

An Historic Figure': John 1:1-5,14.

I was about 18 at the time, had been a Christian for some years, and was keen to tell others about Jesus. So when several others from the church decided to do some street preaching and witnessing in nearby Southend, I decided to go along as part of the team. There were a few of us young guys who turned up to do this with no intention of preaching. Our task was simply to circulate amongst those who were passing and to try to engage them in conversation. It was scary and hard for me to do.

And there were occasions when I would be standing there with Bible ready and someone would approach me and say to me, "But I don't believe the Bible. So whatever you say about Jesus that's recorded there I'm not prepared to accept. Unless you can prove to me from sources outside the Bible that Jesus actually existed and did some of the stuff you say he did, then I'm not interested". And I would be left open mouthed and feeling just a little embarrassed, because in those days I had absolutely nothing to say on that score.

Consequently, when I first read through this book by John Dickson I started thinking back to those days, and realized that I have a responsibility as your Pastor, to reiterate this information for those of you who already know it, and to share it with those of you who don't, ***so that you may have a greater confidence to "always give an answer to those who ask you the reason for the hope that is in you."***

But as well as doing that I want to leave you each week with one related Faith statement about Christ that the Bible gives that is totally astounding. Something that every Christian should know, believe, and courageously declare.

Yet before we come to that statement from the Bible we need to put the Biblical evidence about Jesus to the side for a moment and look only at the non-Biblical proof for Jesus, because that's what the secular historian focus is on. And when we do that we find a strong record of Jesus' existence that secular historians can't deny. A record that actually surprises them, simply because of the attention the person of Jesus' receives in the historic texts.

You see we as Christians have a whole New Testament that is full of information about Jesus that was gathered over several decades, but that is seen by historians as our 'in house' book. Records that were written by believers for believers who were only a tiny group at that time compared to the millions and millions of people in the ancient world.

But as far as any mention of the existence of Jesus outside that small group of believers, recorded in other writings—well they didn't expect to find much if any. Because they knew that "***What has survived of the writings and buildings of, say, first-century Jerusalem, Rome, or Athens would amount to the tiniest fraction of what was***

actually penned and constructed in the period—much less than 1 per cent.”
(John Dickson)

So the historians approach this less than 1% remnant of material with little expectation of even the most important people of that day being mentioned.

And Jesus in AD 30 was by no means an important person as far as the then known world was concerned. He was a Jewish preacher who worked mainly in the less important parts of a very small and conquered Nation. He was no great Roman Identity or well known Greek philosopher. And even in His own nation he was by no means the most famous religious figure. There were many others who claimed to be the Messiah and who lead uprisings against the Roman authorities that were much more effective, and yet next to nothing is found about them.

So the surprise that awaited the secular historians, many of whom were skeptical about Jesus, was the references to Jesus that they found in no less than eleven texts in the Greek-Roman writings of the first and second centuries, and most of those references were very significant.

Now to us 11 texts may not sound much. But we need to remember that we live in an age of electronic storage and retrieval of material, where written history is a necessity and the passing of facts from generation to generation without writing such down is unacceptable.

In ancient times however they had parchment rather than copious amounts of paper, and stone tablets rather than Apple ipads. So to find information about someone like Jesus in 11 ancient texts, we could even term as miraculous.

Of those 11 texts there are three that Dickson presents to us. The first was by a Jewish historian called Josephus. He lived between AD 37 and 100 and was a Jewish aristocrat and a military Commander in Palestine in the 4 and a half year war against Rome that ended in AD 70 with the total destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple.

Though he belonged to the enemy Josephus was well thought of by the Roman Emperors who set him up quite nicely in Rome, and there he wrote his massive work, Jewish Antiquities. In this historic record he happens to mention in section 20 the execution of several Jewish men by the Sanhedrin in AD 62. They were stoned to death as religious 'law-breakers. This mention would be unremarkable except for a passing reference to one of the victims who was the brother of Jesus.

“And so he[Ananus the high priest] convened the judges of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man named James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned. Those of the inhabitants of the city who were considered the most fair-minded and who were strict in observance of the law were offended at this.”

That James is one of four brothers of Jesus mentioned by name in the NT. Our NT records cut off at about AD 60 when James was still going strong. Here we find that in AD62 he became a martyr for what he believed.

Now Josephus at this time had no idea how important this Jesus would later become. But his 'by the way' reference here confirms His existence and His reputation as the Christ.

Dickson's second example comes from the same time period and this is what Dickson writes:- *Mara bar Serapion was an educated Syrian from Samosata in south-east Turkey. Writing from prison to his son, Mara warns his boy that sometimes even the wise are persecuted by the powerful.*

What good did it do the Athenians to kill Socrates, for which deed they were punished with famine and pestilence? What did it avail the Samians to burn Pythagoras, since their country was entirely buried under sand in one moment? Or what did it avail the Jews to kill their wise king, since their kingdom was taken away from them from that time on? God justly avenged these three wise men. The Athenians died of famine, the Samians were flooded by the sea, the Jews were slaughtered and driven from their kingdom, everywhere living in the dispersion. Socrates is not dead, thanks to Plato; nor Pythagoras, because of Hera's statue. Nor is the wise king, because of the new law which he has given.

Dickson goes on to write: "There is a consensus amongst scholars that Mara bar Serapion's wise king is none other than Jesus. It simply strains belief to imagine that there could have been two figures in first century Palestine fitting the description of Jew, law-giver, king and martyr(at the hands of his own people).

Dickson third example comes from the writings of a Roman intellectual named Tacitus whose work—a multi-volume Account of the Roman empire written between AD 114-116, contains yet another passing reference to Jesus.

Tacitus is writing about the great fire of Rome in June AD 64 and it is obvious that he is not a supporter of the Christian faith. He wrote:-

But neither human help, nor imperial munificence, nor all the modes of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order. Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the upmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue."

After quoting these three ancient writers Dickson goes on to quote a modern non-Christian historian who concludes his textbook discussion of the non-Christian sources in the following way:-

"All this does at least render highly implausible any far-fetched theories that even Jesus' very existence was a Christian invention. The fact that Jesus existed, that he was crucified under Pontius Pilate(for whatever reason) and that he had a band of followers who continued to support his cause, seems to be part of the bedrock of historical tradition. If nothing else, the non-Christian evidence can provide us with certainty on that score." Christopher Tuckett

So as Christians we can be encouraged by the fact that there is strong evidence outside of the Scripture for the existence of Jesus. That God did not leave humanity without references to His Son in the secular records. But once we have shown our non-Christian friend that there is proof outside the Bible for Jesus, it is then vital that we witness to them from the Bible the truth that we accept by faith about Jesus that are revealed there.

And when we come to the identity of Jesus and why He is so important to us, then one of the greatest statements about Him is the one we read in John 1 verse 1 and verse 14:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

What a truly and astounding statement that is about Jesus. And it is a truth that has been revealed to our hearts by God's Spirit. God has touched us and given us faith to recognize and receive His Son in human flesh. That's the testimony that we believe and must share with others. And the reason why we need to share it with others is because of what Jesus came to earth to do for them. Verse 14 says(CEV)

***The Word became
a human being
and lived here with us.
We saw his true glory,
the glory of the only Son
of the Father.
From him all the kindness
and all the truth of God
have come down to us.***

As believers in Jesus we can get excited about the fact that secular historians have proof for their recognition of Jesus as a historic figure. But the excitement that we need to show others, is connected with the Jesus who is ours by grace through faith. The Jesus who we know is, from the beginning God, and who has brought into our lives all the kindness and truth of God.

If we can share that excitement somehow with others then the day will surely come when they too will seek Jesus as we once sought Him. And by God's grace find in Him not just some man who lived some 2,000 years ago, but the Son of God who lives to be their Saviour.

