

Skeptics' Corner: What evidence is there that Christianity is True?

Seekers and Skeptics alike see movies such as "The Passion of the Christ", and most recently, "The Da Vinci Code". These two grand productions depict distinct viewpoints of Jesus. Who is Jesus? Did those events about Jesus' life, and what happened in the early centuries among Christ's followers really happen the way they are portrayed in the movie? Are the events of Jesus' life historical, or just a collection of myths and fables made up years after Jesus was dead and gone? And can the Bible itself, the primary source of record for the life and ministry of Jesus, be trusted? Below is a summary of evidence to investigate two claims of Christianity:

1) The Bible can be trusted as an authentic, reliable historical document

2) There are numerous ancient sources outside the biblical document that say much about life, ministry and impact of Jesus of Nazareth

1. The Trustworthiness Of The New Testament Documents

- A. The New Testament (NT) has better manuscript evidence than any other ancient book
 - 1. There are more than 5,000 NT manuscripts and portions of manuscripts.
 - 2. By contrast, most ancient classical works have less than 20 manuscripts.
 - 3. The dates of the NT manuscripts are close to the original writings. For example, there is a gospel fragment of John found in Egypt that dates from only about 25 years from the original autograph. Moreover, most of the New Testament—the "Chester Beatty Papyri"—dates from 100-150 years from the originals. By contrast, the earliest manuscripts found of classical works date from 700-1400 years from the originals.
 - 4. None of the New Testament is lost or missing. By contrast, 107 of Livy's 142 books of history have been lost; and about one half of Tacitus' 30 books of *Annals and Histories* are missing.

2. The Gospel Accounts Of Jesus Are Based On Eyewitness Testimony

- A. The apostle Matthew is often taken by numerous critical scholars as the author or major source behind the first gospel.
- B. It is usually recognized that the apostle Peter is the major source for Mark's gospel.
- C. Luke's authorship of the third gospel and Acts is well-supported, and his companionship with the apostle Paul and reliance on eyewitnesses is well-documented.
- D. John's gospel, which used to be considered the most unreliable of the 4, once again has been recognized by many critical scholars as based on John's eyewitness testimony.

3. The Gospels are very close from the time of writing to the occurrence of the events they record:

Three out of four are dated to within one generation to Jesus' life, and John's gospel to within 70 years of Jesus' life. On the basis of accepted principles of textual and historical analysis, the Gospel records are found to be trustworthy

historical documents—primary source evidence concerning the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

4. The Gospels Are Trustworthy Sources.

- A. These Christian authors were careful to preserve traditional material.
- B. The Gospels were eyewitness accounts, or were close to eyewitness sources.
- C. The picture of Jesus presented in the four Gospels is the same.
- D. The Gospels and Acts exhibit a specific interest in reporting historical facts, not mythology.
- E. Numerous ancient works exhibit similar intentions and methodologies as that of the NT authors, and yet these works are well-accepted as historical facts.
- F. The Gospels are much closer to the events they describe than numerous events recorded in ancient history.
- G. New Testament portions such as Acts have been confirmed by external tests of historicity.
- H. Older attempts to date the gospels later (e.g. into the 2nd century) are no longer well-received by critical scholars. The facts disprove them.
- I. The Gospels were recognized as inspired books almost immediately after having been written.
 - 1. I Timothy 5:18 quotes Luke 10:7 and refers to it as “Scripture”.
 - 2. Clement of Rome (95 A.D.) speaks of the “Gospel” and quotes portions from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Clement refers to them as the words of Jesus.
 - 3. Ignatius and Placard (115 A.D.) refer to verses in the synoptic gospels as the words of Christ.
 - 4. The Didache (late first or early second century A.D.) refers to the “Gospels” twice and quotes portions of all three synoptic gospels each time.
 - 5. Papias’ fragments assert that the gospels of Matthew, Mark and John were all based on eyewitness testimony.
- J. Paul’s epistles were also recognized as inspired Scripture almost immediately after being written.
 - 1. 2 Peter 3:15-16 calls Paul’s epistles “Scripture.”
 - 2. Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Placard all refer to Paul’s writings as inspired.

5. The Historicity Of Jesus

1. Numerous pre- and extra-biblical sources record much ancient testimony concerning Jesus within 125 years after Jesus’ death.

- A. Secular historians, government officials, religious records, etc. report many details about Jesus from non-Christian viewpoints.
 - 1. **Tacitus, a Roman historian (ca. 55-120 A.D.)** who lived through the reigns of over half a dozen Roman emperors, has been called the “greatest historian” of ancient Rome. Tacitus recorded at least one reference to Christ, found in his *Annals*.
 - a. *“Christ’s, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius [14-37 A.D.] at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilates, and a most*

mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, broke out not only in Judea, the first source of evil, but even in Rome..."

- b. A second reference to Christ was found in his *Histories*. Sluices Severs preserved information that Tacitus wrote of the burning of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. The Christians are mentioned as a group connected with these events. (Chronicles 2:30.6)

2. **Seutonius, another Roman historian, makes a reference to Jesus in his writings**

- a. *"Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Christ's, he expelled them from the city."* A wave of riots broke out in a large Jewish community in Rome in 49 A.D., so the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from the city. Seutonius attributes the cause of the uproar at Rome to Christ, apparently his teachings.
- b. *"After the great fire at Rome [64 A.D.]...punishments were also inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief."* Nero blamed the fire on the Christians and tortured them severely.

3. **Josephus, a Jewish historian. (37-97 A.D.)**, was born into a priestly family, and became a Pharisee at age 19. He served Vespasian and his son Titus in Palestine at the time of the Jewish wars (66-70 A.D.), then later moved to Rome and became the court historian for the emperor Vespasian.

- a. In his *Antiquities*, Josephus writes of James, *"the brother of Jesus, who is called the Christ."* Antiquities 20:9, 62 A.D.)
- b. Josephus also references, though debated as to whether there was a Christian interpolation added later, the life of Jesus: *"Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats...He was (the) Christ...he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him."* (Antiquities 18:3)
- c. An Arabic manuscript containing Josephus' writings here is translated, *"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 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 whom the prophets have recounted wonders."* (Antiquities 18:3, Arabic text)

4. **Thallus, a Roman historian**, about 52 A.D. wrote a history of the Eastern Mediterranean world from the time of the Trojan War to his own time. The work itself is lost and only fragments exist in the citations of others. In reference to the sun darkening during the last hours before Jesus died on the cross, Julius Africanus, writing in 221 A.D. asserts: *"Thallus, in the third book of his histories, explains away the darkness as an eclipse of the sun—unreasonably, as it seems to me."*

5. **Pliny the Younger**, a Roman author and administrator who served as governor of the province of Bithynia (modern central Turkey) under the emperor Trajan, wrote a book around 112 A.D. Pliny says the Christian influence there was so strong that pagan temples had been nearly deserted, pagan festivals nearly deceased, and the sacrificial animals had few buyers. Pliny dealt personally with Christians who were turned over to him, asking them if they were Christians. If they denied being Christians, they *"repeated after me an invocation to the Gods, and offered adoration...to your [Trajan's] image. Afterwards, they finally cursed Christ."*

6. **Other Jewish Sources: The Talmud**. A large amount of Jewish oral tradition was handed down from generation to generation. It was organized by subject matter by Rabbi Akiba before his death in 135 A.D., revised by his student Rabbi Meir, and completed around 200 A.D. by Rabbi Judah, and known as the *Mishnah*. Ancient commentary on the *Mishnah* was called the *Gemaras*, and together they formed the *Talmud*. In Sanhedrin 43a, we read: *"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 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!'"* Jesus is said to be "hanged" (Greek *kremámenos* in Galatians 3:13). "Hanged" is a variant expression of "crucified." i.e. Jesus "hung" from the cross/tree before he died.
 - a. **Toledoth Jesu**, compiled in the 5th century A.D. This anti-Christian document not only refers to Jesus, but also gives an account of what happened to Jesus' body after his death. It relates that his disciples planned to steal his body. However, a gardener named Juda thwarted their plans and dug a new grave in his garden. Then he removed Jesus' body from Joseph's tomb and placed it in his own newly dug grave. The disciples came to the original tomb, found Jesus' body gone and proclaimed him risen. The Jewish leaders also proceeded to Joseph's tomb and found it empty. Juda then took them to his grave and dug up the body of Jesus. The Jewish leaders were greatly relieved and wanted to take the body. Juda replied that he would sell them the body of Jesus and did so for thirty pieces of silver. The Jewish priests then dragged Jesus' body through the streets of Jerusalem.

7. **Greek Sources: Lucian the Satirist**, writing in the 2nd century, wrote derisively about Jesus and the early Christians. *"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 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, with the result that they despise all worldly goods alike, regarding them merely as common property."* Lucian, *The Death of Peregrine*, 11-13

8. **Gnostic Sources: The Gospel of Truth**. Probably written by the Gnostic Valentinus around 135-160 A.D., the author addresses the historicity of Jesus: *"The Word came into the midst...it became a body."* Later, he states, *"For when they had seen him and had heard him, he grant them to taste him and to smell him and to touch the beloved Son. When he had appeared instructing them about the Father...For he cam by means of fleshly appearance."* Adding words regarding Jesus' death, *"Jesus, was patient in accepting sufferings...since he knows that his death is life for many...he was nailed to a tree; he published the edict of the Father on the cross...He draws himself down to death through life...eternal clothes him. Having stripped himself of the perishable rags, he put on imperishability, which no one can possibly take away from him."* The Nag Hammadi Library, p.37

9. **Acts of Pontius Pilate**; this purportedly lost document are reported by Justin Martyr (ca.150 A.D.). Justin believed it was an official document of Rome, part of the *Commentarii Principis* composed of correspondence from emperors to various parts of the empire. Justin writes in his *First Apology*, *"And the expression, 'They pierced my hands and feet', was used in reference to the nails of the cross which were fixed in His hands and feet. And after he was crucified, they cast lots upon his vesture, and they that crucified Him parted it among them. And that these things did happen you can ascertain the 'Acts' of Pontius Pilate."*

Summary: According to these nonChristian sources investigated above, we can conclude that the ministry of Jesus, the brother of James (*Josephus*), was geographically centered in Palestine (*Tacitus*, *Lucian*, *Acts of Pilate*). Jesus was known as a wise, virtuous and ethical man who was reported to have performed miracles and made prophecies which were later fulfilled (*Josephus*). As a result of his ministry, he had many disciples, from both the Jews and the Gentiles (*Josephus*, *Talmud*). Gnostic writers relate how Jesus was the "Son of Man" (*Gospel of Thomas*), and also the "Son of God" (*Gospel of Truth*). Jesus was worshiped as deity (*Pliny*, *Lucian*) and that some believed he was the Messiah (*Josephus*, *Mara Bar-Serapion*). Ancient extra-biblical

sources do present a surprisingly large amount of detail concerning both the life of Jesus and the nature of early Christianity. Jesus was a real man who lived in the first century, who forever changed the world through his teachings, life, death, and resurrection. All of the above observations are spelled out in detail in the first 5 books of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts. Read the historical biblical accounts and determine for yourself who Jesus is, and what he means for your life today!

Resources:

Habermas, Gary R. Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus. by Nashville: 1984, Thomas Nelson Publishers

Bruce, F.F. Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974.