

The Case For Jesus

As we discussed in the previous lesson, Christianity is based completely on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Unlike some other religions, it is not about “inner peace” or the search for nirvana. In order for the gospel to be true, Jesus has to have been a real, historical figure who actually lived, who died on the cross, and who was then raised back to life. If those things did not happen – if Jesus is not a historical fact – then Christianity falls apart and is powerless to save anyone. It is not enough for Jesus to be an inspiring story or an uplifting myth; in order for anyone to be saved, the Bible's story of Jesus has to be *true*. This is how one person put it:

“True Christianity, the Christianity of the New Testament documents, is absolutely dependent upon history. At the heart of New Testament faith is the assertion that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor. 5:19). The incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as a real event in time and space, i.e., as historical realities, are the indispensable foundations of Christian faith. To my mind, then, Christianity is best defined as the recitation of, the celebration of, and the participation in God's acts in history, which as the New Testament writings emphasize have found their culmination in Jesus Christ.” (Hagner, *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, p73-74)

The gospel depends upon the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Everything falls apart if Jesus never existed, or if He was not crucified, or if He was not God, or if He never rose from the dead. In other words, if the Bible's account of Jesus Christ is not true then there is no gospel.

So what does history have to say about Jesus? We know that the Bible has a great deal to say about Him, but is there any evidence *outside* of the Bible to indicate that Jesus was a real, historical figure?

The answer is a resounding yes. Even secular historians will admit that Jesus really existed, and that his existence is every bit as certain as the existence of men such as Julius Caesar:

“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.” (Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable*, p72, 119)

Now, this is not to say that all historians actually believe that Jesus was God. What it does mean is that the historical existence of Jesus Christ is beyond dispute. The historical record is clear:

“No serious scholar has ventured to postulate the non-historicity of Jesus.” (Betz, *What Do We Know About Jesus*, p9)

The account of Jesus that people are most familiar with is the one found in the Scriptures. However, the Bible is not the only historical document that talks about Jesus. There are other accounts of Jesus that can be found in the historical record, and in this lesson we are going to take a look at a number of them.

The Historical Record

The Roman historian **Cornelius Tacitus** (who lived from AD 55 – 120) has been called the greatest historian of ancient Rome. He lived during the reigns of more than a half-dozen emperors, and he is highly respected for his integrity (Habermas, VHCELJ, 87). When Tacitus wrote about Emperor Nero, he alluded to the death of Christ and to the existence of Christians at Rome:

“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, 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.” (Annals XV. 44)

Tacitus not only testifies that Christ actually existed, but that He was put to death by Pontius Pilate. This is very valuable information, for it speaks against those who claim that Christ was not a real person. Tacitus also refers to a “pernicious superstition”, which is a reference to the Christian belief that Christ rose from the dead. He then goes on to say that Christians were persecuted (the superstition was “repressed for a time”), but that the religion flourished in the face of persecution. All of this agrees with the account of the early church that we find in the book of Acts. Tacitus even mentions the fact that this “superstition” made its way to Rome – which agrees with what we find in the New Testament.

Another person who mentioned Christ is **Lucian of Samosata**, who was a Greek satirist of the latter half of the 2nd century. Although Lucian despised Christians, he never argued that Christ did not exist:

“The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day – the distinguishing 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 lawgiver 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 as common property.” (Lucian, *The Death of Peregrine*, 11-13)

Not only does Lucian agree that Christ really existed, but he even testifies that Christ was crucified. These things are taken as historical facts. Lucian does not dispute them or try to argue that

there never was such a person as Christ.

In Acts 18:2, Luke records the fact that Claudius expelled all of the Jews from Rome. This event was corroborated by the Roman historian **Suetonius**, who also mentions the person of Christ:

“Suetonius was a Roman historian and a court official under Hadrian and an annalist of the imperial house. In his Life of Claudius (25.4) he said 'As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus [another spelling of Christus], he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome.'”

But that's not all. In Mark 15:33 we are told that when Christ was crucified, there was darkness over the land from the sixth hour to the ninth hour. If that event really happened then you would expect to find some mention of it in the historical record – and that is exactly what we *do* find. The ancient historian **Thallus** mentions this period of darkness, and tries to claim that it was just a three-hour-long eclipse:

“One of the first secular writers who mentions Christ is Thallus. Dated perhaps around AD 52, Thallus “wrote a history of the Eastern Mediterranean world from the Trojan War to his own time” (Habermas, VHCELJ, 93). Unfortunately, his writing now exists only in fragments that have been cited by other writers. One such writer is Julius Africanus, a Christian who penned his work around AD 221. One interesting passage relates to a comment made by Thallus about the darkness that enveloped the land during the late afternoon hours when Jesus died on the cross. As Africanus reports: 'Thallus, in the third book of his histories, explains away the darkness as an eclipse of the sun – unreasonably, as it seems to me (unreasonably, of course, because a solar eclipse could not take place at the time of the full moon, and it was at the season of the Paschal full moon that Christ died)’” (Julius Africanus, Chronography, 18.1)

The problem with Thallus' argument is that, as Julius points out, a solar eclipse *cannot* take place during a full moon. Solar eclipses can only happen when the moon is between the Sun and the Earth, which is called a *new moon*. A full moon occurs when the moon is *opposite* the sun. Thallus' explanation of this event is ridiculous and obviously wrong.

What's really significant is that this period of darkness that *just happened* to coincide with the crucifixion of Christ was well-known, and the ancient world found themselves struggling to explain it:

“This reference shows that the Gospel account of the darkness that fell upon the land during Christ's crucifixion was well known and required a naturalistic explanation from non-Christians. Thallus did not doubt that Jesus had been crucified and that an unusual event had occurred in nature that required an explanation. What occupied his mind was the task of coming up with a different interpretation. The basic facts were not called into question.” (Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable*, p113)

In other words, the reality of Christ was not questioned – nor was the fact of His crucifixion, or the fact of the period of darkness. No one during that era tried to argue that it was all just a myth or a fairy tale.

Another ancient person who record this period of darkness was **Phlegon**:

“Another secular authority, Phlegon, wrote a history called *Chronicles*. While this work has been lost, Julius Africanus preserved a small fragment of it in his writing. Like Thallus, Phlegon confirms that darkness came upon the earth at Jesus' crucifixion, and he, too, explains it as the result of a solar eclipse: 'During the time of Tiberius Caesar an eclipse of the sun occurred during the full moon'" (Africanus, *Chronography*, 18.1)

Origen mentioned it as well:

“Aside from Afircanus, Phlegon's reference to this event is also mentioned by the third-century Christian apologist Origen (*Contra Celsum*, 2.14, 33, 59) and the sixth-century writer Philopoh (*De. Opif. Mund.* II 21)” (McDowell/Wilson, *He Walked Among Us*, p36)

As you can see, this strange period of darkness was every bit as puzzling to the ancient world as one might expect.

The fame of Jesus can be seen in a letter that was written sometime after AD 70 by **Mara Bar-Serapion**. This man was a Syrian, and he wrote a letter from prison to his son to encourage him to pursue wisdom. In his letter he compared Jesus to the philosophers Socrates and Pythagoras:

“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 teaching of Plato. Pythagoras 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.” (Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable*, p114)

Now, this man was definitely not a Christian. Not only did he put Jesus on the same level as Socrates and Pythagoras, but he also thought that Christ lived on through His teachings instead of *through His bodily resurrection*. Nevertheless, this man did not question the fact that Christ actually lived. He believed that Jesus was every bit as real as Socrates and Pythagoras.

There are also Jewish records that testify to the reality of Christ. The **Babylonian Talmud** is a set of documents that were collected during the 3rd to the 5th centuries (AD). The Talmud records the fact that Jesus was executed for “sorcery” and for “leading Israel astray”. It even records the fact that He was killed on the eve of the Passover:

“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 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." (Sanhedrin 43a, cf. *t. Sanh.* 10:11; *y. Sanh.* 7.12; *Tg. Esther* 7:9).

"Yeschu" translates through Greek to English as "Jesus". Some other versions of this passage refer to him as being a Nazarene, which makes the connection even stronger. It's also worth noting that the word "hanged" is another way to refer to crucifixion:

Luke 23:39: "And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us."

Galatians 3:13: "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree:"

The fact that the Talmud states that the crucifixion occurred "on the eve of Passover" agrees with the Biblical account:

John 19:14: "And it was the preparation of the passover, and about the sixth hour: and he saith unto the Jews, Behold your King!"

The Talmud affirms the fact that Jesus actually lived, that the Jewish authorities were involved in His sentencing, and that He was crucified on the eve of the Passover. It even refers to the miracles of Christ by claiming that He was a sorcerer, which meant they accused Him of using demonic power to do His work. That happens to be exactly the response that the Bible records:

Mark 3:22: "And the scribes which came down from Jerusalem said, He hath Beelzebub, and by the prince of the devils casteth he out devils."

The Bible says that the Jewish leaders accused Jesus of using demonic power to work miracles, and the Talmud records exactly the same thing. Once again we find that the historical record agrees with the Biblical account.

Interestingly, the Babylonian Talmud also attempts to debunk the virgin birth of Christ:

...the Babylonian Talmud states, "R. Shimeon ben Azzi said [concerning Jesus]: 'I found a genealogical roll in Jerusalem wherein was recorded, Such-an-one is a bastard of an adulteress'" (b.Yebamoth 49a; m. Yebam. 4:13). In yet another passage we find, "His mother was Miriam, a women's hairdresser. As they say ... 'this one strayed from her husband'" (b.Sabb. 104b). In still another passage we are told that Mary, "who was the descendant of princes and governors, played the harlot with carpenters" (b. Sanh. 106a).

Here we find the Jewish authorities trying to explain away the obvious miracle of the virgin birth of Christ. The reference to "princes and governors" refers to the lineage of Mary, who was a descendant of King David. The mention of "carpenters" refers to Joseph, who was a carpenter. The Jews are saying that since Joseph was not Christ's father, Mary must have committed adultery. We find the same argument being made by the Pharisees in the Bible:

John 8:41b: “. . . Then said they to him, We be not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God.”

The fact that the Talmud would even bother to offer this false argument must mean that the virgin birth of Christ was public knowledge, and the Jewish authorities felt they had to make some kind of response. It's worth noting that the Talmud does *not* try to argue that Jesus never existed at all.

Another person who testified about Jesus was **Clement**, who was the bishop of Rome during the end of the first century. In order to settle a dispute at Corinth he wrote a letter called *Corinthians*. In that letter, he said:

“The Apostles received the Gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was sent forth from God. So then Christ is from God, and the Apostles are from Christ. Both therefore came of the will of God in the appointed order. Having therefore received a charge, and having been fully assured through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and confirmed in the word of God with full assurance of the Holy Ghost, they went forth with the glad tidings that the kingdom of God should come. So preaching everywhere in country and town, they appointed their first-fruits, when they had proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons unto them that should believe.” (*Corinthians*, 42)

This passage demonstrates that the gospel came from Jesus Christ, who appointed and sent out the apostles. The apostles then went all over the world to preach the gospel and set up churches. This agrees with the account of the early Church that we find in the book of Acts.

Ignatius (AD 35 – AD 107), the bishop of Antioch and a disciple of Peter, Paul, and John, also testified to the existence of Christ. While on the way to be executed in Rome he wrote seven letters. Here are some of the things that he had to say about Jesus:

“Jesus Christ who was of the race of David, who was the Son of Mary, who was truly born and ate and drank, was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was truly crucified and died in the sight of those in heaven and on earth and those under the earth; who moreover was truly raised from the dead, His Father having raised Him, who in the like fashion will so raise us also who believe on Him . . .” (*Trallians*, 9)

“He is truly of the race of David according to the flesh, but Son of God by the Divine will and power, truly born of a virgin and baptized by John that all righteousness might be fulfilled by Him, truly nailed up in the flesh for our sakes under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch (of which fruit are we – that is, of His most blessed passion); that He might set up an ensign unto all ages through His resurrection.” (*Smyrneans*, 1)

“Be ye fully persuaded concerning the birth and the passion and the resurrection, which took place in the time of the governorship of Pontius Pilate; for these things were truly and certainly done by Jesus Christ our hope.” (*Magnesians*, 11)

Ignatius was obviously convinced that Jesus was a real person, who was born of a virgin,

sentenced to death by Pontius Pilate, crucified, and then raised from the dead. He had no doubts about the reality of Jesus Christ – and he lived during the lifetime of the apostles themselves.

Another disciple of the apostles was **Quadratus**, who was the bishop of Athens. Quadratus (who died in AD 129) was one of the earliest apologists. Although his defense of the faith has been lost, the Church historian Eusebius (AD 260 - 340) preserved all that remains of Quadratus's defense of the faith to the Roman Emperor Hadrian (c. AD 125):

“The deeds of our Savior were always before you, for they were true miracles; those that were healed, those that were raised from the dead, who were seen, not only when healed and when raised, but were always present. They remained living a long time, not only whilst our Lord was on earth, but likewise when he had left the earth. So that some of them have also lived to our own times.” (Eusebius, IV:III).

As you can see, Quadratus affirms the actual existence of Jesus through the historicity of His miracles. In his argument Quadratus makes a number of key points:

“(1) The facticity of Jesus' miracles could be checked by interested persons, since they were done publicly. With regard to the actual types of miracles, (2) some were healed and (3) some were raised from the dead. (4) There were eyewitnesses of these miracles at the time they occurred. (5) Many of those healed or raised were still alive when Jesus 'left the earth' and some were reportedly still alive in Quadratus' own time.” (Habermas, *The Verdict of History*, p144).

This testifies to the fact that the miracles of Jesus were widely known, that there were many eyewitnesses, and that it was easily possible to confirm the miraculous accounts – not only by talking with people who had seen them, but by talking to the people who had been involved.

As you can see, there is actually quite a bit of evidence in the historical record that affirms the existence of Jesus. The case for the existence of Jesus is quite solid:

“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 the Roman governor in Jerusalem, and the penetration of Christianity into the upper strata of society in Rome itself by the later first century.” (Kee, *What Can We Know About Jesus?*, p19)

The Bible's account of the life of Christ is not some sort of myth that cannot be verified. In fact, the historical record corroborates virtually all of the key points of the life of Christ:

“The Non-Christian sources establish beyond reasonable doubt the following minimum: (1) Jesus was truly a historical person . . . (2) Jesus lived in Palestine in the first century of our era. (3) The Jewish leadership was involved in the death of Jesus. (4) Jesus was crucified by the Romans under the governorship of Pontius Pilate. (5) Jesus' ministry was associated with wonder/sorcery.” (Stein, *Jesus the Messiah: A Survey of the Life of Christ*, p49)

“Even if we did not have the New Testament of Christian writings, we would be able to conclude from such non-Christian writings as Josephus, the Talmud, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger that: (1) Jesus was a Jewish teacher; (2) many people believed that he performed healings and exorcisms; (3) he was rejected by the Jewish leaders; (4) he was crucified under Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius; (5) despite this shameful death, his followers, who believed that he was still alive, spread beyond Palestine so that there were multitudes of them in Rome by AD 64; (6) all kinds of people from the cities and countryside – men and women, slave and free – worshiped him as God by the beginning of the second century.” (Yamauchi, *Jesus Under Fire*, 221, 222)

The bottom line is that we have many good reasons to believe that Jesus actually existed. He is not just a myth or a legend; He is a true part of history.