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ANSWERS
QUESTIONS



Is the Character of Jesus Christ, as
described in the Four Gospels,
Real or Mythical ?



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Ingersoll Answers Questions.

Is the Character of Jesus of Nazareth, as described in the Four Gospels, Mythical or Real?

In all probability there was a man by the name of Jesus Christ, who was, in his day and generation, a reformer—a man who was infinitely shocked at the religion of Jehovah—who became almost insane with pity as he contemplated the sufferings of the weak, the poor, and the ignorant at the hands of an intolerant, cruel, hypocritical, and blood-thirsty church. It is no wonder that such a man predicted the downfall of the temple. In all probability he hated, at last, every pillar and stone in it, and despised even the "Holy of Holies." This man, of course, like other men, grew. He did not die with the opinions he held in his youth. He changed his views from time to time—fanned the spark of reason into a flame, and as he grew older his horizon extended and widened, and he became gradually a wiser, greater, and better man.

I find two or three Christs described in the four gospels. In some portions you would imagine that he was an exceedingly pious Jew. When he says that people must not swear by Jerusalem because it is God's holy city, certainly no Pharisee could have gone beyond that expression. So, too, when it is recorded that he drove the money changers

from the temple. This, had it happened, would have been the act simply of one who had respect for this temple and for the religion taught in it.

It would seem that, at first, Christ believed substantially in the religion of his time; that afterwards, seeing its faults, he wished to reform it; and, finally, comprehending it in all its enormity, he devoted his life to its destruction. This view shows that he "increased in stature and grew in knowledge."

This view is also supported by the fact that, at first, according to the account, Christ distinctly stated that his Gospel was not for the Gentiles. At that time he had altogether more patriotism than philosophy. In my own opinion, he was driven to like the Gentiles by the persecution he had endured at home. He found, as every Free-thinker now finds, that there are many saints that are not inside churches, and many devils that are not outside.

The character of Christ, in many particulars, as described in the gospels, depends upon who wrote the gospels. Each one endeavored to make a Christ to suit himself. So that Christ, after all, is a growth; and since the gospels were finished, millions of men have been adding to and changing the character of Christ.

There is another thing that should not be forgotten, and that is, that the gospels were not written until after the epistles. And I take it for granted that Paul never saw any of the gospels, for the reason that he quotes none of them. There is also this remarkable fact: Paul quotes none of the miracles of the New Testament. He says not one word about the multitude being fed miraculously, not one word about the resurrection of Lazarus, nor of the widow's son. He had never heard of the lame, the halt, and the blind that had been cured; or if he had, he did not think

these incidents of sufficient importance to be embalmed in an epistle.

So we find that none of the early fathers ever quoted from the four gospels. Nothing can be more certain than that the four gospels were not written until after the Epistles, and nothing can be more certain than that the early Christians knew nothing of what we call the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. All these things have been growths. At first it was believed that Christ was a direct descendant from David. At that time the disciples of Christ, of course, were Jews. The Messiah was expected through the blood of David. For that reason the genealogy of Joseph, a descendant of David, was given. It was not until long after that the idea came into the minds of Christians that Christ was the son of the Holy Ghost. If they, at the time the genealogy was given, believed that Christ was in fact the son of the Holy Ghost, why did they give the genealogy of Joseph to show that Christ was related to David? In other words, why should the son of God attempt to get glory out of the fact that he had in his veins the blood of a barbarian king? There is only one answer to this: The Jews expected the Messiah through David, and in order to prove that Christ was the Messiah, they gave the genealogy of Joseph. Afterwards, the idea became popularised that Christ was the son of God, and then were interpolated the words "as was supposed" in the genealogy of Christ. It was a long time before the disciples became great enough to include the world in their scheme, and before they thought it proper to tell the "glad tidings of great joy" beyond the limits of Judæa.

My own opinion is, that the man called Christ lived; but whether he lived in Palestine, or not, is of no importance. His life is worth its example, its moral force, its benevo-

lence, its self-denial and heroism. It is of no earthly importance whether he changed water into wine or not. All his miracles are merely dust and darkness, compared with what he actually said and actually did. We should be kind to each other, whether Lazarus was raised or not. We should be just and forgiving, whether Christ lived or not. All the miracles in the world are of no use to virtue, morality, or justice. Miracles belong to superstition, to ignorance, to fear and folly.

Neither does it make any difference who wrote the gospels. They are worth the truth that is in them, and no more.

The words of Paul are often quoted, that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God." Of course, that could not have applied to anything written after that time. It could only have applied to the scriptures then written, and then known. It is perfectly clear that the four gospels were not at that time written, and, therefore, this statement of Paul's does not apply to the four gospels. Neither does it apply to anything written after that statement was written. Neither does it apply to that statement. If it applied to anything, it was the Old Testament and not the New.

Christ has been belittled by his worshippers. When stripped of the miraculous; when allowed to be, not divine, but divinely human, he will have gained a thousand-fold in the estimation of mankind. I think of him as I do of Buddha, as I do of Confucius, of Epictetus, of Bruno. I place him with the great, the generous, the self-denying of the earth, and for the Man Christ I feel only admiration and respect. I think he was in many things mistaken. His reliance upon the goodness of God was perfect. He seemed to believe that his father in heaven would protect him. He thought that if God clothed the lilies of the

field in beauty, if he provided for the sparrows, he would surely protect a perfectly just and loving man. In this he was mistaken; and in the darkness of death, overwhelmed, he cried out: "Why hast thou forsaken me?"

I do not believe that Christ ever claimed to be divine, ever claimed to be inspired, ever claimed to work a miracle. In short, I believe that he was an honest man. These claims were all put in his mouth by others—by mistaken friends, by ignorant worshippers, by zealous and credulous followers, and sometimes by dishonest and designing friends. This has happened to all the great men in the world. All historical characters are, in part, deformed or reformed by fiction. There was a man by the name of George Washington, but no such George Washington ever existed as we find portrayed in history.

The historical Cæsar never lived. The historical Mohammed is simply a myth. It is the task of modern criticism to rescue these characters, and in the mass of superstitious rubbish to find the actual man. Christians borrowed the old clothes of the Olympian gods and gave them to Christ. To me, Christ the Man is far better than Christ the God.

To me, it has always been a matter of wonder that Christ said nothing as to the obligation man is under to his country, nothing as to the rights of the people as against the will and wish of kings, nothing against the frightful system of human slavery—almost universal in his time. What he did not say is altogether more wonderful than what he did say. It is marvellous that he said nothing about the subject of intemperance, nothing about education, nothing about philosophy, nothing about nature, nothing about art. He said nothing in favor of the home, except to offer a reward to those who would desert their

wives and families. Of course, I do not believe that he said the words attributed to him, in which a reward is offered to any man who will desert his kindred. But if we take the account given in the four gospels as the true one, then Christ did offer a reward to a father who would desert his children. It has always been contended that he was a perfect example of mankind, and yet he never married. As the result of what he did not teach in connexion with what he did teach, his followers saw no harm in slavery, no harm in polygamy. They belittled this world and exaggerated the importance of the next. They consoled the slave by telling him that in a little while he would exchange his chains for wings. They comforted the captive by saying that in a few days he would leave his dungeon for the bowers of paradise. His followers believed that he had said that "whosoever believeth not shall be damned." This passage was the cross upon which intellectual liberty was sacrificed.

If Christ had given us the laws of health—if he had told us how to cure disease by natural means—if he had set the captive free—if he had crowned the people with their rightful power—if he had placed the home above the church—if he had broken all the mental chains—if he had flooded all the caves and dens of Fear with light, and filled the future with a common joy, he would in truth have been the savior of this world.
