

Jesus in Ancient Non-Christian Sources

by
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A frequent criticism that is raised against the historical defense of Christianity is that all the information we have on Jesus comes exclusively from the Gospels and that there are no ancient non-Christian works which affirm a historical Jesus. One of the underlying assumptions is that Christians authored the Gospels and their bias toward Christ makes their work untrustworthy. There are several reasons why we should not be so quick to dismiss the Gospels.

It is true that the writers of the Gospels were believers. However, this does not mean they were not capable of recording an accurate historical account. One must investigate the facts, not the bias of the writer. No person or historian can claim to be completely unbiased and neutral. However, the facts of history are not biased and can be investigated. Therefore, it is the historical evidence that should be studied and they are consistent with the Gospel accounts.

Second, the internal and external evidence reveal that the Gospels were written and circulated within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses. Some are written twenty to thirty years after the life of Christ. This is an important because the account of the Gospels were scrutinized by followers as well as enemies of Christianity. If there were fabrications and exaggerations, the enemies of Christianity could have easily discredited the message of the disciples.

Third, there are various lines of evidences such as the internal evidence, manuscript evidence, archaeology, and historical records that confirm the historical accuracy of the Gospels. Finally, the integrity of the Gospel writers is demonstrated in their inclusion of embarrassing details, preservation of the difficult sayings of Christ, and their attention to historical details.

Therefore, we can be confident that the Gospels are accurate historical works that record the life of Christ and should not be dismissed. Along with the Gospels there are indeed several ancient non-Christian sources that confirm the facts recorded in the Gospels.

Many of these writers were hostile to Christianity. Examples are seen in the way some tried to discredit Christianity or give it a negative label such as a “mischievous superstition.” Enemy attestation is powerful testimony in court. When your opponents verify your facts, this builds a strong case in your favor. We have several Roman and Jewish sources that affirm biblical events and characters.

Roman Sources

Cornelius Tacitus

Cornelius Tacitus was a Roman historian who wrote two major works, the *Annals* and the *Histories*. Tacitus refers to Christ in the *Annals*, which he wrote in 115 AD. In

this passage he records the great fire that occurred in Rome. Nero looking for a scapegoat placed the blame on the Christians. Tacitus wrote,

Consequently, to get rid of the report, 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 Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular. (Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44)

From this passage we learn several facts. First, Christians were hated by the community at large for their “abominations.” Second, Christians received their name from Christ (Christus in Latin). Third, Christ was a historical figure. Fourth, Christ died during the reign of Emperor Tiberius (14-37 AD). Fifth, Christ was put to death by the procurator Pontius Pilate. Sixth, Christ’s death ended the spread of Christianity for a short time. Seventh, Christianity originated in the land of Judea. Finally, Christianity spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire beginning in Judea and spreading even to Rome. These facts recorded by Tacitus affirm several facts mentioned in the Gospels and Acts.

Thallus

Thallus in 52 AD, wrote a history of the Eastern Mediterranean world from the Trojan War to his day. Although much of his work is lost, Julius Africanus writing in 221 AD quotes Thallus. Regarding the death of Christ Thallus wrote,

One the whole world there pressed a most fearful darkness; and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down. This darkness Thallus, in the third book of his *History*, calls, as appears to me without reason, an eclipse of the sun. (Julius Africanus, *Chronography* 18.1)

Thallus reveals several facts in this passage. First, the crucifixion account was known in the Mediterranean world. Second, darkness covered the land on the hour of Christ’s death. Third, an earthquake shook the city. Fourth unbelievers knew of the supernatural events surrounding the death of Christ and were offering a naturalistic explanation.

Pliny the Younger

Pliny was the governor of Bythnia in Asia Minor. In 112 AD, Pliny writes a letter to Emperor Trajan regarding the Christians. His province was experiencing financial difficulties because his economy depended on the religious festivities surrounding the pagan religions and temples. The spread of Christianity was hurting this industry and he was seeking a way to deal with the Christians. He wrote in his letter the following:

They (the Christians) were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food – but food of an ordinary and innocent kind. (Pliny the Younger, *Letter*, 10:96)

From this passage we learn several facts about early Christianity. First, the Christians worshipped Christ as God. This strikes a serious blow to skeptics who attempt to promote the idea that Christ was a man who was promoted to divine status by Christians in the fourth century AD at the Council of Nicea. Second, the Christians followed closely the ethical code taught by Christ. Third, the “food” Pliny refers to is probably the sacraments of communion which would show this meal was celebrated by the Christians.

Gaius Seutonius Tranquillas

Seutonius was the chief secretary to Emperor Hadrian (117-138 AD). Seutonius first mentions the Christians when he refers to a series of riots that broke out in Rome in 49 AD during the reign of Emperor Claudius (41- 54 AD). He wrote, “Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from the city.” (Seutonius, *Life of Claudius*, 25.4)

In a second reference, he writes regarding Nero’s persecution of the Christians. “After the great fire at Rome . . . Punishments were also inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief.” (Seutonius, *Life of Nero*, 16)

From these two brief references we learn the following. First, the Jews were expelled from Rome during the reign of Claudius (which coincides with Acts 18:2). Second, Christ was the reason for the Jewish riots. Christians referred to believers who followed Christ.

Lucian

Lucian was a second century Greek satirist. He spoke very negatively of Christians accusing them of being gullible and believing in a charlatan. He wrote,

The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day – the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account. . . . You see, these misguided creatures start with the general conviction that they are immortal for all time, which explains the contempt of death and voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them; and then it was impressed on them by their original law giver that they are all brothers, from the moment that 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, with the result that they despise all worldly goods alike, regarding them merely a common property.

From this passage we learn the following. First, Jesus was known to have lived as a historical person. Second, Jesus was worshiped by the Christians. Third, Christians believed in eternal life. Fourth, Christians were willing to die for what they believed about Christ. Fifth, Jesus was crucified. Sixth, Christians lived according to the teachings of Christ. Finally, Christians did not mix their faith with the gods of Greece. This goes against skeptics who promote the idea that Christians borrowed their beliefs from Greek mythology.

Mara Bar-Serapion

Mara Bar-Serapion was a Syrian who wrote a letter to his son encouraging him to follow the courageous example of wise men who courageously died for the truth they proclaimed. Mara Bar-Serapion's letter was written some time between the first to third centuries AD. It reads as follows:

What advantage did the Athenians gain from putting Socrates to death? Famine and plague came upon them as a judgment for their crime. What advantage did the men of Samos gain from burning Pythagoras? In a moment their land was covered with sand. What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King? It was just after that that their kingdom was abolished. God justly avenged these three wise men: the Athenians died of hunger; the Samians were overwhelmed by the sea; the Jews, ruined and driven from their land, live in complete dispersion. But Socrates did not die for good; he lived on in the statue of Hera. Nor did the wise King die for good; he lived on in the teaching which he had given.¹

From this passage we learn the following. First, Jesus was a historical figure. Second, Jesus was considered by many to be a wise and virtuous man. Third, the Jews unjustly killed Jesus. Fourth, Christ's teachings were followed and spread by His followers.

Celsus

Celsus was a Roman Philosopher who wrote a work in 177 AD, criticizing the Christians in what he saw as a contradiction of monotheism. He scoffed at Christians who were worshipping a man as God.

“Now if the Christians worshipped only one God they might have reason on their side. But as a matter of fact they worship a man who appeared only recently. They do not consider what they are doing a breach of monotheism; rather they think it perfectly consistent to worship the great God and to worship his servant as God. And their worship of this Jesus is the more outrageous because they refuse to listen to any talk about God, the father of all, unless it includes some reference to Jesus: Tell them that Jesus, the author of the Christian insurrection, was not his son, and they will not listen to you. And

¹ British Museum, Syriac ms, add. 14, 658; cited in Gary Habbermas, *The Historical Jesus*, (Joplin, MO.: College Press Publishing 1996), 200.

when they call him Son of God, they are not really paying homage to God, rather they are attempting to exalt Jesus to the heights.²

Although Celsus clearly misunderstood Christian teachings, from the work of Celsus we learn several things. First, Christians were monotheists, like the Jews polytheism was rejected. Second, the Christians worshipped Jesus as God. Here is evidence of the doctrine of the Trinity, one God revealed in three persons. In this passage the Holy Spirit is not mentioned but the Son, the second member of the Trinity, is worshipped as equal in nature to the Father. Third, Christians held very strongly to the belief in the deity of Christ.

Jewish Sources

Flavius Josephus (37-97 AD)

Josephus was a member of the Pharisees who became a historian for the Roman Empire after the Roman and Jewish war. His major work the *Antiquities* was written between 90-95 AD. He makes two references to Jesus in his work. He first mentions Christ in reference to James.

... he assembled the Sanhedrin of the judges and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called the Christ, whose name was James, and some others and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned. (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 20.9.1)

His second reference to Jesus reads as follows:

Now there was about that 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 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 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. (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.3.3)

There are portions of this passage that are disputed by historians that are indicated by the italics. The majority of this passage is agreed by many to be authentic. The controversy among historians is whether three phrases were later Christian interpolations. Professor Schlomo Pines of Hebrew University did a study on an Arabic manuscript of this passage. He believed the Arabic version was more accurate to the original text. He

² Celsus, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 116, quoted in Ed Komoszewski, James Sawyer, and Dan Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Kregel Publications, 2006), 313.

proposed this as a possible reading that most likely reflects the original wording of this passage on Jesus.³

At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. 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. But those who became his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and there he was alive; accordingly he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.

Even if we remove the disputed portions, Josephus still confirms several key facts regarding the life of Christ. First, James was the brother of Jesus. Second, the Jewish leaders stoned James. Third, Jesus was a virtuous man. Fourth, Jesus had many disciples from the Jews and the Gentiles. Fifth, Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate. Sixth, Jesus' disciples believed He had appeared to them resurrected. Finally, Jesus was believed by many to be the Messiah.

It is also significant to note that in surrounding chapters, Josephus also confirms other figures mentioned in the Bible such as the Herods, the emperors Augustus, Tiberius, and Claudius. He also mentions the high priestly families of Caiaphas, Ananias, and Annas. He also mentions events such as Gamiliel's mention Judas the Galilean's uprising in Acts 5:37 (*Antiquities* 18:1.6), the famine mentioned in Acts 11:28 which occurred in the days of Claudius, (*Antiquities* 17), the sudden death of Agrippa in Acts 12 (*Antiquities* 19), and the death of John the Baptist (*Antiquities* 18). Numerous facts mentioned in the Gospels and Acts are mentioned in the work of Josephus.

Talmud

The Jewish Talmud records the oral traditions of the Jews. This compilation began in the first century AD and was completed by 200 AD. In Sanhedrin 43, a reference is made of Christ.

One the eve of the Passover, Yeshu (Jesus) 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 has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Any one 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.

From this passage we learn several facts. First, Jesus was killed ("hanged" is an alternate expression referring to crucifixion) on the eve of the Passover. Second, Jesus was accused of apostasy. Finally, Jesus gathered a significant following is Jews.

³ James Charlesworth, *Jesus Within Judaism*, 95; cited in Gary Habbermas, *The Historical Jesus*, (Joplin, MO.: College Press Publishing 1996), 193-194.

Conclusion

These non-Christian historical works do not present any new information but corroborate events and characters mentioned in the Gospels and Acts. Second, the facts these writers present are consistent with the Gospels. They do not present facts that contradict any major teaching or events in the Gospels. Third, these writings tell us that Jesus was a historical figure who lived a very unique life. These ancient non-Christian works, along with other historical evidences such as archaeology and manuscript evidence, builds a strong case for the historical reliability of the Gospels.