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Q&A: The Historical Jesus

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The Historical Jesus:

Question: Is it not true that we don't even know in what century Jesus lived? How come we only have a lot of references in the New Testament and no where else from that general time?

Answer: You will have to work pretty hard to find scholars who argue the thesis that Jesus never lived. Even most "liberals" dismiss these views as baseless. It has been refuted time and time again. Why? Because there are first century references to Jesus, several of which critical scholars date to within months to a couple of years after Jesus' death. I'm speaking here chiefly of the early creeds in the New Testament, like 1 Corinthians 15:3ff. Besides all of the New Testament writings, we have a few extra-biblical writings that date from the mid-first century to about 110 AD. Altogether, there are even about a dozen and a half non-Christian sources that mention Jesus within the first 150 years after his death. For all these sources plus a critique of views like those who question or deny Jesus' historical existence, see my book *The Historical Jesus* (College Press, 1996).

Question: Is it true that Josephus' statements about Jesus are in fact not his and were added later in history by those seeking to prove that Jesus was a historical figure?

Answer: The vast majority of scholars who address this issue think that although Josephus' longer statement about Jesus in *Antiquities* 18:3 has been altered a bit, the bulk of it was written by Josephus. This view means that Josephus supplies some very important material about Jesus. An even larger percentage of scholars accepts Josephus' second statement concerning Jesus being the brother of James (*Antiquities* 20:9). Further, we have to make sense of ancient non-Christian historians like Thallus, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Lucian, who reported all sorts of facts about Jesus. In *The Historical Jesus*, pages 243-250, I provide a long list of well over 100 items that are reported about Jesus, many by non-Christians. So, to argue that Jesus never existed totally ignores a large body of historical data. That's why, of over a thousands recent publications on the subject of the historical Jesus, I am aware of less than five who doubt or question his existence.

Question: You mention that the Talmud mentions Jesus' crucifixion. Yet I have heard Jews say Jesus is not mentioned in the Talmud. Please help me out here. I see the translation Yeshu, but how do we know it's referring to Jesus? Are there any other passages of the Talmud that may refer to Jesus? Also, the quotes about crucifixion in your co-authored book *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* include Josephus and Tacitus. Are these quotations debated at all? Or do scholars agree that they are authentic rather than

Christian additions? And what about nails being used in crucifixion, versus tying a person to the cross?

Answer: The questions about the Talmud are legitimate because where Jesus is probably referred to in other texts, but by other names. The clearest is probably Sanhedrin 43a and I think that most scholars believe that it is a reference to Jesus ("Yeshu"), pertaining to his crucifixion. Check it out and see what you think. I don't think there are any questions about Tacitus' reference. Josephus' long passage is usually said to have been adjusted by a Christian, but the majority of scholars think that the main part of the passage is from Josephus, including the comment that Pilate had Jesus crucified. More generally, the vast majority of ancient texts say that nails were used in crucifixion rather than ropes. I believe Mike Licona and I address that in our book. Other ancient non-Christian writers like Lucian also mention Jesus' death. Along with the New Testament records, that's why even Jesus Seminar scholars John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg say that Jesus' death by crucifixion is a solid historical fact.

Question: I understand that the majority of scholars regard most of Josephus' long comment on Jesus to be genuine. Why is this the case? How do scholars know that the entire citation was not a forgery?

Answer: I think that you are correct that very few scholars (including even the many non-Christians who comment on these texts) think that Josephus' two comments on Jesus are forgeries. That response sounds to me like an easy way to avoid the historical references to Jesus. Most scholars take this view because the long passage in Antiquities 18:3 is written in Josephus' style. Further, it has excellent manuscript evidence. Lastly, it is also found in an Arabic translation of Josephus' work, in a version that some scholars favor as being closer to the original ending.

Question: Why do you suppose Josephus does not discuss Jesus in even more detail? Assuming from his two passages that he was in fact aware of Jesus and the corresponding movement, isn't it a bit odd that he includes no other discussion on Christianity? There is plenty about John the Baptist, Pilate, Caiaphas, etc., but very little about Jesus.

Answer: I don't suppose anyone knows exactly why Josephus doesn't say *more* about Jesus than he does, or why, more generally, any writer doesn't say more about someone, especially in ancient times. One possibility could be that Josephus catered to his Roman patrons, and of course, they crucified Jesus. For instance, neither Tacitus, nor Suetonius, nor Pliny the Younger speak well of Christianity. All of them, by the way, along with Josephus, clearly place Jesus in the traditional time slot. But given this general

reluctance not to laud Jesus (Pliny states that early Christians sang hymns to Jesus as to a god and even says that he killed Christians who failed to worship the gods), it's not terribly surprising that Josephus doesn't say more.

Question: I once read a book that tried to argue that much of Jesus' life, including his miracles, death, and resurrection were all based on similar stories among the religions of the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans. Where do you address these ideas in your volume *The Historical Jesus*?

Answer: Since you have my *Historical Jesus*, please check out the critique on pp. 33 -35 and 92-98. Especially on p. 34, I argue that since we have no recorded pagan resurrections before the second century AD, Christianity could hardly have gotten it's central belief from these religions. It's even possible that later versions of these religions may actually have copied from Christianity here! Likewise, there are no crucified saviors, contrary to what you may have heard. Lastly, there are no founders of major world religions besides Jesus who have miracles recorded of them within a generation. So where are the grounds for careful comparison here?

Question: I read a comparison of Krishna's life to Jesus' and the source said that the two parallel each other very carefully. The person argued that views about Krishna were virtually identical to the Christian portrayal of Jesus. Do these parallels really exist?

Answer: First of all, scholars cannot tell whether or not Krishna lived. He very well may not have been a historical character at all! Even if he did, scholars realize that they could be mistaken by as much as centuries. Why? Because unlike the situation with the New Testament, the sources that record Krishna's life date from hundreds to perhaps even thousands of years after he may have lived. Many argue that the parallels you mention actually postdate the early Christian reports, so they are hardly surprising. You don't take my word for this last point. Check out Benjamin Walker's *The Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism*, Vol. 1, pp. 240-241.

Question: Do you know if the Gnostic texts found at Nag Hammadi have multiple copies? For example, are there multiple copies of the Gospels of Philip or of Mary Magdalene, etc., or is there simply one copy of each?

Answer: A few of the Nag Hammadi texts have duplicated portions. We also have some Gnostic fragments from outside of the Nag Hammadi collection, such as some Greek fragments of the Gospel of Thomas.

Question: Doesn't the Gospel of Judas reveal that Christianity was indeed diverse in its beliefs in the early centuries of the Church?

Answer: I appreciate critical scholars' testimony that The Gospel of Judas tells us nothing about either the historical Jesus or Judas. But it's still not fair to give the impression that earliest Christianity was diverse in its main beliefs. This only works if you stretch "earliest Christianity" to the Gnostic writings in the middle of the Second Century AD, well over a century after Jesus lived. But this just will not work in historical terms. The second century may be "early" if your reference point is centuries later. But it is not early if your reference point is Jesus. Then critical scholars sometimes act as if the Gospels, dated from 70-95 AD, are too late to count!! The recent emphasis on the diversity of early Christian beliefs is a hypothesis in need of evidence.

Question: How do you know that the entire life of Jesus Christ was not orchestrated by humans to either establish a new religion because the old ones were starting to die, or to fix the corruption in the already existing church?

Answer: The short answer is because we have historical testimony that can be checked out the very same way that we can check out any historical testimony from the past. Plus, we have about 18 non-Christian sources for Jesus outside the New Testament that tell us a lot about him, too. Still, even critical scholars think that our best material is extracted from the New Testament. And remember, the fact that the early disciples were willing to die for their faith (see details below, under the "Evidence for the Resurrection") shows that they were at least sincere about their faith, which is a huge problem to overcome for this view, and the chief reason why critical scholars almost never take this position.