

The Opera "JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR"

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JESUS BEFORE HIS CONTEMPORARIES

The mission of Webber and Rice's creative work in the controversial opera we are studying, was — it is said — to present "Christ as He appeared to those *around Him* . . . Judas and the Apostles, Magdalen, Pilate and Herod, and all the simple folk of the Jerusalem of His time. It is very possible that years and years of *prejudice* have convinced us that people around Jesus at that time were convinced 100% of Christ's being 'human-plus-something-else.' The *more plausible* view is that for *most of them* this happening called Jesus Christ was an *entirely understandable human* drama with *political understones*."

That is, — if I understand well the above statement — Christ as He appeared to those *around Him* in the *events* of His life (the *happening* called *Jesus Christ*) was *not* a "human-plus-something-else" being, but "just a man, as anyone else" (as Webber and Rice's opera presents Him), who was drawn to intense emotional conflicts (an *entirely understandable human* drama) due somewhat to underlying *political implications* (with *political understones*). In other words, the happening called *Jesus Christ* was quite similar to that of a certain *Theudas* of those days who "arose, *giving himself out to be somebody*, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was slain and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After him *Judas the Galilean* arose . . . and drew away *some of the people* after him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered." (Acts 5,36-37). If that is the meaning of the above statement, then I beg to disagree.

I am not a biblical scholar, and less still any expert in modern "demythologizing" exegesis. I am just an assiduous reader of the New Testament for about 50 years of life. It is

possible that half a century "of *prejudice* has convinced me" that the people *around Jesus*, those who knew Him and followed Him as friends or as enemies — not all indeed, but certainly *quite many*, probably *most* of them — were *convinced* — whether 100% or 50% seems irrelevant to our question — at least for some time and in certain occasions, as when they witnessed Our Lord's miracles or when they listened to His doctrine, that there was before them a "Man-plus-something-else", and not merely "just a man as anyone else." They could eventually forget or waver in that conviction or even lose at all that strong persuasion or belief (I am not talking here of faith), at least for some time. But, is not that a normal occurrence in human fickleness, inconstancy or changeableness? However, that very forgetfulness, hesitancy or loss of something previously possessed, is the best proof of the existence of the thing forgotten, doubted or lost. We know the illustrative examples of the apostles' desertion and Peter's denials (Mt. 26,56; Mk. 14,66-72) after their most earnest promises of unswerving loyalty (Mk. 14,31); and the mad crowd crying "Crucify Him!" (Mk. 15,14) five days only after He was acclaimed "Son of David, who comes in the Name of the Lord" (Mt. 21,9).

I wonder what might be the "prejudice" of those *past* "years and years", alluded in the above statement, which seems affected by the malady of our days, namely, "*prejudice* against *everything* of the *past*". Because, if I am not mistaken, the real "prejudice" — if any — in the past, was rather the opposite. The common rank and file among Christians not so well acquainted with the Gospels, were rather *prejudiced* against the Jews *in general* as enemies of Christ and responsible for His death. Hence, the *prejudice* could have been that those *around Jesus* were *not* convinced that He was a "Man-plus-something-else." But even those who in the past might have entertained such anti-semitic bias, did never include in their prejudice the close friends of Jesus, like the Apostles, the family of Bethany, the crowds of simple folk who followed Him and who were cured by Him. Precisely, just the contrary of what Webber and Rice's opera conveys.

Let us then try to find out what the contemporaries of Jesus who were *around Him*, thought of Him with more or less conviction. First of all, let us make it clear that I do not mean to affirm that *many* of those around Our Lord recognized in Him the Incarnate Son of God, our Lord and God

Himself (cf. Jn. 20,28), as Christians believed after the resurrection and Pentecost, and more definitely still after the Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople and Chalcedon. What I maintain is that *quite many*, probably *most* of those around Jesus, at least surmised — if they were not actually convinced 100% — that He was the "Messias" so long expected by the chosen people of God, the "Christ" or the "Anointed One", "Son of David", "King of Israel", "King of the Jews", "a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and *all the people* . . . the One to redeem Israel" (Lk. 24.19-21), the "Son of Man to come on the clouds of heaven" (cf. Dan. 7.13; Mt. 26.64) that is, "someone who is *more than human*", "an ideal Man, supernatural, preexisting others, possibly God and man at the same time". I repeat, for me the *more plausible view* — and if I am wrong, I would welcome any correction — is that *most* of those who surrounded Jesus, either friends or enemies, during His public life, recognized Him, at least occasionally, as a "Man-plus-something-else" beyond mere human nature, i.e. a man with at least some undeniable preternatural or supernatural gifts or powers.

Otherwise I simply could not understand so many passages of the Gospels. The Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph evidently knew that Jesus was the "Son of the Most High", "eternal King", "Savior of his and of all peoples", "the Christ of the Lord" (Mt. 1,21; 2,2.11; Lk. 1,32-33; 2,11.19.30-32). St. John the Baptist acknowledged Him as "the Lord who baptizes with the Holy Spirit," "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," "the beloved Son of God (the Father)" (Mt. 3,3.11.17; Jn. 1,29.33-35). Of the Apostles, St. Andrew and St. John recognized Him as "the Messias (which interpreted is Christ)"; St. Philip, as the One "of whom Moses in the Law and the prophets wrote"; St. Bartholomew, as the "Son of God, King of Israel" (i.e., the promised Messias) (Jn. 1, 41.45.49). And this was at their first encounter with Jesus. Soon, after the first miracle at the Cana wedding when "He manifested his glory, his disciples believed in Him" (Jn. 2,11) still more firmly; and when they saw Him rebuking the wind and the sea during the storm on the lake "and there came a great calm, the men marvelled saying: 'Who then is this that

¹ cf. THE HOLY BIBLE, *Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*, London, C.T.S., 1965, *The Old Testament, Notes*, p. 1014.

² cf. Simon-Dorado, C.S.S. R., *Praelectiones Biblicae, Novum Testamentum*, I, Marietti, Madrid, 1960 p. 225.

even wind and sea obey Him?" (Mt. 8.27); and when they saw Him walking upon the waters of the lake of Genesareth they "worshipped Him, saying: 'Truly, you are the Son of God'" (Mt. 14.33). Thus when at the last year of His public ministry Jesus asked His apostles "Who do you say that I am?", Simon the son of Jonas, in the name of the twelve, replied: "You are the *Christ, the Son of the living God*" (Mt. 16.16), that is, not only the long expected "Messias" or "Son of God" — as they called Him before at the lake — by adoption (as Elias, Jeremias or other prophets were also), but rather "*Son of the living God*" by nature.³

It is true that Judas Iscariot, due to his ill dispositions, soon perhaps lose gradually his faith in Jesus, so that by the time of Peter's Confession, Our Lord had already spoken of him as "a devil" (Jn. 6.71). But at the beginning, in all certainty, he believed in Jesus as the others. Because, even such a miserable and wretched person as Herod, who just "heard of Jesus, for His name had become well known, kept saying, 'John the Baptist has risen from the dead, and what is why *miraculous powers* are working through him . . . It is John whom I beheaded; he has risen from the dead'" (Mk. 6.14.16). And even the "woman . . . who was a sinner" (Lk. 7.37), and "certain women who had been cured of evil spirits" as well as "Mary, who is called the Magdalene, from whom seven devils had gone out" (Lk. 8.2) became all of them generous believers and ministers of Our Lord (Jn. 4.29; Lk. 8.3; Mk. 16.1.9; Lk. 24.10). Nay, the demoniacs themselves acknowledge Him: the one of Capharnaum called Him: "The Holy One of God" (Mk. 1.21), and the two of Gerasa (Mt. 8.28) called Him: "Son of the Most High God" (Lk. 8.28). And the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate, upon hearing that Jesus has claimed to be "Son of God" surmised this possibility in view of the unexplainable dignified peace and silence of the innocent man so unjustly accused by a mad rabble (Jn. 19.9-12). Still more, the most bitter enemies of Jesus, unable to explain the miracles wrought by the Master, and even obstinately refusing to admit that God was with Him, since they could not deny the facts they just dared to blaspheme attributing them to "the prince of devils" (Mt. 12.24). And when they interviewed the man born blind, cured by Jesus, they were not able to refute the common sensible logic of that poor man, and were

³ *Ibid.*, p. 669.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

just content with insulting and turning him out (Jn. 9,34). And when they saw Lazarus alive after his death and four days at the grave, they just planned, in a fit of desperate madness "to put Lazarus to death also" (Jn. 12,10) together with Jesus. They were indeed at a loss, reasoning out: "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on thus . . ." (Jn. 11,47-48). In other words, they admitted that Jesus was really a "man-plus-something-else" beyond mere human nature. They did not like to believe in Him as "the Christ, the Son of God" (Mt. 26,63), but they were convinced that He was a "man-plus-something-else" they could not explain; and so they resorted to the wicked schemes of the ungodly men of the Scriptures (Wis. 2,12-20), fulfilling thus to the letter what was written of them.

Nicodemus, however, among the Pharisees, "a ruler of the Jews . . . said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, *we know that you are a Teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him*'" (Jn. 3,2). So, he was convinced, and with him many others, that Jesus possessed special *mission and powers from God*, nay, that *God was*, in a very special way, *with Him*; that means to be a "man-plus-something-else"! And the royal official of Capharnaum, together with "his whole household", upon realizing the cure of his son, "believed" in Jesus (Jn. 4,53). And the leper (Mk. 1,40), and the paralytic with the four men who brought him down through the roof (Mk. 2,5), and Jairus (Mk. 5,36), and the Canaanite Syro-phoenician mother (Mt. 15,28), and the father of the possessed boy (Mk. 9,23), and the blind Bartimeus (Mk. 10,52), and the other two blind men (Mt. 9,28-29), and the woman with a hemorrhage (Lk. 8,48), and the proselyte centurion (Mt. 8,10), and the pagan Roman centurion (Mt. 15,39): all of them believed and had faith in Jesus.

But these are isolated instances of the people who *surrounded* Him. Let us look now at the crowds, the huge multitudes that followed Him. From the beginning of His public life, at the first Passover in Jerusalem "many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did" (Jn. 2,23), that is many believed in His divine mission, although Our Lord who "knew what was in man did not trust Himself to them" because He understood well human inconstancy. And then in Capharnaum, the *people* "at sundown brought to Him all who were sick or possessed with *demons*. And *the whole city was gathered together* about door (of the house of Simon

Peter)... And in the (next) morning Simon said to Him. *'Every one is searching for you...'*

And then, it was in the "city of Samaria" called Sychar, that *"many Samaritans from that city believed in Him"* and after *"He stayed there two days many more believed because of His word"* and *"they said, 'We know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world'"* (Jn. 4,5,39-42). And after the cure of the paralytic in Capharnaum the *big crowd* gathered together at the house *"they were all amazed and glorified God saying, 'We never saw anything like this'"* (Mk.2,12): *"when the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God who had given such authority to men"* (Mt. 9,8). In the first multiplication of loaves in the desert an immense crowd of 5,000 people without counting women and children, come *"from all the cities"* of the northern shore of Genesareth lake, said: *"This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world"*, and they were about to take Him by force and make Him king (Jn. 6,14-15). At the second multiplication of loaves realized at the eastern region of the lake, there was another multitude of *"4,000 men apart from children and women"* (Mt. 15,38) who were similarly impressed. So much more because in that occasion *"great crowds came to Him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the dumb, and many others, and they put them at His feet, and He healed them, so that the throng wondered, when they saw dumb speaking the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel"* (Mt. 15,30-31. After the resurrection of the widow's son at Naim *"a large crowd"* that accompanied Jesus, and another *"large gathering from the town"* were present, and *"fear seized upon all, and they began to glorify God, saying, 'A great prophet has risen among us' and 'God has visited his people'.* And this report concerning Him went forth *throughout the whole of Judea, and all the country roundabout"* (Lk. 7,11-17). And when the crowds heard his doctrine, *"they were astonished, and said, 'Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?'"* (Mt. 13,54); *"How is it that this man has learning, when He has never studied?"* (Jn. 7,15). That is why all the people considered Him at least as a great Prophet, and by no means as a mere *"man, just as anyone else"*. At Caesarea Philippi *"Jesus asked his disciples, 'Who do men say that the Son of man is?'"* And they said, *"Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."* (Mt. 16,13-14). No one among the people thought that He was *"just a man"!*

The Pharisees knew well that the immense majority of the people believed in John the Baptist as "a Prophet" sent by God (Mt. 21,26). And then, according to the Evangelist, "many (of those Jews) came to Jesus, and they were saying, 'John indeed worked no sign. All things, however, that John said of this Man were true.' And many believed in Him" (Jn. 10,41-42). His enemies "sought to arrest Him... Yet many of the people believed in Him; they said, 'When the Christ appears will He do more signs than this Man has done?' The Pharisees heard the crowd thus muttering about Him, and the chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to arrest Him... The officers then (later) went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, 'Why did you not bring him?' The officers answered, 'No man ever spoke like this man!'" (Jn. 7, 30-46).

The people of Jerusalem were divided in their opinion about Jesus. "Some of the people said, 'This is really the Prophet'. Others said, 'This is the Christ'. But some said, 'Is the Christ to come from Galilee?...'" (Jn. 7,40-41). "And there was much muttering about Him among the people. While some said, 'He is a good man,' other said, 'No, he is leading the people astray.' Yet for fear of the Jews no one spoke openly of him." (Jn. 7,12-13). Hence, all the people agree that Jesus was either a "Prophet", or "the Christ", or at least someone who might have messianic claims, if it were not only because of his *apparent* (mistakenly thought of) origin. Even those who said that "he was leading the people astray" obviously admitted that He was not a mere man "just as anyone else; all agree that He had the character of a "prophet", although certainly not everybody agreed that He was the Christ or the Messiah. "Yet for fear of the Jews — enemies of Christ — no one spoke openly of him", which obviously they would have done, if there would be at least some who could convincingly say that "he was just a man, as anyone else"!

Even the Pharisee Simon did not discard the possibility of a prophetic character in Jesus, although he tried to find some argument against it ("If this man were a prophet..."-Lk.7,39) which at once was proved to be groundless (Lk. 7,40); nay. Our Lord then proved to be more than a prophet, since He could forgive sins (Lk. 7,48-50; Mt. 9,2) which God alone can do (Lk. 5,21; Mk. 2,7). Everybody *around Jesus* was convinced of this, that is why "the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel together in order to arrest Jesus *by stealth* and..." Not during the feast, lest there be a tumult of the

people' " Mt. 26,3-5; Mk. 14,2). Hence, they knew well that the immense majority believed Jesus to be more than a mere man. And this was evident at the triumphal entrance in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday: "*a great crowd...took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him, crying, 'Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!'*"... *The crowd* that had been with Him when He called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead bore witness. The reason why *the crowd* (who had come to the feast) went to meet Him was that they heard He had done this sign. The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see that you can do nothing; look, *the world has gone after Him!*'" (Jn. 12, 12-19). This admission from the mouth of the mortal enemies of Jesus is the best proof of what we have tried to show here.

But... what about the crowd that later cried before Pilate: "Away with him! Away with Him! Crucify Him!" (Jn. 19-15)? That was simply a mob instigated by the chief priests and the rulers (Lk. 23, 13), which in a fit of popular commotion "did not know what they were doing" (cf. Lk. 23,34); and soon, after Jesus "breathed his last... all the multitudes who assembled to see the sight...returned home beating their breasts" (Lk. 23,46-48), and together with the centurion "*they were filled with awe, and said, 'Truly this was the Son of God'*" (Mt. 27, 54). Hence, even the rabble that in a moment of frenzy were pushed to ask for His death, became themselves so many other witnesses convinced of His being "human-plus-something-else."

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