

30. What is the relation between these facts and Christianity in all ages?

Lesson Seventy-one

THE HISTORICITY OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

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Scripture Reading: Acts 2:22-36.

Scripture to Memorize: "Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God unto you by mighty works and wonders and signs which God did by him in the midst of you, even as ye yourselves know; him, being delivered up by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye by the hand of lawless men did crucify and slay" (Acts 2:22-23).

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31. Q. What is the next question to be considered in studying Jesus of Nazareth?

A. This question: Are we fully justified in accepting Jesus of Nazareth as a historical character?

This is what we mean by the *historicity* of Jesus. That is, Is He really a Person who lived and wrought as a Man among men? Is He an actual and outstanding Figure of human history who lived at the time and in that part of the world indicated by the New Testament writers? Or, is He just an imaginary creation of a group of overwrought religious enthusiasts?

32. Q. What is the first valid ground on which we accept Jesus of Nazareth as a historical character?

A. The first valid ground on which we accept Jesus of Nazareth as a historical character, is the testimony of the New Testament writers.

(1) Matthew, John, Peter, and others, were intimately associated with Him for some three years. They expressly claim to have been eye-witnesses of His manifestations and works (2 Pet. 1:16; 1 John 1:1-4; Acts 2:22, 3:15, 10:38-42, etc.). Paul vouches for the authenticity of his testimony by repeatedly affirming the circumstances of his call to the apostleship, in which, as he relates so force-

fully, Jesus appeared to him personally in His glorified body (Acts 22:3-21, 26:1-29; 1 Cor. 9:1, 15:1-8); and we must remember that Paul was perhaps the most keenly intelligent man of his day. Luke, the historian of the origins of Christianity, long a traveling companion of Paul, expressly states that he had diligently assembled the facts presented in his writings, from eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, and that the information given is trustworthy (Luke 1:1-4). Mark obtained his information first-hand from the Apostles themselves, particularly from Peter and Paul, with both of whom he was long and intimately associated (Col. 4:10, 2 Tim. 4:11, 1 Pet. 5:13). (2) These men are all *competent* witnesses. They had opportunities of observation and inquiry; they were men of discernment and could not have been deceived; and the circumstances were such as to impress deeply upon their minds the events concerning which they testify. (3) These men are *honest* witnesses, as evidenced by their manifest reverence for the truth, and by the fact that they sacrificed all worldly interests, and even their own lives, in support of the things they believed and preached. They literally "forsook all" to follow Jesus. Moreover, their testimony is mutually complementary and corroborative. *Why, then, should we reject the testimony of such capable and honest men, men who lived contemporarily with Jesus; and accept the theories of modern professors, most of whom are exceedingly irreverent in spirit, and all of whom are removed almost two thousand years from the persons and incidents upon which they seek to cast suspicion?*

**33. Q. What is the second valid ground on which we accept Jesus as a historical character?**

**A. The second valid ground on which we accept Jesus as a historical character, is the lives of the Apostles themselves.**

They expressly claim to have been personally associated with Him, and to have been eyewitnesses of His mighty works and wonders and signs. Shall we, then, regard them

as impostors, and their testimony as fraudulent? Moreover, they gave themselves utterly in devotion to the Christ whom they proclaimed. They suffered martyrdom for His cause. *Are men in the habit of giving their bodies to be burned—for a mere myth?*

34. Q. What is the third valid ground on which we accept Jesus as a historical character?

A. The third valid ground on which we accept Jesus as a historical character is the testimony of contemporary profane writers.

By *contemporary profane writers*, we mean secular or uninspired writers who lived at or about the time Jesus lived, and who were hostile to Christianity. (1) *Josephus*, for instance, the most noted of all uninspired Jewish historians, who was born in Jerusalem about A.D. 31, and who died about the year 114, in his celebrated work, *The Antiquities of the Jews* (xx. 9:1), records that Albinus, who succeeded Festus as Procurator of Judea, "assembled the Sanhedrim of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus who is called Christ, whose name was James, and some others . . . and delivered them to be stoned." (2) *Tacitus*, well-known Roman historian, who died about A.D. 115, in his *Annals* (xv. 44), after speaking of the common rumor that accused Nero of having set fire to Rome (A.D. 64), says that the Emperor, in order to put an end to these rumors "began to bring to judgment and to inflict the cruelest deaths upon those whom the people execrated . . . whom they called Christians." "The origin of this name," he adds, "was one Christ who, in the reign of Tiberius, was condemned to death by the Procurator Pontius Pilate." Tacitus is generally recognized as one of the more accurate of historians. (3) *Pliny the Younger*, while governor of Bithynia, wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan (about the year 111), in which he asked the emperor what to do with the Christians. In this letter, Pliny describes the customs of the Christians in his province, and the details given are strikingly con-

firmatory of the representations in the New Testament books regarding the meetings and practices of the early church. Concerning the worship of the Christians, Pliny says: "They sing a hymn to Christ as to a god." (See *Epistle of Pliny*, x. 97.). (4) *Suetonius*, another Roman writer, in his *Life of Claudius*, says: "The Jews, incited by a certain Chrestus continually rebelled, and he drove them out of Rome." Suetonius wrote about A.D. 120. "We know," writes Merejkowski, "that Christians were at that time called Christiani, and therefore that the Chrest of Suetonius can be no other than Christ." (For an excellent presentation of contemporary profane testimony respecting the historicity of Jesus, see *Jesus The Unknown*, pp. 17-48, by D. S. Merejkowski, published in 1933 by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, translated from the Russian by H. Chrouschoff Matheson).

**35. Q. What is the fourth valid ground on which we accept Jesus of Nazareth as a historical character?**

**A. The fourth valid ground on which we accept Jesus of Nazareth as a historical character, is the phenomenal spread of Christianity in the first two centuries of the Christian era.**

Fifty years after the death of Christ there were churches in all the principal cities of the Roman Empire. Nero (37-68), says Tacitus, found a great multitude of Christians to persecute. Pliny wrote to Trajan (52-117) that they "pervaded not merely the cities but the villages and country places, so that the temples were nearly deserted." Tertullian (150-240) writes: "We are but of yesterday, and yet we have filled all your places, your cities, your islands, your castles, your towns, your council-houses, even your camps, your tribes, your senate, your forum. We have left you nothing but your temples." In the time of the Emperor Valerian (253-268), the Christians, we are told, constituted half the population of Rome. The whole Empire was brought under the sway of the Gospel in the time of Constantine (272-337), only three hundred years

after the death of Jesus. (See Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 191). *Can this phenomenal spread of primitive Christianity be satisfactorily accounted for on the basis of devotion to a mere myth?*

**36. Q. What is the fifth valid ground on which we accept Jesus of Nazareth as a historical character?**

**A. The fifth valid ground on which we accept Jesus of Nazareth as a historical character, is Christianity itself.**

The almost twenty centuries of Christian evangelism and conquest; the development of the Christian missionary enterprise; the innumerable churches in all parts of the world; the countless martyrs to the cause of Christ; the world-wide spread of the Gospel; the consecration everywhere of life and talent and substance; the preaching, praying, hymnology and singing of all ages of the Christian era; the Christian ordinances (*baptism*, which portrays the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus; and the *Lord's Supper*, which commemorates His suffering and death); the Lord's Day, the memorial of His resurrection; the Christian calendar which makes Him the central Figure of all human history and chronology: *are all these things monuments to a mere myth?* The notion is incredible! Are all these but manifestations of devotion to an Ideal rather than a Reality? We answer, No; because the voice of history and observation is that ideals languish and are forgotten with the passing of the years. Christianity is itself "the miracle of the ages," because it is founded upon the living, ever-living Christ.

**37. Q. What is the sixth valid ground on which we accept Jesus of Nazareth as a historical character?**

**A. The sixth valid ground on which we accept Jesus of Nazareth as a historical character, is His own teaching, character and life.**

John Stuart Mill writes: "Who among His disciples, or among their proselytes, was capable of inventing the sayings ascribed to Jesus, or of imagining the life and char-

acter revealed in the Gospels?" (*Essays on Religion*, p. 254). "Had Jesus never lived," says Rousseau, "the writers of the Gospels would themselves have been as great as He." Or, as Theodore Parker puts it, "It would take a Jesus to forge a Jesus." "Who but Jesus Himself could have 'invented,' could have created, Jesus? A group of 'unlearned and ignorant men'? (Acts 4:13). That is improbable, but still more improbable is it that the most living of human figures should have been concocted from various mythological materials in the scientific retorts of contemporary philosophers" (Merejkowski, *Jesus The Unknown*, p. 29). "The conception of Christ's person as presenting deity and humanity indissolubly united, and the conception of Christ's character, with its faultlessness, and all-comprehending excellence, cannot be accounted for on any other hypothesis than that they were historical realities" (Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 186).

**38. Q. What, then, can be our only logical conclusion respecting Jesus of Nazareth?**

**A. The only logical conclusion at which we can arrive, in view of the evidence presented, is that Jesus of Nazareth is a historical character.**

(1) As a matter of fact, the historicity of Jesus has never been questioned by competent and honest scholars, even among educated Jews; for example, the well-known work by Dr. Joseph Klausner of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, published in 1926, entitled *Jesus of Nazareth*, in which Jesus is frankly treated as an historical character. Though of course ignoring, as do all Jews, the supernatural element in Jesus' person and life, Dr. Klausner does not even question His historicity. (2) The late Dr. S. Parkes Cadman, in answer to the question, "What have you to say against the theory that Jesus was a mythical creation?" writes as follows: "Simply this, that the theory itself is a mythical creation confined to a small group of intellectual eccentrics who are regarded as negligible by practically all scholars and historians. Admitting the

theory, the difficulty arises as to who invented so matchless a personality as Jesus, and placed in His mouth the teachings which have revolutionized the race." This is all that needs be said on the subject.

REVIEW EXAMINATION OVER LESSON  
SEVENTY-ONE

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