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CONTENTS

Jesus: Man of History .....(Andy Potts)  
 "But once disprove the historicity of Jesus Christ and Christianity will collapse like a pack of cards."

If Jesus were a Scientist .....(Mike L Anderson)  
 "Science teaches us how the heavens go, not how one goes to heaven," - might Jesus have said this?

JESUS: MAN OF HISTORY (1)

By Andy Potts

We are living in a time of great ideological pluralism: many

different belief systems are competing for attention. While affirming the principles of free expression and tolerance of diverging viewpoints, I believe it is essential to be clear on the distinctiveness of the Christian faith. This is all the more vital in the face of widespread ignorance and/or misinformation concerning basic tenets of Christianity. It is not uncommon, for example, for people to ascribe much of Christian belief to the domain of myth, legend or personal opinion.

What, then, is distinctive about Christianity? Put simply, Christianity is Christ. The life and teaching of Jesus and the meaning he attached to what he did are central to Christianity. As Michael Green has put it: "But once disprove the historicity of Jesus Christ and Christianity will collapse like a pack of cards...For Christianity claims that these things happened, that God was made manifest in our flesh, that he did die for us, that he is alive and relevant. And that is not a matter of ideology or mythology but of history" (2).

The question of the historical Jesus is ultimately a question of historical evidence and the means of assessing it. Historical evidence involves the knowledge of all the sources.(3) The sources relating to the life of Jesus can be divided into extra-biblical and biblical sources.

#### EXTRA-BIBLICAL SOURCES (2,4)

The extra-biblical sources consist mainly of the records of Jewish and Roman writers. The Talmuds (AD 100-500), a collection of Jewish tradition, mention Jesus' birth, his death on the eve of the Passover, and his 'sorcery'[i.e. miracles]. Josephus (AD 93), a Jewish historian writes in his 'Antiquities of the Jews' about Jesus, his miracles, his crucifixion under Pilate, his resurrection and his followers called Christians. He also mentions the martyrdom of James the brother of Jesus.

Pliny (AD 112), governor of Bithynia, wrote a letter to the emperor Trajan in which he tells of his dealings with Christians, condemning them to death for their 'inflexible obstinacy.' His problem is that there are so many of them and he wishes to know if he should continue putting them to death. He also describes some of the practices of Christians he had ascertained: how they meet together on a certain day and sing a hymn to Christ.

The 'Acts' of Pontius Pilate: Justin Martyr (AD 150), in his "Defence of Christianity" addressed to the emperor Antonius Pius, describes the casting of lots for Christ's clothes at his crucifixion, and the miracles of Christ and says these things can be verified by consulting the 'Acts' of Pontius Pilate.

Other records include:

- Cornelius Tacitus, a Roman historian, writing in 112 AD mentions Christ's crucifixion under Pontius Pilate and the existence of Christians.
- Lucian of Samosata, a satirist of the 2nd century, speaks scornfully of Christ and the Christians.
- Suetonius (AD 120), a Roman historian and court official under Hadrian, mentions Christ and Christians.
- Thallus (AD 52), a Samaritan-born historian, mentions Christ and the darkness at the crucifixion.
- Phlegon, a first century historian, also mentions the darkness at the crucifixion.
- Mara Bar-Serapion (AD 73) wrote a letter to his son in which he mentions the death of Christ.

Finally, an intriguing piece of evidence can be dated with certainty to between AD 40 and 50. It consists of two inscriptions on ossuaries (caskets containing bones of the dead) which were found in a burial chamber in Talpioth, a suburb of Jerusalem, in 1945 by Professor E.L. Sukenik, a Jewish archaeologist. They read 'Jesus woe!' or 'Jesus, help!' (ie. a short prayer addressed to Jesus) and 'Jesus, let him (who rests here) arise!' These two inscriptions suggest that even at this early date people were praying to Jesus and were looking forward to a future resurrection.

#### BIBLICAL SOURCES

1. Twenty seven different New Testament documents.

2. The writings of the Church Fathers: Polycarp, Eusebius, Irenaeus, Origen and others. They quoted extensively from the New Testament, so much so that virtually the whole New Testament could be reconstructed from their writings. They often used a form of text differing from that in other manuscripts. They thus provide an alternative source for comparison.

The secular sources prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus actually existed and that He was special in some way. These sources are all the more convincing as many of them were antagonistic. But these sources do not tell us an awful lot about Jesus. In order to know about his life, teaching and significance we must turn to the New Testament records, in particular the Gospels. But how reliable is the Gospel evidence for Jesus?

To answer this question we need to consider how the Gospels were compiled. Initially, the Christian message was spread by word of mouth as the disciples moved about preaching the good news. When the eyewitnesses began to die out it became necessary to put down a permanent record of the life and teaching of Jesus. The Gospels were subsequently written towards the end of the first century. Thus, many eyewitnesses of the events would have still been alive, providing a check on the reliability of the accounts.

Further evidence for the trustworthiness of the records can be gained by considering that the pressing issues of the early church do not conveniently appear in the accounts: issues such as the lordship of Christ, the Holy Spirit, the circumcision controversy and meat offered to idols.

The parables are also instructive when determining the genuineness of the Gospel accounts. Who would have made them up if not Jesus? Nobody had taught in this way before Jesus, and nobody did after him. There is no evidence of this form of teaching in the early church. The parables were unique to Jesus.

Finally, we need to consider that the disciples and early Christians suffered hardship, persecution and eventually death for their beliefs. This phenomenon as well as the rapid growth of the church is difficult to explain if the events described in the Gospels never happened.

What all this means is that we have hostile as well as sympathetic witnesses corroborating the historical claim of Christianity: Jesus lived, died and rose again and holds the key to humankind's destiny. Honest enquirers can not reasonably evade the claims of Christ by asserting that he never lived.

#### NOTES

1. This article was originally published in LifeNET Journal (Second edition, July 1994). Permission has been granted for

publication here.

2. Green, Michael. 1983. WORLD ON THE RUN. Inter-varsity Press, p. 25.
3. Elton, G.R. 1967. THE PRACTICE OF HISTORY. Sydney University Press, p. 86.
4. McDowell, Josh. 1979. EVIDENCE THAT DEMANDS A VERDICT. Here's Life Publishers, pp. 81-87.

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## IF JESUS WERE A SCIENTIST (1)

By Mike L Anderson

I'm going to be putting words into our Lord's mouth. This may seem to be an incredibly audacious thing to do. However, if we consider that the wisdom of Jesus is timeless; if we seek to apply His teaching to all our endeavours then surely this is the right thing to do. If we have a sound knowledge of the mind of Christ from the scriptures then perhaps we can infer something about what He would say and do in our circumstances. Of course, I'm doing it as a fallible human being and so it must be tainted by my own perspectives and prejudices. I can only promise that I have been earnest. I leave these thoughts with you as suggestions for your evaluation and reflection.

We will be looking at what Jesus would have said, if He were a scientist, about the following views of science:

1. Science as secular
2. Science as salvation
3. Science as second-rate

### 1. SCIENCE-AS-SECULAR

Have you ever tried to explain your work to a member of the general public? While I was on the staff at the University of Cape Town several Christians asked me how it was that I, as a Christian, could teach evolution; how was it possible to marry Christianity with such secular work?

The idea that science is inherently secular can be dispatched with very quickly.

The records show (John 20:9-13) that Jesus did something as "worldly" or "carnal" as making breakfast for his disciples - even with His resurrected, spiritual body. Is there an essential spiritual difference between preparing breakfast and preparing an agar medium for an experiment? No. Jesus sanctified "secular" activities. There is nothing incongruous about Him practising science even after His resurrection.

Perhaps this tendency to view science as secular is motivated by an old and laudable tradition to avoid conflating science and theology. However, as Francis Bacon realised, this does not mean we should divorce science and RELIGION. The historian Hooykaas says that for Bacon science "was not a purely human but a

divinely inspired work" (2)

The Christian pioneer-scientists had a noble understanding of science. They felt they were revealing God's works. Science is a perfectly spiritual activity when done honestly and to the glory of God.

"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do [why exclude experimenting?], do it all for the glory of God." (1 Corinthians 10:31 NIV)

Would you like to inhibit secularism in your work? Why not take the opportunity, even now, of re-dedicating it to God?

## 2. SCIENCE AS SALVATION

Under this heading I am going to throw together all attempts to make science deliver where it cannot. (Lest I be accused of being anti-science let me hastily add that where science can deliver it has been immensely successful. The next section argues that Christians should, for good theological reasons, be dead against anti-science).

The reason this happens must be the enormous prestige that science has among many people. Have you ever had this encounter with anyone? You are having a religious discussion and they discover that you are a Christian and a scientist. Suddenly, there is excessive deference to your views. The person almost hangs on every word you say. Alan Walker has said: "People are more interested in what scientists think about God, than what God thinks about scientists." And scientists are not always reticent about speaking about religion.

The physicist Paul Davies has said "It may seem bizarre, but in my opinion science offers a surer path to God than religion." (3) The astrophysicist Smoot, after discovering the ripples in the background radiation left as a residue of the Big Bang said: "If you are religious then this is like looking at God" (4). (He seems to know of no religious people besides pantheists).

On the other end of the theological spectrum there are those who believe that contemporary scientific discoveries are a good apologetic not just for a Supreme Intelligence but the great Redeemer-God of the Bible, leaving scientists without excuse (5).

These sorts of views trickle down to the layperson so that some Christians feel at a distinct religious disadvantage if they are not up on the latest discoveries in modern cosmology. I recently talked with a gentleman who had seen the BBC television production "Soul" which had described some of these discoveries. With agitated excitement he told me that findings had important implications for "religious practice." He wanted to find out all he could about the subject. Now, while his curiosity was no doubt noble, was his spiritual restlessness necessary?

What would Jesus have said about all this? Allow me to suggest the following as hypotheses.

a) Jesus would NOT have encouraged people to think that it was in His capacity as a scientist that He had His authority but in

His capacity as the Son of God.

b) He would have said, contra Ross, that people were without excuse long ago. God does not especially reveal Himself to the to those capable of comprehending modern astrophysicists. He might have said a short prayer: Thank you father that you have kept these things from the scientifically educated and revealed yourself to the ignorant. (Cf Matthew 11:25)

c) Jesus would have taken pains to distinguish between knowing God and knowing His works. I can quite easily imagine Him giving the following parable:

And he told them this parable: "A certain man obtained a cum laude Doctorate in Philosophy. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have all this intelligence but have finished my studies.'

"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will pack away my books on mathematics and start a PhD in cosmology. In this way my mind can be exercised on an understanding of the universe.'

And I'll say to myself, "You have done good job of explaining the existence of the universe and have built up a fine international reputation among the learned. Take life easy; let your reputation carry you; eat, drink and be merry." '

"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. What did all your learning accomplish for you? For what does it profit a man if he understands the whole world and yet does not know God?'"

Jesus, if He was living now, might have used the following analogy to distinguish between knowing God and knowing His works. It comes from Dorothy Sayers's (6) excellent work "The Mind of the Maker" (1941).

Shakespeare could quite easily have created a character in one of his plays with an exceptional knowledge of the storyline. This character-expert might have some knowledge of the story-maker, but that does not mean he knows the great bard personally. For that, Shakespeare would have had to write his autobiography into the story; he would have to place himself, as a character, into the storyline. Similarly, it is possible to have an extensive knowledge of God's works through science without knowing God. For a personal knowledge of God we can do no better than encounter God in the flesh (7).

On the other hand knowing the author personally does not make a character an expert on the story-line. This may seem an obvious point but Christians sometimes speak as if their knowing God gives them authority to speak about His works.

I think Jesus would have looked askance at the science-as-salvation view. Cardinal Baronius said at the time of Galileo that the scriptures "teach us how one goes to heaven, not how the heavens go" (8) Jesus might feel prompted to state the corollary today: "Science teaches us how the heavens go, not how one goes to heaven." He would have affirmed the traditional route to the best knowledge of God and salvation: I am the way the truth and the life, no-one comes to the Father but through me" (John 14:6 NIV).

### 3. SECOND-RATE SCIENCE

There are forces around both in and outside the church which are encouraging the view that science is second-rate. They wouldn't put it in quite these terms, but there is little doubt that this is the thrust.

One perspective, the sociological theory of knowledge, says that what scientists observe is determined by their paradigms rather than what is out there so that theory change is a matter of fashion rather than rationality. (9).

How would Jesus have viewed this?

I think He would have reacted against this slur on God's creation. He might have pointed out that we can have confidence in understanding the world, and reconstructing the past, just because God made the world so well.

In particular Jesus would have had a dim view of attempts to make light of scientific evidence. Why? Because, as Creator, He made it. All things were created by Him. This must include evidence and this must include fossil evidence. (By the way, culprits do not create evidence at the scene of a crime, they merely leave it behind. It is precisely because God made the world so coherently that we can reconstruct the past and convict culprits even when there were no witnesses.

As a scientist we would expect Jesus to take seriously the evidence that His Father has made. Some Christians have had much to say about Archaeopteryx but fail to give a decent description of this bird-reptile. One writer (10) gives a description which omits all of its reptile-like and dinosaur-like features such as its tail and pubic peduncle. Why does he not let the evidence, God's evidence, speak for itself? Wouldn't Jesus have done so?

Let me suggest how Jesus might have applied the parable of the talents to this matter of appraising the evidence. You will remember how the lazy servant was prompted into inactivity over the exactness of his master. Perhaps we might be rendered inactive over the thought that in God's eyes only the scientifically perfect will do. This would be a mistake. The parable of the talents suggests that the adequacy of our theories need only be in proportion to the evidence that we have been given. God only expects us to do the best with what we have been given. That is all. No need to have perfect knowledge. Our rigour must be tinged with modesty. But, our modesty must be contained by rigour. Jesus would not have sanctified second-rate science.

This also has applications for the way we look at the work of others. Consider Calvin. I must confess smiling condescendingly at his belief in a stationary earth. However, the comments of historians of science have been a rebuke to me. They have pointed out that Calvin's verdict was not against the common sense of the time (11). So, smugness here is inappropriate.

We have to admit that people have varying degrees of access to evidence. We don't judge the first year with the same standards

as the post-graduate. It also means that we should be inclined to admit that some might be in a better position than ourselves to assess the evidence on a theory even if that person is a non-Christian.

We have the example of Jesus. He Himself admitted his ignorance saying that no-one knows the day or the hour not even the Son. But only the Father. Should we not follow his example and defer to another's professional judgement? This is not gullible, but wise, if the person is in the field and I am not.

Claiming to make a stand for Christ, some Christians are taking it on themselves to be spokesman in fields in which they have no formal training. The Christ-like attitude is to be increasingly modest the further one moves away from ones field of expertise.

#### NOTES

(1) This is an edited transcript of a talk given at a Science & Faith Discussion group given on 19th July 1995 in Cape Town. I am appreciative of the comments and corrections of Adrian Armstrong, Prof Georges Delpierre, Dr Dennis Maeder and Prof Peter Spargo. They do not necessarily share the views expressed here.

(2) Hooykaas, R. (1972) RELIGION AND THE RISE OF MODERN SCIENCE. Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh, pp. 70-71.

(3) Davies, P. (1983) GOD AND THE NEW PHYSICS., Pelican, Harmondsworth, p. ix.

(4) Quoted by Ilic, M and A. Arce (1993) Science, God and Man. TIME. January 4 issue. pp 40-44.

(5) E.g. Ross, H. (1994) What's all the fuss about? FACTS & FAITH 8(1):1-2, Ross, H. (1993) THE COSMOS AND THE CREATOR Navpress, Colorado, p. 115.

(6) Sayers, D. L. (1941) THE MIND OF THE MAKER. Meridian Books, Inc. New York.

(7) This mangles our analogy, but it is interesting to note that Shakespeare's wife was illiterate. Presumably this limited her knowledge of her husbands works, yet did not keep her from a personal and intimate knowledge of her husband.

(8) Quoted in Russell, C.A. (1985) Cross-currents: Interactions between Science & Faith. Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England, p. 47.

(9) The inspiration for this perspective comes from Thomas Kuhn's (1970) THE STRUCTURE OF SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTIONS. The University of Chicago Press. An example of how a Christian writer has used Kuhn's insights to attack historical science is Settanni, H. (1992) SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE: DISCOVERY OF NATURE OR MENTAL CONSTRUCTION? University Press of America, Lanham.

(10) Gish, D.T. (1989) As a transitional form Archaeopterix won't fly. IMPACT No. 198.

(11) E.g. Hooykass, op. cit. (2), p. 154., Russell, op cit (8),

p. 42.

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