The Historical Existence of Jesus: Pauline Epistles

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**Foundational Scripture:**

**Intro**:

* The NT can be divided into 4 or 5 different groups depending on your source and who you talk to. There are the four gospels, the general epistles, the Pauline epistles, history and prophecy. In each one of these divisions Jesus is assumed to be a historical character at the very least and the gospels account for approximately 64 % of His mention in such capacity. The Pauline epistles account for the second largest amount which is about 20 %. We must remember that the primary point of the NT authors is not to engage in a spitting contest about the physical existence of God/Jesus but it is primarily to connect Jesus to Yahweh and His role as the Messiah directing audiences to the salvation brought through Him.

**What Paul’s Epistles say about Jesus:**

1. **He was born of a woman**
   1. In Rom. 1:3 and Gal. 4:4 Paul points to the realization that Jesus was born “according to the flesh” and “born of a woman.” These verses mentioned by Paul are not written to argue the subjects of Gnosticism or incarnation but rather to make a simple but profound declaration that Jesus was a physical human being just like everyone else on earth.
2. **He spoke**
   1. Paul on a particular occasion in writing to the saints at Corinth, directed their attention to the words Jesus had spoken when He was on the earth (1 Cor. 7:10-12). Paul identifies Jesus as the Lord, who had given these instructions concerning marriage and divorce prior to his speaking of it (Matt. 19:9).
   2. The point is that Paul believed Jesus lived and He spoke these things in the presence of multitudes of peoples who were eyewitnesses to His manifestation. What’s more is that Paul’s use of Jesus here in this context at the very least clearly indicates that his audience would have believed in Jesus’ historical existence as well.
3. **He died on the Cross**
   1. The mention of Jesus’ death is vital to the message he wants his audience to grasp and apply. Paul mentions Jesus’ death in all of his writings except for 2 Thess. and Philemon (Rom. 5:6; 8; 14:9; 1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Cor. 4:10; Gal. 2:21). His argument is not to persuade people that Jesus died by providing a detailed autopsy of how it happened, but rather how His death and the kind of death He experienced impacts their faith and the way they should live.
   2. The idea of Paul fabricating a myth or legend in the form of Jesus is quickly debunked because of what is said in 1 Cor. 1:22-23. To the Jews, the idea of a crucified Jesus was against all their expectations and for Paul this made preaching the gospel to them a stumbling block.
   3. To the Gentiles, the idea that a savior, redeemer and god would be degraded and brutally tortured was utter foolishness. In their minds it would have been far better for one to take their own life rather than to suffer in such a manner indicative, of course, of being the chief of criminals and scum of the earth.
   4. Anyone can see that the idea of a crucified Jesus made the preaching of the gospel much more difficult because on both sides of the isle people weren’t quick to accept such a notion. So if Paul knew this being a preacher and minister of the gospel, why fabricate a crucified Jesus since that would have made his job harder producing minimum results?
   5. The obvious answer is that he didn’t fabricate Jesus dying on a cross because He actually lived and it actually happened. Paul would have no reason whatsoever to create a fictional character of this extent living and dying under such circumstances only to make his life a lot harder than it needed to be. The conclusion then is that Paul presented the truth about Jesus’ historical existence which included a death by crucifixion.
4. **He rose from the dead and was seen by many**
   1. The impact and implications of the resurrection is not something that we will discuss in this lesson but in 1 Cor. 15 Paul asserts that there were hundreds of people who saw Jesus after He had risen from the dead (1 Cor. 15:4-8).
   2. The point is that there were more than just two or three people who could attest to the fact that they physically saw, touch and spoke with the man called Jesus the Christ. Paul was one of them and he did not seek to hide this fact because of what it meant to him and what it would mean to his audience.
   3. At the time this letter was being written Paul stated that several of those witnesses were still living. The implications of that statement would be that if anyone who received the letter from Paul doubted His existence and/or His resurrection, they could speak with these witnesses for confirmation.

**Conclusion:** There is no reason that Paul would go to such extremes to create and fictionalize a character who lived the way He did, spoke the way He did and died the way He did for the mere reason of attracting attention to himself and his message. Paul wrote what he did and was passionate about his message because he was convinced that Jesus was a real person who lived, died and rose from the dead and the implications contained within is why he would go so far as to put his life on the line for the sake of the gospel. It would be ludicrous for anyone to put their life on the line for someone or something they could not even begin to prove existed let alone attach a message to that said person or thing. But that Paul, a murderer later turned preacher, suffered and died for Jesus would at the very least emphasize He was indeed a real historical person.

**Sources:**

McDowell, J. *Evidence That Demands A Verdict*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999.