

## WAS CHRIST A MYTH

Edward Jayne

I must begin by saying I disagree with the flier that first advertised my speech on the assumption that Jesus was a myth, if in fact the sentence, "Jesus was a myth" may construed to mean that Christ was nothing else. I was not informed of this title, and in fact I am personally convinced a historical Jesus did exist, though as an atheist I reject his status as a messiah as well as any special relationship he might seem to have had with a God who certainly does not exist in my opinion. Even here, however, I must concede that the existence of God is a remote possibility, but this possibility is so miniscule in my opinion that I am willing to make the inductive leap that for all practical purposes God does not exist. As for Christ, I am able to accept his existence as a person, and even his remarkable genius as a prophet, but not much beyond that.

Early in the twentieth century a number of scholars did support the hypothesis that Christ was nothing more than a myth. These included J.M. Robertson, W.B. Smith, and E. Dujardin, who argued that Christ's identity was concocted based on a pre-Christian god Jesus (or Joshua--perhaps the prophet Joshua). Others such as Drews argued that Christ was borrowed from the Messiah-figure in Isaiah, and others such as P.L. Couchod blamed Paul for having invented Christ. Others yet included T. Whittaker, L.G. Rylands, P. Alfario, A. Bayet, V. Macchioro, R. Stahl, B. Van Eysinga, etc. [see McCabe, pp. 334-5] In a small and excellent book published in 1926, JESUS: A MYTH, the Danish critic Georg Brandes summarized their arguments with lucidity--enough lucidity, in fact, that where the case against Christ's existence breaks down becomes obvious.

How could Christ's non-existence have been promoted to such an extent? Because in fact the documentation of Christ's existence is remarkably sparse. Even his name suggests a fabrication instead of a real person, since the word CHRIST meant the anointed--somebody rubbed with oil in order to perform a sacred service. Jesus Christ could thus be translated, simply enough, as Joshua the anointed, and if the name Joshua were traced to its root, "Jahweh [or God] Saves," we are left with the strange combination, "God Saves the Anointed." I believe in my savior, one might say, God Save the Anointed.

It is also bothersome that contemporary non-Christian authors did not mention Christ. Roman historians a generation beyond Christ wrote voluminous social and natural histories that should have taken his accomplishments into account, but they made no reference whatsoever to the circumstances of his life. There was no reason to leave him out--they were looking for bizarre and original stories. In the words of Annie Besant in 1877:

The very existence of Jesus cannot be proved from contemporary documents. A child whose birth is heralded by a star which guides foreign sages to Judaea; a massacre of all the infants of a town within the Roman Empire by command of a subject king; a teacher

who heals the leper, the blind, the deaf, the dumb, the lame, and who raises the mouldering corpse, a King of the Jews entering Jerusalem in triumphal procession, without opposition from the Roman legions of Caesar; an accused ringleader of sedition arrested by his own countrymen and handed over to the imperial governor; a rebel adjudged to death by Roman law; a three hour's darkness over all the land; an earthquake breaking open graves . . . ; a number of ghosts wandering about Jerusalem; a crucified corpse rising again to life, and appearing to a crowd of above 500 people; a man risen from the dead ascending bodily into heaven without any concealment . . . all these marvelous events took place, we are told, and yet they have left no ripple on the current of contemporary history. [Besant, pp. 193-94]

In other words, Christ might have existed, but there is no documentation of all the extraordinary events reported by scriptures.

Two Roman authors who ignored Christ may be listed more specifically. Both Seneca (c. 3 B.C.-A.D. 65) and the elder Pliny (A.D. 23-79) wrote monumental histories that recorded all the great phenomena of nature on record at the time--earthquakes, comets, eclipses, etc. Seneca's NATURAL QUESTIONS includes two volumes in the Loeb Classics and Pliny's NATURAL HISTORY includes ten volumes. Both made no reference whatsoever to these events in Christ's life listed by Annie Besant, as if they simply had not happened. Pliny in particular was so fascinated with eclipses that he discussed the possibility of a partial eclipse when Caesar was murdered, yet he said nothing of the three-hour total eclipse that supposedly took place when Christ was crucified seventy years later. How could such an eclipse have occurred without any reports having reached Pliny for his supposedly comprehensive 8-volume natural history?

The Jewish historian Josephus (A.D. 37-100) supposedly mentioned Jesus in a passage or two, but these are now treated as obvious forgeries inserted by Christian scribes at a later time. They are so obvious as forgeries that modern editions of Joseph simply exclude them.

One Roman historian Tacitus (c. A.D. 55-117) did in fact refer to Christ when he spoke of "Christus" as the founder of a religious sect that Nero blamed for having set the fire that destroyed large portions of Rome during his reign. The passage (in ANNALS, book xv, sect. 44, written about A.D. 107) can be quoted in its entirety as the primary reference to Christ by a Roman author within the first hundred and fifty years after his death.

[To exonerate himself of the fire that destroyed much of Rome],  
 "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 Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all

things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.

The Roman historian Suetonius (c. A.D. 65-?) seems to have confirmed Tacitus's assessment: "The Christians, a race of men of a new and mischievous (or magical) superstition, were punished." Suetonius also said of the emperor Claudius, "He drove the Jews, who, at the suggestion of Chrestus, were constantly rioting, out of Rome." Pliny the Younger (c. A.D. 62-113), the poet Martial (A.D. 43-100), the stoic philosopher Epictetus (c. A.D. 50-138), and the stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius ((A.D. 121- 180) also seem to have referred to Christians, but without mentioning Jesus in particular.

Perhaps more important was the biographer Plutarch (A.D. 46-120), who wrote an essay, "Superstition," that very probably linked Christianity with other contemporary sects as being superstitious, since both Tacitus and Suetonius had already used the word SUPERSTITION in describing it. Plutarch treated superstition with the same abhorrence as Tacitus and Suetonius expressed regarding Christianity, so it seems probable that he directed his remarks either wholly or partially against Christians. For who else might Plutarch have in mind when he spoke of superstition "making fear to endure longer than life" with a concept of hell that stretched the imagination to its limit:

The abysmal gates of the nether world swing open, rivers of fire and offshoots of the Styx are mingled together, darkness is crowded with spectres of many fantastic shapes which beset their victim with grim visages and piteous voices, and, besides these, judges and torturers and yawning gulfs and deep recesses teeming with woes. Thus unhappy superstition, by its excess of caution in trying to avoid everything suggestive of dread, unwittingly subjects itself to every sort of dread. [Plutarch's MORALIA (Loeb) vol. 2, p. 467]

It must be conceded that Plutarch did not identify Christianity by name or mention Jesus in particular, but the connection seems plain.

This is all we have of non-Christians telling about Jesus through the reign of Marcus Aurelius that ended in the year 180. Much history was written over this period, but in fact only two Roman authors, Tacitus and Suetonius, referred to Christ by name, and they only did so in passing in order to identify him as the inventor of the superstition described as Christianity.

So for understanding Christ's role our only recourse is to fall back on the four gospels and Paul's Epistles. However, these are not altogether trustworthy sources of factual information. Written earlier, Paul's epistles say little about Christ's biography and do not quote his actual sayings. Nor do they refer to his miracles, his ethical teachings, or even his birth, aside from Paul's remark in Romans 1.3. that Christ "descended from David according to the flesh," apparently contradicting the assurance that Christ was directly begotten by God in the Annunciation scenes of both the Matthew and Luke gospels.

Moreover, there was at least a generation or two between when Christ died and the gospels were written. The first of the gospels, by Mark, was written approximately thirty years after Christ was crucified, and the others were written later yet, Matthew and Luke not less than forty years afterwards and John not less than sixty years afterwards. Not surprisingly, little biographical information is available in the gospels beyond what Christ said and the miracles he performed. There is no clear indication how much time elapsed from the beginning of his adult career as a prophet and his crucifixion--it might have been a year, it might have been three years or even five.

Moreover, the gospels frequently contradict each other. From 150,000 to 175,000 discrepancies have been found among them [Smith, p. 180; Mencken, p. 220]. Most notably, only two of the gospels, Matthew and Luke, refer to Christ's birth, and there are substantial differences between the stories they tell. The same problem occurs with Christ's resurrection. There are so many factual variations in sequence and the people involved during the three days (or was it a day and a half?) between Christ's crucifixion and his ascent to heaven that the entire testimony of what happened would be thrown out in a modern court of law. [See C. Dennis McKinsey's *THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF BIBLICAL ERRANCY*, p. 92, for a list of the ten most glaring examples] In literate society in which the Gospels could have been published and distributed with relative ease, this confusion might be interpreted to suggest authenticity; in a pre-literate society it suggests a word-of-mouth report that got well out of control.

Even the most reputable Christian scholars acknowledge the difficulty of proving anything substantive about Christ because of the contradictions and uncertainties in the gospels. Randel Helms quotes four of these scholars in his introduction to *WHO WROTE THE GOSPELS*, including Christ's two outstanding contemporary biographers, Crossan and Meier:

1. Robert Funk: Biblical scholars have not been able to make up their minds whether the biblical narratives are about real or fictive events. Or, if they are about both, which is which. The test is a simple one: did the events depicted as having taken place actually take place? Are the gospels essentially fiction or biography? [A 1997 article, "On Distinguishing Historical Fiction from Fictive Narrative"]
2. John Crossan: "But one cannot dismiss [the reconstruction] or the search for the historical Jesus as mere reconstruction, as if reconstruction invalidated somehow the entire project. Because there is only reconstruction." *THE HISTORICAL JESUS*, p. 426. [italics added]
3. John Meier: "What all the gospels are implicitly doing [involves] putting forth truth claims about certain events that occurred (from the perspective of the evangelists) in

recent human history. These truth claims may or may not, in actual fact, be true. But a critical method that cannot come to grips with the basic claims inherent in the gospel literature is missing a good deal of what the gospels as 1st-century Greco-Roman religious propaganda were all about." *A MARGINAL JEW*, pp. 418-19. I repeat for emphasis: "truth claims" rather than truths, and 1st century Greco-Roman propaganda!

4. Rudolph Bultmann: "[That any gospel is] a primary source for the historical situation out of which it arose, and is only a secondary source for the historical details concerning which it gives information." *EXISTENCE AND FAITH* (1960), p. 38.

Even the Gospel according to John concedes that accuracy was less important than convincing disciples: "Now Jesus did many other signs [or miracles] before his disciples which are not written here. But this has been written so you can believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." John 20.30-31. In other words, John admitted that he felt free to exclude information, limiting his text to stories that would reinforce belief.

In other words, there is little positive evidence of Christ's historic existence, but enough to justify such an assumption. Both Tacitus and Suetonius did refer to Christ, however sketchy their description, and John was totally confident in Christ's existence when he declared his intention to describe Christ selectively in order to enhance his message. In fact it was because of his confidence in Christ's human existence as well as his role as the son of God that he sought to promote his cause as effectively as possible.

Significantly, as early as 1913, the venerable mythologist Sir James Frazer wrote in vol. 6 of *THE GOLDEN BOUGH*: "The doubts which have been cast on the historical reality of Jesus are in my judgment unworthy of serious attention [see McCabe's *A RATIONALIST ENCYCLOPEDIA*, pp. 333-35]. And, indeed, just about all scholars today accept Christ's historical existence, whatever his mythical status might have been. One must conclude, in the words of Joseph McCabe, "that there probably or certainly was a Jewish prophet, a rebel against the official cult, who was executed in Jerusalem, but about who we have no further reliable knowledge" (*A RATIONALIST ENCYCLOPEDIA*, p. 332).

However, one compelling difficulty remains in accepting the truth of Christ's story--its resemblance to the stories of earlier religions that may be clearly identified as myths. Christ himself seems entirely life-like in the gospels, yet the most important events in his life duplicated stories of the pagan gods worshipped at the same time--gods, in fact, whose religious worship was competitive with that of Christ during the third and fourth centuries. Christ's amazing achievement thus seems to have been his true-to-life replication of everything that had any religious appeal in the stories of these pagan figures who were obviously mythical. All would agree: these others were the product of the imagination, but his story (which came much later in ancient history) was brought to earth and could be regarded as having been entirely true, thus perhaps helping to explain the massive conversion that occurred from pagan religions to Christianity that followed. One must conclude that the life of Christ and his miraculous accomplishments were the product of cannibalism by later Christians who pilfered from other

religions whatever gave them their supernatural appeal, that it might further augment the supernatural appeal of Christ himself.

Amusingly, the second century Christian apologists Justin Martyr and Tertullian defended this resemblance between pagan cults and Christianity with the argument that Satan had anticipated Christianity and had therefore imitated it in advance with pagan cults in order to confound Christian believers. In other words, Satan shared with God the power of omniscience, so he was able to initiate earlier gods and goddesses whose stories were the same as Christ's in order to confuse Christian worshippers with the absurd possibility that Christians borrowed from pagan religion, not the other way around. Maybe so, but the simpler explanation would be that Christianity did in fact borrow and embellish pagan stories to give Christ competitive status with the gods worshipped by contemporary cults and mysteries. In effect Christianity went pagan in order to convert pagan worshippers. But to what extent--this is the question?

Borrowings of this sort were possible at the time, as earlier suggested, (A) since the story of Jesus was exclusively transmitted by oral tradition for not fewer than thirty years and perhaps as many as a hundred (the so-called Apostolic Age), (B) since a large variety of pagan religions thrived at the time, and (C) since all religions at the time seem to have drawn upon each other through what has been described as "syncretism" and "theocrasia," borrowing concepts and motifs from each other whenever it could be done. Included among these religions, each with its exclusive claims of validity, were Mithraism, Manichaenism, Gnosticism, and the separate worship (henotheistic, if not totally monotheistic) of Heracles, Cybele, Isis, Osiris, Orpheus, Dionysus Zagreus, and the god Serapis as a theocratic fusion of Osiris and Dionysus. To a large extent, the Jewish faith avoided this market-place competition among religion strategies. However, there was sufficient resemblance between Christianity and pagan faiths at the time of Christ that one may only conclude that Christianity, like most of the rest of the cults and mysteries, "grew by absorbing competing theological ideas" [Smith, p. 181].

Additional to Christianity's success in giving tangible certitude to pagan myth, I want to argue that it also brought into play exactly the right balance between Judaism and pagan fertility worship that had a much broader appeal among the populace. In particular, it seems that Christianity linked the ethical obsession of Judaism both with the worship of various East Mediterranean spring resurrection deities and with Zoroastrian eschatology which emphasized the grand struggle between good and evil and the final judgment-day decision between those sent to heaven and hell. As a result, Christ could be worshipped as a Judaic messiah (as prophesied by Isaiah, 7.14, Micah 5, and Zechariah 9.9) who died and was resurrected (like Dionysus, Osiris, and all the rest), then ascended to heaven to be able preside with God on Judgment Day (as predicted by Zoroaster). A syncretistic triangulation was thus involved: Judaic prophecies of a Messiah, bringing pagan fertility sacrifice and Persian eschatology. And it worked--except that it isn't necessarily true.

To eliminate these pagan trappings and get to the bottom of Christianity, I would argue that it is necessary to discount its syncretistic borrowings as useful advertising during the three or four centuries following Christ's crucifixion. Whether Christianity's "debt" to these pagan religions was accidental or not, I would argue that its appeal was no less mythical, therefore to be dealt with on this basis. This especially applies to Christ's virgin birth, his miracles, his last

supper, and, not least, his death and resurrection. Through EIDETIC REDUCTIONISM, a concept of Husserl's phenomenology that I think can be applied here, I am suggesting that we should seek out the essence of Christianity by excluding from consideration all these specific features in common with pagan worship at the time Christianity came into existence. Especially important in this task is the resemblance to Mithraism, whose worship dominated Rome for a century preceding the Christian conversion of the Emperor Constantine during the first decade of the fourth century. There are too many such resemblances, and they should all be discounted as probable borrowings. This is more or less what Tolstoy tried to do in his 1909 compilation, "The Teachings of Jesus," and we should do the same. The question is no longer whether the story of Christ was a myth, but how and to what extent, and what is left when myth is discounted.

What, then, is left of Christianity denuded of pagan sources and analogues? Much less than one might have anticipated, and in fact, some have argued, nothing at all--that Christianity was entirely derivative. Even its Judaic content, they claim, was borrowed. Joseph McCabe says, for example, that "Not one of the religious sentiments they [the gospels] attribute to Jesus is novel or original." [McCabe, p. 332]. Homer Smith similarly argues that the Sermon on the Mount, probably based on the now-lost LOGIA (or Q-text) of Christ's sayings transcribed by disciples, was nothing more than a compilation from Psalms, Isaiah, Ecclesiasticus, the Secrets of Enoch, the Shemone Lesreh (a book of Hebrew prayers), and other sources. [Smith, p. 186]

But again I must support the probability of Christ's existence, and I guess on literary grounds through an appreciation of his remarkable success in having promoted his ethics with an intensity not to be found elsewhere--also his amazing versatility--his unique idiosyncrasies that identify him as a human being ("Son of Man," that is) no less complex than Plato, Cicero, or any other ancient author. The Christ I discern at the bottom of the four gospels could not have been invented by a committee or patched together by a clever fabricator. He was for real--but perhaps in terms that would not give much comfort to Christians.

Christ's maxims and parables are amazing, as is his moral persuasiveness, but I am also amazed by his passive-aggressive extravagance in rewarding sheer innocence with an eternity of bliss, yet consigning most of humanity to equally eternal hellfire--even those who harbor hostile thoughts or who dare just once to insult another with a harmless epithet. "Thou fool" was such an expression, though he himself used it twice with Pharisees and Saducees (see Matthew 23.17 and Luke 11.40). Amazingly, one cannot even look upon others with lust (which most of us do all the time). Better to cut off our members --eyeballs, arms, whatever--than to risk eternal hellfire (Mathew 5.27-30). Again, a bizarre passive-aggressiveness manifests itself: love and charity are recommended; eternal hellfire otherwise. And guaranteed, the road to heaven is narrow--few can be expected to traverse it.

But far more bothersome--therefore suggestive of the truth--Christ actually rejected family, just as Shakespeare walked out on Anne Hathaway and Bertrand Russell had four wives and countless mistresses. For most of us, family is important--in fact the most important of all. But not for Christ, for whom it very decidedly took second place to faith--and, as Milton warned regarding the truth, once relegated to second place marriage plummets even further below. One cannot help but notice Christ's fierce intensity whenever he explained his preference. Just as George W. Bush writhed with glee in his second debate when he spoke of executing three

prisoners (two, it turns out) for murder, Christ spoke with unusual fervency when he recommended the rejection of family for religion. This was exactly the choice of Christian, in fact, in Bunyan's *PILGRIM'S PROGRESS*, in order to gain eternal life in heaven:

So I saw in my dream that the man began to run. Now, he had not run far from his own door, but his wife and children, perceiving it, began to cry after him to return; but the man put his fingers in his ears, and ran on, crying, Life! life! eternal life! So he looked not behind him, but fled towards the middle of the plain.

Thus begins allegory in which Christian takes flight from family in order to gain entrance to heaven. The same is said in Matthew, 10-34-39, where Christ argued, for example:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

One wonders how Christ might have been aware of the significance of the cross well before he was crucified, but the message is plain: that Christ was willing to break up families in order to obtain the salvation of his followers. The love of Christ was more important than the love of close relatives. And what extraordinary megalomania is implicit in these words.

Christ was more brief in Luke, 14.26: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Again, in Matthew 19.29, Christ argued, "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life." And in Matthew 8.22, when a disciple asked to be allowed to depart to attend his father's funeral, Christ argued, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

In Matthew, 19.3-12, When Christ reaffirmed his rejection of divorce (Matthew, 19.3-12) with the argument, "What God has joined together, let no one separate," his disciples pressed him why he both defended and attacked marriage, Christ justified his ambivalence by explaining that not everybody could accept his teachings, but that, just as there are eunuchs from birth and eunuchs through the choice of others, "there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can" (Matthew, 19.3-12). Christians could gain salvation without being eunuchs, both those able to commit themselves to this status have a better chance. These are harsh words: either castrate oneself or learn to think and behave as if one has, in order to guarantee salvation. What salvation that? And what of marriage and raising children?

Christ even excluded marriage from heaven in Matthew 22.30: "For in the resurrection they [husbands and wives] neither marry nor are given marriage, but are like angels in heaven. Why such hostility? One suspects because Christ had problems with his own family, as might be suggested by two particular references:

When told that his mother and brothers had just arrived and wanted to visit, Christ replied, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" After which he answered himself, pointing to his disciples and saying "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12.46-50).

Which left his family standing outside at the door, a threshold beyond which they could not enter. Christ's single reference to the household in which he was raised occurred in Matthew 13.57, when he explained to his disciples, "Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house."

So here is one particular crux in Christ's teachings that stirs my hermeneutic curiosity. There is too much emphasis on an eschatology of hellfire--certainly in the Matthew gospel--and then again there is too much emphasis on the rejection of the family for spiritual values. What's the connection between these two obsessions? We don't have time enough to pursue this particular question right now, but it confirms my sense, (1) that Christ's vision was ultimately the product of the author himself rather than his text (which means that Christ did in fact exist as a human being), and (2) that his text escaped effective editorial revision well enough to betray emotions not entirely under control (which tends to confirm that Christ's most compelling ideas were finally his own). In other words, Christ himself went over the top--at times well over the top--as did Plato, Shakespeare, and perhaps a dozen others in the history of western civilization. Thus Christ almost certainly existed, but his views must be carefully sifted relevant to one's comparable experience. Some of his teachings are certainly useful, but others are dangerous and harmful to most people.

My conclusion, therefore: I myself cannot accept Christ's divinity, nor his eschatology of hell-fire, nor his ethics of fear, since I do not approve of morality strictly based on rewards and punishment in an imaginary afterlife. And I am frankly appalled by his hostility to religion, which only the most blinkered Christians can ignore. But I continue to be dazzled by Christ's genius in having so effectively articulated a vision of personal obligation essential to the subsequent history of western civilization. Single handedly, at least at the beginning, he brought to a close classical civilization's secular achievement, setting the stage for the Dark and Middle Ages, and the dialectic struggle between orthodox belief and secular disbelief during the last four centuries.

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