CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

EARLY HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY: A BRIEF LOOK

The Trinitarian believes a virg in to be the mother of a son who is her maker.¹

Proving the existence of a historical Jesus is almost impossible; there are Christian theologians who are now content with a Jesus based on faith rather than an actual historical figure.² So let us open this chapter with the question, did Jesus exist? And if so, what evidence do we have from non-Christian sources (the same 'revisionist' criterion that is invoked by Judeo-Christian scholars against Islam)? What is the spectrum of Christian views regarding Jesus? This will shed considerable light on how little is known about him and on the confusion that reigned in early Christian circles. Also, what was his original message? Was it irretrievably lost in its early stages or was it preserved intact in an inspired book? These are some of the questions and topics I hope to cover in this chapter.

1. Did Jesus Exist?

The first fundamental issue we must pose is whether Jesus truly was a real-life figure. Muslims unequivocally believe in his existence, of his birth from the Virgin Mary and his role as one of the most sublime prophets to the Jewish people. Some Christian scholars though are much more hesitant of Jesus’ historicity.

During the past thirty years theologians have come increasingly to admit that it is no longer possible to write a biography of Jesus, since documents earlier than the gospels tell us next to nothing of his life, while the gospels present the ‘Kerygma’ or proclamation of faith, not the Jesus of history.³

i. References to Jesus in Non-Christian Books from the First Century

The writings of the Jewish historian Josephus (37 – c. 100 C.E.), which cover the period up to 73 C.E., do contain two passages about Jesus the Christ. Of these the longer is quite obviously a Christian interpolation, for it is “a glowing description which no orthodox Jew could have written.” The second passage has been scrutinized by Schurter, Zahn, von Dobschütz, Jüster and other scholars, and they regard the words “the brother of Jesus, him called Christ” as a further interpolation. The lone pagan reference still commonly cited is Tacitus’ statement,

that Christians ‘derive their name and origin from Chrisis, who, in the reign of Tiberius, had suffered death by the sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate.’ Tacitus wrote this about A.D. 120, and by then Christians had themselves come to believe that Jesus had died in this way. I tried to show… that there are good reasons for supposing that Tacitus was simply repeating what was then the Christian view, and that he is therefore not an independent witness.

ii. The Historical Christ in Christian Circles

So we see that using primary sources to establish Jesus as a historical figure is impossible.

Assuming that he did walk the earth, and was a central figure in the God-head, it seems only natural that the Christian community must have chronicled all information regarding him. Like a modern day athlete or international movie star, all tidbits relating to him must have been collected, preserved, perused and treasured. The reality was quite to the contrary.

A. The Life of Jesus: Secondary Sources

Christ’s influence on Western civilization is incalculable, yet collecting materials about his life and teachings is fraught with difficulties. Source material is limited to the New Testament (NT), and more specifically to the four gospels. Because they were primarily written to convert unbelievers and strengthen the resolve of the faithful, these gospels fail to provide much of the crucial historical information sought by biographers. The works therefore open themselves up to interpretation, and interpreters often commit the mistake of seeing the texts through the filter of their own beliefs regarding Jesus, finding in the texts exactly what they set out to discover in the first place.

These canonical sources, four gospels and other NT writings, are so meager that they do not allow the drafting of a full biography. The life of Jesus was in fact relevant only insofar as it furthered Christian dogma; with only a handful of gospel passages ever emphasized in congregations (as noted by Maurice Bucaille), interest in the historical Jesus was at best merely subsidiary.

Hermann Reimarus, Professor of Oriental Languages in Hamburg during the 1700s, was the first to attempt a historical reconstruction of Jesus’ life. Before Reimarus, “the only life of Jesus… which has any interest for us was composed by a Jesuit in the Persian language.” Written in the latter half of the 1500s it was tailored specifically for the use of Akbar, the Moghul emperor. This biography is,

a skillful falsification of the life of Jesus in which the omissions, and the additions taken from the Apocrypha, are inspired by the sole purpose of presenting to the open-minded ruler a glorious Jesus, in whom there should be nothing to offend him.

The dubious nature of this work did not stop it from being translated into Latin a century later, by a theologian of the Reformed Church who wanted to discredit Catholicism. And so the first attempt at a biography, written a full sixteen centuries after Jesus walked the winding alleys of Jerusalem, was nothing more than a historically erroneous missionary text which became another pawn in the doctrinal wars between Catholics and Protestants. Even subsequent scholars failed to compose a workable biography. After the loss of the original gospel, no successful effort appears to have been made during the two thousand years of Christianity to compile a historical overview of Jesus. Robert Funk describes the case as follows:

So far as I have been able to discover, no one had ever compiled a list of all the words attributed to Jesus in the first three hundred years following his death… Among the many scholarly books written on Jesus in the last century and more… I found no critical list of sayings and deeds… [Among my colleagues] no one had compiled a raw list… [even though] most of them lecture or write about Jesus nearly every day.

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10 ibid, p. 13.
11 ibid, p. 14.
12 ibid, p. 14.
13 ibid, p. 14.
So scant is the historical material that even the sketching of an outline is problematic, unless one chooses to forsake historicity and rely instead on the "Jesus of faith" as portrayed in the NT.\textsuperscript{15}

iii. Christ and His Mother-Tongue

This lack of information is so broad that we are kept in ignorance of many of Jesus’ most fundamental attributes. If a full list of his sayings has never been known, have scholars at least agreed on what tongue these sayings were uttered in? The gospels, as well as Christian writers from past and present, have failed to provide any answer with certainty. Among the guesswork of early scholars in this regard we have: a Galilean dialect of Chaldaic (J.J. Scaliger); Syriac (Claude Saumaise); the dialect of Onkelos and Jonathan (Brian Walton); Greek (Vossius); Hebrew (Delitzsch and Resch); Aramaic (Meyer); and even Latin (Inchofer, for "the Lord cannot have used any other language upon earth, since this is the language of the saints in heaven").\textsuperscript{16}

iv. Christ: the Moral Attributes of God?

In the God-head Christ is said to be one in three. Anyone entering a church however, any traditionally recognized church, will immediately discern the total absence of two-thirds of this God-head. The Father and the Holy Spirit are nowhere to be seen while the ubiquitous visage of Jesus Christ stands down from church walls and lets into rainbow colors through stained glass windows. Yet despite his elevated role his treatment at the hands of some Christian writers leaves his legacy riddled with black spots, so much so that it becomes difficult to accept him as a figure universally beloved by Christians – or at the least, as a person whose morality they deem worthy of emulating.

A. Canon Montefiore: was Jesus Gay?

Speaking of Jesus at the Modern Churchmen’s conference at Oxford, 1967, Canon Hugh Montefiore, Vicar of Great St. Mary, Cambridge, stated:

Women were his friends, but it is men he is said to have loved. The striking fact was that he remained unmarried, and men who did not marry usually had one of three reasons: they could not afford it, there were no girls, or they were homosexual in nature.\textsuperscript{17}

8. Martin Luther: Jesus Committed Adultery Three Times

Martin Luther also negates the image of a sinless Jesus. This is to be found in Luther’s Table-Talk,\textsuperscript{18} whose authenticity has never been challenged even though the coarser passages are cause for embarrassment. Arnold Lunn writes:

Weimer quoted a passage from the Table-Talk in which Luther states that Christ committed adultery three times, first with the woman at the well, secondly with Mary Magdalene, and thirdly with the woman taken in adultery, "whom he let off so lightly. Thus even Christ who was so holy had to commit adultery before he died".\textsuperscript{19}

2. Jesus’ Disciples

Casting aside these accusations let us look into the NT itself. Being works of faith the gospels portray Jesus’ inner resilience in the most shining light possible, as they must. But what of his disciples, those who bore the burden of circulating his message and the nucleus through which Christianity blossomed. How are they depicted? In the gospels the twelve disciples do receive special teaching and training, as Jesus was often preparing leaders to carry on in his stead. But interspersed we find several episodes of poor discipleship. In Mark the twelve hardly understand anything they are taught,\textsuperscript{20} and an exasperated Jesus proclaims, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?" On the night of his arrest they continually fail to stay awake in prayer, even as he chides them.\textsuperscript{21} At his arrest they flee. Peter, following at a distance and witnessing his master condemned and spat on, thrice denies to the crowd having any connection to him.\textsuperscript{22}

If we take the gospels as an honest depiction of Jesus’ life and the events surrounding his death, then what we read regarding the twelve serves to underlay the reader’s faith in the text, this being a portrait of Christianity’s

\textsuperscript{15} Bolthman, as referred to by G.A. Wells, Did Jesus Exist? p. 9.
\textsuperscript{16} Schweitzer, op. cit., pp. 271, 275.
\textsuperscript{17} The Times, July 28, 1967.
\textsuperscript{18} Weimar edition, ii:127.
\textsuperscript{19} Arnold Lunn, The Devil’s Against Reason, Eyre & Spottiswoode (Publishers), London, 1950, p. 233. Here is the original: "Christus adulter. Christus ist am ersten ein elohomer worden. Neh. 4, bei dem huren muss muliere, quasi illi dico: Nemo significant, quid famil cum ea? Iren cum Magdalena, tunc cum adultera Ioan. 8, die er in Elische damen bin. Aber muss der von Christus auch an ersten ein elohomer werden ehe er sterbe?"
\textsuperscript{20} B.B. Metzger and M.D. Coogan, eds., The Oxford Companion to the Bible, Oxford Univ. Press, 1993, p. 783.
\textsuperscript{21} Mark 9:19.
\textsuperscript{22} Matthew 26:36-45.
\textsuperscript{23} Matthew 26:69-75.
first line of teachers. I must note that there is much external evidence to challenge the gospel accounts; this has immediate bearing on whether the portrayal of the disciples is accurate or otherwise. Whichever view one subscribes to, that they were indeed incompetent (suggesting that Jesus’ teachings were compromised in the earliest stages), or that they were competent but depicted dishonestly by succeeding writers, the end result is to cast doubt on the gospels’ accuracy and hence, their collective cred.

3. Jesus and his Message: Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand

All sources for the teachings of Jesus emanate from anonymous authors. As noted earlier, Hermann Reimarus (1694-1768) was the first to attempt a historical modeling of Jesus. In this he drew a distinction between what lies written in the gospels and what Jesus himself proclaimed during his lifetime, concluding that his actual teachings can be summed up,

in two phrases of identical meaning, ‘Repent, and believe the Gospel,’ or, as it is put elsewhere, ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.’

Because he never went on to explain either of these phrases, Reimarus argues that Jesus was working and preaching within a wholly Jewish framework, content with having his audience understand ‘the Kingdom of Heaven’ in the Jewish context. Namely, that he was the Deliverer of Israel. The intention of setting up a new religion never existed.

i. Jesus and the Scope of his Message

By aiming his teachings at a Jewish audience and expressing concepts from within a strictly Judaic framework, Jesus was clearly limiting his message to that sector of society. This is clear from Jesus’ statement as recorded in Matthew 10:5-6:

5 These twelve [disciples] Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not;
6 But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

24 See Chapter 18.
25 Schweitzer, p. 16, Italics added.
26 ibid, pp. 16-18.

It is also plainly stated in the Qur’an:

And [Allāh] will teach [Jesus] the Book and Wisdom, the Law and the Gospel, and [appoint him] a messenger to the Children of Israel...

Some modern Christian scholars also acknowledge this. As Helmut Koester notes:

It is a simple historical fact that Jesus was an Israelite from Galilee, and that he understood himself to be nothing else but a prophet in Israel and for Israel – a venerable tradition, and he was not the first of these prophets of Israel who was rejected and persecuted.

Koester is not alone. “Jesus certainly thought of himself as a prophet (Mark 6:4; Luke 13:33) but there was a final quality about his message and work that entitles us to conclude that he thought of himself as God’s final, definitive emissary to Israel,” Luther, Voltaire, Rouscau and Bultmann are all of the same opinion.

ii. Christian Creeds

As Jesus never avowed a message beyond that he was the Deliverer, the Messiah, so neither did he define a specific creed, and within a few decades this resulted in chaos. The early Eastern Creeds include: “Epistles A postolorum. II. The Old Creed of Alexandria. III. The Shorter Creed of the Egyptian Church Order. IV. The Marcionian Creed. V. The Early Creed of Africa. VI. The Profession of the ‘Presbyters’ at Smyrna.” The earliest of these is worth quoting for its shortness and simplicity:

Epistles Apostolorum
(Faith)
In God the Father Almighty;
In Jesus Christ, our Saviour;
And in the Spirit, the Holy, the Paraclete;
Holy Church;
 Forgiveness of sins.

29 The Oxford Companion to the Bible, p. 360.
31 ibid, p. 24.
Compare this to the highly verbose Nicene Creed from the fourth century:

I believe in one God
the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
And of all things visible and invisible:
And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the only-begotten Son of God,
Begotten of his Father
before all worlds,

God of God,
Light of Light,

Very God of very God,

Begotten, not made,
Being of one substance with the Father,

By whom all things were made:

Who for us men,

and for our salvation
came down from heaven (Gk. the heavens),
And was incarnate

by (Gk. of) the Holy Ghost

of (Gk. and) the Virgin Mary,

And was made man,
And was crucified also for us

under Pontius Pilate.

He (no and) suffered

and was buried,

And the third day he rose again

according to the Scriptures,

And ascended into heaven (Gk. the heavens)

And sitteth

on the right hand of the Father.

And he shall come (Gk. cometh) again with glory
to judge both the quick and the dead:
Whose kingdom shall have (Gk. of whose kingdom there shall be) no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost,

the Lord and (Gk. the) giver of life,

Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son,

Who with the Father and the Son
together is worshipped and glorified,

Who spake by the Prophets.

And I believe one
Catholic and Apostolic Church.

I acknowledge one Baptism

for the remission of sins.

And I look for the Resurrection of the dead,
And the life of the world to come.

Amen. 52

These two vastly divergent creeds testify that Jesus never truly defined his message, or that it suffered distortion in myriad ways, for otherwise a simple statement of faith would not have ballooned into a prodigious sermon. The earliest creed lacks any Trinitarian reference, whereas the Nicene incorporates Son of God, God of God, and Begotten, all of which attests to the ever-changing nature of belief regarding Jesus during Christianity’s formative days.

iii. The Implications of the Term ‘Christian’ in the Early Days

In fact it appears that the term ‘Christian’ was merely an invention of Roman propaganda, for in the early days,

the name ‘Christian’ was associated with all kinds of detestable crime - this, too, is a common feature of the political propaganda, and the author of 1 Peter... admonishes his readers not to suffer for the things which for the populace were implied in the name ‘Christian,’ (6:15) e.g. as “a murderer, thief, wrongdoer [better malicious magician], or mischief-maker.” 53

The early church busied itself with fighting this ‘Christian’ appellation, which in Roman minds was equated with a breed of criminals. The origins of this terminology imply that it was the Romans, and not the earliest Christians, who were eager to distinguish followers of the new religion from ancient Israelite tradition. 54

4. The Persecution of Early Christians

Whilst Judaism was seen as an annoyance, its sporadic efforts at political independence invariably crushed, it was nevertheless tolerated by the Romans so long as there was no call for a revolt. Christians suffered a different fate, for while proclaiming their loyalty to the emperor they “would not participate

52 Ibid, pp. 220-1. Badcock has italicized insertions into the Greek text necessitated by translation.
54 In fact, the early church was content to designate the new religion simply as the ‘Way’, as in the ‘Way of the Lord’, the ‘Way of Truth’, the ‘Way of Salvation’, and the ‘Way of Righteousness’. [See Dictionary of the Bible, p. 139.]
in the worship in the temples of the gods and were accused of being atheists.\textsuperscript{35} Imperial and public persecution was never more than one step away. The intellectual classes even derided Christianity as a superstition. They were viewed as a threat to the Greco-Roman way of life, given their separation from the rest of society, and because they mainly worshipped in secret, "the report was current that in their conventicles Christians engaged in sexual promiscuity."\textsuperscript{36} Still, Christianity had taken root in most of the provinces of the Roman Empire by the middle of the 3rd century, despite recurrent local persecution and the widespread antagonism of the populace.

Local persecution eventually matured into Imperial policy. As the Roman Empire was tangibly in decline by the latter half of the 3rd century, an Imperial edict in 249 sought to counteract this by commanding all Roman subjects to sacrifice to the gods. Stringent policies were adopted against the Christians, who refused to abide by this edict, to the point where all attendees of church services were threatened with death. In 260 the capture of Emperor Valerian by the Persians brought to an end this round of cruelty and for the next four decades the Church flourished. But in 303 the tide turned again, with a level of persecution far harsher than any the Christians had known before. Hundreds, if not thousands, perished. Tolerance was finally secured through the efforts of Constantine, an aspirant to the throne, who legalized Christianity in 313 and whose own conversion, a few years thereafter, signaled Rome’s sponsorship of the new religion.\textsuperscript{37}

5. Belief Systems in Early Christianity

Confusion regarding the exact teachings of Jesus, coupled with the continuous persecution of Christians until the early 4th century, resulted in a multidimensional array of practices set up under the umbrella of Christianity. Quoting Ehrman:

\begin{quote}
There were, of course, Christians who believed in only one God; others, however, claimed that there were two Gods; yet others subscribed to 30, or 365, or more.... Some Christians believed that Christ was somehow both a man and God; others said that he was a man, but not God; others claimed that he was God, but not a man; others insisted that he was a man who had been temporarily inhabited by God. Some Christians believed that Christ’s death had
\end{quote}

Brought about the salvation of the world; others claimed that this death had no bearing on salvation; yet others alleged that he had never even died.\textsuperscript{38}

Q, the original collection of Jesus’ teachings, was drowned by other competing influences while the new religion was still in its infancy.\textsuperscript{39} The texts that subsequently emerged in Christian circles, seeking to fill this void, began to acquire the status of Scripture. As conflicting strands of theology sought the basis for their beliefs in these Scriptures, various sects - holding vastly different views on Christ - played their parts in mending and molding the text, each aiming to champion its own unique theological vision.

The Orthodox Church, the sect which eventually established supremacy over all others, stood in fervent opposition to various ideas (heresies) which were in circulation. These included Adoptionism (the notion that Jesus was not God, but a man); Docetism (the opposite view, that he was God and not man); and Separationism (that the divine and human elements of Jesus Christ were two separate beings). In each case this sect, the one that would rise to become the Orthodox Church, deliberately corrupted the Scriptures so as to bolster its own theological vision of Christ, while demolishing that of all rival sects.\textsuperscript{40}

6. Conclusions

Consider these points: that the disciples of Jesus, according to the Bible, were students of an uncertain quality; that Q, the original gospel of Jesus, was out-competed by other ideas during the earliest stages of Christianity; that a one-time simple declaration of faith was inflated to encompass new theological notions centuries later, prompted by the lack of a distinct creed; that the great diversity of views concerning the nature of God-head resulted in the corruption of available texts for theological aims; and that on top of this internal chaos, the first three centuries of Christian history were imbued with persecution. Such a volatile atmosphere was not conducive to the preservation of Christian Scripture.