

Did Jesus Exist?

Part I

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“Whom do men say that I am?” Jesus once asked His disciples, according to the narrative of Matthew’s Gospel. The disciples answered, “Some say John the Baptist, some say Elias, and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets” (Matthew 16:16-18). Their answer revealed how even then, among His disciples, there was little consensus over the identity of this Galilean prophet and preacher and teacher. And the controversy endures today.

Among believers and non-believers, Biblical scholars and skeptics, no issue has stirred more activity, excitement, or acrimony than the question, “Did Jesus Exist?”

The existence and influence of Christ among men in this world is rooted in, and flows from history. We have from history, volumes of evidence attesting to His existence; more than all the world’s religious leaders put together. Dr. Philip Schaff, an eminent historian and professor at Yale University wrote:

“Jesus Christ came into the world under Caesar Augustus, the first Roman emperor, before the death of king Herod the Great, four years before the traditional date of our Dionysian (Greek Cynic philosopher; lived 412?-323 B. C.) era. He was born at Bethlehem of Judea, in the royal line of David, from Mary, ‘the wedded Maid and Virgin Mother.’”¹

The Romans ruled the world at that time from the Atlantic Ocean to the Euphrates River, from the British Isles to the African desert; hence, Bethlehem in Judea, the parcel of land where Jesus was born, by comparison to the area of land the Romans ruled, was the size of a boot print.

Christianity has its roots in history, and this is fixed in the Biblical, verbal, prepositional, revelation of the infinite-personal God, Who, at a particular point in time, sent His Son, who suffered and was put to death under Pontius Pilate, a Roman governor. This historical ‘once-for-all-ness’ of Christ and Christianity, is distinguished from all other religious and philosophical systems. The reliability of the writings and writers, who themselves made clearly known in the historical record of this revelation, is, without question, of first-rate importance. Michael Green commented on the history of Christ:

¹Philip Schaff, *History Of The Christian Church*, 7 vols., (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1910).

*At the most obvious level, Jesus was born into a politically insignificant country, some 125 miles long and 50 miles wide on the edge of the Roman map. It was the country of Judea, the national home of the Jewish people for many centuries. At the time the country was governed by Herod the Great; a ruthless, self-serving man who was half Jew and half Gentile, and whose building exploits were matched only by his cruelty. He was not only an independent ruler; he was the cat's-paw of the most powerful man in the world, Augustus Caesar. Augustus was a brilliant soldier and superb governor, who had made his position in the Roman world supreme after defeating all his rivals in 31 B. C."*²

To ask whether Jesus ever lived, would have seemed as a person who emphasizes trivial points of learning in history, as asking whether Homer, or Socrates, or Plato, or Aristotle, or Alexander the Great, or Buddha, or Krishna, or the Roman Emperor Nero, or Shakespeare, or Martin Luther, or Gandhi, or Mohammed ever took part in human affairs. This is to call into question what neither Greek, nor Roman nor Latin, nor Arabic, nor Chinese, nor German, nor French, nor English speaking person ever doubted. After careful and prolonged study, one must be permitted to say, with no wish to be disrespectful, in regard to religion, that, Jesus Christ of history lived, and vividly took part in human affairs and human history.

It was the agnostic historian, Will Durant, who wrote of Christ, *"That a few simple men should in one generation have invented so powerful and appealing a personality, so lofty an ethic and so inspiring a vision of brotherhood, would be a miracle far more incredible than any record in the Gospels."*³

Suppose Homer, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Alexander the Great, the Apostle Paul, Saint Augustine, Ben Franklin, George Washington, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Martin Luther King, never lived—that their story is lie: But one could ask who did their works and who thought their thoughts? Who could have fabricated their lives? Who could have forged a Homer, a Plato, an Aristotle, a Ben Franklin, or a George Washington? What man or nation could have fabricated a Tiberius Caesar Augustus, a Pontius Pilate, a Herod Antipus, or Jesus Christ? Who has asked for the birth certificate of Homer, of Socrates, or Plato, or Julius Caesar, or Emperor Nero? *"Does anyone believe a myth wrote Hamlet? Shakespeare had influenced the world of literature and everyone*

²Milchael Green, *Who Is This Jesus?* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990-192, p. 16).

³Will Durant, *Caesar To Christ*, (Simon and Schuster, N.Y.1944, p. 557).

*knows that there was a personality behind that writing and influence.”*⁴ So it is with the Christ of history.

When anyone undertakes to disprove the existence of Christ as an historical Character who existed two thousand years ago; he or she, may well be asked to attempt a simpler task. In the past, and as well as in today’s world, efforts to disprove His existence have not stopped, and they will not stop. But in spite of their fruitless, futile, and scurrilous efforts, no one has been able to prove that Christ did not exist.

Was Jesus fake? Was Jesus fact or fiction? Is He a myth? Is He a phantom? Is He a ghost? Myths, ghosts, and phantoms do not leave footprints. Jesus was, and continues to be, a real Character in the flow of human history. The mountain of evidence before us attests to the fact that He is a true historic figure: He is a real Person. How do we know that He existed? We know that Christ existed, because the historical record tells us so, (including the Gospel narratives).

For years, the people of the East looked for and awaited the coming of this Christ—the Messiah, and finally the event was brought into the flow of world history.

The narrative of Luke’s gospel opens with “things” that were fully believed, because they were “fulfilled.” Luke’s gospel is a narrative of the established facts—he deals with “deeds – among us” and not doctrine (Luke 1:1-4). Here are deeds in space and time. He moves to chapter 2, and he opens with real people and concrete places at specific times in human history. Caesar Augustus; Cyrenius, governor of Syria; Joseph from Galilee; out of the city of Nazareth; into Judea; unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; . . .to be taxed with Mary, his espoused wife, being great with child (Luke 2:1-5).

In chapter three he places John the Baptist in bone-hard history with a list of names that everyone can check. The list has seven names “big names” and their dates. The “big names” are used to date the beginning of ministry.

“Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip, tetrarch of Iturea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias, the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he came into all the country about the Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins; As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His paths straight’ ” (Luke 3:1-5).

⁴Jim McGuiggin, *If God Came Near*, (The Montex Publishing Company, Lubbock, Texas 1980), p. 33.

The events leading up to the birth of Christ did not occur in a vacuum. These events occurred in hard-bone, undeniable, history. The names, the places, and the events are all verifiable in the flow of history. Noted, New Testament commentator William Barclay offers some insights into this passage:

“(i) Tiberius was the successor of Augustus, and therefore, the second of the Roman emperor. As early as A. D. 11 or 12 Augustus had made him his colleague in the imperial power but he did not become sole emperor until A. D. 14 . . . (ii) The next three dates Luke gives are connected with the political organization of Palestine. The title tetrarch literally means *governor of a fourth part* . . . (a) To Herod Antipas were left Galilee and Peraea. He reigned from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39 and; therefore, Jesus’ life was lived during Herod’s reign and in Herod’s dominions in Galilee. (b) To Herod Philip was left Ituraea and Trachonitis. He reigned from 4 B.C. to A.D. 33. Caesarea Philippi was called after him and was actually built by him. (c) To Archelaus were left Judea, Samaria and Edom. He was a thoroughly bad king. . . . (iii) Of Lysanias we know practically nothing. (iv) Having dealt with the world situation and the Palestine political situation; Luke turns to the religious situation and dates of John’s emergence as being in the priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. The high-priest was at one and the same time the civil and religious head of the community. In the old days the office of the high-priest had been hereditary and for life. But with the coming of the Romans the office was full of all kinds of intrigue.”⁵

Luke was an historian, and he authored the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts of the Apostles. He penned 28 percent of the New Testament. He was an authority on the Greek language, and his usage of Greek in his writings has been recognized as the finest in the New Testament.

The gospel of Luke is a sizable work, and was written with extreme care. Luke’s gospel is in detail and appeals to the detail-oriented person. Doctor Luke wrote with clinical accuracy, and he highlights the existence and humanity of Jesus the Christ.

*“Reading Luke, you get the feeling you are listening through the doctor’s stethoscope to the heartbeat of the Lord, feeling His empathy as He reaches out to those who cross His path.”*⁶

Jesus was born under Augustus Caesar; this Roman Emperor lived from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14. The Jews, through whom Jesus came into the world, were expelled from Rome. These Jews, some of whom were Christians, followed Jesus—Christus, who was the founder of Christianity. Luke wrote: “After these things Paul departed from Athens, and came to Corinth, and found a

⁵William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 31-32.

⁶Charles R. Swindoll, *The Origination Of Something Glorious*, (Bible Study Guide, p. 6).

certain Jew named Aquinas, born in Pontus, lately came from Italy, with his wife Priscilla, (because Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome in A.D. 49) and came unto them” (Acts 18:1-2). There is only one valid conclusion, Luke wrote these words, but if Luke did not write these words, then his work remains one of the most incomprehensible and unintelligible books in literary history.

Noted historian, H. G. Wells, rejected the Gospel narratives, but yet, could not dismiss them; he went on to use the Gospels as his only source material for writing about Jesus and the spread of Christianity in the first century. He admitted that the Gospels carried the conviction of reality, and felt compelled to say of Jesus, “*Here was a man. This part of the tale could not have been invented.*”⁷

Reference to the Existence of Christ from non-Biblical Writers

Now we turn to Josephus, a contemporary Jewish historian who was born in A.D. 37 into a priestly family. He lived around the time of Christ. At an early age he joined the Pharisaic sect. He visited Rome in A.D. 63; during that visit he was impressed with the city of Rome, and he took stock of the might of the Empire. In A.D. 66, at the outbreak of the Jewish War, He was made a commander of the Jewish forces in Galilee. Through Providence he escaped with his life and found himself one of the last two survivors. They surrendered to the Romans and, therefore, won special favor of the Roman commander Vespasian.

Josephus was attached to the Roman general’s headquarters during the siege of Jerusalem. He even served as an interpreter for Titus, son the of Vespasian, and the successor in the Palestine command. When the Roman army crushed the Jewish rebellion, Josephus was taken to Rome. He continued his work using his family name, Flavius. Thereafter, he was known as Flavius Josephus.

This Jewish historian’s works include a *History of the Jewish War*, from 170 B.C. to A.D. 73. This work was written in Aramaic for the benefit of the Jews. Later this work was published in a Greek version. He went on to write a later work; this second work is called *Antiquities of the Jews*. In this work he recorded the story of his Jewish nation from its beginning in Genesis down to his own day.

In this literary work we are drawn to the New Testament. Josephus mentioned and called by name, people mentioned in the gospel narratives. “*The families of Herod; the Roman emperor Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero; Quirinius, the governor of*

⁷H. G. Wells, *The Outline Of History*, Vol. 1. p. 104.

Syria, Pilate, Felix, and Festus, the procurator of Judea; and the rest the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and so on."⁸

Josephus wrote about the time of the death of Herod the Great, 4 B.C.; he documented the fact that Herod was the one who put John the Baptist to death. The New Testament narrative records this death of John the Baptist.

Josephus wrote: "*Now, some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did to John. That was called the Baptist; for Herod slew him, who was a good man, who had commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness toward one another, and piety toward God, and so came to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness.*

Now, when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put into power an inclination to raise a rebellion (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise). . . Accordingly he was sent to prison . . ., and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure against him."⁹

Josephus went on to identify Jesus as "the One called Christ." "*Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful-works a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ; and when Pilate, as the suggestion of the principle men amongst us, had condemned to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; are not extinct at this day.*"¹⁰

The Jewish historian mentioned (a) Herod, (b) John the Baptist, (c) the repudiation of Christ, (d) Jesus being a wonder-worker, (e) Jesus' crucifixion under Pilate, (f) His rising from the dead, (g) His messianic claim, and (h) His being the founder of "the tribe of Christians."

This article is continued in Part II

⁸F. F. Bruce, *New Testament Documents*, p. 104.

⁹Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.5.2, Vol. 4, p. 20.

¹⁰Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.3.3, Vol. 4, p. 11.