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## Jesus Christ and Contemporary Bible Teaching: Questions about the Jesus of History<sup>\*</sup>

Jezus Chrystus i współczesne nauczanie Biblii.  
Kwestia Jezusa jako postaci historycznej

**ABSTRACT:** When defending the divinity of Christ, it is very easy to highlight and criticize the tendency to reduce or transform Jesus into a mythical symbol or a timeless archetype, and thus to slip into crypto-monophysitism. There is a risk in this approach of obscuring or neglecting the true and full humanity of Christ, including His Jewishness. The Gospels are a necessary source when investigating the historical person of Jesus, in order to, as J.P. Meier said, “prevent a bourgeois form of Christianity from domesticating Jesus (...). The reader who wanted to know the real Jesus should close this book immediately because the historical Jesus is not the real Jesus or the easy way to Him. The real Jesus is not accessible and will never be” (English transl. by WTR). This quotation confirms the importance of an accurate study of the New Testament texts. Through the witnesses of the events transmitted to us, we are able to meet the real Jesus Christ, the one who is the subject and the object of the Gospel.

**KEYWORDS:** Gospel, Gospels, evangelist, historicity, monophysitism, witness, witnesses, biblical sciences

**ABSTRAKT:** Broniąc boskości Chrystusa, łatwo podkreślać i krytykować tendencję do redukcji lub przekształcania Jezusa do postaci mitycznego symbolu czy ponadczasowego archetypu, co prowadzi na terytorium kryptomonofizytyzmu. Podejście, w którym przesłania się lub zaniedbuje aspekt prawdziwego i pełnego człowieczeństwa Chrystusa, w tym Jego żydowskie pochodzenie, niesie za sobą pewne ryzyko. Ewangelie są niezbędnym źródłem podczas prowadzenia badań nad Jezusem jako

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postać historyczną. Jak ujął to J.P. Meier, mają „zapobiegać udomowieniu Jezusa przez burżuazyjną formę chrześcijaństwa (...). Czytelnik, który chce poznać prawdziwego Jezusa, powinien natychmiast zamknąć tę książkę, ponieważ Jezus jako postać historyczna nie jest ani prawdziwym Jezusem, ani łatwą drogą do Niego. Prawdziwy Jezus nie jest dostępny i nigdy nie będzie” (tłum. wyd.). Ten cytat potwierdza znaczenie precyzyjnych badań nad tekstami Nowego Testamentu. Patrząc oczami świadków przekazywanych nam wydarzeń, możemy spotkać prawdziwego Jezusa Chrystusa, przedmiot i podmiot Ewangelii.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Ewangelia, Ewangelie, ewangelista, historyczność, monofizytyzm, świadek, świadkowie, biblistyka

Many people in the Western world, highly educated, including many sincere non-believers, often raise questions about the historical reality of the Jesus announced by the Church... Not to engage with these serious historical researchers at the academic level would be to fail in our duty to them and would leave many educated Catholics to question the historical foundations of their faith.

This is how the American scholar J.P. Meier expressed himself at a conference at the Faculty of Theology at the Pontifical Lateran University on the theme of the historical Jesus.<sup>1</sup> This premise introduces new perspectives on the study of the figure of Christ in the disjointed panorama of secularization and de-Christianization in the present day. We must ask ourselves what impact this issue of engagement can have on the way we teach about Jesus Christ in biblical science subjects.

## Christ and the witnesses<sup>2</sup>

First of all, I believe that we should wisely resume the assumption that the Gospels were not born in test tubes. All the Gospels, both those that ended

<sup>1</sup> It should be added, however, that if “the Jesus of history [unlike prophets such as Amos and Isaiah] refuses to be involved in today’s political or economic programs” this shows that “when the Word was incarnated, it was not incarnated in an aistorical or aseptic way.” Cf. J.P. Meier, *La distinzione tra cristologia e ricerca sul Gesù storico*, [in:] *Ricerca storica su Gesù. Bilanci e prospettive*, N. Ciola, A. Pitta, G. Pulcinelli (eds.), SB 81, Bologna 2017, pp. 199–216, cf. 212.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J.D.G. Dunn, *Gli albori del cristianesimo. 1. La memoria di Gesù. 1. Fede e Gesù storico*, Intr. St Bib Suppl. 29, Brescia 2006; idem, *Gli albori del cristianesimo. 1. La memoria di Gesù. 2. La missione di Gesù*, Intr. St Bib. Suppl. 30, Brescia 2006; idem, *Gli albori del*

up in the New Testament canon and the apocryphal ones, reveal an important relationship with the object to which they refer: Jesus Christ. It is a relationship constantly linked to faith in Him, although expressed in completely different ways. However, we can also say that “when we open an ordinary Gospel, the first person we meet is not Jesus, but the writer/evangelist, who plays a role as a witness of faith.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, “what we have today are the memories of the first disciples, not Jesus Himself, but Jesus remembered.” And this is no minor point.

There is the potential here to immediately highlight the tendency to reduce or transform Jesus into a mythical symbol or a timeless archetype, and thus slip into crypto-monophysism.<sup>4</sup> Further, in defending the divinity of Christ, there is a risk of obscuring or neglecting the true and full humanity of Christ, including His Jewishness.

Therefore:

It is not enough to confess that Jesus is a true man: it is too general a statement. Man means that the personality of each person can be defined by the individual cultures that make up diversity. Now Jesus is not only a man, He is a Jew, a fact of reality that needs to be strongly reaffirmed: He whom we call Our Lord is a Jew. Incarnation is humanization, but it is also historicization and inculturation. So, this is the incarnation that is to be taken seriously.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the Gospels are a necessary source when investigating the historical person of Jesus, in order to “prevent a bourgeois form of Christianity from

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*cristianesimo. 1. La memoria di Gesù. 3. L'acme della missione di Gesù*, Intr. St. Bib Suppl. 31, Brescia 2007; idem, *Gli albori del cristianesimo. 2. Gli inizi a Gerusalemme, 1. La prima fase*, Intr. St. Bib Suppl. 52, Brescia 2012; F. Manns, *L'ebreo di Nazareth. Indagine sulle radici del cristianesimo*, Milano 2019.

<sup>3</sup> R. Penna, *La fede cristiana alle sue origini!*, Cinisello Balsamo 2013, p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> With regard to monophysism, I deliberately choose the definition given by the Treccani Encyclopedia: “A doctrine that admitted only one nature in Jesus Christ, Son of God incarnate. It was one of the most important theological currents of the V–VI centuries, which with its fierce controversies weighed heavily on the religious and civil history of the Eastern Roman Empire and then of Byzantium. There were numerous varieties of monophysism, which distinguished themselves essentially on the basis of the theological meaning given to the word *physis* («nature»): the true monophysites, giving it the value of *ousia* («essence»), solved the problem of the relationship between human nature and divine nature in Christ by confusing the one and the other in the most complete way” (Treccani, [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/monofisismo\\_%28Dizionario-di-Storia%29/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/monofisismo_%28Dizionario-di-Storia%29/) [access: 1.05.2020]). Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are by the WTR.

<sup>5</sup> R. Penna, *La lettera di Paolo ai Romani. Guida alla lettura*, Bologna 2018, p. 133.

taming Jesus, that is, transforming Him into a comfortable support for our way of life.”<sup>6</sup> However, this does not necessarily mean that there should be differences, as some research presupposes, between the “Jesus of history” and the “Jesus of faith” (or the “Christ of faith,” as others prefer to say).

## The “Jesus of history” and the “Jesus of faith”

It is not unimportant that the term that brachilogically holds the meaning of Christian preaching – “Gospel,” *εὐαγγέλιον* – starting from the very *incipit* of the Gospel of Mark (“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”),<sup>7</sup> and even from the first words that Jesus pronounced in this writing (“Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying: «The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel»”),<sup>8</sup> takes its definitive meaning in the four librettos of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, the four canonical Gospels.<sup>9</sup>

It should be noted here that only in authors of the second century AD (for example, Appiano, Lucian of Samosata, and Chariton of Aphrodisias) does the term *εὐαγγέλιον* appear with the meaning of “good news.”

In an inscription from 9 BC discovered in Priene – a Greek city of Asia Minor situated on the bends of the river Meander – *εὐαγγέλιον* (the plural of *εὐαγγέλιον*) is used instead:

If the birth day [γενέθλιος ἡμέρα] of the most divine Caesar [τοῦ θειοτάτου Καίσαρος] [the original Latin, found in fragments in Apamea, only says here: principis nostri] bring more joy or advantage [5] we rightly equate it with the beginning of all things [τῶν πάντων ἀρχῆ] (...) [10] Therefore this fact will rightly be considered as the beginning of life and existence [ἀρχὴν τοῦ βίου καὶ τῆς ζωῆς], which marks the limit and the end of repentance [τοῦ μεταμέλεσθαι] of being born [ὅτι γεγέννηται]. And since no day can one derive happier opportunities for society and for the benefit of the individual than for the one who is happy [εὐτυχοῦς] for all, and since also for the cities of Asia the most favourable time for entry into government offices falls in it [καιρὸν εἶναι τῆς

<sup>6</sup> Cf. J.P. Meier, *La distinzione tra cristologia...*, op. cit. pp. 212–215.

<sup>7</sup> Mk 1:1.

<sup>8</sup> Mk 1:14–15.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. G. Stanton, *Gesù e il «vangelo»*, Studi Biblici 180, Brescia 2015; C. Spicq, *εὐαγγελίζομαι*, [in:] idem, *Note di lessicografia neo-testamentaria*, I, Brescia 1994, pp. 649–662.

εἰς τὴν ἀρχὴν εἰσόδου], [15] (...) and since it is difficult to thank adequately [κατ' ἴσον εὐχαριστεῖν] for its many benefits, unless we come up with a new form of thanks for all this... [20] it seems right to me [the person speaking is the proconsul of Asia 'Paolo Fabio Massimo' [line 44] in the name of the city] that all the congregations [πολιτηῶν] have one identical New Year's Eve, the genethliac of the most divine Caesar, and that all the administrators enter their offices in it. [32] For the providence which divinely disposes our lives... [35] gave us and our descendants a gift of a savior [σωτῆρα χαρισαμένη] to put an end to the war and bring about peace, and Caesar once appeared exceeded the hopes of his predecessors, the good announcements of all [εὐανγέλια πάντων], not only going beyond the benefits of those who had preceded him, but without leaving to those who would follow him the hope of an overcoming, [40] and the genethliac day of the god [τῶν δι' αὐτὸν εὐανγελί[ων ἢ γενέθλιος ἡμέ]ρα τοῦ Θεοῦ] was for the world the beginning of the good announcements connected to him [ῥῆξεν δὲ τῷ κόσμῳ τῶν δι' αὐτὸν εὐανγελί[ων]].<sup>10</sup>

From this example, we can rightly say that the literary genre of “Gospel” is therefore independent of the Hellenistic and Palestinian world, and has no models to which it refers, apart from the four books of our Gospels. The only possible points of reference – but only in certain aspects – are found in the genre of biographies of the Greek-Roman tradition. Mark “begins” a new literary genre and creates a genuine “principle” (ἀρχή) through his narration; that is, he clears the path that will lead through those narrations to arrive at the Gospels we know.

If, in the beginning of the book of Mark (Mk 1:1: “Beginning of the Gospel [τοῦ εὐαγγελίου] of Jesus, Christ, Son of God”), the sense of the genitive is both objective and subjective, then the sense of the Gospel is accentuated in Jesus’ word: “convert and believe in the Gospel (Mk 1:15: μετανοεῖτε, καὶ πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ).” Even before the Gospel is a book and the preaching of Jesus Himself, the Gospel is Himself. It is in Him that the movement is generated that will lead His disciples to preach about Him and then to write about Him.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae*, W. Dittenberger (ed.), Lipsiae 1903, p. 458. Cf. E. Ernst, *Marco. Un ritratto teologico*, Brescia 1990, p. 19. And R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses. The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Grand Rapids – Cambridge 2006; R.A. Burridge, *Che cosa sono i Vangeli? Studio comparativo con la biografia greco-romana*, Brescia 2008; S. Guijarro Oporto, *εὐαγγέλιον alle origini del cristianesimo*, “Rivista Biblica” 64 (2016), pp. 189–208; R. Penna, *Vangelo e Inculturazione. Studi sul rapporto tra rivelazione e cultura nel Nuovo Testamento*, Cinisello Balsamo 2001, pp. 231–251; idem, *Vangelo*, Assisi 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Dei Verbum* 18–19 (Second Vatican Council, *Costituzione dogmatica Dei Verbum sulla Divina Rivelazione*, 18 November 1965; *Enchiridion Vaticanum* 1, pp. 872–911); *Sancta*

## The literary genre “Gospel”

For Jesus Christ, we have hardly any serious historical accounts beyond the four books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which has a number of consequences for our understanding of His life. This element is so important that J.P. Meier, in the first volume of his monumental work *Un ebreo Marginale* (A Marginal Jew), published for the first time in the original language in the now distant year of 1991,<sup>12</sup> explicitly states that “the reader who wants to know the real Jesus should close this book – adds the American scholar – immediately, because the historical Jesus is not the real Jesus nor the easy path that leads to Him. The real Jesus is not accessible and never will be.”<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, as Paul writes in his letter to the Romans: “Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers” (Rom. 15:8). The same letter adds that “Seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith” (Rom. 3:30), and, with regard to Abraham, that:

“And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also: <sup>12</sup>And the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised (Rom. 4:11-12, KJV).

The Apostle is more than entitled to pronounce these statements, as one who was “Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee” (Phil. 3:5). The universal character of Jesus’ Jewishness is highlighted here.<sup>14</sup> This is even what Jesus says about Himself, for example, in the Gospel of Matthew: “But

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*Mater Ecclesia* 2 (Pontificia Commissione Biblica, *Instructio Sancta Mater Ecclesia*: AAS 56 [1964], p. 715; see also: *Enchiridion Biblicum*, § 644–659). Cf. J.D.G. Dunn, *Dal Vangelo ai Vangeli. Storia di una continuità ininterrotta*, Cinisello Balsamo 2012.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that this volume came out for the first time in translation (ed. edition) and in Italian only ten years later in 2001.

<sup>13</sup> J.P. Meier, *Un ebreo marginale: Ripensare il Gesù storico. 1. Le radici del problema e della persona*, Brescia 2001, p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> This idea is based “on the fact that the historical Jesus never went to preach outside the borders of Israel. Jesus was a Jew from beginning to end. He lived for Israel, He was a servant of the circumcised” (R. Penna, *La lettera...*, op. cit., p. 133).

he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt 15:24). For this reason, the post-Easter missionary mandate, which has an obvious universal character, is emphasized:

<sup>19</sup>Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: <sup>20</sup>Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen (Mt 28:19-20, KJV).

Meier adds that along with other characters of antiquity, Jesus and Simon Peter are simply not accessible to us today with historical research, nor will they ever be.<sup>15</sup> Significantly, the paradoxical situation of Paul of Tarsus and Ignatius of Antioch<sup>16</sup> is highlighted, because in the letters they left – thirteen letters of the New Testament canon are attributed to Paul,<sup>17</sup> and seven letters attributed to the original martyr of Antioch<sup>18</sup> – are more accessible to the modern historian than the persons of Jesus Himself and the Apostle Peter.<sup>19</sup>

It is therefore beyond question that any research on Jesus cannot disregard the Gospels, and with them the faith of those who have transmitted them to us, beginning with their authors.

There are also sources external to the Gospels, including those preserved in the New Testament writings, as well as extra-Biblical sources,<sup>20</sup> such as those reported by historians of antiquity. For example, in the writings of Suetonius, we find the following passage:

We report here the testimony of the historian Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (69-122), taken from the life of Claudius: “The Jews who continually tumbled

<sup>15</sup> Cf. J.P. Meier, *Un ebreo marginale...*, op. cit., p. 29. The same author indicates the five main criteria (alongside secondary criteria) for determining the historicity of the evangelical material: the criteria of contradiction (or embarrassment), discontinuity, multiple attestation, consistency, and the criterion of rejection and execution. Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 157–184.

<sup>16</sup> 35–107 d.C.

<sup>17</sup> Within the corpus, seven authentic letters and six pseudo-epigraphs can be distinguished, according to most scholars. Cf. *Dizionario di Paolo e delle sue lettere*, G.F. Hawthorne, R.P. Martin, D.G. Reid (eds.), Cinisello Balsamo 1999; A. Pitta, *L’evangelo di Paolo. Introduzione alle lettere autoriali*, Graphè 7, Torino 2013.

<sup>18</sup> In addition to the seven letters (*Efesini, Magnesi, Tralliani, Filadelfiesi, Romani, Smirnesi, Policarpo*), other pseudopigraphic letters must be added.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. J.P. Meier, *Un ebreo marginale...*, op. cit., p. 29, no. 9.

<sup>20</sup> R.E. van Voorst, *Gesù nelle fonti extrabibliche. Le antiche testimonianze sul Maestro di Galilea*, *Studi sulla Bibbia e il suo ambiente*, Cinisello Balsamo 2004.

at the instigation of [a certain] Cresto [*impulsore Chresto*], he [Claudius] drove them out of Rome."<sup>21</sup>

Publius Cornelius Tacitus (55/58–117/120), for his part, mentions both Pontius Philatus, the Emperor Tiberius and Judea, as well as his *supplicium* (a generic term that alludes to a death sentence):

In order to silence every rumour, Nero declared guilty and condemned to the most refined torments those whom the people called *Crestiani* [*chrestianos appellabat*], who were hateful for their wickedness [*per flagitia inuisos*]. They took their name from Christ, who had been tortured by the procurator Pontius Philatus under the empire of Tiberius; repressed for a short time, that fatal superstition [*exitiabilis superstitio*] now regained strength not only in Judea, the place of origin of that evil, but also in the City, where all atrocities and shames converge on every side and find followers [*cuncta undique atrocias aut pudenda confluunt celebranturque*]. Those who confessed [to being Christians] were arrested at first, then, on their revelations, others in large numbers were condemned not so much as incendiaries as haters of mankind [*odio humani generis*] (...) affixed to crosses [*crucibus adfixis*] and burned.<sup>22</sup>

These testimonies transmit to us only very scattered elements, or accounts of events a step removed from the Gospels and mediated by the testimony of the first disciples, those who are, in the words that Peter pronounced at Caesarea in the house of the centurion Cornelius:

The witnesses of all the things He did in the region of the Jews and in Jerusalem. And He commanded us to proclaim to the people and to testify that He is the judge of the living and the dead, constituted of God. They killed Him, hanging Him on a cross, but God raised Him up on the third day, and He wanted Him to manifest Himself, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen by God, to us who ate and drank with Him after His resurrection from the dead. And He has ordered us to announce to the people and to testify that He is the judge of the living and the dead, constituted by God.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Suetonius, *Vita di Claudio*, 25.4.

<sup>22</sup> Tacitus, *Annali* 15, 44, 2–4. Cf. R. Penna, *L'ambiente storico culturale delle origini cristiane*, Bologna 2012, pp. 275–277; idem, *Le prime comunità cristiane. Persone, tempi, luoghi, forme, credenze*, Saggi 61, Roma 2011, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> Act. 10:39–42.



We should not overlook the fact that “it was faith that assured Jesus to history, since no one who had not been His disciple took the slightest interest in Him, let alone handed down His memory.”<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, “tradition itself in its most ancient form is... creation of faith (...) for us the point is that the saying or story shows the influence (*impact*) had by Jesus.”<sup>25</sup>

Here another element also comes into play: the canonical Gospels, unlike the Apostle’s letters, become part of the canon without the author’s name. The “fact of the anonymity of the Gospels is very important: the author hides behind the figure of Jesus, the protagonist of the story, as well as behind the respective Christian community, of which he is the bearer of the word.”<sup>26</sup> In addition, it should be pointed out that “the current names... are due only to the later tradition starting from the second century. None [of the true authors] refers to either the time or the place of their composition.” In fact, “it is as if only the image of Jesus that they transmit counted.”<sup>27</sup>

## The letters of Paul and the canonical Gospels: a study grounded in New Testament canon

To complete the argument made in these notes, we must address one important gap. There is an interesting text in Paul’s letters, in the first letter to the Corinthians, which requires us to examine the Gospel tradition: “The Lord has disposed that those who proclaim the Gospel live by the Gospel.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> R. Penna, *Ricerca e ritrovamento del Gesù storico. Alcune considerazioni*, “Rivista Biblica Italiana” 60 (2012), pp. 371–395, 375.

<sup>25</sup> J.D.G. Dunn, *Gli albori del cristianesimo – I. La memoria di Gesù – 1. Fede e Gesù storico*, op. cit., p. 144 (cf. pp. 207–270).

<sup>26</sup> R. Penna, *Vangelo*, op. cit., p. 102.

<sup>27</sup> R. Penna, *La formazione del Nuovo Testamento nelle sue tre dimensioni*, Cinisello Balsamo 2011, p. 50.

<sup>28</sup> 1 Cor. 9:14 Cf. also 1 Thess. 4:15: “For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep;” 1 Cor. 7:10: “And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband;” 1 Cor. 7:25: “Now concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment (...);” 1 Cor. 11:23: “For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread;” 1 Cor. 14:37: “If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord;” 2 Cor. 12:9: “And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

The Apostle made this clear in his own thinking: “If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things?”<sup>29</sup> Further, this work was identified at the very beginning of the section of the same letter: “Am I am not an apostle? am I not free? have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? are not ye my work in the Lord?”<sup>30</sup>

The Apostle presents reasoning which is even more compelling. Referring to Scripture,<sup>31</sup> Paul asks himself: “Doth God take care for oxen? Or saith he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: that he that ploweth should plow in hope; and that he that thresheth in hope should be partaker of his hope.”<sup>32</sup> This is an argument said a *fortiori*: if God takes care of creatures “without reason,” there is all the more reason for God to take care of a rational creature.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, in one of the pastoral letters, the same Old Testament text is used: “Scripture says: «You shall not muzzle the trembling ox», and «He who works is entitled to his reward».”<sup>34</sup> It is precisely this last element that is in harmony with the instructions given by Jesus to the apostles in their mission, as the Gospel according to Matthew tells us: “for the workman is worthy of his meat.”<sup>35</sup>

The Pauline *kerygma* that we find in the first letter to the Corinthians also provides us with an important clue:

For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve (1 Cor. 15:3-5).<sup>36</sup>

<sup>29</sup> 1 Cor. 9:11.

<sup>30</sup> 1 Cor. 9:1.

<sup>31</sup> Dt 25:4: “Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn.”

<sup>32</sup> 1 Cor. 9:9-10.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Luther wittily noted that the text of Deuteronomy was not written for oxen, since “oxen cannot read.”

<sup>34</sup> 1 Tim. 5:18.

<sup>35</sup> Mt 10:10. As is well known, however, Paul decides to give up this complex of elements linked to a reward: “But I have used none of these things: neither have I written these things, that it should be so done unto me: for it were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying void” (1 Cor. 9:15). To reach this conclusion, Paul argues, in the name of the Gospel: “Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ. Do ye not know that they which minister about holy things live of the things of the temple? and they which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar? Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:12-14).

<sup>36</sup> E. Best, *Mark’s use of the Twelve*, ZNW 69 (1978), pp. 11–35; G. Brambilla, *Il crocifisso risorto*, Brescia 1998; R.E. Brown, *Introduzione alla Cristologia del Nuovo Testamento*,

There is no doubt that the reference to Cephas<sup>37</sup> – the name Paul always used for Peter – is the same as we find in Luke’s Gospel when the Eleven met the disciples of Emmaus: “And they rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven gathered together, and them that were with them, saying, the Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon” (Lk 24:33-34). Matthew also uses Paul as a source of inspired Scripture. In fact, as has been noted, “Paul conveys to us a thought of Jesus about twenty years before the Synoptics.”<sup>38</sup>

We have only touched upon a few examples,<sup>39</sup> but these confirm the importance of an accurate study of the New Testament texts. Through the witnesses of the events transmitted to us, we can arrive at an effective encounter with Jesus the Christ, the one who is the subject and object of the Gospel.

The *Dei Verbum* states:

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Brescia 1995; P. Danove, *The Characterization and Narrative Function of the Women at the Tomb* (Mk 15,40-41.47; 16,1-8), “Biblica” 77 (1996), pp. 375–397; S.T. Davis, D. Kendall, G. O’Collins, *The Resurrection. An interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus*, Oxford 1997; W. Marxsen, *Il terzo giorno risuscitò... La risurrezione di Gesù: un fatto storico?*, Torino 1993; J.P. Meier, *Un ebreo marginale*, op. cit.; U.B. Müller, *L’origine della fede nella risurrezione di Gesù. Aspetti e condizioni storiche*, Assisi 2001; R. Penna, *I ritratti originali di Gesù il Cristo. Inizio e sviluppi della cristologia neotestamentaria*, I, Studi sulla Bibbia e il suo ambiente, Cinisello Balsamo 1996; idem, *La fede cristiana...*, op. cit.; idem, “He died for our sins” 1 Cor. 15:3b: due categorie culturali intrecciato, [in:] idem, *Parola Fede e Vita. Stimoli dal Nuovo Testamento*, Roma 2013, pp. 103–113; idem, *Le apparizioni del Risorto, fondamento della fede pasquale*, [in:] idem, *Parola Fede e Vita. Stimoli dal Nuovo Testamento*, Roma 2013, pp. 115–122; idem, “Ultimo fra tutti apparve anche a me” (1 Cor. 15.8). *Paul and the Apparitions of the Risen One, Foundation of the Paschal Faith*, [in:] *Il paradosso della risurrezione. Alle origini della fede cristiana*, A. Landi (ed.), Bologna 2019, pp. 115–142; B. Prete, *L’annuncio dell’evento pasquale nella formulazione di Luca 24,5-7*, [in:] *L’opera di Luca. Contenuti e prospettive*, Leumann 1985, pp. 281–306; H. Schlier, *Sulla risurrezione di Gesù Cristo*, Brescia 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; Gal. 1:18; 2:9, 11, 14.

<sup>38</sup> *Le parole dimenticate di Gesù*, M. Pesce (ed.), Milano 2004, p. 504.

<sup>39</sup> We could include in this passage the clues provided by the Gospel of Mark (cf. Mk 6; Mk 11) from which we can see the evidence of two springs in the narrative. This makes it possible to extend the duration of Jesus’ ministry to a period of time congruent with the narrative of the Fourth Gospel: “and they continued there not many days. And the Jews’ passover was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem” (Jn 2:12-13). In Jn 5:1 there is talk of an unspecified feast, perhaps *Shevu’ot*; in Jn 7:2-10 there is talk of a feast of the *Capanne* (*Sukkôt*, in the month of *Tishri*, between the end of September and the beginning of October); in 10:22-23 there is talk of a feast of the *Dedicazione* (*Hanukkah*, around mid-December). Cf. R. Penna, *Un solo corpo*, Roma 2020, p. 57; J.P. Meier, *Un ebreo marginale...*, op. cit., pp. 402–441.

Drawing both from his own memory and from his memories [*ex sua propria memoria et recordatione*] and from the testimony of those who ‘from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word’ [*ex testimonio illorum ‘qui ab initio ipsi viderunt et ministri fuerunt sermonis’*], they wrote with the intention of letting us know the truth [*veritatem*] of the teachings on which we have been taught.<sup>40</sup>

## Jesus Christ, the subject and object of the Gospel

Jesus wanted to be met in the living voice of the church, which transmits from generation to generation “all that it is and all that it believes.”<sup>41</sup> For this reason, Christ spoke the following resounding words to the disciples:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.<sup>42</sup>

The premises mentioned above therefore lead to an awareness of using exegesis in the New Testament, especially in the case of the Gospels, although as we have seen, not only the Gospels, but throughout the tradition that refers to them and that must be compared with them – the best possible testimony that witnesses have given us:

Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us. Even as they delivered them unto us [οἱ ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς], which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word [οἱ τοῦ λόγου]; It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.<sup>43</sup>

The Council states:

<sup>40</sup> DV 19; cf. pp. 872–911.

<sup>41</sup> DV 8.

<sup>42</sup> Mt 28:19-20.

<sup>43</sup> Lk 1:1-4.

It escapes no one that among all the scriptures, even those of the New Testament, the Gospels possess a well-deserved superiority [*merit excellère*], for they are the principal testimony concerning the life and doctrine of the Word incarnate, our Savior.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

If, as we have seen, “the real Jesus is not accessible” and probably “never will be,”<sup>45</sup> and that it will be the faith of the witnesses of His origins that will transmit to us the image of Christ that accompanies us, it follows that current teaching on Jesus Christ in the faculties of theology must now, more than ever, become a historically-founded testimony and therefore the object of analysis in the biblical sciences. We must follow in the footsteps of the early Church in its progression from oral testimony to mass dissemination of written works.

It was the faith of witnesses that transferred into the bedrock of history that constant claim, beginning with the testimony of Peter before the centurion Cornelius at Caesarea Marittima, transmitted to us by the book of the Acts of the Apostles:

And we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews, and in Jerusalem; whom they slew and hanged on a tree: Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly; Not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before God, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead (Acts 10:39-41).

This testimony is based on historical reality, proportionate to the singularity of the events that have been transmitted to us, and which we find in only four canonical Gospels:

The Holy Mother Church has held and believes firmly and most constantly [*firmiter et constantissime tenuit ac tenet*] that the four above-mentioned Gospels, whose historicity [*quorum historicitatem incunctanter affirmat*] faithfully transmits [*fideliter tradere*] what Jesus Son of God, during His life among men, actually worked and taught [*fecit et docuit*] for their eternal salvation, until the day He was taken up into heaven. The apostles then, after the Lord’s ascension, transmitted to their

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<sup>44</sup> DV 18

<sup>45</sup> Cf. J.P. Meier, *Un ebreo marginale...*, op. cit., p. 27.

listeners what He had said and done, with the most complete understanding that they, instructed by the glorious events of Christ and enlightened by the light of the Spirit of truth, enjoyed. And the sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, choosing some things from the many handed down by word of mouth or already in writing, drawing up a summary of the others or explaining them with regard to the situation of the churches, finally preserving the character of preaching, but always in such a way as to report true and sincere things about Jesus. They, in fact, drawing both from their own memory and recollection [*ex sua propria memoria et recordatione*] and from the testimony of those who 'from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word' [*ex testimonio illorum 'qui ab initio ipsi viderunt et ministri fuerunt sermonis'*], wrote with the intention of making known to us the 'truth' [*veritatem*] of the teachings on which we have been instructed.<sup>46</sup>

Without the four canonical Gospels, and using only the remaining letters of the apostles, starting with the thirteen written by the Apostle Paul and the tradition linked to him, we would have no news about Christ's actions.<sup>47</sup> His teaching, or part of it, would have been passed on to us, but not the consistency of those actions that accompany His words, and the context in which those actions take on their specific meaning and their perennial relevance.

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<sup>46</sup> DV 19.

<sup>47</sup> The "economy of Revelation includes intimately connected events and words [*gestis verisque intrinsece inter se connexis*], so that the works, accomplished by God in the history of salvation, manifest and strengthen the doctrine and the realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the works and illustrate the mystery contained therein" (DV 2).

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