

Dr. Robert C. Newman  
Biblical Theological Seminary  
Hatfield, PA

## SEARCH FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS

### Some Recent Examples

1. *The Last Temptation of Christ* novel (1955) by Nikos Kazantzakis, film (1988) by Martin Scorsese: Jesus a collaborator who makes crosses for the Romans; gathers followers, but unsure whether to love or hate Romans; persuades Judas to betray him; has fantasy on cross of marrying Mary Magdalene, then Mary of Bethany, committing adultery with Martha.
2. *Jesus Christ Superstar* rock opera (1971) and film (1973) by Andrew Lloyd-Weber and Tim Rice: Jesus a superstar guru whose fame has gone to his head, starting to believe what others say of him; Jesus dies, blaming God; Judas speaks from grave, also blaming God; no resurrection (closing instrumental entitled John 19:41).
3. *The Passover Plot* (1966) by Hugh J. Schonfield: Unlike *JC Superstar* where Jesus lets everything get out of control, here Jesus has everything planned to nth degree; Jesus learns to interpret prophecy like Essenes, comes to believe he is Messiah, sets out to fulfil own death & resurrection, staging triumphal entry, blowing Judas' mind with wasted perfume, timing own movements so as to be arrested too late to be on cross for more than a few hours; has accomplice give him drug at code-words from cross; but speared by soldier; when removed from tomb by Jos Arimathea, gives message to secret follower who is mistaken for Jesus by women, apostles.
4. *The Sacred Mushroom & the Cross* (1970) by John Marco Allegro: Super plot theory! Jesus (& Xy & Judaism) never existed! All were code-words for super-secret cult stressing sexual orgies and hallucinatory drugs.
5. *Jesus the Magician* (1978) by Morton Smith: Jesus was a gnostic magician, who felt possessed by a supernatural spirit at his baptism and thereafter claimed to be deity; he developed techniques of self-hypnosis & claimed he could fly & teach his disciples to also; visited heaven, saw God and was freed from Mosaic law.

### Why all this Variety?

Are the Gospel accounts really this unclear? No! But people who have never read them are in no position to respond.

1. Many don't like the biblical Jesus  
nothing new; the Pharisees, priests, Romans, etc. didn't like Him either

2. Won't admit the occurrence of miracles
  - argument of Hume: contradict our stds by which we judge reality; more likely that witnesses lying, senses deceived
  - argument of Harnack: ancient people didn't know difference between natural and miracle
  - argument of Bultmann: universe a closed system of cause & effect
3. Try to reconstruct from hypothetical sources
  - Gospels pitted against one another
  - evidence re/ authorship rejected
  - various hypothetical documents "discovered"
  - votes taken on which words & deeds authentic

## Historical Evidence about Jesus

### 1. Pagan Sources:

Tacitus, *Annals* 15:44

But neither human help, nor imperial munificence, nor all the modes of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order. Therefore to scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more...

Pliny, *Letters* 10:96

Pliny to the Emperor Trajan:

It is my custom to refer all my difficulties to you, Sir, for no one is better able to resolve my doubts and inform my ignorance. I have never been present at an examination of Christians... For the moment this is the line I have taken with all persons brought before me on the charge of being Christians. I have asked them in person if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution...

An anonymous pamphlet has been circulated which contains the names of a number of accused persons. Among these I considered that I should dismiss any who denied that they were or ever had been Christians, when they had repeated after me a formula of invocation to the gods and had made offerings of wine and incense to your statue, none of which things, I understand, any genuine Christian can be induced to do. Others, whose names were given me by an informer, first admitted the charge and then denied it; they said they had ceased to be Christians two or more years previously...

They also declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god... This made me decide it was all the more necessary to extract the truth by torture from two slave-women, whom they call deaconesses. I found nothing but a

degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths. I have therefore postponed any further examination and hastened to consult you.

Mara, *Letter to His Son*

For what else have we to say, when wise men are forcibly dragged by the hands of tyrants, and their wisdom is taken captive by calumny, and they are oppressed in their intelligence without defense? For what advantage did the Athenians gain by their murder of Socrates.... Or the people of Samos by the burning of Pythagoras... Or the Jews by the death of their wise king, because from that time their kingdom was taken away?

For with justice did God make recompense to the wisdom of these three: for the Athenians died of famine; and the Samians were overwhelmed by the sea without remedy; and the Jews, desolate and driven from their own kingdom, are scattered through every country. Socrates is not dead, because of Plato; neither Pythagoras, because of the statue of Juno; nor the wise King, because of the laws which he promulgated.

Summary on Pagan sources:

- Jesus lived in Judea in the reign of Tiberius.
- A Messianic claim was ascribed to him.
- He apparently was a teacher.
- He was put to death by Pontius Pilate and/or the Jews.
- His followers continued after his death.
- They worshiped Jesus as God, though they would not worship the gods.
- They were willing to endure torture and death rather than curse Jesus.

2. Jewish Sources:

Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.3.3

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, on hearing him accused by men of highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him.

Agapius, *Universal History*

Similarly Josephus the Hebrew.... At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. His conduct was good and he was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive; accordingly he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.

Talmud: BT, *Sanhedrin* 43a

On the eve of Passover Yeshua was hanged. For forty days before the execution a herald went

forth and cried, "He is going to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Anyone who can say anything in his favor, let him come forward and plead on his behalf." But since nothing was brought forward in his favor he was hanged on the eve of Passover.

Summary on Jewish sources:

- Jesus lived in Judea during the rule of Pontius Pilate.
- His birth was alleged to be unusual, illegitimate.
- His character was controversial.
- He worked miracles, also controversial.
- He gathered followers, who considered him the Messiah.
- He was condemned by Pilate, accused by Jews.
- He was hanged/crucified on Passover eve.
- His resurrection was reported on the third day.

3. Christian Sources: sketch, cp attestation w/ ancient historians

The Gospels

detailed agreement

Paul

supports same picture

note post-resurrection appearances

## Conclusions

Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*

If miracles not rejected in advance, Gospels **look good** by both secular historical methods and by methods used by liberal NT scholars.

C.S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 117 (Macmillan hb):

Letter of senior devil Screwtape to his nephew Wormwood; we keep people off balance by bringing out new Jesus every few years; keep their attention away from the records, which **say what they say** and can only give another picture by distortion, etc.

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