

**WHY
BELIEVE
IN
JESUS CHRIST?**

by Russell Collins

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Introduction

Of all the men of renown known to humankind, one man, Jesus Christ, has had the greatest influence upon the conduct of human affairs.

There is in the world today an organisation called the Christian Church. Its origin can be traced back to Israel, then known as Palestine, to about the year 32 AD. Something must have happened there to give it a start. The institution of the Christian Sunday can also be traced back to Israel to about the same period of time. The festival called Easter can be traced back to the same place and to about the same era. Originally a pagan festival, some early church leaders set aside Easter Friday to commemorate the Crucifixion of Jesus, and the following Sunday to commemorate His Resurrection.

Furthermore, it has been remarked that it was within the countries of Western Europe which embraced Christianity, that most of the great discoveries of contemporary science were made, giving rise to the dominance of science in the world today, and to what is broadly known as Western civilisation.

Because the Christian influence has made such a vast difference to history and to the lives of so many men and women, and because Jesus' teachings make such claims for Himself, and make such demands on us as individuals, we cannot wisely refuse to consider the implications of His influence on human affairs during the past two millennia.

These observations give rise to the following questions when giving proper consideration to the topic Why Believe in Jesus Christ?

1. Did He ever live?
2. What information do we have about Him?
3. In any case, why bother to believe?

RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONS

1. DID HE EVER LIVE?

Jesus of Nazareth is reputed to have lived nearly two thousand years ago in a small country bordering on the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, the country now known as Israel. The record of history establishes this to be so.

The late Sir James Frazer (1854-1941), an English anthropologist and classical scholar, although not a believer, wrote:

"My theory assumes the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth as a great religious and moral teacher, who founded Christianity and was crucified at Jerusalem under the governorship of Pontius Pilate. The testimony of the gospels, confirmed by the hostile evidence of Tacitus (Ann.XV,44) and the younger Pliny (Epist.X,96) appears amply sufficient to establish these facts to the satisfaction of all unprejudiced enquirers The doubts which have been cast upon the historical reality of Jesus are, in my judgment, unworthy of serious attention. Quite apart from the positive evidence of history and tradition, the origin of a great religious and moral reform is inexplicable without the personal existence of a great reformer ... Such dissolving views are for the most part the dreams of students, who know the great world chiefly through its pale reflection in books."

Many other historical scholars and scientists have come to the same conclusion, and opposing views now come only from those who espouse contradictory theories which ignore the historical evidence.

There are three more references to Christ in the historical records of the period. They are Josephus (Jewish Antiquities, XVIII, 63 and XX, 200), and Suetonius (Vita Claudii 25:40). These passages establish the historicity of Jesus Christ beyond doubt, because to reject Him as myth or fabrication requires that the historical records be rejected also. See the Appendix for the details of these references.

2. WHAT INFORMATION DO WE HAVE ABOUT HIM?

The references to Christ in Jewish and secular history are brief. It is only the Bible that provides a wealth of information about Him.

The Witness of the Gospels

There are the accounts of many eye-witnesses and people who had close contact with eye-witnesses. The early Christians accepted the four gospels as true records without question. The gospels appeared in the lifetime of large numbers of people who had been eye-witnesses of Jesus' deeds, and had listened to His sermons and parables, and the accuracy of their record was not questioned.

At that time and in that part of the Roman Empire the people of several nationalities saw and were astonished by His miraculous deeds of feeding multitudes, healing the sick and even restoring life to the dead.

The gospels have done more than any books or writings to establish honesty in the world. This is a moral fact. Such writings cannot have a dishonest origin. The Apostle Paul in his letters to the Corinthians writes about Jesus in such a way as to indicate that his readers must have been well acquainted with the facts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. He writes of Jesus in the same matter-of-fact way that we would write of the Second World War or man's journeys to the moon. If the facts about Jesus' life and ministry have been romanticised or distorted by people's imaginings, as some have said, then such theories do not explain the change in His disciples, the huge influx into the Christian Church in its early days, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, and the conclusion reached by so many people independently that Jesus was truly the Son of God.

Jesus Christ is the Central Figure in Scripture and History

The advent of Jesus Christ placed a turning point in human history, not only a change-over for our dating system, but He provided, through His teachings, an explanation of history from the beginning to His own time, and also an exposition of the future, and contained within that exposition is the only hope for everlasting happiness for all mankind. No other philosophy has such a scope of understanding, nor does any other religion make so many and great claims based on its founder.

The writers of the gospels recorded the facts as they themselves witnessed them or were told of them by eye-witnesses. The records that they have compiled of Christ show Him to be unique, a man without fault or sin:

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin .” (Hebrews 4:15).

His character is shown to exemplify the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love. Christ Himself never showed any consciousness of sin or failure in Himself:

“Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, who don't you believe me?” (John 8:46).

Messianic Prophecy

Christ's earthly ministry had been foretold by the Old Testament prophets centuries before it took place. The main events and details are the following:

- His birth at Bethlehem (Micah 5:2);
- His flight into Egypt (Hosea 11:1);
- His riding into Jerusalem (Zechariah 9:9);
- His death by piercing with no bones being broken (Psalm 22:16; Psalm 34:20; Zechariah 12:10; 13:6);
- the specific details of Isaiah 53;
- the seventy weeks of Daniel (Daniel 9: 24 to 27).

The suggestion that someone read the prophecies and fulfilled them by play-acting is entirely untenable because most of the prophecies concern Messiah's birth and death, two details of life which cannot be stage-managed.

The Supreme Teacher

Jesus Christ is the supreme religious and moral teacher. He speaks with masterful authority. He brushes aside all the traditions of the Jewish elders and supersedes the Law of Moses (Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7). His teachings on God, the forgiveness of sins, the difference between formality and reality in religion, and on moral purity are without parallel or equal in any of the world's great teachers or philosophers.

The Supreme Example

It is sometimes said that Jesus' teachings set too high a standard for anyone to reach. While this is true, He showed that God has provided a way by which the problem can be overcome. The response to this ought to be along these lines.

Jesus Himself lived up to His teachings.

If Jesus' followers try sincerely to follow His teachings, they will be accepted as children by God, and forgiven on confession when and where they fall short of Christ's perfection:

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9);

"For it is written, As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me and every tongue shall give praise to God. So each of us shall give account of himself to God." (Romans 14: 11 and 12).

In other words, Christ's perfection cannot be attained by us in this life, but God accepts our intentions and efforts to be like Christ as though we were successful.

If all people followed and obeyed Christ's teachings now, earth would be a place of peace and prosperity. Our social and international problems would be solved in a short time.

Jesus handled difficult situations with ease, and transferred the problems to His accusers and questioners, such as paying tribute to Caesar (Mark 12: 13 to 17), casting out devils (Matthew 12: 22 to 30), responding to the questioning of His authority (Matthew 21: 23 to 27), and questioning His hearers about Himself in relation to David (Mark 12: 35 to 37). He displayed profound learning and wisdom without having been taught by a human teacher; *"The Jews were amazed and asked, "How did this man get such learning without having studied?"* (John 7:15).

The reader is warmly recommended to read our booklet 'Who is Jesus?' especially the final section, 'Christ Our Example' (pages 16 and 17).

Jesus' Claims for Himself

Old Testament prophecies indicated that a Messiah would come to the Jewish race through the lineage of David. Jesus claimed to be that one, sent from God to fulfil God's promise to Abraham, to bless all the families of the earth. Jesus claimed to have power from God to do His will and so establish the authenticity of His mission. He foretold His death, and claimed that He would be raised to life for the purpose of returning, at the proper time, to establish God's kingdom on earth. The Biblical record of the prophecies, His blameless life on earth and His miracles substantiate those claims beyond doubt.

The Testimony of the Miracles

Jesus' miracles are sometimes questioned. His miracles were part of His credentials as the Son of God. The early opponents of Christianity never denied His miracles. The Jews attributed them to demon possession; some philosophers, such as Celsus, to sorcery; while some secular and Christian writers, such as Quadratus and Justin Martyr, refer to them as indisputable. No contemporary critic or writer of Jesus' life denies the miracles of Jesus.

The Resurrection of Christ

There are six independent written testimonies to the fact of the Resurrection: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul and Peter. Three of them, John, Paul and Peter, are eye-witness accounts. All testimonies agree on the central points. Jesus died. He was buried. A stone was placed at the door of the tomb with a seal and an armed guard. On the third day, very early, He came out of the tomb. He appeared to many during forty days. He ascended to Heaven and was seen no more.

It is a fact that there was the empty tomb. The Jewish and Roman authorities could not produce the body, and conspired to conceal the fact of the resurrection by lies and bribery:

"While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, 'You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him

and keep you out of trouble. So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day. (Matthew 28: 11 to 15).

If the resurrection was merely a revival from a faint or swoon, then both Christ and His disciples would have been parties to a deception, and people do not stake their all for something in which they do not believe. The disciples could not have removed the body to perpetrate a deception because of the extraordinary change in their demeanour after the event. Previously His disciples were weak, dependent and timid; suddenly they were bold and courageous, willing to put up with any hardship, torture and even death, and were intent on founding the Church of Jesus Christ. There cannot be a mistake on the main issue. People do not die for what they know to be a lie.

After Jesus' resurrection, His followers saw Him, talked with Him, touched Him and watched Him eat. Sometimes there were ten or so at a time, and on one occasion over five hundred brethren all together. Many of these appearances are related by independent witnesses. They are entirely free from fanciful or grotesque incidents that could imply evil (Satanic) involvement.

Jesus' appearances could not have been merely visions. Visions are intensely individualistic, seen only by a small minority of people with a special nervous temperament, and then only under stress of special circumstances. Each person's visions are peculiar to himself or herself. Visions may be thought to speak, but rarely are conversations conducted. Visions are intangible and do not alter material things. They are also likely to recur at irregular intervals for years in a susceptible individual.

The Resurrection appearances break every known phenomenon of visions. All kinds of people with every variety of temperament saw the same appearances. Many saw Jesus at the same time and in the open air. On one occasion more than five hundred brethren saw Him at the same time. There were conversations with Jesus, His followers touched Him and saw Him eat. He prepared a fire and food for them for breakfast. The appearances began within a few hours of the stone being rolled back from the tomb, before legend or imagination had a chance to develop. After forty days, apart from a special manifestation to the Apostle Paul, the appearances ceased.

When all the information is considered and discussion is done, the vision theory breaks on one incontrovertible fact; the tomb was empty and the body was gone.

3. WHY BOTHER TO BELIEVE?

As to this question, the world of Christianity is divided into two classes: those who are willing to make the effort, and those who cannot be bothered. For many people there is a significant degree of satisfaction in leading a good moral life, obeying the laws of the land, conforming to acceptable social behaviour and taking responsibility for the obligations of family and employment.

For sincere believing Christians, Christianity has the purest moral code and clear requirements of obedience, proper behaviour and taking responsibility for obligations. But there is also the promise of rewards that far exceed the satisfaction of leading a good moral life.

Jesus Christ came to earth for the purpose of reconciling the human race with its creator. This is stated simply in John 3:17:

“For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

Christ established the way of salvation, and called upon all those who came to know of Him to follow the perfect example that He set during His life on earth, and then in God’s due time, to be rewarded with eternal life. The example of goodness which He set, the challenge to accept the call to follow Him, and the boundless vision of eternal life are almost beyond human comprehension. To try to live a Christian life, a life of good in a world of evil, places upon each person the utmost demands of service in spite of all manner of temptation.

However, God tells us in the Bible that He *“rewards those who earnestly seek him.”* The searching for God must be done in faith, as the Bible tells us:

“And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6).

Moreover, any search for God and any approach to Him must be made through Jesus Christ, as He Himself said, *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* (John 14:6)

The apostle Peter also testified of Jesus Christ, *“And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among man by which we must be saved.”* (Acts 4:12).

The Bible tells us that it is in order to seek a reward for faith and obedience. Peter said to the Lord Jesus, *“We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”* Jesus replied, saying to Peter that he and the other apostles would sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Matthew 19: 27 and 28)

The sincere and obedient believer in Jesus Christ is promised a reward far greater than anything this world can offer. The apostle Paul tells believers that they *“are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ.”* (Romans 8: 16 and 17)

The reward promised is a heavenly inheritance, *“and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.”* (1 Peter 1:4)

The apostle Paul writes of this heavenly inheritance as so certain that we can say we have it now, because God *“raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.”* (Ephesians 2:6).

The Lord Jesus Christ promises, *“To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations - ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery’ - just as I have received authority from my Father.”* (Revelation 2: 26 and 27).

The apostle Paul also tells us, *“However, as it is written: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.”* (1 Corinthians 2:9).

SUMMARY

Jesus is in a different category from ordinary people and indeed all people because of the supremacy of His character, the supremacy and authority of His teaching, His miracles and resurrection, and because the facts of His birth, His ministry, His death and resurrection all being foretold centuries before they occurred.

Jesus claims to be the Son of God (John 17:1); the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6); and the only means of access to the Heavenly Father. He applies prophecies to Himself (Luke 24: 25 to 27; 4: 16 to 21); claims to have all power in heaven and earth (Matthew 28:18); and is described as the future Judge of the world (Acts 10:42; 17:31).

The historical and biblical testimony to Jesus' character and teaching, and of His miracles and His own resurrection rule out any possibility of delusion or mental instability. He spoke the truth for all who are willing to hear it and contemplate it.

Jesus has shown us what God is like. God's prime characteristic is love (1 John 4:8), and Jesus has revealed this for all peoples of the world to see and understand, and for all peoples of the world to believe, if and when they will.

APPENDIX

Historical References to Jesus Christ

Josephus. Jewish Antiquities, Book 18, Chapter 3, Paragraph 3

“Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works; a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was (the) Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.”

Josephus. Jewish Antiquities, Book 20, Chapter 9, Paragraph 1.

“Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, (or some of his companions); and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned:

Pliny. Book 10, Letter 96

"To the Emperor Trajan.

"It is a rule, sir, which I inviolably observe, to refer myself to you in all my doubts; for who is more capable of guiding my uncertainty or informing my ignorance? Having never been present at any trials of the Christians, I am unacquainted with the method and limits to be observed either in examining or punishing them. Whether any difference is to be made on account of age, or no distinction allowed between the younger or the adult; whether repentance admits to a pardon, or if a man has been once a Christian it avails him nothing to recant; whether the mere profession of Christianity, albeit without crimes, or only the crimes associated therewith are punishable; in all these points I am greatly doubtful.

"In the meanwhile, the method I have observed towards those who have been denounced to me as Christians is this: I interrogated them whether they were Christians; if they confessed it I repeated the question twice again, adding the threat of capital punishment; if they still persevered, I ordered them to be executed. For whatever the nature of their creed may be, I could at least feel no doubt that contumacy and inflexible obstinacy deserved chastisement. There were others also possessed with the same infatuation, but being citizens of Rome, I directed them to be carried thither.

"These accusations spread (as is usually the case) from the mere fact of the matter being investigated and several forms of the mischief came to light. A placard was put up, without any signature, accusing a large number of persons by name. Those who denied they were, or had ever been, Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the

Gods, and offered adoration, with wine and frankincense, to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for that purpose, together with those of the Gods, and who finally cursed Christ (none of which acts, it is said, those who are really Christians can be forced into performing) these I thought it proper to discharge. Others who were named by that informer at first confessed themselves Christians, and then denied it; true, they had been of that persuasion but they had quitted it, some three years, others many years, and a few as much as twenty five years ago. They all worshipped your statue and the images of the Gods, and cursed Christ.

“They affirmed, however, the whole of their guilt, or error, was, that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a God, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then re-assemble to partake of food, but food of an ordinary and innocent kind. Even this practice, however, they had abandoned after the publication of my edict, by which, according to your orders, I had forbidden political associations. I judged it so much the more necessary to extract the real truth, with the assistance of torture, from two female slaves, who were styled deaconesses: but I could discover nothing more than depraved and excessive superstition.

“I therefore adjourned the proceedings, and betook myself at once to your council. For the matter seemed to me well worth referring to you, especially considering the numbers endangered. Persons of all ranks and ages, and of both sexes are, and will be, involved in the prosecution. For this contagious superstition is not confined to the cities only, but has spread through the villages and rural districts; it seems possible, however, to check and cure it. It is certain at least that the temples, which had been almost deserted, begin now to be frequented; and the sacred festivals, after a long intermission, are again revived; while there is a general demand for sacrificial animals, which for some time past have met with but few purchasers. From hence it is easy to imagine what multitudes may be reclaimed from this error, if a door be left open to repentance.”

Pliny: Book 10; Letter 97

Trajan's reply to Pliny

“The method you have pursued, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those denounced to you as Christians is extremely proper. It is not possible to lay down any general rule which can be applied as the fixed standard in all cases of this nature. No search should be made for these people; when they are denounced and found guilty they must be punished; with the restriction, however, that when the party denies himself to be a Christian, and shall give proof that he is not (that is, by adoring our Gods) he shall be pardoned on the ground of repentance, even though he may have formerly incurred suspicion. Information without the accuser's name subscribed must not be admitted in evidence against anyone, as it is introducing a very dangerous precedent, and by no means agreeable to the spirit of the age.”

(This translation was provided by the State Library of Victoria.)

Suetonius. *Vita Claudii*, 25:40.

“He (Claudius) expelled the Jews, who had on the instigation of Chrestus continually been causing disturbances, from Rome.”

Tacitus. *Annals*, 15, 44.

“But all human efforts ... did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius, at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome...”



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