

THE HISTORICITY OF JESUS
AND
THE RELIABILITY OF NEW TESTAMENT DOCUMENTS

Did Jesus of Nazareth actually live or was he a myth? Are we able to prove that he was an actual person of history? And if he was an actual person, can we learn anything about his life, his teaching and if he was the Son of God?

In the world today many believe Jesus of Nazareth never existed, that he is a creation of man, a myth. The Christ myth theory is essentially without supporters in modern academic circles and most scholars regard the arguments for Jesus' non existence as unworthy of any response- on par with claims that the Jewish Holocaust never existed and that the Apollo moon landing took place in a Hollywood studio. (1) The reasoning behind this is that there is historical evidence supplied by both friendly and hostile sources that make this quite an indisputable matter. (2) Jesus of Nazareth was an actual person in history.

The first century Roman, Tacitus, is considered one of the most accurate historians of the ancient world (3) He wrote how the Christians had been made scapegoats for the great fire of Rome in AD 64 "...Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate."(4)

Another ancient writer that confirms the existence of Christ was Suetonius, who was the chief secretary to Emperor Hadrian (reigned from A.D. 117-138). In his writings he confirms the report in Acts 18:2 about all the Jews being expelled from Rome, "As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome. (5) He also wrote of the aftermath of the great fire at Rome "Punishment

was inflicted on the Christians, a body of people addicted to a novel and mischievous superstition.”(3)

Yet, another ancient pagan historian named Thallus took the existence of Christ for granted. (5) He was a Samaritan born historian who lived and worked in Rome about the middle of the first century. His works have been lost to us, but a writer named Julius Africanus, in about A.D.221 quotes Thallus in a discussion about the darkness that followed the crucifixion of Christ “Thallus, in the third book of his histories, explains away this darkness as an eclipse of the sun.”(3) This reference to Thallus shows that as early as the middle of the first century the facts’ concerning Jesus’ crucifixion was already common knowledge and that pagans such as Thallus were already trying to explain the matter of the darkness as a natural phenomenon. It never occurred to these early pagans to deny the existence of Jesus (2)

There are also other ancient pagan writers that write about Christians and Christ; These include Pliny the Younger, Emperor Trajan, Mara-Bar-Serapion. But perhaps the most interesting is the second century Greek writer Lucian of Samosata whose work contains sarcastic critiques of Christianity: “The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account...these misguided creatures start with the general conviction that they are immortal for all time...and then it was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment they are converted and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage and live after his laws. All this they take quite on faith...” Lucian despite being a leading critic of the church ends up giving one of the most informative accounts of Jesus and early Christianity outside of the New Testament.(3)

There are also Jewish writings from history that confirms the existence of Christ: the Talmud and Josephus. The Talmudic writings concerning Jesus are those composed between A.D. 70 and 200. Most of the references to *Yeshu'a of Nazareth* are unfriendly and perhaps the most significant writing is Sanhedrin 43a: "On the eve of Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, 'He is going forth to be stoned because he practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Anyone who can say anything in his favor let him come forward and plead on his behalf.' But since nothing was brought forward in his favor he was hanged on the eve of the Passover!"(3)

Josephus, a former Jewish general turned historian, also gives us many references not only to Christ but also to many of the people we read about in the New Testament such as: John the Baptist, Pilate, the Herods, Felix, Festus, Jesus' brother James, of Annas, Caiaphas and the Caesars. His most significant reference is to Jesus "And there arose about this time Jesus, a wise man, if indeed we should call him a man; for he was a doer of marvelous deeds...This man was the Messiah. And when Pilate had condemned him to the cross at the instigation of our own leaders, those who loved him from the first did not cease. For he appeared to them on the third day alive again, as the holy prophets had predicted...the race of Christians, so named after him, has not yet died out."(2)

The historicity of Jesus of Nazareth can not be denied, writers and historians from antiquity confirms that there was a Jesus of Nazareth. Modern critical methods fail to support the Christ myth theory

In acknowledging the fact that Jesus was an actual person, one notices that all of these ancient writers speak little of what he said, did or taught. To learn who this Jesus of

Nazareth was, we must look to the New Testament documents. Without the New Testament Documents we know nothing of the life of Christ, nothing about the burial of Christ and we know nothing about the evidences for the resurrection of Christ.(4) This requires us ask are the New Testament documents reliable?

In looking at the historical reliability, the New Testament documents should be tested by the same criteria by which all historical documents are tested. Since we do not have the original or signature copies, how reliable are the copies in regard to the number of manuscripts and the time line between the signature and the copy.

According to F. E. Peters, “the works that make up the Christians’ New Testament was the most copied and widely circulated books of antiquity.”(3) As a result there is a multitude of manuscript evidence. If you count Greek copies alone the New Testament is preserved in some 5656 partial and complete manuscript portions that can be dated from the second century through the fifteenth centuries; If you count manuscripts in other languages you have almost 25,000 copies(3). The sheer number of copies is overwhelming especially when you compare it to other ancient works of history that are considered “reliable” However, what is truly remarkable and attest to the reliability of the New Testament documents is how close in time the copies are to the signature copies. There are 114 fragments that have been dated within 50 years of the originals; 200 books within a hundred years; 250 documents containing most of the New Testament within a 150 years and 325 complete New Testaments with in 225 years.(3) When you compare this to such writers as Plato, only 7 copies with the closest being 1300 years, or Homer, who has only 643 copies with the closest being 400 years or Caesar and his Gallic Wars which only has 10 copies dated a thousand years away.(3,4)

One must agree with F.F. Bruce, “There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament (5)

Another test of reliability comes from the documents written from 90 A.D. to 160 A.D. by a group of men called the Apostolic Fathers. These were men who had sat at the feet of the apostles or at the feet of men who did; these men included Justin Martyr, Eusebius, Ignatius, and Clement of Rome. Their writings are so numerous that if “no manuscripts of the New Testament were extant, the New Testament could be reproduced from their writings alone.”(3) As these writers wrote to encourage early Christians and quoted from the New Testament, we can reason two facts (1) that during this time span the New Testament had already been completed and (2) the Christians in the first and early second century received the New Testament documents as reliable, historical fact.

The writers of the New Testament were writing at the same time as others such as Josephus and Tacitus were writing their histories. Just as these men wrote their histories in a historical context, naming persons, events, places and times, speaking of morals, politics, customs and culture, so did the New Testament writer. If the New Testament writers agree with the classical historians from antiquity we must accept the New Testament writers as reliable as well. Luke in his writings mentions Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod , tetrarch of Galilee, Philip, tetrarch of Iturea, Lysanias, Annas, Caiaphas, John the Baptist. All of these men can be found outside of Luke’s text in the classical histories. Luke is a reliable history. Events found in Mark, such as the darkness that took place during the crucifixion can be found in the histories of Thallus. The famine prophesied by Agabus in the book of Acts can also be found in the writings of

Josephus. Seutonius in his writings also talks about the expulsions of the Jews from Rome which is also recorded in Acts 15.

Were the New Testament writers accurate historians and are their writings accurate. Sir William Ramsay, regarded as one of the greatest archaeologist ever to live, concluded after thirty years of research “Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy... this author should be place along with the very greatest of historians.”(3) Nelson Glueck, a noted Jewish historian, states “...no archaeological discovery has ever controvert a biblical reference.” (3) As archeology has often set out to disprove the Bible they have continually been finding evidence that the New Testament documents have been accurate: from the Pilate inscription found in 1968 by an Italian archaeologist named Antonio Frova, the Erastus inscription, the Pool of Bethesda, and the coinage used in New Testament writings. Archeology has not disproved Biblical statements but verified the Bible’s accuracy.

Perhaps though, the most interesting discovery is the Nazareth decree found in 1878 on a slab of stone with a decree from Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54). The decree basically stated that no grave should be disturbed or bodies extracted or moved. Although this type decree was not uncommon, the penalty for violation is “the offender was to be sentenced to capital punishment on the charge of violation of sepulcher” Did Claudius having heard of the Christian doctrine of resurrection and Jesus’ empty tomb try to keep to reports as surfacing again.? This argument makes sense in light of the Jewish leaders claiming the body of Christ had been stolen by the apostles. (3)

Did Jesus exist and are the New Testament documents an accurate, reliable history? The only reasonable answer is yes. You may not believe that the New

Testament is the word of God, but the fact is: that Jesus existed and that the New Testament is a reliable history book, whether you decide to believe it or not.

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