

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

I heard a caller to a radio program confidently say that he had done extensive research and found that there are no contemporaneous references to Jesus and therefore no proof that he ever existed. I don't think he is right, but how do you respond to someone who says that everything we have ever been told about Jesus is legendary and he never actually existed?

The caller was right about one thing: we have no contemporaneous references to Jesus (mentions of Jesus written during his lifetime). But that is not a reason to seriously doubt that he lived. We have references to Jesus soon enough after his lifetime to establish that he existed.

There are three early references to Jesus in non-Christian sources that are sufficient to establish to the satisfaction of most historians that Jesus was a historical person. The Jewish historian Josephus writing in about 94 A.D. mentions the martyrdom of James, the brother of Jesus and refers to “the brother of Jesus, who was called the Messiah. James was his name.” Pliny the Younger, writing in 111-113, describes what he had heard of the worship of

Christians, how they were “accustomed to gather on a fixed day before sunrise and sing a hymn antiphonally to Christ as to a god.” The Roman historian Tacitus, writing around 115, relates how the Emperor Nero in 64 blamed the burning of Rome on the Christians and tells us, “Christus, from whom their name is derived, was executed by the procurator Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius.”

References to Jesus in Christian writings begin earlier. Historians date the crucifixion either to the year 29 or 30. The first reference to Jesus we have comes from 20 or so years later in the oldest preserved Christian writing: Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians (dated 50 or 51). Paul refers to Jesus as “our Lord Jesus Christ,” “[God's] Son

THE REV.
WILLIAM G.
GARTIG



from heaven,” and tells us he was crucified, raised and will come again. So we have a 20-year gap between Jesus' life and the first written mention of him.

The earliest account of what Jesus said and

did (beyond being crucified and raised) is in the Gospel of Mark. We don't know exactly when Mark was written, but most scholars guess mid-60s to early 70s. If we take the year 65 for Mark, that would be 35 years after Jesus' lifetime.

The 20-year gap to the earliest mention of Jesus and the 35-year gap to Mark is far better than almost any other religious leader from the ancient world.

For Zoroaster, Lao-tzu, Confucius, Buddha, Abraham and Moses, there is at least 300 years of purely oral transmission before any of their words or stories about them were written down.

Muhammad's case is special: the words of the Qur'an seem to have been carefully preserved both orally and in

written form from the very beginning, but no such care was taken with the words and deeds of Muhammad, which only began to be written down 125 years after his death.

Of the ancient figures I have looked into, only the philosopher Socrates does better than Jesus. Two of his disciples (Plato and Xenophon) wrote reminiscences of him.

So while we have no exactly contemporaneous references to Jesus, our historical sources for his existence and his words and deeds are better (closer to the event) than those for almost all other ancient religious figures. We would love to discover somewhere verbatim notes taken down during the Sermon on the Mount or other contemporaneous written materials but that is unlikely. We are actually quite well off having the Gospel accounts of Jesus written one or two generations after his lifetime and the even earlier letters of Paul.

The Rev. William G. Gartig will answer your questions about the Bible, Episcopal life and other religious subjects. Send questions to 2146 Cameron Ave. Apt. 5, Cincinnati, OH 45212-3631 or at gartigwg@episcopal-dso.zzn.com.