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Christological Reflections: A Historical Perspective

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Christological discourse holds a central place in the wider theological discourse due to the centrality of the doctrine of Christ in the establishment of the Christian message. This in effect places integral value on the task of Christological formulation if at all we intend to stabilize Christian theology. The core of the Christian message is inherent in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In as much as the primary sources of Christology remains the biblical narrative, there is a significant urge for theological practitioners to supplement the biblical narrative with a well-researched historical account of the life of Christ beyond the confines of the scripture to verify authenticity and historicity of the biblical account. This calls for an industrious effort of theologians to engage historical data as an indication of the existence of Christ. Our study seeks to undertake this task and contribute to Historical and Christology scholarship by addressing the question of the historical quest of Christ. To accomplish this task, our approach will be centred on pagan testimonies, Jewish testimonies, and historical evidences from materials outside the biblical sphere. A negligence of addressing these concepts may subject the Christian narrative to massive objection in our day and age.

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INTRODUCTION

The enlightenment age brought with it a significant contribution to scholarship discipline that saw a deeper investigation and inquiry subjected to matters that were previously accepted and believed without much criticism and question. This sceptic attitude that emerged in this age increased the need for deeper scrutiny on matters that were previously taken on face value. For Kant, this was an age best defined as man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity which is the inability to make use of one's own understanding without the guidance of another and self-incurred because its cause lies not in the lack of understanding but in the lack of the resolve and the courage to use it without the guidance of another and thus the motto of this age was courage to use your own understanding as is captured by Schmidt (1996, p. 55-64).

This enlightenment dispensation was birthed by the rapid and widely circulated information that was bent on interrogation of medieval scientific establishments and the dogmas of religion that had not been previously subjected to trial and testing. Hill (2004, p. 10) agrees that the enlightenment did not simply appear from nowhere, as if someone turned on a light bulb one day but like any other period in history, it grew out of what came before and in some respects, it was a rebellion against earlier ideas and institutions, some of which had been held sacred for over a millennium. In theological circles many doctrinal stances were in this age under new scrutiny and most specifically the doctrine of Christ. This is an era that saw the emergence of Christology under trial. Dawes (2000, p. 1) has observed that for more than 1600 years the idea of the question of the historical Jesus was nowhere to mention in the minds of the Christian interpreters of the Bible who saw no difference between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of the Church's proclamation. This attitude changes in the seventeenth century he (ibid) further alludes as a divorce between the claims of faith and those of history. This divorce was orchestrated by the

emphasis that history was homogenous and this had two implications: first, it led to a contraction of the ontological gap between Christ and other human beings and secondly, it led to the growing historical scepticism as is analysed by McGrath (2016, p. 295). This idea is seconded by Dawes (2000) that the separation was necessitated by two things: The taken for granted authority of the Bible needed to be undermined; and a sense of historical distance needed to be developed.

Cairns (2009, p. 49) articulates accurately that Christianity has its beginnings from the subjective human side in temporal history and because these values are inextricably linked with the person, life and death of Christ, some considerations must be given to the evidence for the historical existence of Christ. It is in this regard that this work wishes to contribute to scholarship by deliberation on the quest for a historical Jesus by a steadfast analysis of biblical criticism as an attempt to undermine and discredit the integrity of message of the life and ministry of Christ. There are significant areas that have generated heated debate among scholarship with regard to the quest for a historical Jesus. These areas include and are not limited to the virgin conception and birth of Jesus; the early life of Jesus; the miracles of Jesus, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Our study shall be keen to tackle these areas by observing the criticism that has emerged in all these areas and the response that has been accorded.

The Virgin Conception and Birth of Jesus

According to a universal belief of the historic Christian Church, Jesus of Nazareth was born without human father, being conceived by the Holy Ghost, and born of the Virgin Mary (Machen, 1958, p. 1). Among the protestants as is elaborated by Brown (1973, p. 22) the question of the virginal conception has been debated for a length of time and on many occasions settled with a negative response about historicity that is accompanied with a perceptive hesitancy that is a threat against the symbolism touching on the mystery of Christ. The

point of the Incarnation which offers the hardest problem to the modern mind is the Virgin-Birth because the reconciliation of two natures, the divine and human, in one Person presents even less difficulty than the Conception of the Virgin according to Hitchcock (1910, p. 25). Since the denial of the virginal conception was initiated by the rationalists, there remains a certain suspicion about those who hesitate to evaluate it as a historical fact (Brown, 1973). This conversation demands the massive input of historians, theologians, and exegetes and not a casual response like, since the early Christians accepted the virginal conception, we must follow in their footsteps blindly, rather we must be open to an honest attempt to survey the evidence as is captured by Brown (1973, p. 30).

This discussion has been tackled along different fronts such as scriptural defence and traditional history of which this study sincerely appreciates, however this work would so wish to restrict herself toward the historical argument. O'Carroll (2000, p. 358) analyses that the doctrine of the virginal conception is found widely in the second century: in the official creeds, that of Hippolytus (c. 217) though later being well-known, but the *antecedents*, *Romanum Vetus* and *Textus Receptus* more ancient as witnesses from near the end of the second century; in the popular stories called Apocrypha; in the most important inscription of the times, that of Abercius; and in Christian writing by St. Ignatius of Antioch, Aristides, St. Justin Martyr, St. Irenaeus—these last two being the first exponents of Marian theology, interpreters of Is. 7:14 in a Marian sense, pioneers of the Eve-Mary doctrine; to these add St. Clement of Alexandria who died before 215. There are also serious problems for those who maintain that the virginal conception is a theological concept devoid of an historical reality because of the question of why early Christians would create so many problems for themselves and open the wide door to the charge of illegitimacy by inventing the idea of Jesus being born of a virgin? (Witherington, 2003).

Because of its significance, the doctrinal emphasis of Christ's virgin birth is indispensable to a biblically based Christology and Soteriology according to Dockery and Nelson (2007, p. 426). In as much as we may rationally suggest other means God could have employed to sustain Jesus as

sinless, the historical actuality inherent in the virgin birth is a historical non-negotiable according to Lewis and Demarest (2014, p. 2:274). Therefore, the virgin birth should not be an obstacle to faith but rather a help because if one rejects the virgin birth, he receives the approval of some people in the modern academy whereas if one affirms the virgin birth, he receives the support of Scripture and almost 2000 years of church history (Dockery & Nelson, 2007).

The Early Life of Jesus

Another area that has been a centre of contention has been the early life of Jesus from his birth to the baptism because of the silent Scriptures has accorded to this phase of the life of Christ. Apart from the pockets of the narrative of Jesus as a twelve-year-old there has been a gap in the narrative of Christ with regard to these years that has generated enormous speculations and emergence of different writings in an attempt to bridge this gap. Bond (2012) affirms that we know nothing about Jesus' early life with any degree of certainty with numerous infancy gospels trying to fill in the gap with wild and fanciful tales of his boyhood exploits, but these clearly have no historical value. Albert Schweitzer (1968, p. 38-39) called them 'the fictitious lives of Jesus' that were chiefly characterized as the words of 'a few imperfectly equipped free-lances. Such works often attempted to invent Jesus' internal motivations and speculate on other aspects of his life, even in areas where the Gospels are silent as is articulated by Habermas (1996, p. 16).

The typical approach was to postulate the existence of a secret organization or association often the Essenes, who were portrayed as being leading, but secret, members of society, and hence were able to manipulate events and circumstances in Jesus' life (Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ*, 1996). In the same breadth researchers into the life of Jesus in the 18th century, such as Hermann Reimarus and Karl Bahrdt sought to portray Jesus as the agent of a secret enlightenment order that had set itself the goal of spreading the religion of reason in the world and were at the same time anti-Trinitarians and pioneers of the radical rationalistic criticism of dogma according to Matt Stefon (2011, p. 107). It is

apparent that the time from Jesus' early childhood to the beginning of his public ministry has been referred to as 'the silent years' with the only record we have of any specific event being the family trip to Jerusalem for the Passover when Jesus was about twelve (Dockery & Nelson, 2007).

The Miracles of Jesus

The question of the miracles of Jesus being historical and not mythical is a critical one with regard to the New Testament scholarship. As a progression to the narrative advanced by critics such as Bahrtdt that sought to link Christ to the Essence, they move further that the miracles of Jesus were staged production with intention of attracting followers according to Joseph (2012, p. 22). Albert Schweitzer, in his landmark book on the ways in which Jesus has been interpreted by European critical scholars, treats Karl Bahrtdt as one of the first to attempt to explain away supernaturalism in the Gospels. Coming from the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment, he accepted the Evangelists' accounts as factual but incomplete, and proceeded to give rational explanations of how Jesus allegedly operated a secret society as is envisioned by Phipps (2008, p. 302). Schweitzer (2001, p. 37) brings out the consideration Bahrtdt's interpretation of the multitude feeding and the water walking episode: "The Order had collected a great quantity of bread in a cave and this was gradually handed out by his disciples to Jesus, who stood at the concealed entrance... Jesus walked towards the disciples over the surface of a great floating raft as articulated by Schweitzer (2001, p. 40-42).

Klausner (2020, p. 81) elaborates how Bahrtdt in his works has attempted to find a connecting link between the isolated episodes recorded in the gospels and to find reasons for what Jesus did and why he suffered, and so account for all the miracles by natural means. For him both link and reason are both found in the Essenes whom Bahrtdt and Venturini describe as a secret order and taught Jesus certain methods of healing by which he worked the supposed miracles, or else Luke, who was a physician, assisted him in many instances of supposed death; such are the acts which Jesus did and which were accounted as miracles by the onlookers and the disciples. As we encounter the miracle narratives in the Gospels, the questions in

the minds or ordinary readers, as well as many students of the historical Jesus, are 'Did it happen?' and 'Did it happen like that?' according to Twelftree (1999, p. 243). With regard to what we can know about the past, Twelftree captions positivism or naïve realism as one means to putting the complex issues in their most simplistic form and through careful observation gain unquestionable objective knowledge of things in the case of history; another view of how to know things is phenomenalism which is that in our observations, all that we can be certain of is our own impression of the text; and lastly is the proposal of critical realism that when applied to historical inquiry such as the historicity of the miracles of Jesus means that we hold that there is a past reality outside the historian and the data or documents while at the same time accepting that the only access we have to this past is by a recapturing or re-creative understanding that develops through and alongside the process of interaction between the historian's data and the historians and his understanding of his world (Twelftree, 1999).

The best place to close our submission of this segment is the voice of the miracles of Jesus outside the parameters and confines of the New Testament that would aide an independent analysis of the miraculous with regard to the ministry of Jesus. In as much as scholarship concluding that the passage is Jewish Antiquities 18:63-64 by Josephus was victim to Christian redactors and copyist additions, early Christians thought of it otherwise as wonderful and authentic attestation of Jesus. It affirms that "...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..." according to Strobel (1998, p. 79). Twelftree (1999, p. 254) echoes the same sentiments that in as much as Josephus most probable mention of Jesus, Christian redactors and copyist have added to, subtracted from, and altered the passage but one of the lines is probably authentic and affirms that "He [Jesus] was one who wrought surprising feats" *paradox on ergon poiētēs*, "a worker of unexpected uncommon feats". (Twelftree, 1999) further acknowledges that Josephus had no particular reason to attribute the miracles to Jesus because he even did not consider Jesus unique in this respect, but from him we secure evidence that

Jesus was at least reputed to perform surprising feats, probably miracles.

Secondly, there was the Babylonian Talmud which is the great compilation of rabbinic tradition edited in Sasanid Mesopotamia in the fifth through seventh centuries C.E., and is arguably the most important Jewish text according to Rubenstein (2005, p. 1). Kalmin and Lightstone (1996, p. 1) agrees that soon after its redaction in about sixth century of our era, the Babylonian Talmud- Talmud bavli displaced virtually all other rabbinic literary oeuvres at the top of the pyramid of authoritative and sacred texts revered and studied within rabbinic canon. Inherent in this literature that preserved a tradition with probable association with Jesus of Nazareth: "It, has been taught on the eve of the Passover Jesus was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, 'He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery' and by sorcery the probable meaning would be the use of particular paraphernalia to perform healing according to (Twelftree, 1999)

Pitre (2017, p. 283) in direct quote from the Sanhedrin observes that:

On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, "He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Anyone who can say anything in his favour, let him come forward and plead on his behalf". But since nothing was brought forward in his favour he was hanged on the eve of the Passover! -Ulla retorted: Do you suppose that he was one for whom a defense could be made? Was he not a Mesith [enticer], concerning whom Scriptures says, "Neither shall you spare, neither shall you conceal him" [Deut 13:9]? With Yeshu however it was different for he related to the government. Our Rabbis taught: Yeshu had five disciples, Matthai, Nakai, Nezer, Buni, and Todah (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 43a).

Although the material has a measure of deficiency with regard to submission of contemporary evidence of Jesus being a miracle worker, it submits to students of historical Jesus an important independent and indirect evidence as it portrays Jesus as a sorcerer-healer (Twelftree, 1999). Pate

(2015) in like manner affirms that the Talmud does not in any way deny the miracles of Jesus but attribute them to magic. However, it is important to acknowledge that this testament serves as a crucial voice of the historical Jesus with regard to his miraculous engagement. Brill (2010, p. 57) seconds the idea that the Talmud does however, contain several negative stories involving a protagonist called Jesus or Joshua who may refer in some of the cases to the Jesus of the New Testament yet these stories are not central within the Talmud, which only wanted to distance Jews from the new religion. However, it is possible that in Jewish-Christian debates the traditions have been confused such that Jesus' name has been only latter and incorrectly associated with stories of other, often unorthodox figures and this places the material of doubtful value to us with regard to our quest for the historical Jesus (Twelftree, 1999).

Evans (Ed.) (2003, p. 247) brings out some of these materials as according to Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.6. Jesus was brought up in secret and hired himself out as a workman in Egypt and having tried his hand at certain magical powers he returned from there, and on account of those powers gave himself the title of God (*Contra Celsum* 1.38). In agreement, (Twelftree, 1999) confirms that Origen in his quotation of Celsus in the end of the second century concerning Jesus: "He was brought up in secret and hired himself out as a workman in Egypt, and after having tried his hand at certain magical powers he returned from there, and on account of those powers gave himself the title of God. Chadwick (1980, p. 37) in his critique questions why a magician should have taken the trouble to teach a doctrine which persuades every man to do every action as before God who judges each man for all his works, and to instil a conviction in his disciples whom he intended to use as the ministers of his teachings. Did they persuade their hearers because they had been taught to do miracles in this way, or did they not do any miracles?

Again, this is too late to be considered as direct evidence, and Celsus may be dependent on Christian traditions in building his case. However, it is certainly not material that would have been created by Christians and in any case, Celsus indicates a continuing tradition that Jesus was thought to have powers that enabled him to perform

miracles (Twelftree, 1999). In his analysis, Saunders (2010, p. 57) draws a contrast that Celsus is positive about the learned arts of astrology and magic, attributing the former to the Chaldeans and latter to the Magi while Origen these deceitful and destructive arts which draw on the power of *daimons* through their formulae. Justin Martyr's dialogue with Trypho, "But though they saw such works, they asserted it that it was magical art. For they dared to call him a magician and deceiver of the people," (69.7) with Justin probably alluding to the Synoptic tradition, which Jesus is accused of casting out demons by the power of Satan, however, his choice of words ('magic,' 'magical powers,' and 'deceiver of the people') suggest that this is a criticism of what he has heard in the second and third-century criticism, and not the criticism originally levelled against Jesus according to Chilton & Evans (1998, p. 480)

Another piece of indirect evidence that the historical Jesus performed miracles is in the continuing use of his name by healers. Evans (2014, p. 191) in *The Routledge Encyclopaedia of the Historical Jesus*, accurately observes that the fame of Jesus as an exorcist and healer continued to live on as pagans and Jews, as well as Christians, invoked his name in a variety of incantations, amulets, and magical papyi. Names often of those considered to have been powerful healers- Solomon, for example (*Josephus Ant. 8:46-49*)- were used by later healers in their incantations for miracles. Once again though very late, the evidence from the rabbinic material is that Jesus was remembered as a healer, for the rabbis prohibited healing by Jesus' name. And Arnobius, a Christian apologist who died about A.D. 330, says that Jesus' name was used in exorcisms in his day (*Adv. Gent. 1:43*) (Twelftree, 1999). One pagan charm instructs the patient to conjure, by saying: "I adjure you by the God of the Hebrews, Jesus..." with the charm going on to appeal to the seal (ring) of Solomon (*PGM IV. 3007-41*) according to (Evans, 2014).

The relevant material from outside the New Testament is small but significant in giving us evidence that Jesus was known as or had a reputation as a successful miracle worker. In the case of Josephus, although his material has been transmitted and altered by Christians, a core of evidence exists independent of Christian traditions.

Though the rabbinic material is late, it is valuable in that it does not appear to be dependent on Christian traditions. In the case of evidence from Celsus, which comes to us through Christian traditions, we have information transmitted that would not have been created by Christians because of the offensive nature. In the case of Arnobius and other Christian writers, though we do not have independent evidence, we do have information that is transmitted incidentally to their purposes. Turning to the New Testament, we see that Jesus' reputation is well founded. The historical evidence articulated concerning the miracles of Jesus are a key contributor to scholarship and the quest of historical Jesus.

The Death and Resurrection of Jesus

Another key landmark that is crucial in Christology apart from the miracles is His death and resurrection that marked the key purpose of His incarnation which was the redemption of humanity. Erickson (2000, p. 761) agrees that He became incarnate, however, because of the task that he had to accomplish- saving us from our sin. The historical scholarship of the Christological discipline is also keen to capture this momentous occurrence in Christianity with the lenses of history. To achieve this end, we shall observe first and foremost His death and subsequently His resurrection. Thiessen (1979, p. 229) acknowledges the significance of the death of Jesus rather than his earthly life is of supreme importance contrary to the facts in the case of ordinary men. Rutledge (2015, p. 44) emphasizes on the significance by reflecting the difficult work in the teaching about the cross because the practice of taking up the cross, as Jesus himself called us to do bears the connotation of total reorientation of the self toward the way of Christ. The crucifixion is the touchstone of Christian authenticity, the unique feature by which everything else, including the resurrection, is given its true significance because it is in the crucifixion that the nature of God is truly revealed thus the crucifixion is the most important historical event that has ever happened (Rutledge, 2015).

Horsley in his work on *The Death of Jesus*, in (B. Chilton and C. A. Evans (Eds.) (1994, p. 396-399) argues that from a historical context there is high probability that Jesus was crucified, close to Pesah,

as a political and religious rebel. McKnight (2005, p. 53) affirms that essentially, Jesus was put to death because of accusations levelled against him of being a false prophet and a magician who was in danger of leading the people astray. But historically, Jesus was crucified by the Roman soldiers and any attempt to cast doubts on the same would be a tall order as it would be to doubt the existence of Jesus because it enjoys the security of history to an extent that one cannot think seriously about the ongoing significance of Jesus while ignoring his crucifixion. It is evident that several ancient people used crucifixion but among the Romans it was used as their primary punishment usually for slaves which Lipsius (2008, p. 30-32) exemplifies with lots of references to pagan authors and with regard to the execution of Jesus, Lipsius states that he was not sentenced by Jewish law because if that were the case, he would have been stoned, but by the Roman law which is indicated in the inscription *rex ludeorum on the titulusi* the sign ordered by Pilate.

In his critique and analysis of the work of Lipsius' Samuelsson, (2013, p. 6) acknowledges that the main contribution of the survey of ancient text by Lipsius and the coining of the great part of the nomenclature used in almost every subsequent study on the punishment of crucifixion. But due to his strong inclination to refer mainly to the fathers of the church, his position on the various terminologies is in danger of being coloured by what might be called an ecclesiastical understanding of the death of Jesus. Zestermann (1867, p. 9) also submits a survey of the crucifixion as it was conducted in ancient world concluding that it was a form of punishment that was used regularly at least during the last centuries. What may be a matter of faith is the meaning which we attach to the death of Christ: but His death itself is a fact of purely historical order according to William Park Armstrong (Ed.), (1908, p. 515).

Craig (2000, p. 23) correctly captions that ever since the disciples began to proclaim that Jesus was risen from the dead, some have denied the historical resurrection and have tried to come up with ways of explaining away the evidence through alternative theories most of which have been unanimously rejected by contemporary scholarship. The conspiracy theory was the first alternative used by the Jews to explain away the resurrection stating

that it was a hoax and that the disciples stole the body and lied about Jesus' appearances to them afterwards according to Craig (2000, p. 24). This theory was strongly refuted by the great historian Eusebius in his *Deomonstratio Evangelica* arguing that it was inconceivable that such a well-planned and thought-out conspiracy could ever succeed as collaborated by McDowell and Sterrett (2011). Craig (2010, p. 251) on the affirmative states that no scholar would defend the conspiracy hypothesis today with its only place of being found is the popular readings, sensationalist press or Internet fantasies.

After the controversy theory was the apparent death theory that attempted to argue that all the miracles recorded in the gospel could be explained by purely natural causes with the critique on the resurrection that Jesus did not really die on the cross but was laid unconscious in the tomb where he revived, managed to escape, and convinced his disciples that he had been raised from the dead according to Craig (2000, p. 36). It is also referred to as 'the swoon theory' that had a massive following in the midst of German rationalists in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century. Habermas and Moreland (1998, p. 125) asserts that David Strauss is credited to have dealt the historical deathblow to the swoon theory that was advanced by Karl Venturini, Heinrich Paulus, and others. Strauss was on the fore front to advance the hallucination theory of the resurrection of Jesus and as Schleiermacher (1963, p. 420) is quick to unearth the flaws in the hallucination thesis. The hallucination theory was chiefly popular in the nineteenth century but the advent of twentieth century psychology and psychiatry, as well as common body of historical facts has produced enormous criticism of these theories and resultantly few contemporary scholars have pursued these avenues according to Habermas (2003, p. 10).

It was the nineteenth century liberals who exposed many weaknesses in all the theories and resultantly by the turn of the century, none of the theses was left standing as all of them failed to adequately account for the data surrounding Jesus's resurrection in light of Habermas (2003, p. 14). Sandoval (2010, p.3) acknowledged that it is hard to find better historical evidence than the early testimony regarding the resurrection and the New Testament documents holds the best credentials of

all classics surviving from antiquity and a rejection of their witness is a rejection of all other ancient documents rendering our understanding of ancient history to the status of fiction. We are left with a formidable historical conclusion of an empty tomb, Jesus appearance to his followers which comes to a great dimension from a category of historical probability so high as to be virtually certain, as the death of Augustus in AD 14 or the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 as is stipulated by McDowel (2010, p.305).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The task of this work was to undertake scholarship on Historical and Christology scholarship by addressing the question of the historical quest of Christ. The study was able to undertake this task by a keen observation of the virgin conception and birth of Jesus; the early life of Jesus; the miracles of Jesus and the death and resurrection of Jesus. We have analysed these areas by observing the criticism that has emerged in all these areas and the response that has been accorded. The study has been able to capture the resources inherent in historical studies to the scholarship and formulation of Christological studies. There is a wealth of evidence incumbent on historical studies that are of essence in the conceptual framework of biblical Christology and the contribution to the quest of a historical Jesus. The study therefore further recommends further engagement with the historical evidence of Christ to facilitate factual and well-articulated Christological studies.

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