

January 12, 2014

False Ideas About Jesus Christ (part one)

By Wayne Jackson

Without question, Jesus of Nazareth is the most dominating figure in human history. Who was he? Alternatively, in the words of the Teacher himself in a question to the leaders of the Jewish community, “What do you think of the Christ?” Every intellectually reflective person must come to grips with this engaging question.

The available data regarding the identity of Jesus are definitive. He is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:30-31). Regrettably, however, there are numerous erroneous opinions regarding him in the marketplace of religious ideas.

Jesus Never Existed

As strange as it may sound, some, in their desperation to dismiss the Lord, deny that he ever lived upon this earth. A German historian named Bruno Baur, near the middle of the 19th century, advanced this notion. In our own time, The Great Soviet Encyclopedia (Moscow, 1952), in a two-line entry under “Jesus,” states, “the name of the mythological founder of Christianity.” One scholar notes that this reveals more about the authors’ bias than their historical judgment (Metzger, 1965, 78).

An apostate Pentecostal, turned-skeptic, has affirmed that he is “convinced that the story of Jesus is just a myth” (Barker, 1992, 359-360). What a woefully ignorant viewpoint. It dismisses the following lines of evidence.

There are thousands of copies of the Greek New Testament Scriptures (in part or in whole), some of which stand in the shadows of the apostles themselves, that testify to the existence of Jesus Christ.

The Jewish historian Josephus twice mentions Christ (Antiquities 18.3.3; 20.9.1). The Babylonian Talmud refers to Jesus’ trial by the Sanhedrin, and to his execution on the eve of the Passover. The prominent Jewish scholar of Hebrew University, Joseph Klausner, in his famous book, Jesus of Nazareth, had an extensive section demonstrating the Hebrew evidence for Christ’s existence (1989, 17-54). He did not dispute the matter at all.

There are several Roman sources documenting the historicity of Jesus. Pliny, governor of Bithynia, wrote a letter to the Roman emperor Trajan (c. A.D. 112) in which he referred to the fact that Christians gather on a certain day to worship Christ as if he were a god (Epistle X.96). The historian Tacitus, in his Annals (c. A.D. 115), commented regarding one “Christus” who was condemned to death by Pontius Pilate (XV.44). Finally, Seutonius (c. A.D. 120), secretary to the emperor Hadrian (hence one having access to official records),

mentions the expulsion of certain Jews from Rome due to the controversy surrounding “Chrestus” (Vita Claudii XXV.4)— an incident which agrees with Luke’s reference in Acts 18:2.

Though he did not accept Jesus as the Son of God, Klausner exposes the arguments of those who deny that these are references to Jesus of Nazareth; he argues there is historical proof for the existence of Christ and his extensive influence in the early years of Christian history (1989, 60-62).

(Antiquities 18.3.3; 20.9.1). The Babylonian Talmud refers to Jesus’ trial by the Sanhedrin, and to his execution on the eve of the Passover. The prominent Jewish scholar of Hebrew University, Joseph Klausner, in his famous book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, had an extensive section demonstrating the Hebrew evidence for Christ’s existence (1989, 17-54). He did not dispute the matter at all.

There are several Roman sources documenting the historicity of Jesus. Pliny, governor of Bithynia, wrote a letter to the Roman emperor Trajan (c. A.D. 112) in which he referred to the fact that Christians gather on a certain day to worship Christ as if he were a god (Epistle X.96). The historian Tacitus, in his *Annals* (c. A.D. 115), comments regarding one “Christus” who was condemned to death by Pontius Pilate (XV.44). Finally, Seutonius (c. A.D. 120), secretary to the emperor Hadrian (hence one having access to official records), mentions the expulsion of certain Jews from Rome due to the controversy surrounding “Chrestus” (Vita Claudii XXV.4)— an incident which agrees with Luke’s reference in Acts 18:2.

Though he did not accept Jesus as the Son of God, Klausner exposes the arguments of those who deny that these are references to Jesus of Nazareth; he argues there is historical proof for the existence of Christ and his extensive influence in the early years of Christian history (1989, 60-62).

A Spirit Being, Not Flesh

Out of the ancient world of the New Testament period there eventually evolved a movement known as Gnosticism. This term covered a variety of sects that advocated numerous aberrant ideas at variance with biblical truth. Many scholars are convinced that there are a number of New Testament warnings concerning the developing errors of this heresy (cf. 1 Timothy 6:20).

One branch of this philosophy was known as “Docetism” — from the Greek term *dokein*, which means, “to seem.” These heretics believed that Jesus was not a real, flesh-and-blood man; he merely “appeared” to be. This notion strikes at the very heart of the gospel. By implication, it denies such matters as the incarnation (John 1:14), the Savior’s resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-4), and the high priesthood of the Son of God (Hebrews 2:17-18). Thankfully, any significant movement no longer seriously entertains this false ideology.

Christ, The First-Created Being

Those affiliated with the Watchtower Society allege that the second Person of the Godhead, Jesus Christ, was not an eternal being. Instead, it is claimed, he was “the first of God’s creations . . . he had a beginning” (*Reasoning from the Scriptures*, 1985, 409). There is no basis for this fanatical theory, as the following facts reveal.

A number of passages assert the eternity of the Word who became flesh (John 1:14). Isaiah denominates him as “everlasting” (9:6), and Micah declares that his goings forth have been “from everlasting” (5:2).

When John affirms: “In the beginning was the Word” (1:1), he employs an imperfect tense form, which suggests “continuous timeless existence” (Bernard, 1928, 2).

Christ is designated as “the Alpha and the Omega” (Revelation 21:6; 22:13), which expression is applied to God earlier in the same document (1:8). The phrase constitutes a “strong assertion of the true and eternal deity of Jesus Christ” (Vos, 1975, 111).

However, the “Jehovah’s Witnesses” argue that since Jesus is called “the firstborn of all creation” (Colossians 1:15), and “the beginning of the creation” (Revelation 3:14), he must have had an origin in time, hence, was not eternal. The arguments are invalid.

First, the term “beginning” (arche) in this text is a reference to Christ as the “first cause” of creation (Danker, 2000, 138; Thayer, 1958, 77). As Robertson noted: “not the first of creatures ... but the originating source of creation” (1933, 321). In Revelation 22:13, Jesus is designated as “the beginning” and “the end.” If “beginning” means that he had a commencement, does “end” suggest that he will be terminated ultimately?

Second, the term “Firstborn” does not imply an origin for the Savior. “Firstborn” is used frequently in the sense of “rank,” i.e., the “chief” (Liddell & Scott, 1869, 1400). Adam Clarke has shown that the Hebrews even referred to Jehovah, the Father, as “the firstborn of the entire world” to signify the fact that he produced all things (n.d., 516). Not even the Watchtower folks contend that the Father had an origin. Long after Christ was in existence (as conceded even by the Watchtower Witnesses), a prophet announced: “I [the Father] also will make [future tense] him [Christ] my first-born” (Psalm 89:27). Obviously, the term denotes rank, rather than chronological commencement.

Christ Was An Angel

Another false theory of the self-styled “Jehovah’s Witnesses” is the claim that Jesus is to be identified with Michael, the archangel (Reasoning, 1985, 218). Considerable New Testament evidence demonstrates that Christ was not an angel. Note this irresistible logic.

First, angels refuse worship (Revelation 22:8, 9). However, Jesus accepted worship (Matthew 8:2; 9:18; 14:33). Jesus, thus, was not an angel. The worship of angels is sinful (Colossians 2:18). If Christ was a mere angel, he should have rebuked those who worshiped him (Matthew 14:33), yet he never did!

Second, the entire first chapter of Hebrews is an argument proving that Jesus was not of the angel class. For instance, God never said to an angel: “You are my son, this day have I begotten you” (1:5); and yet, he did make that statement of Christ. Clearly, Christ was not an angel. In addition, all the angels were to worship Jesus (1:6). However, one worships a superior, not an equal. Obviously, therefore, Christ was not of the angel class. For a more elaborate discussion of these erroneous ideas, as entertained by the Watchtower advocates, see the author’s booklet, *Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Doctrine of the Deity of Christ* (1979).