

Extrabiblical Evidence of the Life of Jesus

One of my favorite classes in seminary at Biola University was one focused on the “Search For The Historical Jesus.” Some critics of Christianity will point out that the New Testament can be considered biased reporting as the authors were all pro Jesus and had an agenda to advance Christianity. Some might think this hinders objectivity in what they report to have occurred. As it pertains to the person of Jesus of Nazareth, there are 22 extra-Biblical texts written within 150 years of His life and ministry that describe him in some way. While all 22 of these must all be weighed into evidence, I will present in this short summary five of the 22 entries and review what they tell us about the Jesus of history.

Extra-Biblical Literary Record

From Two Early Historians

Flavius Josephus (AD 37-97) : Considered by many to be the most important historian from the 1st century. The non-Arabic manuscripts are considered to have been tampered with over time but the Arabic rendering is considered by nearly all scholars to be pure. Below I quote from the Arabic manuscript of ‘Antiquities’, by Josephus.

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 other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. But 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, concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.¹

What historical facts can be ascertained from the conservative Arabic version of Josephus’ work? (1) Jesus was known as a wise and virtuous man, one recognized for his good conduct.(2) He had many disciples, both Jews and Gentiles. (3) Pilate condemned him to die. (4) Crucifixion was explicitly mentioned as the method of execution. (5) The disciples reported that Jesus had risen from the dead and (6) that he had appeared to them on the third day after crucifixion. (7) Consequently, the disciples continued to proclaim his teachings. (8) Perhaps Jesus was the messiah concerning whom the Old Testament prophets spoke and predicted wonders.

Cornelius Tacitus (AD 55-120) was a Roman historian who lived through the reigns of over a half dozen Roman emperors. Tacitus’ *Annals* cover a period of time between Augustus’ death in AD 14 to that of Nero in AD 68. Section 15:44 of *Annals* primarily describes the hideous tortures afflicted upon Christians who were accused by Nero of setting the fire that consumed 10 of Rome’s 14 sections. A small section of 15:44 however sheds some light on the historical Jesus.

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, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for a moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil but even in Rome...²

Historical Facts that can be gleaned from the Annals of Tacitus (15:14) (1) Christians were named for their founder, Christus (Latin), (2) who was put to death by the Roman procurator Pontius Pilatus (3) during the reign of emperor Tiberius

¹ Testimonium Flavinium, *Antiquities* (18:63-64)

² Tacitus 15:44

(Ad 14-37). (4) His death ended the ‘superstition’ for a short time, (5) but it broke out again, (6) especially in Judea where the teaching had its origin, (7) also however in Rome.

From A Government Official

Pliny the Younger (Ad 61-113) became the governor of Bithynia in northwestern Turkey and found that the Christian influence in his region was becoming very strong. He considered the Christians to be dangerous because of the impact they had on commerce surrounding temple worship as well as their inflexible devotion to Christ rather than Caesar. Pliny wrote to Emperor Trajan to explain his approach in dealing with Christians. The relevant portion of this letter is cited below.

They (Christians) declared that the sum of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this : 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.³

Facts gleaned about Christ in a letter from one government official to another. (1) Christ was worshipped as deity by early believers. (2) Jesus’ ethical teachings are reflected in the oath taken by Christians never to be guilty of a number of sins mentioned in the letter. (3) There is also a possible reference to Sunday worship in Pliny’s statement that Christians met “on a certain day”.

Jewish Writings

The Talmud. The Talmud was compiled between 180-200AD and is still considered to be in close enough time proximity to the life of Jesus to be deemed credible. One section of the Talmud sheds light on the person of Jesus. *Sanhedrin* 43a reads as follows :

On the eve of the 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 has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel into 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.⁴

Facts about Jesus in the Talmud. (1) The method of execution was proposed to be stoning but in the end was hanging. (Although moderns interpret the word ‘hanged’ to imply a noose around the neck, the Greek word *kremamenos* is the same one used to describe the two men who died on either side of Jesus. To be ‘hanged’ is a variant expression of crucifixion. (2) Jesus was killed because his ‘sorcery’ (ability to do the unexplainable) led Israel astray (3). Although the Talmud doesn’t consider Jesus’ miracles to be a picture of God’s power, it does concede that Jesus was able to affect nature. (4) No one came forward to defend Jesus at his trial, he was then killed.

An Ancient Attested Christian Source

Quadratus wrote an apology to the emperor Hadrian at about Ad 125. As a Christian and therefore considered to be favorable towards Christ, one may be cautious about including Quadratus in a collection of outside sources. This apology has been included because it is preserved through a statement of Eusebius in *Ecclesiastical History* (fourth century). In this work, Eusebius states that Quadratus wrote his apology in order to answer malicious claims meant to harass Christians. It is stated by Eusebius that this defense revealed Quadratus’ knowledge of the situation.

³ Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, 10.96

⁴ *The Babylonian Talmud*, translated by I Epstein (London : Socino, 1935), vol III, Sanhedrin 43a

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.⁵

Facts from Quadratus' apology : (1) Jesus miracles could be 'checked out' by skeptics who were interested because they were done publicly. Specific types of miracles are described as well. (2) Jesus healed some (3), and raised others from the dead. (4) It is reported that there were eye-witnesses of these events (5) who were still alive after Jesus death at the time of the author's apology.

Conclusion

We're only looking at 5 sources here. 17 other sources remain that were written prior to the start of the 3rd century. These must be considered for their contributions to the subject in order to prepare a full external assessment. Listed below

Non Christian Sources : Seutonius (AD 117-138), Thallus (AD 52)

Government Officials : Emperor Trajan (AD 98-117), Emperor Hadrian (AD 117-138)

Jewish Sources : Toledoth Jesu (5th century based on 1st century oral tradition)

Gentile Sources : Lucian (2nd century), Mara Bar Serapion (2nd century)

Gnostic Sources : Gospel of Truth (AD 135-160), Gospel of Thomas (AD 140-200), Apocryphon of John (AD 120-130), Treatise on Resurrection (late 2nd century)

Lost Works : Acts of Pontius Pilate (early 2nd century), Phlegon (AD 130-140)

Early Christian Sources : Clement of Rome (AD 95), Ignatius (AD 110-115),

Late Christian Sources : Barnabas (AD 130-138), Justin Martyr (AD 150-160)

Below is a summary of what we have learned of Jesus and His ministry from the five sources listed. Please realize that all of the below summary is put forth without using the Bible once at all as a reference.

1. Christians were named for their founder, Jesus Christ, who was widely accepted as a wise and virtuous man, recognized for his good conduct.
2. He lived during the reign of Tiberius Caesar, (Ad 14-37)
3. and had many disciples, both Jews and Gentiles
4. to whom he would teach ethical principles regarding absence from sin.
5. He was recognized as being able to affect nature through the performance of 'sorcery' / miracles
6. Some of these miracles were healings,
7. others were resurrections from the dead
8. These miracles were well attested
9. and could be checked out by eye witnesses of the events.
10. He was brought into custody and accused of leading Israel astray.
11. For this he was given a trial at which no one stepped forward to defend him.
12. He was given into the hands of the Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate
13. who condemned him to die
14. by method of crucifixion
15. Jesus death ended the 'superstition' for a while,
16. but it broke out again because the disciples reported that Jesus had risen from the dead
17. and appeared to them on the third day after crucifixion.
18. Consequently, the disciples continued his teachings

⁵ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*

19. especially in Judea where the teaching had its origin
20. but also in Rome.
21. After this event, Jesus was worshipped as deity by early believers.
22. A day of worship seems to have been determined. (Possibly Sunday)
23. Perhaps he was the messiah concerning whom the Old Testament prophets spoke and predicted wonders.

The Jesus portrayed through 'unbiased' historical record bears an uncanny resemblance to the Jesus depicted in the gospel accounts. As a result of this harmony, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John should be considered credible witnesses.

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