

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	1 John		Pastor/Teacher
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THE REALITY OF JESUS

The Washington Post on Christmas Day announced, with its usual bravado, that evidence Jesus actually existed is very doubtful. This was not the first time they made this claim – but to do so on Christmas Day made it all the more galling. Back in 2014 they carried an op. ed. piece by Raphael Lataster with the subtitle “There are clearly good reasons to doubt Jesus’ historical existence.”¹ Relying on the “authority” of the noted arch-athiest and Jesus-denier Richard Carrier, Lataster dismisses not only the New Testament claims but also the historical credibility of Tacitus and Josephus, who both asserted the existence of Jesus.² Even the noted agnostic New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman, who is no friend to anything resembling orthodox Christianity, finds this reprehensible scholarship.³

I. JOHN’S ASSURED AFFIRMATION: GOD MANIFESTED IN THE FLESH. “As to the knowledge, ‘That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you;’ that which we have seen and heard of the ‘Word of life;’ ‘the Life;’ which ‘was manifested;’ ‘that Eternal Life which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us’ (vers. 1, 2). These names and descriptions of the Son undoubtedly refer, in the first instance, to his eternal relation to the Father; of whose nature he is the image, of whose will he is the expression, of whose life he is the partner and the communicator. But this eternal relation – what he is to the Father from everlasting – must be viewed now in connection with what he is as he dwells among us on the earth. It is ‘the man Christ Jesus’ who is the ‘manifested life.’ He is so from first to last, during all the days of his flesh; from his being ‘made of a woman, made under the law,’ to his being ‘made sin and made a curse’ for us, and thereafter, ‘for his obedience unto death, even the death of the cross, highly exalted:’ from the Baptist’s introduction of him to John and others of the apostles as ‘the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world,’ to the hour when, as John so emphatically testifies, his side was pierced, and ‘there came out blood and water.’ Every intervening incident, every miracle, every discourse, every act of grace, every word of wisdom and of love, is a part of this manifestation. In every one of them ‘the eternal life which was with the Father is manifested to us.’ He who liveth with the Father evermore, dwelling in his bosom, is manifesting to us in himself – in his manhood, in his feelings, sayings, doings, sufferings, as a man dwelling among us – what that life is, -- not liable to time’s accidents and passions, but unchanging, eternal, imperturbable, -- which he shares with the Everlasting Father, -- and which now he shares also with us, and we with him.”⁴ John points to the reality of his claim by appealing to the account of the earthly life of the incarnate Son. There were eyewitnesses.

A. **They heard.** When he says, “Which we have heard,” he is speaking of incarnation, the coming of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ to this world, and His assumption of a human body and the putting of Himself under human limitations.

The 'we' is the editorial 'we' of John. It might possibly also include the other disciples as eyewitnesses. The verb is in the perfect tense, which tense in Greek refers to a past completed action having present results. The expanded translation would be, 'that which we have heard with the present result that it is ringing in our ears.'"⁵

- B. **They saw.** This is emphasizing their direct, personal experience. Two words are used. Barclay explains, "He says that he has *gazed* on Christ. What, then, is the difference between *seeing* Christ and *gazing* upon him? In the Greek, the verb for *to see* is *horan*, and it means simply to see with physical sight. The verb for *to gaze* is *theasthai*, and it means to gaze at someone or something until something has been grasped of the significance of that person or thing. So Jesus, speaking to the crowds of John the Baptist, asked: 'What did you go out in the wilderness *to see* (*theasthai*)?' (Luke 7:24); and in that word he describes how the crowds flocked out to gaze at John and wonder who and what this man might be. Speaking of Jesus in the prologue to his gospel, John says, 'We beheld his glory' (John 1:14). The verb is again *theasthai*, and the idea is not that of a passing glance but of a steadfast searching gaze which seeks to discover something of the mystery of Christ."⁶
- C. **They handled.** The word *epsēlaphēsan* means more than to "touch." It refers to something that is closely examined, and as Westcott points out, "There can be no doubt that the exact word is used with a distinct reference to the invitation of the Lord after His Resurrection: *Handle me . . .* (Luke 24:39, *psēlaphēsate me*). The tacit reference is the more worthy of notice because St. John does not mention the fact of the Resurrection in his Epistle; nor does he use the word in his own narrative of the Resurrection. From early times it has been observed that St. John used the term to mark the solid ground of the Apostolic conviction."⁷

CONCLUSION: John declares that the purpose for writing this epistle is that his readers might have apostolic fellowship (1:3) and joy (1:4), and this can only be possible with a very real Jesus who is not merely an idea or a system of thought. The Jesus of history *must* be the Christ of faith. The late James Boice summed it up nicely, "As objective and tangible as the revelation of God in Christ was, this would nevertheless have gone unnoticed by John and the others had God not intervened to reveal Christ to them subjectively. This seems to be the meaning of the twofold repetition of the word 'appeared' in verse 2. In the first instance it refers merely to the fact of Incarnation: 'the life appeared.' It refers to the same point of which John is speaking in the prologue to the Gospel when he says that the true light 'was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him' (John 1:10). In the second instance the reference is to the life having been revealed to John personally: 'and has appeared to us.' This refers to the point at which the disciples 'have seen his glory' or 'believed.' No one today can repeat the objective experiences of Christ possessed by the apostles. That is why we need their testimony to Christ as preserved in their writings. Nevertheless, we can and must repeat their subjective experience as, on the basis of the objective revelation, the Holy Spirit makes Christ alive and real both to our minds and hearts. The historical Jesus and a personal commitment to Him belong together. In John's day this was the antidote to the heresy that would have separated the historical Jesus from the so-called Christ of faith. In our day it is equally valid as an antidote either to any who would, on the one hand, attempt to 'demythologize' the faith through science or a mystical experience or who, on the other hand, would substitute a historical but distant Christ for a personal commitment to Him by which He becomes both the Savior and the Lord of life."⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ cf. the thoughtful analysis by Wm. M. Briggs, “Washington Post to Christian on Christmas Morning: Jesus Didn’t Exist,” *The Stream*, Dec. 26, 2017.

² The Roman historian Tacitus, who wrote early in the second century, describes Christians as those who had received their name from “Christ who had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius” (*Annals* 15:44). These details mesh perfectly with the information found in the New Testament. Writing about five years later than Tacitus, another Roman historian of the day, Suetonius, refers to the expulsion of Jews from Rome in the time of the emperor Claudius (AD 41-54). The cause for this imperial edict he attributes to rioting “at the instigation of Chrestus” (*Claudius* 25:4). Josephus was a Jewish historian, who wrote during the second half of the first century AD, would seem to offer much more promising material. In his *Jewish Antiquities*, he makes passing mention of “James, the brother of Jesus, who was called the Christ,” who he claims was delivered up to the Sanhedrin to be stoned sometime in the decade of the 60s (*Ant.* 20:200). Josephus also tells of John the Baptist, whom Herod killed even “though he was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practise justice towards their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing to join in baptism” (18:117). But the most striking and significant passage occurs in 18:63-64: “About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvellous things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.” Cf. Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of The Gospels* (IVP, 1987), pp. 196-200.

³ Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (Harper One, 2012). His disdain for the kind of nonsense in the *Washington Post* is obvious. He declares that these outrageous claims are stunning. “I was surprised because I am trained as a scholar of the New Testament and early Christianity, and for thirty years I have written extensively on the historical Jesus, the Gospels, the early Christian movement, and the history of the church’s first three hundred years. Like all New Testament scholars, I have read thousands of books and articles in English and other European languages on Jesus, the New Testament, and early Christianity. But I was almost completely unaware – as are most of my colleagues in the field – of this body of skeptical literature. I should say at the outset that none of this literature is written by scholars trained in New Testament or early Christian studies teaching at the major, or even the minor, accredited theological seminaries, divinity schools, universities, or colleges of North America or Europe (or anywhere else in the world). Of the thousands of scholars of early Christianity who do teach at such schools, none of them, to my knowledge, has any doubts that Jesus existed. But a whole body of literature out there, some of it highly intelligent and well informed, makes this case. These sundry books and articles (not to mention websites) are of varying quality. Some of them rival *The Da Vinci Code* in their passion for conspiracy and the shallowness of their historical knowledge, not just of the New Testament and early Christianity, but of ancient religions generally and, even more broadly, the ancient world. But a couple of bona fide scholars – not professors teaching religious studies in universities but scholars nonetheless, and at least one of them with a Ph.D. in the field of New Testament – have taken this position and written about it. Their books may not be known to most of the general public interested in questions related to Jesus, the Gospels, or the early Christian church, but they do occupy a noteworthy niche as a (very) small but (often) loud minority voice. Once you tune in to this voice, you quickly learn just how persistent and vociferous it can be. Those who do not think Jesus existed are frequently militant in their views and remarkably adept at countering evidence that to the rest of the civilized world seems compelling and even unanswerable. But these writers have answers, and the smart ones among them need to be taken seriously, if for no other reason than to show why they cannot be right about their major contention. The reality is that whatever else you may think about Jesus, he certainly did exist. Serious historians of the early Christian movement – all of them – have spent many years preparing to be experts in their field. Just to read the ancient sources requires expertise in a range of ancient languages: Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and often Aramaic, Syriac, and Coptic, not to mention the modern languages of scholarship (for example, German and French). And that is just for starters. Expertise requires years of patiently examining ancient texts and a thorough grounding in the history and culture of Greek and Roman antiquity, the religions of the ancient Mediterranean world, both pagan and Jewish, knowledge of the history of the Christian church and the development of its social life and theology, and, well, lots of other things. It is striking that virtually everyone who has spent all the years needed to attain these qualifications is convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was a real historical figure.”

⁴ Robert Candlish, *1 John* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1973), p. 4.

⁵ Kenneth Wuest, *Word Studies From The Greek New Testament: Great Truths To Live By* III (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 99.

⁶ Wm. Barclay, *The Letters of John: The Daily Study Bible* (The Saint Andrew Press, 1976), p. 23.

⁷ B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of John* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1966), p. 6.

⁸ J. M. Boice, *The Epistles of John* (Zondervan, 1979), p. 29.