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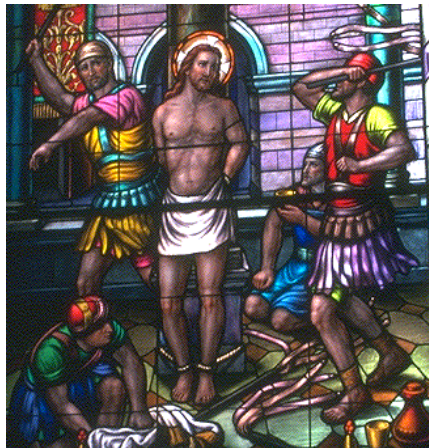
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Historical Evidence for the Gospel Accounts of Jesus Christ

Written by Robert Jones
Acworth, Georgia



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Christian Theology and History Adult Sunday School Courses

Robert Jones

www.sundayschoolcourses.com

I've always been a strong believer in adult Sunday School classes and Bible studies in our churches. And many churches have quality, Biblically-based adult-focused programs. Unfortunately, just as many churches tend to downplay adult education, focusing on children's education (not a bad thing in itself), or focusing on the needs of the "unchurched", where topics such as church history and theology are often purposely ignored.

Yet there is a strong need for adult education focused on both the Bible and the basic tenets and history of the Faith. Among the reasons:

- Not all adults come from a strong childhood background in the church – adult Sunday School classes/Bible studies may be their first serious introduction to what Christianity is all about
- Christianity (and especially Evangelical Christianity) is under constant attack from the media and popular culture (movies, music, etc.). We need to give fellow Christians the tools to defend the Faith against attack (or to provide a "ready defense" as Peter says in 1 Peter 3:15)
- Even adult Christians that have a strong Biblical background often know little about the origins and history of their Faith

To better meet the needs of adult Christians (both those mature in their Faith, and those just starting out in the "School of Christ"), I've written a series of courses that focus on the history of the Christian Church (including the Jewish roots), as well as the development of doctrine in the Church. The topics represented in these courses are intended to both further the participant's walk in the Faith, as well as serve as a starting point for Christian apologetics.

While the primary purpose of these courses is for use in churches, they also may be useful for High School and College projects, especially the courses focused primarily on historical aspects.

One note: these courses are primarily written from an Evangelical Protestant viewpoint (I come from a Reformed Church background), but I hope I've given ample time to other points of view throughout the various courses.

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"I shall prove to you as you stand here that we have not believed empty fables, or words without any foundation but words filled with the Spirit of God, and big with power, and flourishing with grace."
(Justyn Martyr, "Dialogue With Trypho", 9)

Introduction

Attacks on the veracity of the Gospels

Over the last two hundred years, the historical veracity of the Bible has been under attack from both within and without the faith. The attacks range from questioning whether Jesus ever existed (He did), to postulating bizarre theories regarding Jesus that have far less empirical evidence to back them than do the Gospels themselves. The chart below lists some of the primary skeptics since the 18th century:

Skeptic	Date	Premise
H.S. Reimarus	1778	Claimed disciples stole the body of Jesus, and made up the resurrection story
David Friedrich Strauss	1835	In <i>Life of Jesus</i> , doubted historical accuracy of gospels
Bruno Bauer	1882	Denied that Jesus actually lived
Religions-geschichtliche Schule	c. 1900	Drew parallels between Christianity and other religious sects in the Mideast
William Wrede	1901	In <i>Messianic Secret</i> , claimed that the evangelists had put words in the mouth of Jesus to make theological points
Albert Schweitzer	1906	In <i>The Quest of the Historical Jesus</i> , denies that Jesus was the Messiah
K.L. Schmidt	1919	Claims details of time and place in the Gospels are fabricated
Elizabeth Clare Prophet	1984	In <i>Lost Years of Jesus</i> , pictures Jesus as a mystic traveling in India for 17 years
Michael Bagent, Henry Lincoln	1982	In <i>Holy Blood, Holy Grail</i> , Jesus as the husband of Mary Magdalene
G.A. Wells	1971, 1975, 1982	In three different books, questions whether Jesus ever existed
Jesus Seminar	1993	Panel members voted on which words of Jesus are "accurate"; <i>The Five Gospels</i> claim that only 18% of the words attributed to Jesus are verifiable
Laurence Gardner	1996	In <i>Bloodline of the Holy Grail</i> , Jesus as 1) husband of Mary Magdalene 2) an Essene teacher 3) brother of Joseph of Arimathea
Dan Brown	2003	International best selling novel <i>The Da Vinci Code</i> uncritically accepts the basic premise of <i>Holy Blood, Holy Grail</i> , and the Gnostic "gospels"

Interestingly enough, though, modern archaeology, and ancient history do verify much of the historical panoply of the Gospels. The first section of this course will look at recent archaeological findings that

have verified key Gospel accounts, and confounded the skeptics. The second part looks at contemporary historical evidence supporting the Gospels accounts of the life of Jesus.

Why study the historical Jesus?

So why do we "search" for the historical Jesus? Why do we seek historical verification of the Gospels? Isn't the "Jesus of Faith" sufficient? The Apostle Peter tells us that we DO need to be able to defend and verify the basis for our faith:

"Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." (1 Peter 3:15, NRSV)

Biblical scholar John Meier offers these additional thoughts:

"...the quest for the historical Jesus reminds Christians that faith in Christ is not just a vague existential attitude or a way of being in the world. Christian faith is the affirmation of, and adherence to, a particular person who said and did particular things in a particular time and place in human history. The quest underlines the fact that there is a specific content to Christian faith, content connected with specific persons and events in past history. While the quest cannot supply the essential content of faith, it can help theology give greater depth and color to that content." (Meier, p. 30)

Discussion questions:

- What effect would absolute proof that a minor historical detail (say, the name of a city) in the Gospels was inaccurate have on your faith?
- What effect would absolute proof that a major historical detail (say, proof that Pontius Pilate never existed) in the Gospels was inaccurate have on your faith?
- Were the Gospels written to be histories?

The Gospels as History

"Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia." (Ireneus, "Against Heresies", 3.1.1)

In the last 150 years, the Gospels of the New Testament have come under continued attacks by both Christians and non-Christians who question their historical accuracy. Yet, again and again, archaeological and historical evidence continues to verify the accuracy of the Gospels. This is especially interesting considering the Gospels were not written as histories, but rather, as testaments of faith. (If the Gospels had been written as histories, there would be many more details about the childhood of Jesus (as appeared in later spurious gospels), and we would know SOMETHING about the period of Christ's life between the ages of 12-30.) Archaeologists William Dever has said:

"But of course the Bible is not, in the final analysis, about history at all. It's about His Story. But there is history there as well." ("Is the Bible Right After All?", p. 31)

Discussion question:

Why didn't one of the intimates of Jesus write a "History of Jesus and His Ministry"?

However, the fact that the Gospels are not biographies of the life of Jesus, doesn't mean that the historical detail contained therein is not accurate. For example, famous archaeologist Sir William Ramsey said:

"Luke is a historian of the first rank...this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians." (McDowell, p. 110)

Biblical archaeologist G. Ernest Wright once said:

"The Biblical scholar no longer bothers to ask whether archaeology proves the Bible. In the sense that the Biblical languages, the life and systems of its people are illuminated in innumerable ways by the archaeological discoveries, he knows that such a question is certainly to be answered in the affirmative." (Davis, p. 54)

What the Gospels tell us about the historical Jesus

- His mother's name was Mary; she was betrothed to Joseph, a carpenter
- Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, not by Joseph
- Before Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem to participate in a census called by the Emperor Augustus
- Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the reign of Herod the Great (Herod died in 4 B.C., so Jesus was born \leq 4 B.C.)
- Jesus was descended from King David in the House of Judah (and may have been considered the legitimate King of the Jews by some.)
 - Herod, fearing that Jesus was the legitimate heir to the Davidic dynasty, ordered all boys 2 years and younger, in and around Bethlehem, to be slain
- Mary & Joseph took Jesus to safety in Egypt, until the death of Herod
- Several prophets identified the baby Jesus as the Jewish Messiah ("anointed one")
- Jesus grew up in Nazareth in Galilee (Northern Palestine)
- Jesus had brothers (James, Joseph, Judas and Simon), and sisters
- Jesus was a carpenter by trade (as was his father, Joseph)
- Jesus began his ministry at about 30 years of age, after he was baptized in the Jordan River by his relative (cousin?) John the Baptist

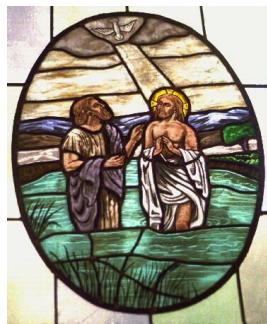


Photo by Robert Jones

- Jesus spent 40 days in the desert to prepare for his mission; he successfully resisted temptation by the devil
- Jesus made Capernaum in Galilee the headquarters of his ministry
- Jesus primarily ministered to the Jews, but also had Samaritan and Roman followers

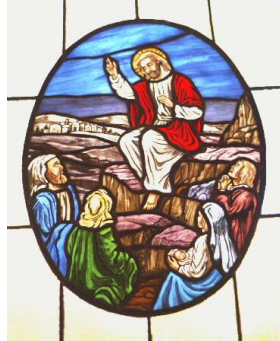


Photo by Robert Jones

- Jesus had twelve close followers, referred to as Apostles. He had many other followers (attracting crowds at least as large as 5,000 in some cases). Some of his most loyal followers were women, including Mary Magdalene.
- At some point in his ministry, Jesus proclaimed himself the Son of God
- Jesus performed 36 recorded miracles, including raising from the dead, healings, turning water into wine, walking on water, and providing food to 5,000+ people from 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish
- Jesus preached a message of redemption from sin, salvation by faith in God and His Son, and proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was nigh.
- Jesus performed numerous exorcisms, driving out demons
- Jesus was betrayed by one of his 12 followers (Judas Iscariot) during a visit to Jerusalem for Passover
- Jesus was tried before members of the Jewish Sanhedrin, and accused of blasphemy, for proclaiming himself the Messiah of Old Testament prophecy, and the Son of God
- Because the Jews had no law to put a man to death, they brought Jesus before the Roman Governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. Pilate deferred the case to Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee. Herod Antipas returned Jesus to Pilate.
- Pilate offered to the crowd in Jerusalem to release Jesus, but they demanded his crucifixion
- Jesus was tortured by Roman soldiers



- Jesus was crucified on a Hill called Golgotha (Calvary). When he died, a great darkness appeared over Jerusalem, and several miraculous events occurred.

- Jesus rose from the dead, and appeared several times to the Apostles, and women followers
- 40 days after he rose from the dead, Jesus ascended to heaven



Photo by Robert Jones

Discussion Question:

What other attributes would you add to the historical life of Jesus?

What the Gospels don't tell us

- What time of year Jesus was born
- When or how Joseph died
- What Jesus did between the ages of 12-30
- Anything about the Essenes (possibly the Dead Sea Scroll sect)

Validating the Gospels - examples of indirect evidence

So, can we trust the historical account of Jesus given in the Gospels? There is both direct and indirect evidence to attest to much of the Gospel accounts. Some indirect evidence would include:

- Manuscript evidence - there are over 22,000 extant New Testament manuscripts, some dating as early as the 2nd century. In contrast, Julius Caesar's history of the Gallic Wars ("All Gael is divided into three parts...") has only 9 or 10 extant copies dating a thousand years after his death. (McDowell, p. 112) Therefore, we can be reasonably sure that what is contained in the Gospels we have today is an accurate representation of what was originally written in them.
- If the authors of the Gospels (and the Apostolic Fathers) made up the contents of the Gospels, would they have included details such as:
 - Peter's stumbling dialogue during the Transfiguration
 - The flight of the Apostles after the arrest of Jesus
 - A woman (Mary Magdalene) being the first to see the risen Christ, and the first to spread the news of the risen Christ
 - The jockeying of the Apostles for position (Mark 9:33/34, Luke 9:46)
 - Christ asking his Father to "Take this cup from me" before His arrest
 - Peter's denial
 - Jesus's inglorious reception in his hometown (Luke 4:28/30)
- Many of the skeptics of the veracity of the New Testament postulate that the whole thing was made up by the Apostles. However, if the Gospel writers and the Apostolic writers had made up the Gospels, would they have been willing to die for their lie? Various sources record that all of the original Apostles died violent deaths for their beliefs except John.

The next section focuses on some famous (direct) examples of how archaeology has proved the skeptics wrong about the supposed historical inaccuracy of the Gospels.

Archaeological Evidence

Pontius Pilate

Prior to 1961, some skeptics challenged whether Pontius Pilate ever existed. Although Pilate is mentioned in all four Gospels (plus in Acts and 1 Timothy), skeptics claimed that there was no independent, direct verification that Pilate lived.

All that changed in 1961 at Caesarea Maritima. An Italian expedition discovered a 2 foot by 3 foot stone with Pilate's name on it, in the Roman theater. The inscription read:

]S TIBERIEUM
PON]TIUS PILATUS
PRAEF]ECTUS IUDA[EA]E

...Tiberium
Pontius Pilate,
Prefect of Judea (McRay, p. 204)

The crucifixion - nailed or tied?

The New Testament identifies that Christ was "nailed" to the cross (John 20:25, Acts 2:23, Col 2:14). (Traditional depictions show nails through both the palms of His outstretched hands, and through His ankles). Many historians doubted the accuracy of this statement, feeling, rather, that people that were crucified were probably tied to the cross (and left to die of thirst and exposure), rather than nailed.

In 1968, a man that was crucified c. mid-first century A.D. was discovered by Vassilios Tzaferis, in a suburb of Jerusalem called Giv'at ha-Mivtar. Tzaferis (and Nico Haas, who published the data from the dig) concluded:

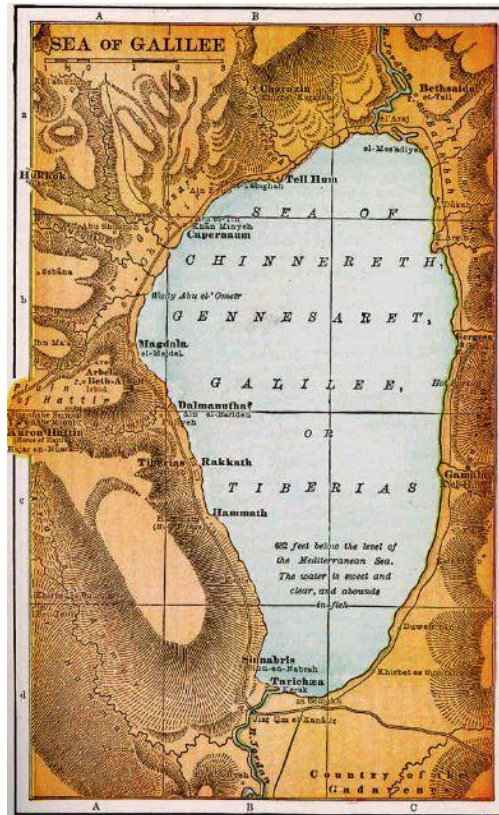
"The feet were joined almost parallel, both transfixing by the same nail at the heels...the upper limbs were stretched out, each stabbed by a nail in the forearm." (McRay, p. 205)



Gergesa

The Synoptic Gospels identify that Jesus visited by boat a town on the east shore of the Sea of Galilee, identified as "the region of the Gerasenes" (Mark 5:1, Luke 8:26). Traditionally, this has been identified with the towns of Gerasa, or Gerdara, which are (respectively) 37 and 5 miles from the Sea of Galilee. So how could Jesus have stepped ashore from a boat?

In 1970-1974 (also in 1980, and again from 2001 to the present), Vassilios Tzaferis excavated the remains of a Byzantine church, located near an unexcavated city known as Tell el-Kusri, on the east shore of the Sea of Galilee. A nearby breakwater contains the remains of a harbor. Many scholars now believe this is the "Gergesa" (or the "region of the Gerasenes") mentioned in the Bible - exactly where the New Testament says it was.



Map source: "Classic Map" from Ages Master Christian Library

Lysanias of Abilene

Luke (Luke 3:1) identifies that when Lysanias was "tetrarch of Abilene", John the Baptist began his ministry. Some historians challenged this statement, because the only known Lysanias was the ruler of Chalcis, 40-36 B.C. However:

"...an inscription has been found from the time of Tiberius (A.D. 14-37) that names Lysanias as tetrarch in Abila near Damascus." (McRay, p. 160)

Nazareth - fact or fiction?

Many skeptics doubted that Nazareth existed in the time of Jesus. The doubts are based on the fact that Nazareth is not mentioned in any of the following sources:

- Nazareth is not mentioned in the Old Testament (see, for example, Joshua 19:10-15)
- Josephus (see next section) gives the names of 45 towns and villages in Galilee. Nazareth is not among them!
- The Jewish Talmud mentions 63 towns and villages in the area. Nazareth is not among them.

Excavations by Bellarmino Bagatti in 1955 have shown that there was an agricultural settlement on the site identified in the New Testament as Nazareth. The site dates back as far as 900 years before Christ. Evidence of use during the Roman occupation has been found.

Also, excavations by Michael Avi-Yonah at Caesarea in 1962 unearthed a tablet with the name "Nazareth" contained on it. The tablet demonstrates that Nazareth existed at least as early as first century A.D.

The great census debate

Luke (2:1-3) identifies the following as an historical event occurring at the time of the birth of Jesus:

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register." (NIV)

Many skeptics have doubted the veracity of this statement, given that the only census known by a Quirinius until recently was one dated by Josephus as A.D. 6. (Jesus couldn't have been born later than 4 B.C., because that was the year that Herod the Great died). So, Luke must have been wrong, either about the census, or about Jesus being born when Herod the Great was still alive, right? Wrong!

"Jerry Vardaman has discovered the name of Quirinius on a coin in micrographic letters, placing him as proconsul of Syria and Cilicia from 11 B.C. until the death of Herod." (McRay, p. 154)

Further evidence indicates that it is very possible that a census could have been ongoing in Israel at the time of Jesus' birth - it was just a different census (and probably a different Quirinius) than mentioned by the Josephus.

Note also that Luke was aware of the later (6 A.D.) census, which he refers to in Acts 5:37 as "the" census, as opposed to "a" census in Luke 2:1-3).

Historical Evidence - Contemporary Secular Sources

It is interesting to hear how secular contemporaries of Jesus described Him. In Acts 25:13-20, we get some clues from the New Testament itself. But is Jesus mentioned by contemporary secular sources outside the New Testament? While the number of references are probably fewer than you might imagine, they do exist! The primary source material is from Jewish turncoat-Roman historian Flavius Josephus.

Flavius Josephus

- 37 A.D. (?) - 100 A.D.
- Josephus was a Jewish aristocrat that led rebel troops against the Romans in Galilee during the First Jewish Revolt (66-73 A.D.) (Photo from "The Life and Works of Flavius Josephus", translated by William Whiston, 1736)
- He later betrayed the Jews, and served the Romans
- He wrote two massive historical works
 - "The Jewish War"
 - "Jewish Antiquities"



- John the Baptist, James the Just (brother of Jesus), and Christ are all mentioned in "Jewish Antiquities"
- There is a lengthy passage describing John the Baptist in "Jewish Antiquities". Many similarities with the Gospel accounts can be discerned:
 - "...that was called the Baptist..."
 - "...commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism..."
 - Baptized with water for remission of sins
 - Put to death by Herod (Antipas) who feared John would incite the people to rebellion

"2. Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness. Now when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late. Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure to him." ("Jewish Antiquities", 18.5.2; Photo: John the Baptist at Mission Santa Clara, CA, photo by Robert Jones)



- Jesus is mentioned twice by Josephus. One time is in reference to his brother James the Just (head of the Christian church in Jerusalem). Some interesting points regarding this passage:
 - Ananus, a Sadducee, was high priest of the Sanhedrin. He was "...very rigid in judging offenders..."
 - "...Jesus, who was called Christ..."
 - "brother of Jesus...whose name was James" - Josephus identifies James by his more well-known brother
 - James accused before the Sanhedrin, and "delivered to be stoned"

"But this younger Ananus, who, as we have told you already, took the high priesthood, was a bold man in his temper, and very insolent; he was also of the sect of the Sadducees, who are very rigid in judging offenders, above all the rest of the Jews, as we have already observed; when, therefore, Ananus was of this disposition, he thought he had now a proper opportunity [to exercise his authority]. Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the sanhedrim of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned:" (Jewish Antiquities 20.9.1)

- "The Testimonium" - The primary secular reference to Jesus Christ is in what is now known as the Testimonium, in the 18th book of "Jewish Antiquities". Note that many Bible scholars consider the bracketed passages to be later Christian interpolations. However, even without the italicized parts, we learn a great deal about the life of Jesus:
 - Jesus lived
 - He was a teacher and miracle worker
 - He had followers both among the Jews and the Gentiles
 - He was condemned to the cross by Pontius Pilate
 - His followers didn't stop following him even after the crucifixion
 - The "tribe" of Christians, founded in Jesus' name, still existed at the time of the writing of "Jewish Antiquities" (93-94 A.D.)

"3. 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 amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; [for he appeared to them 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." ("Jewish Antiquities", 18.3.3)

- Jesus is possibly mentioned in "The Jewish Wars", also by Josephus. However, the earliest manuscripts that contain the references to Jesus date to the 10th or 11th century, so most scholars consider it a late Christian interpolation. The passage is entitled "The Ministry, Trial and Crucifixion of 'The Wonder-worker' (Jesus)"
 - "...his works were divine..."
 - He worked miracles
 - Some people considered him the reincarnation of Moses, others thought he was sent from God
 - He did not keep the Sabbath, but did nothing shameful
 - Many people followed him, thinking that he might lead a revolt against the Romans
 - He healed people on the Mount of Olives
 - His followers wanted him to enter Jerusalem and "cut down the Roman troops and Pilate"
 - The Jewish leaders, led by the high priest, betrayed him to Pilate
 - Jesus appears before Pilate, and is freed because Jesus had healed the dying wife of Pilate (!)
 - The Jewish leaders crucify Jesus, after bribing Pilate with 30 talents for the right

Thallus

- A 1st century historian (perhaps as early as 52 A.D.) - his works are lost!
- Quoted by several of the Early Church Fathers
- Clearly accepted the historical existence of Jesus, although he tries to find a natural explanation for events described in the scriptures as divinely inspired.

"1. As to His works severally, and His cures effected upon body and soul, and the mysteries of His doctrine, and the resurrection from the dead, these have been most authoritatively set forth by His disciples and apostles before us. On the whole world there pressed a most fearful darkness; and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down. This darkness Thallus, in the third book of his History, calls, as appears to me without reason, an eclipse of the sun". (Julius Africanus, c. 221 A.D., "The Chronology of Julius Africanus", 18.1)

Phlegon

- Wrote "Chronicles" c. 140, now lost
- Quoted by Julius Africanus, Origen
- Like Thallus, he clearly accepted the historical existence of Jesus, although, like Thallus, he tries to find a natural explanation for events described in the scriptures as divinely inspired

"Phlegon records that, in the time of Tiberius Caesar, at full moon, there was a full eclipse of the sun from the sixth hour to the ninth — manifestly that one of which we speak." (Africanus, 18.1)

"Now Phlegon, in the thirteenth or fourteenth book, I think, of his Chronicles, not only ascribed to Jesus a knowledge of future events (although falling into confusion about some things which refer to Peter, as if they referred to Jesus), but also testified that the result corresponded to His predictions. So that he also, by these very admissions regarding foreknowledge, as if against his will, expressed his opinion that the doctrines taught by the fathers of our system were not devoid of divine power." (Origen, "Against Celsus", Book 2.14)

"And with regard to the eclipse in the time of Tiberius Caesar, in whose reign Jesus appears to have been crucified, and the great earthquakes which then took place, Phlegon too, I think, has written in the thirteenth or fourteenth book of his Chronicles." (Origen, 2.33)

Pliny the Younger

- Was Governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor
- Wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan in 112 A.D. regarding the Christians in his province
- Verifies that Christians in 112 A.D. both worshipped Christ "as to a god", and were willing to die for their belief in Christ



Photo by Robert Jones

Cornelius Tacitus

- Born c. 52-55 A.D.
- Served as senator, under Vespasian, and later (112-113 A.D.) governor of Asia
- In "Annals" (c. 116 A.D.), he verifies the details of Christ's death at the hands of Pontius Pilate

"Christus, the founder of the name [Christians], had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue." (quoted from McDowell, p. 49)

Suetonius

- A Roman historian, wrote in c. A.D. 120:

"As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome." (quoted from McDowell, p. 52)

Mara Bar-Serapion

- Sometime after the fall of Jerusalem (70 A.D.), Mara Bar-Serapion (a Syrian) wrote a letter from prison to his son

"What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King? It was just after that that their kingdom was abolished...Nor did the wise king die for good; he lived on in the teaching which he had given." (quoted from McDowell, p. 52)

Discussion Question:

Are you surprised that there aren't more contemporary secular historical references to Jesus? Why or why not?

What the secular historical references tell us

Historical Fact	Verified By	N.T. equivalent
John the Baptist lived	Josephus	Matt 3:1
John baptized with water for remission of sins	Josephus	Matt 3:6
John was put to death by Herod (Antipas)	Josephus	Luke 9:9
Jesus was called Christ	Josephus	Acts 2:36
Jesus had a brother named James	Josephus	Mark 6:3
Jesus lived	Josephus, Thallus, Phlegon	The New Testament
Jesus was a teacher	Josephus	Matt 17:24
Jesus was a miracle worker	Josephus	John 7:21
Jesus had Gentile followers (as well as Jewish)	Josephus	Matt 8:5/13
Jesus was condemned to die by Pontius Pilate	Josephus, Tacitus	Mark 15:15
After the death of Jesus, his followers continued to teach in his name	Josephus, Mara Bar-Serapion	Acts
The followers of Jesus were named Christians (named after Jesus Christ)	Josephus, Tacitus	Acts 11:26
There was a darkness of the sun at the death of Jesus	Thallus, Phlegon	Luke 23:44/45
Jesus had knowledge of the future	Phlegon	Matt 24:1/2
There were earthquakes at the death of Jesus	Phlegon	Matt 27:51/54
Christians worshipped Christ as God	Pliny the Younger	Matt 14:33
Christians were willing to die for their belief in Jesus	Pliny the Younger	Acts 7:55 - 8:2
Christianity spread to Rome	Tacitus	Acts 23:11
Jewish followers of Christ were	Suetonius	Acts 18:2

Historical Fact	Verified By	N.T. equivalent
expelled from Rome by Claudius		
Jesus as King of the Jews	Mara Bar-Serapion	Matt 12:2, John 19:19/22

Historical Evidence - Contemporary Rabbinical References

Jesus was also mentioned in the writings of the early rabbis. Most Rabbinical references to Jesus were hostile, but they prove that Jesus was viewed as an historical personage in the place and time period that the Gospels indicate.

- Sample references:

"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 [crucified, see Gal 3:13] him on the eve of Passover." (from Sanhedrin 43a)

"Would you believe that any defense 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." (from a third-century commentary on the proceeding passage)

"Our rabbis taught: Yeshu had five disciples - Mattai, Nakkai, Netzer, Buni, and Todah." (from Sanhedrin 43a)

(Quoted from McDowell, p. 64/65)

What the Rabbinical references tell us

Reference	N.T. equivalent
Jesus was crucified on the eve of Passover	John 19:14
Jesus performed miracles, that were viewed as sorcery by the Jewish leaders	Mark 3:22, Matt 9:34, John 11:47
Jesus was not stoned, as per normal Jewish law, but crucified (which could only be administered by the Romans)	John 18:31
Christ was "near the kingship"	John 19:19/22, Matt 1:6
Jesus had disciples, one was named Matthew	Matt 10:2/3

Historical Evidence - References by the Early Church Fathers

There are, of course, many references by the Early Church Fathers that validate the Gospels. Several are included here as examples. Keep in mind that there was no canon, no New Testament at the time of these writings, so it is interesting to see how the Early Church Fathers viewed the historical Christ.

Clement of Rome

- A.D. 30-100
- May be the Clement mentioned in Phil 4:3

- Bishop of Rome 92 A.D. to 101 A.D.

"Jacob, through reason of his brother, went forth with humility from his own land, and came to Laban and served him; and there was given to him the scepter of the twelve tribes of Israel....From him also [was descended] our Lord Jesus Christ according to the flesh." (Chapter 32, First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians)

"Let us consider, beloved, how the Lord continually proves to us that there shall be a future resurrection, of which He has rendered the Lord Jesus Christ the first-fruits by raising Him from the dead." (Chapter 24, First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians)

Ignatius

- Was Martyred in A.D. 117 - thrown to the lions in the Coliseum in Rome

"For this end did the Lord suffer the ointment to be poured upon His head, that He might breathe immortality into His Church." (Ephesians 17)

"For our God, Jesus Christ, was, according to the appointment of God, conceived in the womb by Mary, of the seed of David, but by the Holy Ghost. He was born and baptized, that by His passion He might purify the water." (Ephesians 18)



Mary and Jesus, photo by Robert Jones

"...but that ye attain to full assurance in regard to the birth, and passion, and resurrection which took place in the time of the government of Pontius Pilate..." (Magnesians, 1)

"Stop your ears, therefore, when any one speaks to you at variance with Jesus Christ, who was descended from David, and was also of Mary; who was truly born, and did eat and drink. He was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate; He was truly crucified, and [truly] died, in the sight of beings in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth. He was also truly raised from the dead..." (Trallians 9)

"...was of the seed of David according to the flesh, by the Virgin Mary; was baptized by John...and was truly, under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch, nailed [to the cross] for us in His flesh." (Smyraeans 1)

Epistle of Barnabas

- Written between A.D. 70 & 135
- The author of this letter is unknown - some people believe that it was written by the Barnabas that traveled with Paul, but most scholars reject this.

"Moreover, when fixed to the cross, He had given Him to drink vinegar and gall." (Barnabas 1)

Aristides

- Wrote a defense of Christianity to Emperor Hadrian (2nd Century)

"The Christians, then, trace the beginning of their religion from Jesus the Messiah; and he is named the Son of God Most High. And it is said that God came down from heaven, and from a Hebrew virgin assumed and clothed himself with flesh; and the Son of God lived in a daughter of man. This is taught in the gospel, as it is called, which a short time was preached among them; and you also if you will read therein, may perceive the power which belongs to it. This Jesus, then, was born of the race of the Hebrews; and he had twelve disciples in order that the purpose of his incarnation might in time be accomplished. But he himself was pierced by the Jews, and he died and was buried; and they say that after three days he rose and ascended to heaven. Thereupon these twelve disciples went forth throughout the known parts of the world, and kept showing his greatness with all modesty and uprightness. And hence also those of the present day who believe that preaching are called Christians, and they are become famous." (Aristides 2)

Justyn Martyr

- 100 A.D.(?) - 165 A.D.(?)
- Wrote early apologetics
- Was beheaded by the Romans

"Now there is a village in the land of the Jews, thirty-five stadia from Jerusalem, in which Jesus Christ was born, as you can ascertain also from the registers of the taxing made under Cyrenius, your first procurator in Judaea." (First Apology, Chapter 34)

"'They pierced my hands and my 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 from the Acts of Pontius Pilate [now lost]." (First Apology, Chapter 35)

Summary

Thanks to recent archaeological discoveries, and ancient secular, Jewish, and early church historical sources, there is strong validation of the historical background of the Gospels, and solid evidence for the historical Jesus.

Sources

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Thanks also to Ruth Baker for additional information on Kursi/Gergesa.

About the Author

Robert C. Jones grew up in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania area. He made his living as a hotel lounge band leader/musician from 1974-1981. In 1981, he moved to the Atlanta, Georgia area, where he received a B.S. in Computer Science at DeVry Institute of Technology. From 1984-2009, Robert worked for Hewlett-Packard as a computer consultant.



Robert is an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church. He has written and taught numerous adult Sunday School courses (see front inside cover). He has also been active in choir ministries over the years, and has taught the *Disciples* Bible Study six times.

Robert is also President of the Kennesaw Historical Society, for whom he has written several books, including “The Law Heard 'Round the World - An Examination of the Kennesaw Gun Law and Its Effects on the Community”, “Retracing the Route of the General - Following in the Footsteps of the Andrews Raid”, and “Kennesaw (Big Shanty) in the 19th Century”. A new book, “Images of America: Kennesaw”, was published by Arcadia in 2006.

Robert has also written several books on ghost towns in the Southwest, including in Death Valley, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and Mojave National Preserve.

In 2005, Robert co-authored a business-oriented book entitled “Working Virtually: The Challenges of Virtual Teams”. His co-authors were Lise Pace and Rob Oyung.

His interests include the Civil War, Medieval Monasteries, American railroads, ghost towns, hiking in Death Valley and the Mojave, and Biblical Archaeology.

Robert is available as a guest speaker on Christian history and theology topics in the Atlanta Metro area, and North Georgia. See <http://www.sundayschoolcourses.com/speaker.htm> for more information.

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The “Christian History and Theology” courses:

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