

The Reliability of the Gospels - 10

The 'Uninventable' Jesus

The Gospels depict Jesus in a way unlike any other historical figure or character of the day, either Jewish or from Roman-Greek society. He has some of the characteristics of a Jewish teacher, but there are major problems with seeing him in this way. There is nothing about him to suggest he is a Greek hero.

The Apostle Paul noted this:

For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:22-23).

The point here is that if the pagan Greeks were inventing someone to be the Son of God, he would not have been crucified. Instead he would have been a hero in the Greek mould. Similarly, if the figure of a Messiah were to have been invented by a Jew, then that Messiah would not have been crucified.

The Jewish Expectation

The Jewish idea of Messiah came from the Old Testament. Passages like Psalm 2 give a picture of the kind of person the Messiah would be:

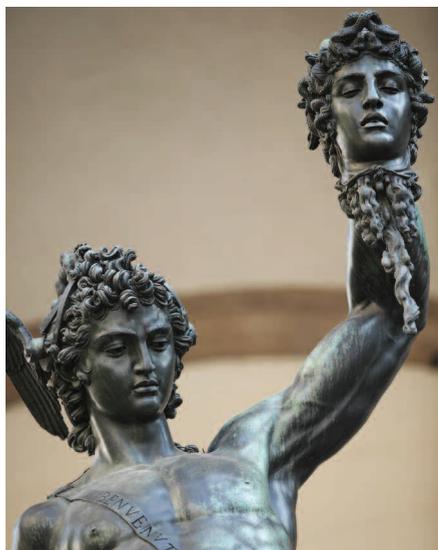
The LORD has said to me, "You are My Son, today I have begotten you. Ask of Me, and I will give you the nations for your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron; you shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel." (Psalm 2:7-9).

In the first and early second centuries there were a number of people who claimed to be the Messiah and raised rebel armies to defeat the Romans. All of them failed and their followers were scattered. However, their existence indicates what Jews expected in a Messiah.

Had the Gospels been made up by a messianic Jew, they would have reflected these military ambitions. Certainly, the descriptions of the Jewish authorities (Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees) would have been quite different.

No Greek Hero

The alternative possibility is that the Gospels were invented by a Gentile (a non-Jew). However, we also know what the Greeks expected from a Son of God. In the second century, Lucian



of Samosata wrote a satire on Christianity, and an attack on Christianity was written by Celsus. In the early third century Philostratus wrote a book which attempted to show that Apollonius of Tyana was a more acceptable hero than Jesus Christ. These attacks on Christianity show what kind of hero the Greeks were expecting and would find palatable.

The Greek documents indicate a hero who differed from Jesus in a number of ways. The Greek messiah would have had the body of a Greek god. He would have defeated his enemies in battle, caused and stopped plagues, destroyed monsters and appeared in great splendour and glory. As Celsus explains in intricate detail, the hero would have met kings and worked with cities. He would not have been born to a carpenter's wife, in an obscure area on the fringe of the Roman Empire. His miracles would have been magnificent works of huge theatrical effect rather than healing sick people or feeding the hungry. He would have been a philosopher-hero like Apollonius or a demigod like Hercules.

Clearly Jesus of Nazareth, who walked among the poor, healed the sick and proclaimed the Kingdom of God to come would not match the expectations of those looking for a pagan hero or a Greek demigod.

Inspiring Followers

It is almost impossible to imagine how a figure like Jesus could have inspired a community of followers who, after his death, spread across the world carrying his message. That is unless the claims of Jesus and the testimony of eye-witnesses are true and he genuinely rose from the dead.

Many Jews followed messianic figures like Theudas (see Acts 5:36) or the Egyptian leader (Acts 21:38). They rose up and went into the desert, or they mustered armies to fight the Romans, but they were defeated. The messianic figure died and the surviving followers dispersed. The followers then had two choices. Either they found another messianic pretender to follow or they gave up completely. They did not continue to follow their leader after he had died.

Jesus Christ is different. Jesus never raised an army, and had no intention to take power by force. At the time of his crucifixion his last remaining disciples "*forsook him and fled*" (Mark 14:50). During the time between the crucifixion and the resurrection, Jesus' disciples hid away. There was no intention to go out and spread the message of Jesus despite his death.

It was only after the resurrection that the followers of Jesus began to organise themselves, and only fifty days later, after Pentecost, that they began to proclaim the Gospel publicly. There was something quite different about Jesus which meant that his disciples followed a different course of action from those followers of other teachers and leaders.

Essentially the Jesus of the Bible could not and would not be invented. Nobody in the ancient world would have devised anyone like the Jesus we read about in the Gospels. He simply doesn't fit the ideas of the world of his time. The evidence shows that Jesus was real, and because he rose from the dead he still is real. It is up to us to consider this carefully and to investigate the claims of Jesus Christ.

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