

REFLECTIONS
ON THE
"JESUS OF HISTORY"

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Answers to the question of Jesus: "For you, who am I?"(1) are numerous. Some affirm that He is John the Baptist, Elias, Jeremias or one of the prophets. Mr. Hu Yutang adds another point of view in his article: the "Jesus of History"(2) For him, the Nazarean was only a revolutionary who failed.

In a long account of about 15,000 characters, Mr. Hu presents the person of Jesus in the socio-political context of the day; he analyzes various documents concerning Christ - particularly in the Gospel - to arrive at the origin of Jesus; he ends up by giving us a personal interpretation on the life of the founder of Christianity. Reading this article is stimulating for Christians. In fact, the Marxist outlook of Mr. Hu leads to deep reflection and obliges us to take a stand regarding his statements. This is what I shall attempt to do in these few lines, hoping that they will become a positive contribution to the research regarding the true Jesus.

SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLE

Mr. Hu, a noted historian, begins by probing the problem of the historicity of Jesus. He quotes numerous and diverse documents: Flavius Joseph, Origen, Pliny the Younger, Tacitus and others. He reaches the conclusion that Jesus really existed, that He was truly involved in the origin of the Church. His arguments are solid and his work is well done. In comparison to the stand of Mr. Yang Zhen in his book: "General History of Christianity", there is evident improvement in analysis.(3)

After having attested to the historicity of Jesus, the author studies the Gospels themselves. Then he develops his thesis which is really the heart the matter. It is capsulized for us in the following paragraph:

"The Gospels present to us two images of Jesus: a Jesus who admits an evanescent kingdom of heaven, a cosmos with abstract

frontiers, which demands love of enemies, a Jesus who affirms the salvation of those with patience, a kingdom where the humbled ones will be happy. He demands good relationship and obedience to those in authority, a willingness to submit and kneel down to persecutors and oppressors. We will call him the 'First Jesus'.

In the gospel writings there is another Jesus who sees the Kingdom of heaven as one whose reality can be established in today's world; a Jesus who advocates struggle and violence to bring about the kingdom of heaven, one who supports the upheaval of the established order, the reconstruction of a new society, who advocates the overthrowing of the Roman power and directing class of the Jewish religion in order to restore the 'Kingdom of David'. This person will be called the 'Second Jesus'."(4)

After this, Mr. Hu asks himself which of these two is the Jesus of History. He analyzes the socio-political context of the time; the Jewish people who were colonized by the Romans and the deep divisions of the social classes in Palestinian society. There was a rapidly deteriorating religion among the Jews and different factions were formed in the country, such as the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Zealots and the Essenes. It is within this situation, a country stirred up with various currents of dissatisfaction and agitated by popular movements and riots, that Jesus appears.

The preaching of Jesus quickly gained a popular and remarkable success. He became head of a mass movement against the Romans and the ruling classes of the Jews, but in this he failed and was condemned to death. His disciples turned him into a Messiah and spread the legend that he died to save humanity, was resurrected from the dead and ascended into heaven. Following this, the primitive Church spread all around the Mediterranean. Shortly afterwards it had to give in to the Roman power. Under the inspiration of Saint Paul, the Church then fabricated the 'First Jesus', an idealized man, and all the beliefs of the community became more and more spiritualized. After the wars of Judea, the party of Paul began to play a leading part. Then they greatly relativized the teachings of Jesus in order to accommodate them to their situation and for its survival in this society which sanctioned slavery. The revolutionary Jesus became the good savior. Here, violence was replaced by love, the establishment of the kingdom was to be delayed indefinitely.

MR. HU CHALLENGES CHRISTIANS

The article summarized above cannot leave Christians indifferent; it should rather provoke them to some reactions. To begin with, here are some aspects of the study which appear positive to me:

- i) - The Marxist analysis leads the author to insist on the economic, social and political realities into which Jesus inscribed his actions and his words. These were perceived by the poor and the oppressed as a point of departure toward justice and liberation. On the other hand, they were considered terribly threatening by all the social classes interested in maintaining the establishment. This explains the haste with which Jesus was arrested and executed. The author challenges many theologians who often believe they are exempted from seeing that the death of Jesus can be explained also in this way: his tragic end came about through the conflicts and opposition he was facing. This prompted him to adopt a definite stand regarding the situation of his time. The prophetic behaviour of Jesus cannot be fully evaluated without a precise understanding of the struggles between the local powers at that time. By refusing to follow the rules of the game, Jesus, although involved in these conflicts, considerably transcended them. The exegete Joachim Jeremias has already scrutinized a certain number of the social and cultural realities of that period, but it is still very little.
- ii) - It is true that in the Gospels there are a certain number of words and stands which appear to be contradictory to one another, and it seems fair and logical that the author should bring these up. In the history of the Church, the dominating trend has always been one of reconciliation and of synthesis. We have always tried to minimize differences, to give reasons for contradictions, and to do this as a matter of principle or of a basic reality. The concern is to defend the 'absolute truth' of the revealed Word, and the no less absolute truth of an institutional Church as divine and always homogeneous. Yet it is certain that the image of Jesus as presented in the Gospels is far from being harmonious and homogeneous. Ever since Bultman published his works, exegetes have accepted the concept that the eschatological preaching of Jesus expresses in certain passages the expectation of a radical change, and in others, the preparation of an event somewhat far-off, unforeseeable and difficult to identify.
- iii) - It is true that there is a Jesus of meekness and a Jesus of violence. A diversity in the behaviour and the words of Jesus is according to all probabilities closer to human

reality than an angelic and disincarnated one. Even in the present days, it is not so clear yet to many Christians that love can be violent, that it is a burning fire.

- iv) - No matter how unreal the idea of opposition between the first and the second Jesus actually is, it cannot be so easily dismissed. It was impossible to imitate the "Second Jesus in the Christian society of the second century" states the author. Is it possible now for the Christians of the twentieth century? In particular is it possible in a collective manner as in the Church? Aren't we rather far less radical than Jesus in his commitment to the Jewish society of his time? Aren't we also always superimposing the reassuring and disincarnated figure of the first Jesus to that of the Christ of the Gospel?

This challenge is good for us. It could serve as the point of departure in a common fruitful search. Sharing with authors who have a materialistic view of the Bible can be enriching for us. Mr. Hu is giving another proof of this.

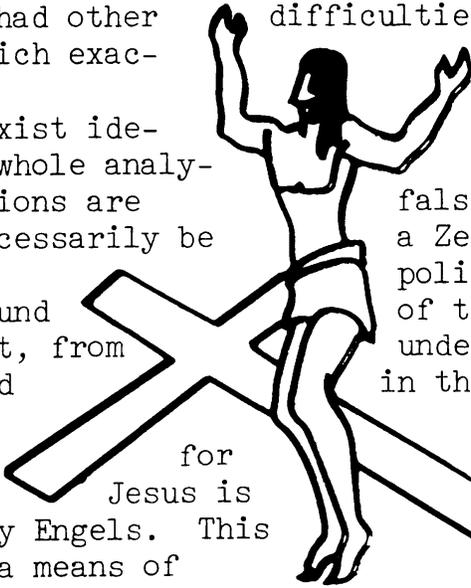
NEGATIVE ASPECTS

But this article is in many ways unsatisfactory and often leaves the reader yearning for more than it gives. In my opinion, several parts of this work would deserve a real in-depth study so as to give more weight to certain affirmations. It is clearly seen that Mr. Hu is a noted historian. The best part of his analysis is the one describing Palestine in the time of Jesus. But on the other hand he does not seem aware of the modern techniques of exegesis and various research that has been carried out. Here are the parts I would find objectionable:

- i) - The author does not seem to take into account the evident difference between the Greek and Indian myths and the Gospels. The New Testament was composed in the decades immediately following the events and therefore was written at the time of and from the account of witnesses.
- ii) - The Judaism which Mr. Hu describes as being in a disintegrating state, was not so decadent at that time. In fact it nourished the heroic revolt of the '70's and 130's and has been a constant factor all through the persecutions of twenty centuries of history.

- iii) - Although at the outset, he presents the Gospels as carriers of an ecclesial multiform experience already ancient, the author then neglects to recall this theory when he classifies the evangelical material. So then we ask ourselves on what criteria does the author attribute this or that word to the first or second Jesus? Mr. Hu fails to place the Gospels either in their respective time or location. Finally, it is difficult to affirm with him that the editing of the Gospels was completed in 150 A.D.(5)
- iv) - We may agree with the author that Christianity often took the most conciliatory position regarding the Roman Empire. Within the context of the persecutions, there was already enough tension. However, we can hardly accuse people who opposed Roman totalitarism unto death of being weak.
- v) - To affirm as the author does that John the Baptist and Jesus were Zealots seems to be without foundation. In fact the Precursor of the Messiah appeared closer to the Essenes. Jesus seemed to lean more on the side of the Pharisees through his preaching about faith in the resurrection, lay movement and that the will of God be taken seriously. The anti-pharisaic attitude of Jesus can be explained by the well-known fact that one becomes more irritated by those closer to one's positions. Moreover the primitive Church had other difficulties with the pharisaic movement which exacerbated the problems.

iv) - The Marxist ideology dominates so much of the author that the conclusions are falsified. For a Marxist, Jesus must necessarily be a Zealot and his originality must be political. The ideological background of the author prevents him, as I see it, from understanding how Jesus was situated in the society of his time.



His criteria for attributing this or that word to this or that Jesus is in fact the Marxist theory as developed by Engels. This theory can be interesting if used as a means of questioning and researching, but it cannot constitute an assumption. While attempting to be scientific, the method of the author is in reality of a dogmatic nature in many ways.

The author is visibly torn between two interpretations in face of this religious phenomena:

i) the Marxist one which presents Jesus as a product and interpreter of a popular movement. His aim is to reverse the established order of Roman imperialism supported and accepted by the upper classes of Jewish society.

ii) the other view, a dimmed recognition of a genuine religious experience of the Jewish people and of the faith of Jesus. The Roman occupation was never able to suppress their faith in Yahweh, contrary to what happened in all the other religious traditions of the conquered nations. The faith even seems to be presented as the main motive of the revolt. Insofar as we might consider the religious actions of Jesus, it is interesting to note the choice of Gospel texts that the author uses. First of all there is an allusion to the liberation brought about by Jesus regarding the observance of Judaism.(6) This is followed by a call to faith and finally to love others because all are brothers and sisters.(7) All these texts converge into a vibrant commendation of the Message of Jesus in the last paragraph of the article where the words 'love' and 'tenderness' predominate.

Could it not be, finally, that the author was very embarrassed by the authentic religious fact and that he had trouble classifying it in his Marxist categories? Even when minimizing the impact of faith upon the Jewish people and the first Christians, Mr. Hu must admit that there is here a complex phenomenon that can neither be explained nor analysed easily. Jesus himself is particularly difficult to classify, because, even after asserting that he was a Zealot wishing to upset the establishment, the author praises his compassion and his universal love.

In a certain way, this lack of internal logic is really in favour of the author because it proves that he could get out of the framework of his habitual thought, the Marxist analysis, to grasp the Gospel Message. His last paragraph is surely able to impress many Christians:

"'Whoever observes the will of my Father is truly my brother, my mother.' What emotions are raised in the hearts of people by these words! What hope does it carry! The Christianity of the early days is a source of life and if its diffusion is so rapid, it is largely due to the fact that Jesus Christ demanded from his disciples, a reciprocal and equilibrating love from all."

Mr. Hu did understand that, in the end, only love can fully explain

the behaviour of Jesus.

In fact, Jesus preached neither resignation nor revolt. In the Gospel, nowhere can we see him proposing solutions which would presuppose a political strategy. It is simply that after meeting him, people find themselves facing their responsibilities to change the unjust order in society. Jesus did not evade the economic, social and political realities. He shows clearly that this order must be changed and transformed, but that it is up to each and every one to want a different social structure and to find the means to carry it out. To achieve this end, he touches the heart of the people, appeals to their intelligence and to their freedom. On meeting him whoever was overburdened, felt called to take a stand. This decisiveness obliges the oppressors to make a choice between renouncing oppression or reinforcing it. Jesus, by siding with the oppressed, attracts to himself the persecution of the powerful who refuse to be converted. The very fact that the poor hear this Good News is a sure sign that the Kingdom is near. This does not mean merely resignation on their part, but rather confronting openly all that alienates the human person and society in general.

CONCLUSION

The author has accomplished a commendable work on the "Jesus of History" and the study he puts forth for us is most interesting. It is too bad that he did not have access to recent documentations that would allow him to know the latest developments in exegesis and historical research. This would have given more authority to his work. It is hoped that the libraries in China are equipping themselves with modern findings in all disciplines so as to allow the many researchers possibilities to go more deeply into their studies. In this way, they could have exchanges with their counterparts in other countries. There is no doubt that many specialists would then be most happy to be able to share with their Chinese partners engaged in similar works, and they would mutually profit from the exchange.

At a time when the China of the "Four Modernizations" is insisting so much on the "Spiritual Civilization", the author could have used this study to compare the teachings of Jesus to the ideals set forth today in his country, pointing out the convergences and their disagreement. This would have given his article a value for the present reality. Upon the reading of the Chinese press, one cannot help noticing how much emphasis is placed on values that are not foreign to the Gospels - a spirit of selflessness, of unselfishness in serving people without interest, a spirit of fearing neither hardship nor death, a bravery in self-sacrificing. All these qualities are regularly cited in the Chinese newspapers.(8) Thus the fine conclusion of Mr.Hu's article which praises tenderness and universal love

would have been even more effective and could have become an eventual common meeting ground for people with different viewpoints who are still open to dialogue.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Mt. 16,13.
2. Shijie Zongjiao Yanjiu (Studies on World Religions) 1981 no. 1, page 84 -100.
3. See the review of this book in Tripod no. 2 page 22.
4. The anti-Roman interpretation of Jesus' actions goes back as far as Reimarus (Posthumous works published in 1778. See "Jerome Biblical Commentary" page 41). It was taken up again by R. Eissler (Iesus Basileus or Basileusas) Heidelberg (1929-1930) and has been continuously used until now, either in the context of Judaic historiography (with a tendency to exonerate the Jewish people) or in the recent Theology of Liberation.
5. No one today says that the composition of the Gospels went on until 150.A.D. Those who affirmed this at Tübingen institute in the last century have been refuted by the discovery, among other things, of a fragment of John 18 (John was the last of the Gospels to be written) dating back to the first half of the second century, therefore between 100 and 150 A.D. (Rylands Papyrus). See Jerome Biblical Commentary Page 584-585.
6. Mt. 22, 37-38; Mk. 12, 29-30.
7. For example Zhejiang Ribao 2-4-81: "Praise on Spiritual civilization", or Yunnan Ribao 2-5-81, page 3 and other papers.

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