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978-0-521-36915-2 - What Can We Know about Jesus?

Howard Clark Kee

Excerpt

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Introduction: Knowing Jesus and Knowing about Jesus

Paul was persuaded that he had seen Jesus (1 Cor 9:1). His having seen Jesus was as real to him as was the experience of Jesus reported by the other apostles. This was true even though he had had no association with Jesus during his earthly lifetime such as the disciples had had. Paul's call as an apostle was based on having seen Jesus risen from the dead, as he reports in 1 Corinthians 15:8. There he makes no distinction between his having seen Jesus and the appearances of Jesus to the disciples. Equally important is that apparently they also saw no difference between Paul's experience and theirs, since they accepted him as having been called to apostleship by the risen Christ, just as they had been. But Paul's vision of the living Christ was not his only direct encounter with Jesus. Paul tells in 2 Corinthians 12:9 what the Lord said to him, when once he was taken up into the presence of Christ – who had been exalted to heaven – giving him instruction about enduring the difficulties and sufferings he was undergoing (“My grace is sufficient for you . . .”). It is clear that Paul's claim to know Jesus was based on personal experience. Paul was persuaded that he *knew* Jesus.

This kind of knowledge, which is based on claims of spiritual or mystical encounter, is widely greeted with skepticism in the modern world, as it was by many in ancient times. Yet, in addition to these claims of mystical experience of Jesus, Paul offers in his letters important information as to what he *knows about* Jesus, which has come to him through traditions, handed down by those who preceded him in the early Christian community. As such, it can be critically examined and com-

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pared with other testimony from eyewitnesses of Jesus, just as one would evaluate evidence in a modern court or academic setting. For example, when Paul reports the tradition about the Eucharist or communion, he says he received it "from the Lord" (1 Cor 11:23), but the terms he uses for receiving and transmitting show that he is passing on to others in the community what had been passed on to him. The basic details of the eucharistic meal, and even the terminology used – "took," "blessed," "broke," "gave" – match reports from other sources wholly independent of Paul, such as the Gospels (Mk 14:22–4, Mt 26:26–8, Lk 22:17–19). Is Paul's knowledge of Jesus based on firsthand religious experience or on tradition? The answer is, of course, both.

In modern times, Christians commonly claim to have the same ways of "knowing Jesus," based on both personal experience and tradition, but much of the emphasis falls on private encounters with Jesus. For example, there are many hymns and gospel songs in which believers celebrate their associations with Jesus. These range from "In the Garden," with its refrain about Jesus—"He walks with me and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own" – to the southern spiritual "I Have a Little Talk with Jesus, and I Tell Him All About My Troubles," which ends with the line, "Just a little talk with Jesus makes it right, all right." Yet if all the beliefs of Christians, ancient and modern, about the existence of Jesus were to be based solely on such claims of immediate spiritual experience, skeptics might write off these reports as delusions, falsehoods, or the output of wild imaginations. Yet even those who base their claims of knowing Jesus on private spiritual encounters acknowledge freely that the specifics and the meaning of these experiences are grounded in tradition – that is, on the picture of Jesus that comes through the New Testament, and, especially, through the Gospels.

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Knowing Jesus

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As early as a century and a half after Jesus was born, there were those in the Roman world – both pagan and Jewish – who sought to discredit Jesus. They suggested that he performed his miracles by means of magic, and scoffed at the notion of his having been born of a virgin. In the Jewish sources, for example, a pun was invented on the Greek word for virgin, *parthenos*, for which was substituted *Pantheros*. Instead of the early Christian claim that Jesus was born of a virgin, the notion was proposed that he was really the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier named Pantheros. What is important for our purposes is that Jesus' detractors sought to destroy his reputation, but did not deny either that he existed or that he performed extraordinary deeds. Similarly, assertions by some modern scholars that Jesus was a magician deny the divine origin of the mission in which Christians have seen him as engaged, but at the same time acknowledge that he did exist and that a major factor in his appeal was his ability to perform healings and other forms of renewal of life.

From the seventeenth century to the present, however, there have been those who have wanted to deny that Jesus ever lived or to discredit completely the Christian reports of his activities. These proposals include the theory that he never truly existed. The skeptics' assumption is that the gospel accounts of Jesus are the product of ancient mythmakers who were seeking to demonstrate his unique relationship to God in fantastic accounts that reached their climax in the fraudulent story of his having been raised from the dead. Other suggestions as to who the "real" Jesus was include (1) that he was really a mildly reforming rabbi whose intentions were misunderstood by the contemporary Jewish leadership and whose followers completely distorted the facts in writing the gospel narratives; and (2) that he began his career as a member of the Essenes, the Jewish monastic sect that lived at Qumran, overlooking the

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Dead Sea, while awaiting the end of the age and God's intervention on their behalf. He would establish them in Jerusalem as the true people of God who were to renew and purify the Temple. Jesus, the theory postulates, ran afoul of the political and officially established religious authorities, who conspired to bring about his execution. The question remains as to how we are to bring together the evidence about Jesus from non-Christian sources and relate it to the testimony of the New Testament writers.

In what follows, we shall look in some detail at historical references to Jesus in pagan and Jewish sources from the early centuries after his birth (Chapter 1), in order to see what matches, modifies, supplements, or contradicts reports in the Gospels. In this connection, we shall analyze the probable relationship of Jesus to the various Jewish groups of his day, including the Dead Sea sect. Then we shall turn to the early Christian testimony about Jesus, both that included in the New Testament (apart from the Gospels) and other early Christian writings that claim to offer information about him, including some that have become available only in recent decades (Chapter 2). In Chapters 3 and 4 we shall concentrate on the most important body of evidence for our knowledge of Jesus – that is, on the oldest available forms of access to the gospel evidence. Our primary attention will be first on “Q,” the source used by Matthew and Luke that consists primarily of the sayings of Jesus; then we shall analyze the Gospel of Mark, which is the earliest of the Gospels, and which provided the writers of the other three gospels a basic source and structure for their accounts of the public career of Jesus. John, we shall see, follows the Markan pattern in a general way, but offers important differences in detail about Jesus' career and the content of his teaching. It is to an analysis of these other three Gospels – Matthew, Luke, and John – that we turn in the final chapter.

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As we examine this range of evidence, we shall see important differences in insight and interpretation, as well as certain common features in the portrayal of Jesus. In a concluding section we shall summarize the results of this inquiry as to “what we can know about Jesus.”

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Chapter 1

What Can We Learn from Sources Outside the New Testament?

The historical writings dealing with the Roman world in the first century of our era contain very few references to Jesus. This should not be surprising. It was only after the Christian movement had grown in numbers and significance to become an important factor in Roman politics and society that mention of it appeared in the historical sources. Although Acts reports the numbers of converts to Christianity in Jerusalem in the thousands (Acts 2:41; 4:4), the fact that the gatherings of Christians took place in private homes (1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:23) suggests that participants in the Jesus movement in gentile cities during the first generation probably numbered in the dozens, or scores at the most. The majority of these people were of simple backgrounds, so that their role in society would not have drawn public attention to them. It is precisely those events connected with Jesus and his followers involving encounters with the Roman authorities that appear as the rare allusions to Christianity in sources outside the New Testament.

Evidence from Josephus

The most striking of these references to Jesus appears in the monumental work, *Antiquities of the Jews*, written by the Jewish historian Josephus, who lived from the mid-thirties to the end of the first century A.D. Originally a champion of Jewish national independence, he turned to the role of collaborator with the Romans when they invaded Palestine in A.D. 67–70.

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Evidence from Josephus

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In Josephus' list of Jewish nationalists and troublemakers in the first century he mentions both Jesus and Jesus' brother James, who became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, the ancient text of Josephus' *Antiquities* that has come down to us gives evidence of having been tampered with by Christians in order to make the Jewish author bear Christian testimony. The relevant text reads as follows:

About this time [i.e., while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, A.D. 26–36] 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, upon hearing him accused by men of the 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 of God had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him. And the tribe of Christians, so-called after him, has still to this day not disappeared. (*Antiquities* 18.63)

This passage in its present form reads as though Josephus were a Christian – which of course he was not. The distinguished Jewish scholar L. H. Feldman, who made this translation, thinks we should simply omit the sentence, “He was the Messiah.” Then we may read the rest of the statement as the author's report of what the Christians claimed about Jesus. If this is a correct evaluation of this section from Josephus, it would reflect his estimate of the movement from the perspective of the late first century, when he was writing this major historical account of Palestinian Judaism. It obviously links the death of Jesus with Pilate as the Gospels do, and specifies that he died by crucifixion. It refers to his unusual abilities, his claim to wisdom, and the fact that both Jews and non-Jews responded to his message. It bears witness to the claim of his followers that God had brought him back from the dead and that in him the promises made to the prophets were fulfilled.

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In addition, it notes that his major public role was that of teacher, and that the quality characterizing his relationship to his followers was that of love. Missing is any detailed information as to what he taught or the nature of his remarkable "feats." The remark, "if indeed one ought to call him a man," could be understood to imply that Jesus is divine, but since Josephus gives no hint of having been drawn to Christianity, it more likely originally indicated that Josephus thought Jesus was an agent of Satan. This would fit with the report in the Gospels of an accusation against Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees that he was in league with the prince of demons (Mk 3:22; Mt 9:34). In this extrabiblical evidence there is no denial that Jesus performed extraordinary deeds: The issue is the source of his power.

Evidence from the Roman Historians

Among the letters written by the Roman governor Pliny to the emperor Trajan around the year 110 was one concerning the growth of the Christian movement in Bithynia, a province on the south shore of the Black Sea in what is now Turkey. Earlier, as Pliny told the emperor, the presence of Christians had been evident in the cities of this district, but more recently it had spread to even the rural areas. As a result, there had been an alarming drop in support for and participation in the worship of the gods at the temples promoted officially by the Roman state. More seriously, Pliny continued, the Christians, even under threat of death, refused to offer the appropriate required prayers and gifts to the image of the emperor, who was now officially to be regarded as divine.

When Pliny had investigated what the members of the Christian groups did, he was astounded to find that their behavior was so inoffensive: They gathered early in the morning to sing a hymn to Christ as a god; they took an oath to avoid wicked

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Evidence from the Roman Historians

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deeds such as fraud, theft, deceit, or adultery. Pliny was surprised to find that their sacred meal consisted only of ordinary food. Among their leaders were women, who were called deaconesses. The worst he could say about the Christians was that they were subject to a "depraved and excessive superstition." But because they refused to perform the divine honors to the emperor, and therefore threatened the solidarity of local support for his rule, he had offered them the choice of renouncing their faith in Jesus (for which renunciation they could give evidence by their participation in the official ceremonies) or facing execution. Here, as in the evidence from Josephus, several important features of the Jesus movement receive confirmation: the affirmation – in the name of Jesus – of the commandments attributed to Jesus against stealing, false witness, adultery; the importance of the common meal as the central act in which the unity of God's people is confirmed; and the important place of women in the leadership of the church.

In his *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, Suetonius (A.D. 70–122?) mentions an incident that occurred in Rome during the reign of the emperor Claudius (A.D. 41–54). The Jewish community there had been split apart "at the instigation of Chrestos," he reports. Claudius reacted by driving all the Jews from Rome. It is widely believed that this writer mistook what would have been for him an uncommon title, *Christos*, for the familiar Greek name *Chrestos*. What created the disturbance among the Jews in Rome, therefore, was not the arrival of a troublemaking individual with a common name (*Chrestos*), as Suetonius supposed, but the coming to that group of someone preaching to the Jews about *Christos* – that is, proclaiming Jesus as Messiah. This expulsion of the Jews from Rome by Claudius is also reported in Acts 18:1–4, where we read that two of Paul's original helpers in Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila, had been driven out of Rome along with other Jews. The fact

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that they were apparently Christians when Paul began his association with them confirms the theory that Jesus was being effectively preached as Messiah to Jews in Rome before the middle of the first century. But otherwise it adds no new information about him.

Another Roman historian, Tacitus (A.D. 55–117?), reports in his *Annals* (15:44) that when the emperor Nero (who ruled from 41 to 54) was suspected of having set Rome on fire, he shifted the blame to the Christians and punished them accordingly. As Tacitus wrote:

Neither human help, nor imperial munificence, nor all the modes of placating heaven, could stifle the scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order [i.e., of Nero]. 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 style Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for their hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on corpses, and when light failed were burned as lamps by night. Nero had offered his gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the garb of a charioteer, or mounted on his chariot.

Once more, in this excerpt from Tacitus, we have support for the report in the Gospels that Jesus was put to death under Pontius Pilate. The additional information that this took place during the reign of Tiberius (A.D. 14–37) gives us a terminal date for that event (A.D. 37) and, when linked with the term of Pilate's governorship (26–36), points to the year 29 as the most plausible date for Jesus' crucifixion. The vivid account serves