including: the crucifixion; that Jesus was considered a lawgiver; that Christ was worshipped as God; and that His followers committed to follow Christ's laws.

The Letter From Mara Bar-Serapion

A Syrian named Mara Bar-Serapion wrote a curious letter from prison during the first century. The letter was written to his son, Serapion, to encourage him to follow the example of various esteemed teachers of past ages. This letter is listed as Syriac Manuscript number 14,658 in the British Museum. His father reminded him:

What advantage did the Athenians gain from putting Socrates to death? Famine and plague came upon them as a judgment for their crime. What advantage did the men of Samos gain from burning Pythagoras? In a moment their land was covered with sand. What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King? It was just after that that their kingdom was abolished. God justly avenged these three wise men: the Athenians died of hunger; the Samians were overwhelmed by the sea; the Jews, ruined and driven from their land, live in complete dispersion. But Socrates did not die for good; he lived on in the statue of Hera. Nor did the wise King die for good; he lived on in the teaching which he had given.

The historical value of this Mar Bar-Serapion letter is that it provides strong independent pagan corroboration that Jesus was considered to be the "King" of the Jews. This letter may refer to a Gospel statement about the written statement that was placed above the cross. "And set up over his head his accusation written, This is Jesus The King Of The Jews" (Matthew 27:37). The writer of the letter also states that Jesus was executed illegally by the Jews, who then suffered the judgments of God for their misdeeds in a possible reference to the well known tragic destruction of Judea and Jerusalem by the legions of Rome in A.D. 70. It is fascinating to note that the writer considered that Jesus was in some sense immortal because His teachings "lived on" after His death. In addition Mara Bar-Serapion refers to Jesus as "a wise and virtuous man." As a pagan Mara Bar-Serapion considered Jesus to be a great philosopher together with Socrates and Pythagoras.

Julius Africanus, Thallus, and Phlegon

A very early confirmation of the truth of the crucifixion of Jesus is found in the writings of the pagan historian Thallus, in his Third History. The significance of this account from the middle of the first century relates to the fact that it is one of the earliest historical records of an event connected with the crucifixion and may have been written at the very time the first of the Synoptic Gospels were being composed by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. One of the most miraculous aspects of the crucifixion was the supernatural darkness that covered the land during the three hours while Jesus hung on the Cross. This miracle was recorded by several pagan historians. Matthew recorded this event in his Gospel: "Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour" (Matthew 27:45). This remarkable event was also recorded in Mark 15:33 and Luke 23:45, 46.

Julius Africanus was a North African Christian teacher writing in A.D. 215. He recorded the writing of a pagan historian by the name Thallus who wrote his book in A.D. 52 only twenty years after the resurrection of Christ. Thallus wrote that the darkness totally covered the land at the time of the Passover in A.D. 32. Julius Africanus records, "As to [Jesus'] works severally, and His cures effected upon body and soul, and the mysteries of His doctrine, and the resurrection from the dead, these have been most authoritatively set forth by His disciples and apostles before us. On the whole world there pressed a most fearful darkness; and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down. This darkness, Thallus, in the third book of his History, calls as appears to me without reason, an eclipse of the sun. For the Hebrews celebrate the passover on the 14th day according to the moon, and the passion of our Saviour falls on the day before the passover; but an eclipse of the sun takes

place only when the moon comes under the sun." (Thallus (Samaritan, 1st century) -Julius Africanus, Extant Writings 18, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol 6).

Julius Africanus explained that Thallus' theory was unreasonable because an eclipse of the sun cannot occur at the same time there is a full moon. The moon is almost diametrically opposite the sun during full moon which would make a solar eclipse impossible at that time. This historical reference by the pagan historian Thallus confirmed the Gospel account regarding the miraculous

darkness that covered the earth when Jesus was dying on the cross.

There are other ancient historical references to this supernatural darkness which occurred at the death of Christ. Modern astronomers confirm that Julius Africanus was right in his conclusion that a normal eclipse could not possibly occur at the time of a full moon, which occurred at the time of the Jewish Passover. The high priest carefully calculated the position of the full moon to the smallest degree because their whole Jewish liturgical calendar, especially Passover, depended on determining the precise lunar position. There are two important points here. First, the pagan Syrian historian Thallus, who was alive at the time of Jesus' death occurred has confirmed that darkness covered the earth at the very time recorded in the Gospels. Secondly, the fact that there was a full moon present makes it certain that this darkness was not an eclipse but that it was a supernatural event.

Another remarkable historical reference to this supernatural darkness is found in the manuscript of another pagan historical writer from Lydia named Phlegon who was granted freedom by the Emperor Adrian. In approximately A.D. 138 he noted the astonishing fact that this "great and extraordinary eclipse of the sun distinguished among all that had happened" occurred "in the fourth year of the two hundred and second olympiad" which was the nineteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar as emperor of Rome. The Christian historian Eusebius (A.D. 300) in his Chronicle quoted from Phlegon's sixteen volume Collection of Olympiads and Chronicles as follows:

All which things agree with what happened at the time of our Saviour's passion. And so writes Phlegon, and excellent compiler of the Olympiads in his thirteenth book, saying: ÔIn the fourth year of the two hundred and second olympiad there was a great and extraordinary eclipse of the sun, distinguished among all that had happened before. At the sixth hour the day was turned into dark night, so that the stars in the heavens were seen, and there was an earthquake in Bithynia which overthrew many houses in the city of Nice.' So writes the above named author.

Furthermore, Phlegon indicated that the darkness that covered the earth began at the sixth hour, which is equivalent to our noon hour, is precisely the same time period as recorded in the Gospels in Matthew 27:45. The Christian writer Tertullian indicated that this supernatural

darkness was recorded in the Roman archives that could still be consulted. "At the same time at noonday there was a great darkness. They thought it to be an eclipse, who did not know that this also was foretold concerning Christ. And some have denied it, not knowing the cause of such darkness. And yet you have that remarkable event recorded in your archives." Another writer, the martyr Lucian, spoke of the public archives which recorded these supernatural events as follows: "Look into your annals; there you will find that in the time of Pilate, when Christ suffered, the sun was obscured, and the light of the day was interrupted with darkness."

A Roman Government Inscription From the Reign of Emperor Nero

In my research I found a fascinating report of an inscription that was discovered in the ruins of Marquofiae in the Roman province of Lusitania (ancient Portugal) that is clearly dated to the reign of Emperor Nero who died in AD 68. This inscription reads as follows:

NERONI. CL. CAIS AUG. PONT. MAX.

OB PROVINC. LATRONIB

ET. HIS. QUI. NOVAM

GENERI. HUM SUPER

STITION. INCULCAB

PURGATAM.

The translation reads:

TO NERO CLAUDIUS CAESAR,

AUGUSTUS, HIGH PRIEST,

FOR CLEARING THE PROVINCE

OF ROBBERS, AND THOSE

WHO TAUGHT MANKIND

A NEW SUPERSTITION.

This inscription almost certainly refers to the new faith of Christianity because this was the only popular new religion that appeared throughout the Roman Empire during the reign of Nero. While Nero's heaviest persecution fell upon the Christians, a number of early Church writers (including Tertullian) affirm that the persecution was carried out throughout the provinces as well. The Roman accusation that the early Christians taught "a new superstition" was related to the Gospel's claim that Jesus had risen from the dead and that He was the Son of God. If this inscription is genuine it would represent the earliest pagan inscription that refers to the new faith of Christianity as having an impact throughout the empire only thirty-five years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Christian Writer Hegesippus

The historian of the early Church, Eusebius, wrote about A.D. 325 about the persecution of the Christians by the Roman emperors in his book Ecclesiastical History. He quotes from another Church historian Hegesippus who wrote about an interview with the descendents of the brothers and sisters of Jesus of Nazareth. Speaking of Caesar Domitian who ruled from -A.D. 81. to A.D. 96 he wrote,

The same emperor ordered the execution of all who were of David's line, and there is an old and firm tradition that a group of heretics accused the descendants of Jude - the brother, humanly speaking, of the Saviour - on the ground that they were of David's line and related to Christ. Himself. This is stated by Hegesippus in so many words:

And there still survived of the Lord's family the grandsons of Jude, who was said to be His brother, humanly speaking. These were informed against as being of David's line, and brought by the evocatus [veteran] before Domitian Caesar, who was as afraid of the advent of Christ as Herod had been. Domitian asked them whether they were descended from David, and they admitted it. Then he asked them what property they owned and what funds they had at their disposal. They replied that they had only 9,000 denarii [\$5,000] between them, half belonging to each; this, they said, was not available in cash, but was the estimated value of only twenty-five acres of land, from which they raised the money to pay their taxes and the wherewithal to support themselves by their own toil.

Then, the writer continues, they showed him their hands,

putting forward as proof of their toil the hardness of their bodies and the calluses impressed on their hands by incessant labour. When asked about Christ and His Kingdom - what it was like, and where and when it would appear - they explained that it was not of this world or anywhere on earth but angelic and in heaven, and would be established at the end.

Regarding the brothers and sisters of Jesus the Gospel record is clear that Mary and Joseph did have additional children after the virgin birth of Jesus. The Gospel writers refer to the brothers and sisters of Jesus on several occasions including the following: "And when he was come into his own country, he taught them in their synagogue, insomuch that they were astonished, and said, Whence hath this man this wisdom, and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us? Whence then hath this man all these things?" (Matthew 13:54-56).

The Crucifixion of Jesus

Both the Gospel record and the writings of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus declare that Jesus was crucified by Roman soldiers after a religious trial by the Jewish Sanhedrin court and a capital trial in front of the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate. Luke's Gospel records this as follows: "And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left" (Luke 23:33). Josephus wrote: "Upon an indictment by leading members of our society, Pilate sentenced him to the cross" (Antiquities).

Crucifixion was the cruelest forms of execution ever developed by diabolical minds to dehumanize their victim and prolong their terminal sufferings as long as several days before death mercifully ended their agony. Crucifixion was first developed by the Scythians of southern Russia and later used by the Assyrians and Carthoginians of north Africa. The Roman Empire probably adopted this brutal form of execution from their constant enemies, the Carthoginians. Even the blood thirsty Romans were so appalled by this horrific punishment that they utilized it only against slaves or foreign enemies. Roman citizens were legally immune from crucifixion, which explains why the Apostle Paul, as a Roman citizen, was beheaded as opposed to being crucified like Peter. (Tillemont,

Memoires, i, P.324). During the slave revolt of 71 B.C. led by Spartacus the Romans crucified six thousand slaves on the roads outside Rome to place fear in the hearts of the slave population throughout the empire. During the final months of the terrible siege of Jerusalem in AD 70 the Roman legions crucified hundreds of Jewish citizens each day who attempted to escape the horrific famine within the starving city.

The Gospel record of Christ's crucifixion refers to the Roman practice of breaking the legs of the victims to hasten death. However, the Gospel of John asserts that the legs of Jesus were not broken because He had already died. John states: "But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they brake not his legs" (John 19:33). Several German theologians have cast doubt on the historical accuracy of this account because they felt John simply created this imaginary detail to be able to show that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah as a type of the Passover Lamb of which God commanded: "neither shall ye break a bone thereof" (Exodus 12:46). King David had directly predicted this event when he wrote: "He keepeth all his bones: not one of them is broken" (Psalm 34:20). However, a recent archeological discovery in Israel of skeleton of a crucified man provides remarkable proof that the writer of the Gospel account must have been a knowledgeable eyewitness of the crucifixion of Jesus.

Very few skeletons of victims of crucifixion have been found by archeologists. However, Israeli archeologists discovered an ossuary at the excavations at Giv'at ha-Mivtar, near Jerusalem, which contained the skeleton of a man who had been crucified. The ossuary which was inscribed with the name of the victim "Jehohanan" included two heel bones which were transfixed by a single six and a half inch spike. Interestingly, the heel bones contained minute particles of olive wood which might be the remnant of a foot support used by the victim to push himself upward to enable his distended diaphragm to inhale air.

Significantly the leg bones of the victim were crushed with a violent blow that would have made it impossible for the criminal to continue raising himself up. This would cause him to quickly drown, due to the accumulated fluid in his lungs. The scientist who examined the bones, Dr. Nicu Haas, declared that the evidence from the fractured bones suggested that the blows were delivered while the victim was still alive. Dr. Haas wrote: "This direct, deliberate blow

may be attributed to the final 'coup de grace'." [Haas, N., Anthropological Observations on the Skeletal Remains from Giv'at ha-Mivtar (Israel Exploration Journal 20, 1970, pg 38-39)]

Did Jesus Actually Exist?

"The name of Jesus is not so much written as plowed into the history of the world."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

In light of the wealth of historical evidence about Christ it is surprising that there are learned professors and authors who seriously deny that Jesus of Nazareth ever even lived. However, numerous books have appeared in the last two hundred years that have made this assertion, in spite of the ample biblical and non-biblical evidence referred to in this book. For example, Professor John Allegro of Manchester University wrote a book entitled *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* in 1970 which suggested that the earliest Christians were actually a secret cult group that used sacred mushrooms and utilized the name "Jesus" as a code word to avoid letting outsiders know about their activities. Not surprisingly, Allegro's thesis was criticized immediately by almost every major historical scholar. For example, *The Times* newspaper of London, UK, printed a letter signed by fifteen scholars in Semitic languages who dismissed his conclusion stating that it was "not based on any philological or other evidence that they can regard as scholarly."

Another scholar, Professor G. A. Wells of Birkbeck College, London, has produced three books in the last decade that deny that the Jesus of the Gospels existed. Wells argues that the first New Testament statements about Jesus were created by the Apostle Paul who didn't know any details about the historical Jesus. The professor suggests that the Gospels were written much later (at some point before A.D. 120) and represent a basic fabrication of stories about an imaginary Jesus.

As this book will demonstrate, there is powerful historical evidence that confirms many of the details of the life and death of Jesus both in the historically reliable Gospels and numerous non-biblical sources. C. S. Lewis addressed the question of the historical accuracy of John's gospel:

I have been reading poems, romances, vision literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I

know that none of them is like this. Of this text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage - though it may no doubt contain errors - pretty close to the facts; nearly as close as Boswell. Or else, some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative. If it is untrue, it must be narrative of that kind. The reader who doesn't see this simply has not learned to read. [C. S. Lewis, quoted by Ian Wilson in *Jesus: The Evidence*, p. 49, Harper and Row, Publishers, San Francisco, 1984]

Nicholas Sherwin-White commented on the authenticity of the historical statements of the Gospel writers in his book *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*:

... it can be maintained that those who had a passionate interest in the story of Christ, even if their interest in events was parabolical and didactic rather than historical, would not be led by that very fact to pervert and utterly destroy the historical kernel of their material.

The Town of Nazareth

Christ was often called Jesus of Nazareth and the early Christians were identified as Nazarenes. The origin of the name "Nazarene" may mean "of Nazareth." It may be directly derived from the town of Nazareth in which He grew up, worked with His father, and taught. However, it is also possible that "Nazarene" is derived from the Hebrew word "netzer" which means "a branch," a title that is often applied prophetically to the Messiah in the writings of the ancient Jews. In Isaiah 11:1 we read "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots." Again in Zechariah 3:8 we read: "behold, I will bring forth my servant the BRANCH."

Some have suggested that the town of Nazareth did not actually exist in the first century when the Gospel record indicates Jesus and His family lived there. It is true that the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus does not mention Nazareth in his Jewish history. Fortunately an archeological discovery made in 1955 under the foundations of the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth indicated the town was inhabited before the Christian era. A third century marble inscription found at the seat of Roman government in the city of Caesarea appears to be a tablet naming the town of Nazareth.

The Lives of the Apostles as Historical Evidence

There is a considerable amount of historical evidence about the lives of the disciples within the writings of the early Church. Jesus Christ chose the twelve apostles whose role was to confirm by their words of witness and their lives the reality of the life, death, and resurrection of Him. He commanded these fishermen and tax collectors to abandon their previous lives and follow Him to a destiny beyond that of any other men in the history of mankind. Two thousand years later, millions of parents still name their sons by the names of the apostles who followed Christ. Jesus' choice of disciples was not based on their previous character or accomplishments; none of them had risen to prominence in the society of Israel in the first century. It is interesting to note that Jesus did not choose the type of men most modern leaders would choose for such a task as preaching a revolutionary message to the world. None of the twelve disciples were religious scholars or professional men of distinction before Christ chose them. None of the disciples were wealthy; none were natural leaders within the Jewish society during that first century. None of the personal qualities of the disciples at the time Jesus chose them suggested that they would ultimately prove to be great men of faith who would stand the test of time. However, after three-and-a-half years in the daily presence of Jesus, these men were transformed into great men of God who would stand unflinching against the imperial power of Rome, the greatest power on earth.

Jesus apparently chose His disciples in the same manner that the sculpture Michelangelo chose the rough marble for His projects; because of the possibilities hidden within the uncut stone. A story about Michelangelo tells about a young girl who watched the great sculptor as he produced his masterpiece of King David in his workshop in Rome. As she watched him chisel into the huge block of marble she asked Michelangelo how he knew that the figure of David lay hidden within it. The answer, of course, was that Michelangelo saw in his imagination the possibility of what the marble could reveal if he removed the unnecessary material. Jesus Christ chose His band of disciples, not for what they were in themselves before He met them, but for what they could become after the touch of the Master's Hand.

The Martyrdom of the Apostles

Most of our information about the deaths of the apostles is

derived from early church traditions. While ancient tradition is unreliable as to small details, it very seldom contains outright inventions. Eusebius, the most important of the early church historians wrote his history of the early church in A.D. 325. He wrote, "The apostles and disciples of the Savior scattered over the whole world, preached the Gospel everywhere." The Church historian Schumacher researched the lives of the apostles and recounted the history of their martyrdom.

Matthew suffered martyrdom in Ethiopia, killed by a sword wound.

Mark died in Alexandria, Egypt, after being dragged by horses through the streets until dead.

Luke was hanged in Greece as a result of his tremendous preaching to the lost.

John faced martyrdom when he was boiled in a huge basin of boiling oil during a wave of persecution in Rome. However, he was miraculously delivered from death. John was then sentenced to the mines on the prison island of Patmos. He wrote his prophetic Book of Revelation on Patmos. The apostle John was later freed and returned to serve as Bishop of Edessa in modern Turkey. He died as an old man, the only apostle to die peacefully.

Peter was crucified upside down on an x-shaped cross, according to church tradition because he told his tormentors that he felt unworthy to die in the same way that Jesus Christ had died. The tradition of the early Church recorded that as Peter was being led to his crucifixion he was heard to say, "None but Christ, none but Christ."

James the Just, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, was thrown over a hundred feet down from the southeast pinnacle of the Temple when he refused to deny his faith in Christ. When they discovered that he survived the fall, his enemies beat James to death with a fuller's club. This was the same pinnacle where Satan had taken Jesus during the Temptation.

James the Greater, a son of Zebedee, was a fisherman by trade when Jesus called him to a lifetime of ministry. As a strong leader of the church, James was ultimately beheaded at Jerusalem. The Roman officer who guarded James watched amazed as James defended his faith at his trial. Later, the officer walked beside James to the place of

execution. Overcome by conviction, he declared his new faith to the judge and knelt beside James to accept beheading as a Christian.

Bartholomew, also known as Nathanael, was a missionary to Asia, in present day Turkey. Bartholomew was martyred for his preaching in Armenia when he was flayed to death by a whip.

Andrew was crucified on an x-shaped cross in Patras, Greece. After being whipped severely by seven soldiers they tied his body to the cross with cords to prolong his agony. His followers reported that, when he was led toward the cross, Andrew saluted it in these words: "I have long desired and expected this happy hour. The cross has been consecrated by the body of Christ hanging on it." He continued to preach to his tormentors for two days until he expired.

The apostle Thomas was stabbed with a spear in India during one of his missionary trips to establish the church in the sub-continent.

Jude, the brother of Jesus, was killed with arrows when he refused to deny his faith in Christ.

Matthias, the apostle chosen to replace the traitor Judas Iscariot, was stoned and then beheaded.

Barnabas, one of the group of seventy disciples, wrote the Epistle of Barnabas. He preached throughout Italy and Cyprus. Barnabas was stoned to death at Salonica.

The apostle Paul was tortured and then beheaded by the Emperor Nero at Rome in A.D. 67. Paul endured a lengthy imprisonment which allowed him to write his many epistles to the churches he had formed throughout the Roman Empire. These letters, which taught many of the foundational doctrines of Christianity, form a large portion of the New Testament.

The details of the martyrdom of the disciples and apostles are found in traditional early church sources. These traditions were recounted in the writings of the church fathers and the first official church history, Ecclesiastical History, written by the historian Eusebius in A.D. 325. Although we can not at this time verify every detail historically, the universal belief of the early Christian writers was that each of the apostles had faced martyrdom

faithfully without denying their faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Another great leader of the early Church was Polycarp who was martyred at the age of 86 by being burned alive before an audience of thousands in the amphitheatre in the city of Smyrna. When the Roman governor demanded that the aged bishop deny his faith in Jesus and worship the emperor to save his life. Polycarp refused the invitation to save his life by blaspheming Christ and denying his faith in these timeless words, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me wrong; and how can I now blaspheme my King who has saved me?"

Henry G. Bosch described the enormous influence of Jesus of Nazareth on the course of western history, philosophy, theology, and society. Bosch wrote:

Socrates taught for 40 years, Plato for 50, Aristotle for 40, and Jesus for only 3. Yet the influence of Christ's 3-year ministry infinitely transcends the impact left by the combined 130 years of teaching from these men who were among the greatest philosophers of all antiquity; yet, some of the finest paintings of Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci received their inspiration from Him.

Jesus wrote no poetry; but Dante, Milton, and scores of the worlds greatest poets were inspired by Him. Jesus composed no music; still Haydn, Handel, Beethoven, Bach, and Mendelssohn reached their highest perfection of melody in the hymns, symphonies, and oratories they composed in His praise. Every sphere of human greatness has been enriched by this humble Carpenter of Nazareth.