

Lesson 6: Jesus Christ—Historical Evidence

I. Introduction

- A) There have been radical claims through the years that explicitly state Jesus never existed:
1. Philosopher Bertrand Russell in his essay “Why I am not a Christian” makes the following statement: “Historically it is quite doubtful whether Christ existed at all, and if He did, we do not know anything about him.”
 2. A Marxist political candidate made the following claim in her opening statements at a debate with Josh McDowell: “Historians today have fairly well dismissed Jesus as being historical.”
- B) These two “deep thinkers,” and others like them (there aren't many), couldn't be farther from the truth. Even the American Revolutionary Thomas Paine, who held Christianity in contempt, had this to say: “[Jesus Christ] was a virtuous and an amiable man. The morality that he preached and practiced was of the most benevolent kind...” Paine shrugs off Jesus' claim to deity as mythological, but he does not doubt that Jesus lived.
- C) In fact, there is so much extra-biblical evidence for Jesus having walked the earth that you would be hard pressed to find a competent historian that does not believe Jesus was real. F.F. Bruce, who is the Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester, had this to say: “Some writers may toy with the fancy of a 'Christ-myth,' but they do not do so on the grounds of historical evidence. The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar. It is not historians who propagate the 'Christ-myth' theories.”
1. Howard Clark Kee, professor emeritus at Boston University, makes the following conclusions from the sources outside the New Testament: “The result of the examination of the sources outside the New Testament that bear directly or indirectly on our knowledge of Jesus is to confirm his historical existence, his unusual powers, the devotion of his followers, the continued existence of the movement after his death at the hands of [Pilate] in Jerusalem, and the penetration of Christianity into the upper strata of society in Rome itself by the later first century.”
 2. After using 20,000 words to describe Jesus in the Encyclopedia Britannica (1974 edition)--more words than used for Aristotle, Cicero, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, or Napoleon Bonaparte—the author concludes thus: “These independent accounts prove that in ancient times even the opponents of Christianity never doubted the historicity of Jesus, which was disputed for the first time and on inadequate grounds by several authors at the end of the 18th, during the 19th, and at the beginning of the 20th centuries.”
- D) In this lesson, then, we'll examine part of a large body of evidence from secular and Jewish sources placed as closely to the time of Jesus as we can. As usual, this will just be a sampling of the evidence, though also the strongest.

II. Early Secular Sources

- A) These references to Jesus are powerful for a couple of reasons. First, they tend to come from Roman historians, who are well regarded as thorough and unbiased in terms of recording historical events as they happened, sans “spin.” Second, though they lack a lot of the bias we might encounter today, they were generally antagonistic toward Christianity—recall the sport of feeding Christians to the lions that happened in the Roman Coliseum. Antagonistic sources are powerful pieces of evidence.
- B) Cornelius Tacitus (circa A.D. 55-120) was a Roman historian who lived through six emperors. He was a senator, a consul and ultimately a Governor in Asia. Scholars seem to

agree that, in general, Tacitus was a very reliable historian who was trustworthy, critical of his sources and usually accurate. The following excerpt is an independent recounting of the fact that Jesus lived, that Judea was the primary region from which Christianity spread, and of the fact that Jesus died at the hand of Pontius Pilate.

III. In his book *Annals*, Tacitus mentions the death of Christ and Christians being in Rome, while discussing Nero's reign: "But not all the relief that could come from man, not all the bounties that the prince could bestow, nor all the atonements which could be presented to the gods, availed to relieve Nero from the infamy of being believed to have ordered the conflagration, the fire of Rome. Hence to suppress the rumor, he falsely charged with the guilt, and punished with the most exquisite tortures, the persons commonly called Christians, who were hated for their enormities. Christus [Christ, JDS], the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius: but the pernicious superstition, repressed for a time, broke out again, not only through Judea, where the mischief originated, but through the city of Rome also."

1. The "pernicious superstition" may be an allusion to Christ's resurrection from the dead, and we'll see a similar statement in other historians' words.

B) Lucian of Samosata was a Greek satirist from the latter part of the second century. He spoke scornfully of Christ and of Christians, never assuming or arguing that Christ was not real.

1. Lucian said in his book *The Death of Peregrine*: "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 were 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 as mere common property."

C) Suetonius was another Roman historian who was also a court official under Hadrian and an annalist of the Imperial House.

1. In his book *Life of Claudius*, Suetonius says: "As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus [another variation of Christ, JDS], [Claudius] expelled them from Rome." Note that Acts 18:2 says the same thing!

2. In another of his books, *Lives of the Caesars*, he says: "Punishment by Nero was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition." This is not only another reference to Nero implicating Christians in the fire of Rome, but also another reference to this superstition. Two independent sources now appear to have referenced early Christian belief in the resurrection of Christ. That portion of our faith, then, did not simply appear in the Bible during its transmission through the ages. Belief in the resurrection was a core belief for early Christians and was prominent enough to be noticed by at least two Roman—antagonistic—historians. That is significant!

D) Pliny the Younger was Governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor and is famous for a large number of letters—both personal and professional—that he published and others published after his death. One letter he wrote to the Emperor Trajan tells of the persecution of Christians he carried out and also gives details into some of their worship habits. Note also two more references to a superstition. What else could it be, other than the belief in Christ's resurrection?

1. *It is a rule, Sir, which I inviolably observe, to refer myself to you in all my doubts; for who is more capable of guiding my uncertainty or informing my ignorance? Having*

never been present at any trials of the Christians, I am unacquainted with the method and limits to be observed either in examining or punishing them. Whether any difference is to be made on account of age, or no distinction allowed between the youngest and the adult; whether repentance admits to a pardon, or if a man has been once a Christian it avails him nothing to recant; whether the mere profession of Christianity, albeit without crimes, or only the crimes associated therewith are punishable in all these points I am greatly doubtful. In the meanwhile, the method I have observed towards those who have been denounced to me as Christians is this: I interrogated them whether they were Christians; if they confessed it I repeated the question twice again, adding the threat of capital punishment; if they still persevered, I ordered them to be executed. For whatever the nature of their creed might be, I could at least feel no doubt that contumacy and inflexible obstinacy deserved chastisement. There were others also possessed with the same infatuation, but being citizens of Rome, I directed them to be carried thither. These accusations spread (as is usually the case) from the mere fact of the matter being investigated and several forms of the mischief came to light. A placard was put up, without any signature, accusing a large number of persons by name. Those who denied they were, or had ever been, Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the Gods, and offered adoration, with wine and frankincense, to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for that purpose, together with those of the Gods, and who finally cursed Christ none of which acts, it is said, those who are really Christians can be forced into performing these I thought it proper to discharge. Others who were named by that informer at first confessed themselves Christians, and then denied it; true, they had been of that persuasion but they had quitted it, some three years, others many years, and a few as much as twenty-five years ago. They all worshipped your statue and the images of the Gods, and cursed Christ. **They affirmed, however, the whole of their guilt, or their error, was, that they 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.** Even this practice, however, they had abandoned after the publication of my edict, by which, according to your orders, I had forbidden political associations. I judged it so much the more necessary to extract the real truth, with the assistance of torture, from two female slaves, who were styled deaconesses: **but I could discover nothing more than depraved and excessive superstition.** I therefore adjourned the proceedings, and betook myself at once to your counsel. For the matter seemed to me well worth referring to you, especially considering the numbers endangered. Persons of all ranks and ages, and of both sexes are, and will be, involved in the prosecution. **For this contagious superstition is not confined to the cities only, but has spread through the villages and rural districts;** it seems possible, however, to check and cure it. 'Tis certain at least that the temples, which had been almost deserted, begin now to be frequented; and the sacred festivals, after a long intermission, are again revived; while there is a general demand for sacrificial animals, which for some time past have met with but few purchasers. From hence it is easy to imagine what multitudes may be reclaimed from this error, if a door be left open to repentance.

IV. Early Jewish Sources

A) There are references to Christ's crucifixion in the Babylonian Talmud. It reads:

1. "It has been taught: On the eve of Passover they hanged Yeshu. And an announcer

went out, in front of him, for forty days (saying): 'He is going to be stoned, because he practiced sorcery [a reference to Jesus' miracles, JDS] and enticed and led Israel astray. Anyone who knows anything in his favor, let him come and plead in his behalf.' But, not having found anything in his favor, they hanged him on the eve of Passover."

2. Another version of this text reads "Yeshu the Nazarene," which, given that Yeshu translates through Greek to English as Jesus, makes the connection to Jesus even stronger. Clearly, the hanging referred to is the crucifixion, as Paul did in Galatians 3:13 (which itself is a further explanation of Deuteronomy 21:23).
 3. What's more, a comment in the Jewish text from the 3rd century reads: "*Would you believe that any defence would have been so zealously sought for him? He was a deceiver, and the All-merciful says 'You shall not spare him, neither shall you conceal him.'* It was different with Jesus, for he was near to the kingship." It is not obvious what "near to the kingship" means, but it may be speaking of His descent from King David.
- B) There are also references to Christ having disciples in the Babylonian Talmud. A passage asserts that "Yeshu had five disciples—Mattai, Nakkai, Netzer, Buni, and Todah." Other than Mattai perhaps being a reference to Matthew, there is no way of knowing who the other names refer to. The number of disciples is a bit troubling, but other Rabbis mentioned in the Talmud also had five disciples, so it may be the explanation for the specific number (disciple envy??). One thing is clear, however. Rabbinical tradition maintains that Jesus (Yeshu) had disciples. That's hard to swallow if, in fact, Jesus were not a real person. Jews would love to dismiss Him as a fable, but they can't.
- C) There are also attempts to discount the virgin birth in the Talmud.
1. One passage states: "*R. Shimeon ben Azzai said [concerning Jesus]: 'I found a genealogical roll in Jerusalem wherein was recorded, Such-an-one is a bastard of an adulteress.'*"
 2. Another passage states: "*His mother was Miriam [an etymological relative to Mary—JDS], a women's hairdresser. As they say...this one strayed from her husband"*
 3. Still another says that Mary "*who was a descendant of princes and governors, played the harlot with carpenters.*" Clearly Luke's lineage of Christ shows Mary having descended from royalty and the carpenters is an obvious reference to Joseph.
 4. Again, if Jesus were not a real person, there would be no need to try to explain the circumstances of his birth, whether miraculous or otherwise.
- D) We have already introduced one passage in the works of Josephus, but there are some important things to understand about that passage. There is also another passage in his works that we can read for ourselves.
1. That passage that we read in an earlier class states: "*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 among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to the 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.*" There is considerable debate concerning whether later Christian scribes perhaps embellished this passage—there are things written that an orthodox Jew (Josephus was not a Christian as far as we can tell) simply would not say (least of all that Jesus was the Christ, as we'll see in the next passage). Again, though, Josephus at least believed that Jesus was real and clearly references a principal figure in the

crucifixion, Pilate.

2. The second passage is not controversial and reads more like what an orthodox Jew would write: “...so he assembled a council of judges, and brought before it the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ, whose name was James, together with some others, and having accused them as lawbreakers, he delivered them over to be stoned.”
- E) These are only a few of the Jewish sources that refer to Jesus. It is simply inconceivable that Jews would perpetuate the myth of a Christ-imposter if he had never existed.