

JESUS

With the coming of December 25th, it is a very good time to reflect on the historical Jesus. The non-Christian sources regarding Jesus are very limited, but these independent accounts do prove that in ancient times even the opponents of Christianity never doubted the historicity of Jesus.

Josephus, a Jewish historian of the court of Emperor Domitian, wrote about the events of the Jewish-Roman Wars (66-70 C.E.). Josephus Antiquities XX (200 C.E.) writes about the stoning in 62 C.E. of James, the brother of Jesus, who was the so-called Christ. Josephus uses the proper name “Jesus”, for as a Jew he knows that “Christ” is a translation of Messiah, so he adds the qualifier “so-called” to the second name that was familiar in Rome.

Another Roman historian, Suetonius, writing on the life of Emperor Claudius, stated, “Claudius expelled the Jews, who had on the instigation of Chrestus continually been causing disturbances from Rome” (see Vita Claudii 25:4). This no doubt refers to the problems of the Roman Jews being upset by the Christians in their midst. Suetonius mistakenly used the name Chrestus, instead of Christ.

The 1st and 2nd century Talmud writings of some rabbis also mention Jesus. The Talmud, a compendium of Jewish law, lore, commentary, apologetics and polemics, reveals an acquaintance with the early Christian tradition. The picture offered in these writings may be summarized as follows: Jesus was born illegitimate, worked magic, mocked the wise, seduced and stirred up the people, was crucified on the eve of the Passover. The writings of the Life of Jesus or The Toledot Yeshu were one such collection of assertions among the Jews of the Middle Ages.

Current Christian sources for Jesus are many, but have to be read as coming from a faith community who saw this Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ and Messiah of history. Catholic/Christians is the faith of those who recognize Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, and accept him as their Lord and Savior. Our beliefs and practices are the result of the experiences of those who knew Jesus during his earthly life, and those since who know him through the grace of the Holy Spirit, given by God to those who put their trust in him. Most Catholic/Christians believe in One God Creator, Jesus the Redeemer and the Holy Spirit the Sanctifier – all of which is called ONE god, the Trinity.

The main source for knowledge about Jesus is the Christian Scriptures, also called the New Testament, especially the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These writings were compiled between 70 and 100 C.E. All of them coming from an original faith community, first by way of eyewitness and oral tradition, and later being written down by the followers of the eyewitnesses.

The consensus among modern Scripture scholars designate Mark, as the earliest of the Gospel writers around 65-70 C.E. Jesus in Mark's Gospel is a man with a purpose. In fact, the Gospel of Mark has been dramatized as a one-man play. There is no mention of

Jesus' birth or childhood. Jesus' ministry begins with being baptized by John the Baptist. Then he calls his disciples and announces the coming of the Kingdom of God. Mark's community comprised the Roman followers of Jesus.

The Gospel of Matthew (middle 80's C.E) was written for the early Jewish followers of Jesus. Here Jesus is seen as the fulfillment of all beliefs from the Jewish Scriptures, also called the Old Testament. Jesus is the new Moses, and Matthew shows the parallels between the two. Matthew establishes that just as the Egyptian Pharaoh feared and loathed the Hebrews in Moses' time, so King Herod treated Jesus and his followers with scorn. A collection of Jesus' most famous statements, the Sermon on the Mount or the Beatitudes is in Matthew.

The Jesus of Luke's Gospel is a picture of compassion and forgiveness. The Gospel of Luke needs to be seen as the first part of a two-volume work. The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles were written by and for the same person around 85 C.E. Luke shows Jesus as open to all believers, not just the Jews. He shows Jesus as the miracle worker, and the one who calls people to discipleship.

The first three Gospels show that Jesus' life and teachings have a certain similarity, resulting in their being called the Synoptic Gospels. Now the Gospel of John, written much later than the other three Gospels (around 95-100C.E.), shows what happens when a believing community has the time to reflect on whom and what Jesus is. John's Gospel has Jesus as being awe inspiring right from the first verses. John shows Jesus as divine, coexisting with the Creator. John shows Jesus at the very beginning of creation.

The early church also had to struggle and reflect on who and what Jesus is. One needs to remember that the early church was underground for over 300 years. It was only after the Emperor Constantine became Christian that the serious task of theology could begin. The Saint Anselm dictum that "theology is faith seeking understanding" is very true in regards to Jesus. Early councils of church leaders had to reflect and debate questions such as: Is Jesus human or divine? Is Jesus one person or two persons? Was Jesus created and born? All these questions were ironed out in early councils of church leaders.

The first great council was Nicea in 325, which produced the Nicene Creed that we say each Sunday at Mass. Nicea clearly stated that Jesus was divine, true God from true God, begotten not made, one in substance with the Father. The next great council was Ephesus in 431. This one had to be called because some people were teaching that the Son of God in Heaven and the man Jesus on earth were two different persons. The Council of Ephesus in 431 declared that there is only one person in Jesus, although there is a difference between his divine and human natures. Thus, Jesus is one person, with two natures, human and divine.

The final council to tackle the question of Jesus' identity was the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Some were teaching that Jesus was only divine and not human. Jesus' divinity was so stressed that his humanity was being forgotten. The Council of Chalcedon proclaimed that both divine and human natures were present in the person of Jesus.

Every believer and each new generation needs to try to answer the “Who is Jesus” question. One is a Christian if one accepts that Jesus is divine. How one lives one’s life should also be judged by the question “How ought a believer in Jesus the Christ live?” Throughout one’s life, where one stands in relation to these questions has a significant effect on both religious and spiritual development.

This Christmas on December 25th let us celebrate that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, our Savior born for us!