
Jesus: The Historical One

Are the New Testament books which detail Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies reliable? How can one know in this century that Jesus, a Nazarene carpenter, actually lived in the first century? Is the story of His marvelous life only wishful thinking? Early Christians affirmed that such a person was with them in the flesh and that they saw His glory. However, were they only imagining a glorious ideal of the human race?

The four Gospel Accounts of Jesus' alleged life, after microscopic examination by determined unbelievers, represent in our age the most accredited historical documents in existence.¹ If one were to take the position that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were simply self-deceived followers of a mythical Jesus, that position would be demolished when

¹There was a time when "the basic trustworthiness of the New Testament records" was challenged, "but that time is long and permanently past" (John H. Gerstner, *Reasons for Faith* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960], 86).

he listened to statements from non-Christians. Not many non-Christian quotations are available from the early centuries, but the few statements extant about Jesus are certain demonstrations of the truth that He actually lived.²

FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS

Flavius Josephus was a learned Pharisee, born seven years after the church was started. He lived until after the New Testament had been completed. He was not a Christian, but he had an almost reverential respect for Jesus:

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.³

Carelessness in the use of words, along with veneration, certainly characterized Josephus in the preceding statement, for he left the impression of belief

²Non-Christian remarks "may also help to refute the contention, advanced quite seriously by some critics at the end of the 19th century, that Jesus never actually lived at all and that the story of Jesus was an elaboration of a myth about a god who appeared on earth for a while in human form" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1962 ed., s.v. "Jesus Christ," by Jaroslav Jan Pelikan).

³Josephus *Antiquities* 18.3.3.

in the facts of the gospel.⁴ His true belief, however, is seen in a later book, which serves as a corrective; that writing referred to Jesus as the one who “was called Christ.”⁵

Strong is the evidence that Josephus did not believe in the deity of Jesus, but equally strong is the evidence that he believed that Jesus of Nazareth lived in the first century. From the standpoint of one outside the “tribe” of Christians, the words of Josephus witness against anyone who views Jesus as a mythical character.

THE TALMUDS

Extensive Jewish writings of the first five centuries called the Talmuds (in two parts, the Mishna and the Gemara) speak of Jesus. As might be expected, the references are sparse and hostile; but the idea of

⁴So pro-Christ is Josephus’ statement that many scholars have asserted that the whole section is an interpolation. Less drastic but to the same effect is the decision to make certain words interpolations. (Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching*, trans. Herbert Danby [New York: Macmillan Co., 1929], 56.) All extant copies of Josephus’ writings have the entire section, however, and the section has been quoted since A.D. 324 (by Eusebius). As far as textual evidence is concerned, one can as easily reject any other portion of Josephus’ writings as this section. Only subjective reasoning can delete it.

The *New York Times* News Service, under a Jerusalem dateline, February 13, 1972, told of a tenth-century Arabic manuscript which has a variant for the Josephus text, as follows: “At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. And his conduct was good, and [he] was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive; accordingly, he was perhaps the messiah concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.”

⁵Josephus *Antiquities* 20.9.1.

a non-real Jesus, the Talmuds deny.⁶ They speak of "Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary, the daughter of Eli."⁷ They recite His trip to Egypt and recognize His miraculous ability. However, they ascribe His power either to His having stolen the correct pronunciation of God's name from the temple or to His practicing Egyptian magic. Specific names of Jesus' followers are mentioned, including Matthew, Thaddaeus, one named Bauni, and Nicodemus. The Passover crucifixion is not omitted, but all references are heavy with evil insinuations, accusing Jesus of sorcery and seduction.⁸

Sarcastically, the rabbis referred to Jesus as "The Hanged One" and "The Son of the Virgin."⁹ They made insulting puns on the word "gospel," making it sound as if it meant "iniquity of the Margin," or "Sin of the Writing Tablet."¹⁰ If they had ever considered the idea of a mythical Jesus, surely their attacks would have been different. Their every insult is grounded in the actuality of the Nazarene carpenter.

⁶F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), 102. Bruce cited Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 18ff., and Maurice Goguel, *Life of Jesus*, 70ff., to show the complete confidence of the Jews in the historicity of Jesus. "A person did once exist whose name was Jesus or Christ," and He "was crucified in Palestine during the reign of Tiberius" (Maurice Goguel, *Life of Jesus* [New York: Barnes & Noble, 1933; 3d impression, 1958], 70).

⁷Thomas Hartwell Horner, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: E. Littell, 1831), 1:197.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Jesus was called *Ha-Taluy*, "The Hanged One," and *Ben Pantera*, "The Son of the Virgin." The word *pantera* is a corruption of the Greek word *parthenos*, "virgin." (Ibid.)

¹⁰*Euangelion*, "gospel," was altered to 'Awen-gillayon or 'Awon-gillayon. (Babylonian Talmud, tractate Shabbath, 116 a, b, quoted in F. F. Bruce, 102.)

CORNELIUS TACITUS

Another historian, considered the Roman Empire's most outstanding, was Cornelius Tacitus. About A.D. 110, he wrote a description of the burning of one-third of Rome during the Neronian era (A.D. 54–68). Because some Romans said that Nero himself had caused the "Great Fire" of 64, he set about to refute the accusation. As part of his report, Tacitus wrote,

Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, from whom they got their name, had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate when Tiberius was Emperor; and the pernicious superstition was checked for a short time, only to break out afresh, not only in Judea, the home of the plague, but in Rome itself, where all the horrible and shameful things in the world collect and find a home.¹¹

His writings show that Tacitus was disgusted with those "styled Christians," but it is also clear that he was solidly convinced that "Christus" had "been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate."

C. PLINIUS SECUNDUS

Another Roman writer and contemporary of Tacitus, a governor of Bithynia, was C. Plinius Secundus. He was identified as Pliny "the Younger" to distinguish him from his eminent uncle by the same name. Pliny the Younger wrote to Emperor Trajan in A.D. 112, asking advice concerning what he should do about the many Christians in his province.

¹¹Tacitus *Annals* 15.44, quoted in Bruce, 117.

With heathen temples being abandoned, and Christians willingly suffering death for the name of Christ, it would have been impossible to make Pliny think that a myth about Jesus had started the widespread "contagion." Pliny's remarks illustrate the extent of Christian influence: "Nor has the contagion of this superstition been confined to the cities only, but it has extended to the villages, and even to the country."¹²

SEUTONIUS

Seutonium (65–135), Tacitus' contemporary and fellow-historian, wrote in about A.D. 120 of a drastic action taken by Emperor Claudius in A.D. 49: "As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome."¹³ (The one whom Tacitus had called "Christus,"¹⁴ Seutonium called "Chrestus."¹⁵)

The writer Orosius mentioned that this expulsion took place in the ninth year of Claudius' reign. As Werner Keller pointed out, that means that a Christian community existed in Rome "not more than fifteen to twenty years after the Crucifixion."¹⁶

Unbelieving Jews in the Roman Jewish ghetto apparently were persecuting Christian Jews. They raised such a public disturbance as to disgust Claudius. Accordingly, the emperor, looking upon the

¹²C. Plinius Secundus *Epistles of Pliny* 10.97, quoted in J. W. McGarvey, *Evidences of Christianity*, Part 3 (Louisville: Guide Printing and Publishing Co., 1891), 12–14.

¹³Seutonium *Life of Claudius* 25.4, quoted in Bruce, 118.

¹⁴Tacitus *Annals* 15.44, quoted in Bruce, 117.

¹⁵Horner, 1:200.

¹⁶Werner Keller, *The Bible as History* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1958), 379.

matter as an internal Jewish squabble, ordered every Jew to leave Rome. Aquila and Priscilla were in that unhappy group. In Corinth Paul found “a certain Jew named Aquila, a man of Pontus by race, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome; . . .” (Acts 18:2). This sad incident, reflecting a large number of Christians in Rome within twenty years after Jesus’ death, could hardly have occurred if there never had been a “Chrestus.” Seutonius’ remark is again proof, from an objective and even hostile source, of the historicity of Jesus.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

The impact of a living, breathing, dying first-century Jesus of Nazareth cannot be offset, for what He did was not “done in a corner” (Acts 26:26). Whatever else about Christ might be attacked, His actuality must be admitted. “No man of information entertains a doubt concerning the existence of Napoleon Bonaparte, Oliver Cromwell, Julius Caesar,” or Jesus of Nazareth. “The facts that Julius lived, waged war in Gaul, and was assassinated in the Roman Senate, are admitted by all to belong to real and authentic history; but they are not so near to modern times, nor half so well attested, as the facts, that Jesus lived, preached his gospel in Judea and Galilee, and was crucified on Calvary.”¹⁸

¹⁷Seutonius also wrote of the Great Fire of Rome, and that Nero (64–68), Claudius’ successor, inflicted punishment “on the Christians, a class of men addicted to a novel and mischievous superstition” (Seutonius *Life of Nero* 21.2, quoted in Bruce, 118).

¹⁸J. L. Dagg, *The Evidences of Christianity* (Macon, Ga.: J. W. Burke and Co., 1869), 85, 90.

Frederick C. Grant claimed, "Such modern theories as the 'Christ-myth' are rejected by all the scientific historians."¹⁹ One lecturer made this statement:

To assume that he [Jesus] never lived, that the accounts of his life are inventions, is more difficult and raises more problems in the path of the historian, than to accept the essential elements of the gospel stories as fact.²⁰

F. F. Bruce said, "Some writers may toy with the fancy of a 'Christ-myth,' but they do not do so on the ground of historical evidence."²¹

"Had the New Testament never been written, and had the fathers maintained an unbroken silence, we should be able to gather from these outside sources [that is, statements of unbelievers], and be compelled to receive, all the great facts of Christianity."²² Christianity, then, is historically based and geographically grounded. In contrast to a shadowy Confucius or a doubtful Buddha, Jesus stands forth as real as Julius Caesar. As one grapples with the question "Who do you say that the Son of man is?" he has something solid on which to base his answer.

¹⁹*Encyclopedia Americana*, s.v. "Jesus Christ," by Frederick C. Grant.

²⁰H. G. Wells, in N. B. Hardeman, *Dallas Lectures for 1943* (Dallas: Eugene Smith, 1943), 122.

²¹Bruce, 119.

²²Harvey W. Everest, *The Divine Demonstration* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1884), 85.