



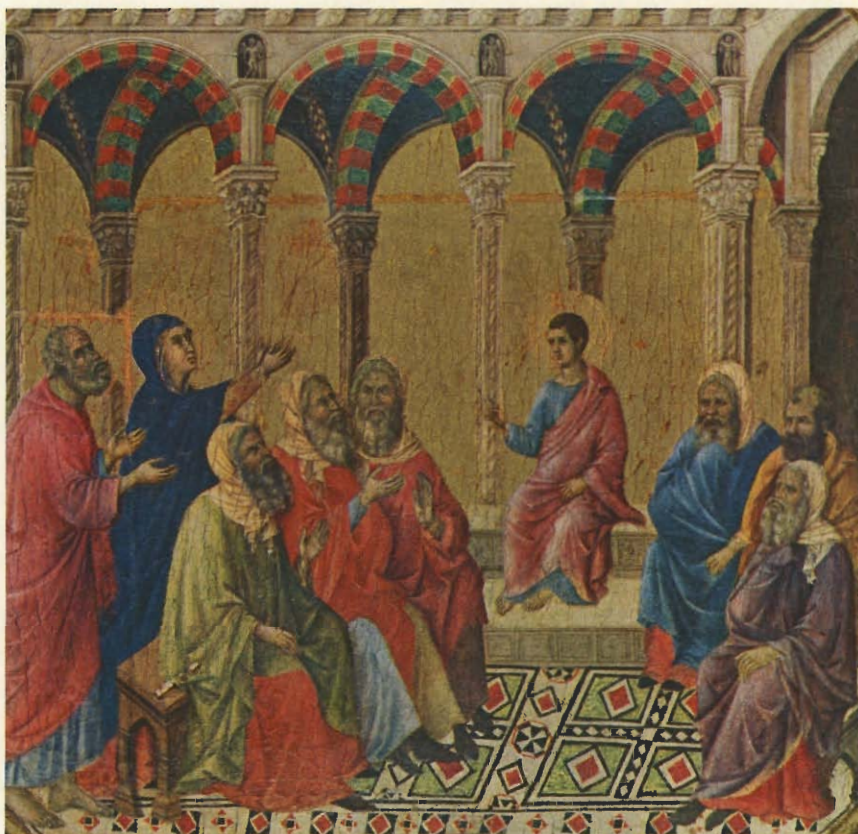
Detail from *The Feast in Emmaus*, Caravaggio

# Life in the Time of Christ and His Physical Attributes

**Roger L. Hiatt, M.D.**

I want to share with you a most sacred subject, one which I don't believe you would read in any other medical journal. One that is almost too reverent to approach. But I attempt to approach it because I believe we can learn from it. Don't we say that it is life eternal to know the only true God and Jesus Christ? And if we could know more about him and his life, couldn't we feel closer to him? Each of us must focus on the attributes of the Savior. This academy, if it is to be successful, must have its focus on the attributes of the Master.

Many physicians have as a hobby the study of historical facts about a person, an event, or a disease—for example, the study of Abraham Lincoln. What did Lincoln really die of, medically



The Twelve-Year-Old Jesus in the Temple, Duccio

speaking? If someone had been there to take him to one of the better hospitals of today as they did President Reagan when he was shot, could Lincoln have been saved? In other areas: What did Napoleon really die of while he was banished in Elba? What about leprosy in the time of Christ?

One day I was on an assignment and visited the Memphis State University LDS Institute of Religion, and the subject for the period was, "What Was Christ Like Physically?" I said to myself, "No one really knows." Before I left that day, I realized that we do know a lot about him. Since then I have read a great deal about this subject and have done considerable research.

The question arises, Where can we get sources that are reliable? These are very difficult to come by. We can, of course, look at art. We can look at historical writing in the time or after the time of the Savior. We can look at the customs of the day, which only infer what his life must have been like. We

can look at the spoken and written word in modern day. The most authentic source we have is the scriptures.

#### Art

Of course, no one actually painted a portrait of the Savior. No one was actually there and took a photograph. We have to rely on how people envisioned him. If you look at the third and fourth century paintings, they showed him to be youthful without a beard. Some of these paintings have been preserved in the catacombs. In the fifth and sixth centuries—the Byzantine period—he was painted as bearded, manly, and much stronger than the paintings in the earlier centuries. A third period of artists envisioned him older, more mature, leaner, with deep-set eyes, longer hair, and a beard. The portraits we have today are similar to these.

#### Historical Writings

Early retrospective descriptions of

the Savior may be found in the writings of St. Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullion, Pilgrim of Piacenze in 570 A.D., Andrew the Metropolitan of Crete in 810 A.D., Epiphanius of Constantinople in 800 A.D., and the Epistle of Lentulus in the 13th century. In all cases these are men who wrote a retrospective description. As far as we know, none of them are really accurate. One of them is widely known, and although it has been quoted many times, I realize its source is still questionable. It was supposedly read to the Roman senate by a man named Lentulus who was a predecessor of Plato and is recorded in *Conscript Fathers in Heart Throbs*, Vol. 1, p. 421:

"In our day appeared a man named Jesus Christ, who is yet living among us and of the Gentiles is accepted as a prophet of great truth; but his own disciples call him the Son of God. He has raised the dead and cured all manner of disease. He is a man of stature somewhat tall and comely with a ruddy countenance, such as the beholder may both love and fear. His hair is the color of a filbert when fully ripe, plain to his ear, whence downward is more of orient color, curling and waving on his shoulders. In the middle of his head is a seam of long hair after the manner of the Nazarites. His forehead is plain and delicate, the face without spot or wrinkle, beautiful with a comely red. His nose and mouth are exactly formed. His beard is the color of his hair and thick, not in any length but forked. In reproving he is terrible; in admonishing courteous; in speaking, very modest and wise; in proportion of body, well shaped. None has seen him laugh, many have seen him weep. A man, for his surpassing beauty, excelling the children of men."

#### Customs of His Day

We can only infer what his life was like, but from the customs of the time we can learn several things. Breakfast was usually somewhere between 9 a.m. and noon. For this meal they usually had bread, fruit, and cheese. At

supper time they had meat, vegetables, and butter. They had many feasts. The most famous was the Feast of the Passover, where the family would go to Jerusalem and celebrate. They also had many fasts which were associated with religious observances.

Their clothing consisted of an inner garment, an outer garment, a girdle, and sandals, in keeping with the terrain of the area. There are scriptures which refer to this clothing such as "He rent his garments," or "Gird up his loins."

Family life was interesting. Somewhere in Nazareth and its hills, Jesus played as a boy. He no doubt had a boyhood similar to others of his day. Furniture was small and well made, and, because Joseph was a carpenter, no doubt that home had very substantial and proper furniture. Their clothes were homespun wool and Mary probably sang lullabies of the day, usually psalms and prayers, to Christ.

By the age of two, children were weaned, and by the age of three the father began to teach them the principles of living, using many stories, usually with the scriptures as a text. By the age of six the formal school began in the synagogue and later other places for their vocational training were added. Their hair was usually light and long.

Leviticus 27:1-8 records the growth stages of the children in the time of the Savior. The first of these growth stages was birth to thirty days. We know many events occurred in the life of the Savior that were important in these first thirty days. The next period was from one month to five years. These were the formative years before formal training occurred. Then ages five to ten were the growing years, and after twenty the children were considered adults. The older age and declining years were similar to older age in our day.

The average Israelite was small and short, only sixty-three to sixty-seven inches tall. We know from the scriptures they were smaller than the Canaanites. However, they were very physically strong because they had to labor for their keep; they had to work



Healing the Lame and the Blind, Sicilian-Byzantine Mosaic (12th Century)

hard. In addition to the training I described earlier, they received vocational training at a later time in life. In the case of the Savior, he received training in carpentry.

#### Modern Works

There are a few modern works from which we can learn. George F. Richards, in the Conference Reports of October 1949, pg. 15, gave a talk on the physical appearance of the Savior and quoted many of the sources that I have referred to. Of course Talmage, in *Jesus The Christ*, describes some of the life and times of the Savior. More recently, the six-volume set by Bruce R. McConkie makes considerable reference to life in the time of Christ.

#### Scriptures

Now we come to the most authentic, true source available that reflects some idea of what he was really like and what his life was like. As physicians and as followers of Christ, let us read the scriptures and think together on some of the things that we can learn about him and his physical life.

First of all we have the scripture from Exodus 12:5, "Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year: ye shall take it out from the sheep or from the goats." Now it had to be without blemish. It had to be a perfect lamb, and it was sacrificed in similitude of the Savior who would come in his day. They had to pick the finest lamb of the flock, a perfect lamb without



*The Marriage in Cana, Spanish-Flemish Altar (15th Century)*

blemish. What did that really mean? That meant it had to have all perfect structures and perfect anatomy as possible. To me that would mean that the Savior then was without blemish. If so, we can assume that he was without blindness, lameness, broken bones, extra fingers or toes, or humpback—because imperfect animals could not be sacrificed. We can also assume, since we have no recorded instances of his being ill, that he did not suffer from the diseases of his day like fever, leprosy, tuberculosis and plague. Isaiah records in 53:2, “For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant and a root out of a dry ground. He hath no form nor comeliness. And when we shall see him there is no beauty that we should desire him.” This means he would be beautiful and complete.

He was similar to other men. How do we know this? Let’s look at the scriptural evidence. How about the disciples on the road to Emmaus following the crucifixion? You remember how they “walked with him by the way” and they did not know who he was and felt he was a stranger. They proceeded to inform him of the great events of the preceding day as he walked with them along the road. He apparently was no different than other Jewish men of his day.

How about the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well? When she met him there he asked of her a drink of water and she said, “How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? . . . Jesus answered and said unto her, If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.” Did she think he was any different from any other Jewish person? No.

How about Judas in the Garden of Gethsemane? How did he identify the Savior? He betrayed him with a kiss. He had to point him out to the captors to identify him.

How about the disciples on the Sea of Galilee after his resurrection as they saw a man and didn’t particularly



*Calling of the Apostles Peter and Andrew, Duccio*

recognize him? What did the Savior tell them to do? "Cast your nets on the side of the boat," and when they came up with a huge amount of fish they suddenly thought, "This is the Master." How about the Doubting Thomas? What did he want to do? He saw a man there, no different than other people. He wanted to touch the prints in his hands and feet, and to see for himself and feel the scar in his side.

Then, how about Mary at the tomb? Whom did she mistake him to be? The gardener! "Where hast thou taken him? Tell me and I will go to him." While I was on a tour of Israel in 1979, I stood at the garden tomb and thought of Mary as she approached this area that first Easter morning and saw the Savior. He was like a man, not greatly different than any other Jew of his day.

He was strong, very strong. How do we know this? He was first without spot or blemish. Secondly, we have no record of illness in his day. Thirdly, he had made journeys over this rough terrain of Israel, the mountains, the sand, the shores, and the wooded areas, and he walked it most of the time. He also fasted 40 days. It takes a strong physical man to do that. Most importantly, he was strong enough to carry the cross after scourging. Scourging would cause many people to die without being crucified. Yet after he was scourged, he was not only strong enough to carry the cross but strong enough to withstand the crucifixion until the time had come for him to give up the ghost and relinquish his life. He had also been scourged the night before in the pit of Caiaphas where he spent the last night of his mortal life. Somewhere on Col-

gotha Hill or Calvary, he had enough physical strength to withstand that awful way to die, the crucifixion.

Did he get weary? Surely he became weary. We know that. After he fasted and was on the Mount of Temptation, Satan tempted him and said, "Make of these stones bread." He was hungry. That was a temptation. Mary often bathed his feet when he came to her house and to the home of Lazarus in Bethany. We know on one occasion he went to the other side of Galilee to rest after a long day of talking to the disciples. I think the next telling point about the physical stature of Christ came when he was tired one day and went out on the Sea of Galilee to rest. You remember the storm came up, depicted by the song, "Master the Tempest Is Raging." The disciples shook him and said, "Master, we perish." Af-



*The Cleansing of the Temple, El Greco*

ter a long, hard day, his nervous system was so tranquil and so at peace with God, himself, and the world, that he was able to sleep through the storm. Doesn't that tell you something about his tranquility of soul? He was at peace with God and himself.

His feet and legs were strong because he walked where he went most of the time. His hands and arms must have been strong. I'm sure his hands showed the effects of being a carpenter's son. His arms and hands were strong enough to take the whip in the temple and drive the money changers from the temple because they were making of his house a den of thieves. His hair and beard no doubt were in keeping with

the styles of the day. His hearing, what was it probably like? It's mentioned at times. You remember the beggar calling him, "Thou Son of David, have mercy on me." Can you imagine in a crowd of bustling people that he was able to hear the beggar say, "Thou Son of David, have mercy on me." Somewhere in Jerusalem he preached many times, and somewhere here he was able to hear people. He mentioned smell, taste, and touch. How about the time when the woman touched his garment and he said, "Who touched me?" When all denied, Peter and they that were with him said, "Master, the multitude through thee and press thee, and sayest thou, Who touched me?" And Jesus said,

"Somebody hath touched me: for I perceive that virtue is gone out from me." His sensitivity to touch was superb. We hear mentioned in the scriptures of odors and sweetness, texture, and salt in his parables. He apparently enjoyed food. We hear about his eating at Mary's home and the feeding of the 4,000 or 5,000.

His face must have been pleasant to look upon. His eyes must have been piercing. Remember the time when he saw Zaccaeus in a tree "afar off" and again where the Savior describes the figs and their maturity on the tree. I believe that shows he had good vision. As I thought about his voice, it fascinated me. It must have been sound and firm.

Look at this example. Can you imagine speaking to 4,000 or 5,000 people without a microphone? On the Mount of Beatitudes, when the most beautiful sermon of all time was given, all the people crowded around and he spoke to them. His voice must have been penetrating, piercing, strong, powerful.

His education and intellect were superior. He was taught first by his father, then by his Jewish family, then at the synagogue, then the most important of all he learned by the Holy Spirit. You see, he had the greatest teacher man can have—the Holy Ghost. So he was the most learned man of his day. Yes, we see examples of his mentality all through the scriptures. It was powerful and unsurpassed. You remember at the age of twelve when he went down to the Feast of the Passover in Jerusalem and his parents came back to seek him, the scriptures recorded that “He astounded the doctors and lawyers of his day.” And then this scripture follows it. “And the child grew and he waxed strong in spirit filled with wisdom and the glory of God was before him.” He used parables to teach. You see, he actually read the mind. The scriptures record this phrase, “And from henceforth they durst not ask him any more questions.” He caused men to marvel and to say of him, “He is not learned,” meaning he was not formally taught. Other scriptures say, “They marveled at his answers.”

Spiritually he had no equal. He had sympathy for the poor, the sick, the sinner, the needy, the sorrowful. He had empathy for all. He was powerful and kind. He even wept at the passing of Lazarus. The shortest scripture said, “Jesus wept.” This great feeling he had and the love he had are the most powerful attributes I see in his person. As he passed the well of Bethesda that day (and Bethesda has become a medical term in America) and saw the lame man who could not get down into the healing waters, he had sorrow for him and empathy and feeling. And he said, “Arise, take up thy pallet and walk.” And he did.

In the words of J. Francis of Los



Detail from *The Way to Calvary*, Tintoretto



*The Crucifixion, Matthias Grunewald*

Angeles: "Here is a man who was born in an obscure village. He worked in a carpenter shop until he was 30 and then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held office. He never went to college. He never put his foot inside a big city. He never did one of the things that usually accompanies greatness. He had no credentials but himself. He had nothing to do with in this world except the naked power of his divine manhood. When still a young man the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. Another betrayed him. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial.

He was nailed on a cross between two thieves. His executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth while he was yet dying, and that was his cloak. When he was dead he was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave from the pity of a friend. Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and today he is the center of the human race and the leader of the column of progress. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched and all the navies that were ever built and all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as profoundly as has this one solitary man."

As I conclude, these two thoughts from our latter-day scriptures tell us what he was like after the resurrection. Nephi records, "And it did pierce them that they hear it to the center inasmuch as there was no part of their frame that it did not cause to quake. Yea, it did pierce them to the very soul and did cause their hearts to burn." Joseph Smith records this beautiful description: "I saw two personages whose brightness and glory defy all description." Again in D&C 110:3 we find, "His eyes were as a flame of fire, the hair of his head was white like the pure snow, his countenance shone above the brightness of the sun, and his voice was as the sound of rushing of great waters, even the voice of Jehovah."

#### Our Savior and Lord

Now the most crucial point of all. When I stood before that open garden tomb and looked into that area, I had a feeling that I shall never forget—that my sins have been forgiven me. If I live the rest of my life and never go into the office again, and I devote every moment to my family, this university, the goals of the academy, the Church, I could never repay a fraction of what the Savior has done for me. The attributes of the Savior must penetrate this university and the academy. They should penetrate our practices. For I know without a doubt that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. I know there was a man named Jesus Christ who lived on this earth physically, as we live, and that he experienced life and the troubles and trials of life as we do. I know that he is my Savior, I love him, and I think he loves me. It is my prayer that we, as physicians, who have so much materially, educationally, spiritually, may use the art we have that we might be sure that the Savior is the center of our lives. I pray in Christ's name. Amen.

*Roger L. Hiatt is chairman of the Department of Ophthalmology at the University of Tennessee School of Medicine and was selected as outstanding ophthalmologist for the year in the state of Tennessee. He currently serves as president of the Memphis, Tennessee Stake.*