

Review of Franco Tommasi, *Non c'è Cristo che tenga. Silenzi, invenzioni e imbarazzi alle origini del Cristianesimo: Qual è il Gesù storico più credibile?* (Lecce, Manni, 2014).

FERNANDO BERMEJO-RUBIO

The title of this book might seem at first sight somewhat confusing. “Non c'è Cristo che tenga” is an Italian expression meaning something like “There is nothing to do”, “That’s all there is to it”, so it seems to indicate that a radically sceptical stance towards the historicity of Jesus/Christ will be taken. There is, however, nothing of this sort. The second subtitle immediately corrects that possible first impression by clarifying that the aim of the book is to weigh up what is the most plausible view offered so far about the historical figure of Jesus. Furthermore, the strong terms used in the first subtitle (“silence”, “invention”, “embarrassment”) make plain that this task will be tackled in a truly critical way.

Non c'è Cristo che tenga (from now on, NCCCT) is indeed a critical and engaging book. This could admittedly come as a surprise for the lay reader, since its author is not a historian, a philologist nor a Bible scholar, but a Professor of Informatics in the Dipartimento di Ingegneria dell’innovazione of the Università del Salento (Italy). There is, however, no reason to be puzzled. Many research fields, especially in the Humanities, are vitiated by tiresome repetition and ideological constraints, and therefore we should not rule out in advance the possibility that an outsider has something valuable to contribute. In the specific realm of Jesus studies, the above-mentioned flaws are particularly serious, to the point that the same group of convoluted and far-fetched ideas are time and again repeated by many theologians and exegetes self-styled as historians. In these circumstances, there is no reason at all to silence the voice of an outsider, especially if – as it is the case of Franco Tommasi – this is the voice of an intelligent, thoughtful and learned person.

Moreover, Tommasi is an intellectually honest scholar. He does not boast –as so many others like to do– about being particularly original. From the first lines of the Preface he clearly states that the subject has been exhaustively tackled, and that many things he has to say have been already repeated and expounded before. Undaunted by this fact, he proceeds to justify the writing of his book – and he does it in a compelling way –. Tommasi takes to task the overwhelming majority of scholars, since either they display a more or less clearly faith-oriented view, or they have a prejudiced stance against Christianity which tends to distort their historical reconstructions, or – when they do not endorse a “pro” or “con” position – they are usually not clear enough when it comes to expound the surest results of critical research. According to the author, this situation seems to be particularly worrying in Italy, and he has accordingly decided to write a book to offer a fair overview of the current research.

Tommasi does not hide the fact that NCCCT is a book born in a fragmentary manner, and that he has not aimed at a completely systematic exposition. Nevertheless, the resulting work is well-ordered and clearly structured in three parts. The first part is entitled “I Problemi aperti” (Open Questions), and is devoted to the basic facts which are the starting-points of the research. Three problems are identified: 1) The non-Christian sources are almost silent on Jesus, and the oldest Christian sources (Paul and the so-called Q) do not say a lot about the biographical material reported by the

Gospels; 2) A conspicuous part of the data about Jesus contained in the 1st century Christian sources are the result of theological creativity and pious fantasy; 3) The Christian tradition has preserved several elements (embarrassing material) which strongly contradict the Jesus image which those sources try to build.

The second part is devoted to the explanations which have been offered for these odd facts. The author identifies five positions: 1) The Fundamentalist; 2) The Moderate Christian positions, which try to salvage the core of the traditional, confessional image; 3) The non-confessional, mainstream views of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet or as a religious and ethical innovator; 4) The reconstruction of Jesus as involved in anti-Roman ideology and/or activity; 5) The mythicists' view, according to whom Jesus did not exist.

The third part is the briefest, and contains a heterogeneous set of reflections on Christianity and on the ways in which Christians defend their tradition. The work closes with two lengthy appendices: one of them contains helpful information about basic questions related to the topic (a glossary, information on the sources, criteria of historicity...); the other one is devoted to make honestly clear the author's personal stance towards religious matters and Christianity.

NCCCT carefully surveys and evaluates every position identified by its author, devoting a whole chapter to each one (only the Fundamentalist deserve only a couple of pages – there is indeed not much to reflect!). Whereas most scholars blithely rule out in advance the mythicist view as outdated, Tommasi devotes to this position, and especially to that of Robert Price, more than 20 pages, thereby showing a truly independent stance. Richard Carrier's *On the Historicity of Jesus. Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt* was published in 2014 and unfortunately could not be reviewed in NCCCT – in the meanwhile, and particularly because of this massive book, Carrier has become the most conspicuous representative of the mythicist position. Even more interestingly, unlike most scholars in the guild, after having surveyed all the positions, Tommasi makes the effort of detecting a possible common ground between the mythicists, mainstream scholarship and proponents of an anti-Roman Jesus. This is sobering proof of this scholar's unprejudiced mind.

But, even though Tommasi is fair to the possible valuable aspects of the different positions he examines, he boldly – and, in our judgment, correctly – tends to endorse one of them, namely, the view of Jesus as a figure belonging to the Jewish resistance against Rome, thereby vindicating Samuel Brandon's work (chapter 9 of NCCCT). According to the Italian scholar, the reason for doing so is that such a hypothesis is the best explanation for the available data. At the same time, he clearly states that the discourse of those rejecting this view is inconsistent: they are bound to recognize the fact that the Gospels are biased sources which reread Jesus' story in the light of later contexts and interests, but then they state that there is no available evidence for the view of an anti-Roman Jesus, since the sources do not offer an image of him involved in political matters. But if there is every indication that the information has been tampered with, it is fallacious to use the resulting information as proof of something! The vicious circle proves that the emphatic rejection of the hypothesis of an anti-Roman Jesus betrays deep-rooted prejudices.

Tommasi does not just show the untenable character of the prevailing scholarly views, but also lucidly denounces the secular myth about Jesus, namely, that which presents the Galilean as a moral and spiritual paradigm. Even many non-believers and atheists cling to this idea ("I do not like the Church, but I like Jesus"), without realizing that the

view of Jesus as a model of compassion, meekness, peace, love, and universalistic openness is not independent from the Church, but an outcome of the distortion and inflation of his figure carried out in the Gospels. It is the Christian tradition that has constructed Jesus in such a captivating way. A close survey of the sources reveals, however, a whole series of traits – credulity, loyal adherence to the ritual and purity prescriptions of the Hebrew Bible and its myths, visionary religiosity bordering on fanaticism, intense nationalism, anti-pagan prejudices and intolerant attitudes, love for theocracy, self-aggrandizement, and so on – which hardly cohere with a pattern to be imitated by any modern man eager for epistemic and moral excellence.

NCCCT shows how misguided is the usual claim that many prevailing views of Jesus should be endorsed just because the overwhelming majority of scholars endorse them. Most of the people working in the field of historical Jesus studies are in fact not independent historians, but theologians and exegetes, what means that the prevailing views are heavily conditioned by ideological constraints. Tommasi is fair enough to recognize that some Christian scholars are indeed competent and honest, but at the same time he (correctly) states that for most of them their beliefs and dogmatic commitments take the upper hand over independent research, so their approaches are usually vitiated by apologetic aims.

Another remarkable aspect of this book is that it has been written with a detached attitude towards Christianity. Detachment – what Italians call “distacco” – does not imply any kind of hostility, but only an attitude free from confessional (or, for that, anti-confessional) prejudices. This is an important point, since most books on Jesus and Christianity are dictated by ideological commitments and written with tedious unctiousness (or with tedious scorn). Far from it, Tommasi casts a sharp eye on these subjects, but without ever indulging in disparagement. NCCCT is written in a serious and respectful manner, but at the same time pervaded by irony and a sense of humor that are not aimed in the least at offending the believer and that will delight the sceptical reader. This is a welcome achievement, because good humour is not very frequent in the field of Jesus studies!

Of course, the acknowledgment of the many values of this book does not imply that a specialist will not find some points which could have been more nuanced or somehow qualified. Below I will offer some examples.

A small number of statements might be judged somewhat hyperbolic, as when the author refers to Stevan Davies as “la massima autorità mondiale degli studi sul Vangelo di Tomaso” (p. 193). It is true that Davies is a great specialist in the Gospel of Thomas, but there are several scholars who could be deemed as the leading figures in the field, such as the US scholar April DeConick, who has written several very important monographs on this work that are not cited in NCCCT.

I have already remarked that Tommasi’s attempt to find a common ground between several approaches is indeed very valuable. The section devoted to this topic is, however, very brief, and could –and perhaps should– have been deepened. The reason is that one of the typical objections to the hypothesis of an anti-Roman Jesus is that it overlooks or downplays the importance of the religious factor in the life of the Galilean preacher. The objection is usually unfounded, but it should be made plain that involvement in anti-Roman resistance did not prevent anyone from being an intensely religious figure, in fact such an involvement often relied in Jewish history on serious faith commitments. This aspect deserves to be emphasized.

NCCCT devotes several pages to the *Testimonium Flavianum*, the passage in Antiquities XVIII where Flavius Josephus refers to Jesus. These pages contain intelligent reflections on this much-debated text, and underline the problems arising from the usual reconstruction, according to which the removal of three sentences would allow us to recover the original text. This is correct, but Tommasi states that according to current hypotheses –the text 1) is completely authentic, 2) is a complete forgery, 3) has been expunged by Christians– a fourth one should be added, namely, that the original text written by Josephus was very different to the extant text. This is indeed a possible scenario, but it is a hypothesis that has been already put forward in the history of the research. In fact, several scholars from very different backgrounds who are not mentioned by Tommasi in this regard (Eisler, Bienert, Reinach, Pötscher, Twelftree, Bammel, Stanton...) have pointed to the existence of some negative echoes even in the text as it is usually reconstructed in mainstream scholarship.

As to the political involvement of Jesus, Tommasi – otherwise a very well-informed author – does not cite several authors who have made some significant contributions to the topic. Even though some of these scholars have not always fully endorsed the critical view of an anti-Roman Jesus, there are some aspects in which they have accepted Brandon's arguments, as it happens with the hypothesis that in all probability Jesus refused to pay the tribute to Rome. Tommasi (rightly, in my view) argues that the most plausible reading of Mk 12:13-17 is that Jesus refused to pay the tribute (see pp. 83-84, 227-228), but he cites only Samuel Brandon (and Hyam Maccoby) in this regard. Nevertheless, scholars of Christian background such as Richard Horsley, Douglas Oakman and William Herzog have endorsed Brandon's (and others') interpretation on the issue of the tribute. To tackle this aspect would have made Tommasi's conclusions much stronger than it might have been.

A related question is that of Jesus' high view of himself in God's plan, and specifically the traces hinting at a royal claim by the Galilean preacher. Endorsing the suggestions of other scholars (Maccoby and Donini, although J. K. Elliott's *Questioning Christian Origins* could have been cited), in two different sections of his book Tommasi rightly observes that the anointing of Jesus in Bethany was likely the occasion when Jesus was publicly anointed as King-Messiah. A kingly claim by Jesus is, however, such an important issue as to deserve a more extended treatment. There are indeed many traces in the Gospels hinting at such a claim, and gathering all those traces would have been helpful for the lay reader to realize this point, thereby enhancing the hypothesis of an anti-Roman Jesus.

A further issue which could have improved the book would have been a greater attention to the current debate on criteria. Tommasi devotes several valuable pages to the criteria of historicity, but he does not refer to the methodological debates which are burgeoning in the last years in the guild. I refer to titles like Dale C. Allison's *Constructing Jesus. Memory, Imagination, and History* (2010), or Chris Keith and Anthony LeDonne (eds.), *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (2012). Admittedly, perhaps this kind of discussion will be finally deemed a storm in a teapot, but there are reasons to think that –for instance – the rehabilitation of the “recurrent patterns” criterion in the work of Allison and others is a methodological improvement that deserves to be known by lay readers.

The former remarks are not aimed in the least at undermining the importance of NCCCT, whose overall reliability I readily and vehemently recognize. They are just minor points of the kind that a specialist in the field could add. The sobering lesson is

indeed that all this material would further underpin the approach taken by Franco Tommasi. *Non c'è Cristo che tenga* is a very valuable and exciting book, full of insightful remarks, common sense, love for truth, and even ethical energy, that deserves serious attention. Of course it should be widely read in Italy, but its openness, critical sense, and unprejudiced stance make it relevant also in an international context. I warmly recommend its reading to any person interested in this most fascinating topic.

