

Did Jesus Really Exist as a Real Person in History?

Written by Rev. Leroy Thompson



Introduction

At different times in the history of Christianity, questions have arisen regarding the truthfulness of the Christian faith. Some of these questions, like the perennial Easter lily, surface during the Easter celebrations. These questions usually arise for basically two reasons, (1) as an objection to the Christian faith and (2) as a legitimate need to have a clearer understanding of the foundations on which the Christian religion is established. For clarity's sake, the question, though not often verbalized, is often asked like this "Did the Jesus Christ of Scripture exist as a historic person, like Alexander the Great?" This writer asserts Jesus Christ is a historic person proven by credible, verifiable historical records.

This article, therefore, will look at the evidence presented in history for the historic Jesus Christ of the Scripture. The study will assess data from historic writings, Archeology, and the Bible that validates the claim that Jesus Christ of the New Testament lived and died just like Alexander the Great.

Evidence from Secular History

Unearthing evidence from secular history to build a case for the historic Jesus Christ of the Bible has become necessary both in Christian and secular circles. There have been charges from proponents within and outside of the Christian faith that the Jesus of Scripture is not all that evangelical Christians make him out to be. Stanley E. Porter and Stephen J. Bedard in the book 'Unmasking the Pagan Christ' elaborate;

Several teachers of religion have recently asserted that Jesus was never a historical figure but rather just one literary incarnation of an ancient symbol ... These authors believe that certain universal spiritual truths appear in every religion. The central savior figures in these religions are universal symbols dressed in the particular culture of each society. The Jesus of the New Testament is understood simply as one of those symbolic spiritual archetypes described with first-century Jewish imagery.¹

Charges like these from religious figures within Christianity fuel the desire from evangelicals to counter their claims by publicizing authentic and credible information that supports the historic Jesus as set forth by the Bible. The '*Jesus Seminar*' also of recent years has presented a Jesus that is not consistent with the Jesus revealed by the scriptures. According to its founder Robert Funk,

the historical Jesus has been overlaid by Christian legend, myth, and metaphysics and thus scarcely resembled the Christ figure presented in the gospels and worshipped by the Church today. The goal of the Seminar is to strip away these layers and to recover the authentic Jesus who really lived and taught.²

The results of their effort have destructive implications for the Jesus of the Bible as presented in evangelical circles. Dr. William Lane Craig in his article on *Rediscovering the Historic Jesus: Presuppositions and Pretensions of the Jesus Seminar*, summarizes their findings,

¹ Stanley E. Porter & Stephen J. Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ*, (Toronto, Ontario: Clements Publishing, 2006), 9-10.

² Dr. William Lane Craig, *Rediscovering the Historic Jesus: Presuppositions and Pretensions of the Jesus Seminar*, <http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/docs/rediscover1.html> (Nov. 8, 2005) Access April 17, 2010.

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The real, historical Jesus turns out to have been a sort of itinerant, social critic, the Jewish equivalent of a Greek cynic philosopher. He never claimed to be the Son of God or to forgive sins or to inaugurate a new covenant between God and man. His crucifixion was an accident of history; his corpse was probably thrown into a shallow dirt grave where it rotted away or was eaten by wild dogs.³

These claims and the propagation of their findings are the contemporary reasons for the questions about the historic Jesus of Scripture. These same claims and findings of the Jesus Seminar are not the evidence presented by the biblical record. Contrariwise, such assertions, by the Seminar, are not consistent with the available, independent, non-biblical evidence of Jesus from secular history as evidenced below.

Letters of Pliny

The letters of Pliny the Younger to Emperor Trajan, dated about A.D. 112, form a part of the corroborative support for the historic Jesus. These letters from a Non-Christian perspective serve to establish the fact that people in the Roman Empire hazard their lives to worship and follow Jesus who they believe was a god.⁴ Pliny thus related information he has garnered about Christians:

They were in the habit of meeting before dawn on a fixed day, when they recite in turn a hymn to Christ as to a god and would bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal act but rather that they would not commit any theft, robbery or adultery, nor betray a trust nor refuse to restore a deposit on demand. This done they would disperse, and then they would meet again later to eat together...⁵

Pliny's account is consistent with Jesus' teaching and the practice of New Testament Christianity. His witness stands as one cord in a rope supported by other non-Christian writings that continue these discussions.

Writings of Suetonius

Suetonius was a Roman historian, born in 69 A.D. and died in 122 A.D. He was a contemporary of Pliny the Younger and the author of the *Lives of the Caesar*.⁶ In this work, he referred to Christians who were punished when Nero passed a law against them. Suetonius states, "Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to new and mischievous superstition."⁷ He later added that Jews were expelled from Rome under Emperor Claudius because of rioting "at the instigation of Chrestus"⁸ This reference points to Jesus as the object of the Christian Jew's worship and loyalty. Though Suetonius did not elaborate on this persecuted group it is evident that they followed Christ. This reference to the Roman historian demonstrates that the Jews of Rome were opposed to those who evidently worship Christ or "Chrestus" as God.

Annals of Tacitus

³ Ibid., 2

⁴ Michael Gleghorn, Ancient Evidence for Jesus from Non-Christian Sources.

http://www.probe.org/site/c.fdKEIMNsEoG/b.4223639/k.567/Ancient_Evidence_for_Jesus_from_NonChristian_Sources.htm#text8. (2001)

⁵ R.T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus*, (London Sydney: Hodder & Stoughton, 1999), 42.

⁶ Soyilent Communications, NNDB, Suetonius, <http://www.nndb.com/people/874/000087613/> (2010)

⁷ Stanley E. Porter & Stephen J. Bedard, *Unmasking the Pagan Christ*, 137.

⁸ Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, (Nashville: Broadman. 1997), 371.

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According to R.T. France, Tacitus is the only pagan writer in the early century to give unequivocal reference to Jesus as a historical figure.⁹ This Roman historian lived between A.D. 55-A.D.117. He gives specific references to people and places that are consistent with and supportive of the gospel witness about Jesus' existence. He therefore sets in stone the following contrives of Nero which now serves as a witness for Jesus' historicity.

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 Judaea, the first source of the evil but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular.¹⁰

The fact that a Roman historian with information available at his disposal was precise and direct in his writing should be of great support in this field of study to modern-day readers. This writer believes that though Tacitus wrote about Nero, providence would have it that he did the following: give the name of Christ the originator of Christianity; give the region of the beginning of Christianity; and show that Christ was contemporary with Tiberius reign and Pilate governorship when they put him to death. This information is the iceberg that puts a hole in the advocates of the Jesus Seminar and the Pagan Christ Titanic.

One would be hard-pressed to explain away the historic Jesus in light of such external pieces of evidence. However, if persons reject these and other available records from secular history as spurious, then attempts can be made to discount the historicity of Jesus Christ. This action though must take into account another hurdle, the evidence from independent Jewish sources.

Evidence from Jewish Sources

The shreds of evidence from Jewish sources are hard to be ignored Israeli writings accepted by the very Hebrew nation that has rejected Christ. The witness for the historic Jesus also comes from those scripts that Israel references regularly.

Josephus

Josephus lived about A.D. 37 - 100 and was a former Priest and Pharisee in his early days. He later became one of the most known authorities on the events that transpired during the time that Jesus lived. Though he was seen as a traitor by the Jews¹¹(for serving Rome), yet his writing is without question significant. He went at length to record aspects of Hebrew history that detail events that independently substantiate the testimony of the Bible. This is the context in which this Jewish historian gives credence to the real, not perceived according to detractors, Jesus Christ of history. In 'Josephus Complete Work', Antiquities of the Jews, he stated,

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... and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the time did not forsake him, *(for he appeared to them alive on the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other*

⁹ R.T. France, The Evidence for Jesus, 21.

¹⁰ Extra-biblical references to Jesus and Christianity, http://www.rationalchristianity.net/jesus_extrabib.html

¹¹ Lee Strobel, The Case For Christ, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 101-102.

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wonderful things concerning him;) and the tribe of Christian, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.¹²

Though there may be legitimate questions about certain phrases as highlighted above, the overwhelming conclusion by Jews and historians are that the passage is authentic.¹³ This text, written by Josephus, even with the disputed phrases taken out, still proves conclusively that Jesus did exist even as the Scripture witness. Let readers now look at a second most unlikely Jewish source that also contradicts the claims of critics.

The Babylonian Talmud

The Babylonian Talmud is “a collection of study teachings based upon the Hebrew Bible and oral commentaries of Jewish learning.”¹⁴ Its compilation was completed in A.D 500.¹⁵ The Talmud in certain areas mentions Jesus referring to him as an impostor and magician who was condemned to death.¹⁶ The text of the Talmud contains the following:

On Passover eve they hanged Yeshu. For forty days beforehand a crier went out proclaiming, 'He is going out to be stoned because he has practice magic and led Israel astray. If anyone has anything to say in his defense, let him come and speak for him.' But they found nothing in his favor so they hung him on Passover Eve.¹⁷

There is general agreement among Bible scholars that “Yeshu”¹⁸ is a reference to Jesus of the Bible. Though the passage does not mirror exactly the gospel testimony of Jesus' accusation and death, it certifies the recognition of Jesus from the frame of reference of those who oppose him.

This evidence from Jewish sources corroborates that of secular history and presents the groundwork for an examination of the evidence from Archeology.

Evidence from Archeology

Though archeology cannot prove “the New Testament to be either theologically inspired or historically accurate”¹⁹ yet it can confirm the accuracy of the biblical record. According to renowned archaeologist John McRay, "If we dig in Israel and find ancient sites that are consistent with where the Bible said we will find them that show that the history and geography are accurate."²⁰ Credibility is therefore confirmed to other areas, events, and teachings of a biblical text when archeological findings verify the biblical witness.

MacRay in an interview with Lee Strobel in the book, ‘The Case for Christ’ asserts the credibility of the gospel witness. His conclusions are based on the accuracy of archeological findings as outlined in the New Testament. For example, the gospel of John records that the pool of Bethesda had five porticoes but many persons doubted this since no such place was found. However, in recent years the pool of Bethesda has been unearthed and bears the exact description as the Scripture portrays²¹. Another example is noteworthy, the Bible records the name of the

¹² Josephus, Josephus Complete Work, (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1964), 379.

¹³ Lee Strobel, The Case For Christ, 104-105.

¹⁴ Oral Roberts' University, The Babylonian Talmud Research Guide, (Nov. 2007) <http://www.oru.edu/university/library/guides/talmud.html>

¹⁵ Lee Strobel, The Case For Christ, 112.

¹⁶ Ibid, 113.

¹⁷ R.T. France, The Evidence for Jesus, 33.

¹⁸ Ibid, 34.

¹⁹ John McRay, Archaeology & the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 17.

²⁰ Lee Strobel, The Case For Christ, 127.

²¹ Ibid, 132.

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Roman governor/ prefect, Pontius Pilate, who delivered Jesus to be crucified. For a long period, critics of the Bible and Christianity doubted the authenticity of such a person. According to the site 'Former Things':

It was not long ago when many scholars were questioning the actual existence of a Roman Governor with the name Pontius Pilate. In June 1961 Italian archaeologists ... uncovered this ... limestone block. The inscription reads Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judaea.²²

These and many other testimonies from archeological excavations confirm the accuracy and reliability of the Jesus of history according to the biblical record. With all these considerations a final piece of evidence must not be neglected; that of the Bible.

Evidence from the Bible

The evidence from the Bible includes the descriptions from the Gospel writers and the Apostle Paul's letters that testify of Jesus' actual earthly presence.

The Gospel Account

All four gospels present a unified account of the life and character of Jesus. Though the first three, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are more similar in their description of Jesus' activities, John complements their work through the process of "interlocking."²³ The four books agree so there is no need to search for other information. These gospels therefore can be taken at face value as factual reports of Jesus and constitute knowledge of him. Matthew and Luke testify of Jesus' conception and birth while Mark and John further corroborate details of his life and ministry. All four gospels speak of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection which are also supported by secular evidence that had no motive to shore up his 'claims. All this and much more come to us from the gospel as a portrait of a real man in the real world and yet transcended his environment that his followers saw him as more than a man.²⁴ Indeed the evidence from the gospel points to the Jesus of History as also supported by the Apostle Paul.

The Letters of Paul

The Apostle Paul's letters to individuals and churches in the New Testament are replete with references to the person of Jesus Christ and his work. On numerous occasions, he encouraged his readers to mimic Christ. Sure enough, if Christ was not a real person, in Paul's understanding, there would be no need for him to encourage them to imitate his Lord. Paul, a former Pharisee and Christian antagonist, certainly was convinced that Christ was of real personage. One writer elaborates,

What Paul appears to know about Jesus is that he was born as a human (Rom. 9.5) to a woman and under the law, that is, as a Jew (Gal. 4.4), that he was descended from David's line (Rom 1.3; 15.12) though he was not like Adam (Rom. 5.15), that he had brothers, including one named James (1 Cor. 9.5; Gal. 1.19), that he had a meal on the night he was betrayed (1 Cor. 1.23–25), that he was crucified and died on a



²² Former Things, <http://www.formerthings.com/pontius.htm> (2010)

²³ Craig L. Blomberg, How Historians can Know Him and Why it Matters (682D63AE01) This phenomenon involves instances in which John refers to something so cryptically as to raise all kinds of questions that he nowhere else answers but that the Synoptics do, or vice-versa. For example, John 3:24 refers in passing to the Baptist's imprisonment, but only the Synoptists ever narrate that event (Mark 6:14–29 and parallels).

²⁴ R.T. France, The Evidence for Jesus, 138.

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cross (Phil. 2.8; 1 Cor. 1:23; 8.11; 15.3; Rom. 4.25; 5.6, 8; 1 Thess. 2.15; 4.14, etc.), was buried (1 Cor. 15.4), and was raised three days later (1 Cor. 15.4; Rom. 4.25; 8.34; 1 Thess. 4.14, etc.), and that afterward he was seen by Peter, the disciples and others (1 Cor. 15.5–7)²⁵

Such a description merits the attention of readers who search for the historic Jesus in the pages of the Bible. Paul's letters stand as a solid testament to the Jesus of history.

Conclusion

Although writers throughout the centuries disputed the life and work of the historic Jesus Christ of the Bible, unlike that of Alexander the Great, evidence has been unearthing that contradicts their claims. The critics of Christianity who tries to present another Jesus that is not consistent with the Scriptures have the evidence of historians of the early centuries and archeology against them. To deny the witness of Scripture with the many supernatural accounts, as the critics have done, is to also deny the available data on the historicity of Jesus Christ. This all seems unjustified. The attempt to discredit Jesus Christ and the movement, of Christianity, which arose on account of his resurrection from the dead.

The evidence proves conclusively that the Jesus of Scripture is the historic Jesus whose life was undeniably acknowledged by historians, Bible writers, and the reliability of archeological evidence. The truthfulness of Christianity is then also validated by the evidence of the historic Jesus Christ of the Bible. *

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²⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, How Historians can know Him and why it matters, 3-4 (682D63AE01)