

Jesus: In History and the Bible

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Jesus said, “Believe in God; believe also in me” (John 14:1, ESV).

He was challenging us to trust him like we would trust God. The Apostles’ Creed leads us to say the same thing:

*I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord.*

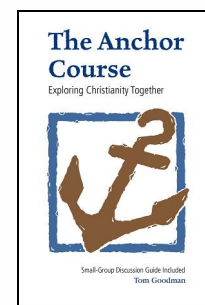
Believe in God; believe also in Jesus.

Jesus claimed to be the only one who can really tell us who God is. He said, “No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matthew 11:27, NIV). In fact, he said, “To see me is to see the Father” (John 14:9, Msg). The earliest Christians said the same thing. Just a few years after Jesus walked the earth, Paul wrote, “We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen” (Colossians 1:15, Msg). This is all the more remarkable considering that earlier in his life Paul had persecuted other Jews who made these claims. Another Scripture says that Jesus “perfectly mirrors God” (Hebrews 1:3, Msg). According to Jesus and to those who have believed him, to know what God is like we must look to Jesus.

So, a large part of exploring and explaining the Christian faith involves exploring and explaining Jesus. In Chapters 7-10 of *The Anchor Course*, I explain how Scripture describes Jesus (go to www.AnchorCourse.org to find out how to order copies). In this paper, though, we’ll look at some non-biblical references to Jesus from the first and second century A.D. Though written by non-believers, these brief comments from ancient sources reinforce what the earliest Christians believed about Jesus.

Four of the most important sources come from Josephus, Tacitus, Pliny, and a section of the Talmud. Flavius Josephus was a Jewish historian of the first century A.D. He was born in A.D. 37 and wrote in the closing decades of that century. One of his books, the *Antiquities*, was a history of the Jews from Creation until the time of his book, around A.D. 93. Several characters from the New Testament are mentioned, such as Ananias, Herod, Pilate, and John the Baptist. Of course, for our study, the most significant name he mentions is Jesus:

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



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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.ⁱ

Cornelius Tacitus was born around 52-55 A.D. He served as senator under Vespasian, and later (112-113 A.D.) he served as governor of Asia. In his history of the Roman Empire, the *Annals* (c. 116 A.D.), we find a section that makes reference to what Christians believed. Tacitus described how Nero, in an attempt to turn blame from himself for the fire that devastated Rome in A.D. 64, pointed the finger at Christians. In this section, Tacitus briefly explained to his readers his understanding of this persecuted group:

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 centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.ⁱⁱ

Pliny the Younger was governor of Bithynia in northwestern Turkey. He was known as “the Younger” to distinguish him from his uncle, Pliny the Elder, who was famous for his vast encyclopedia. As Governor, Pliny the Younger corresponded with the Roman Emperor Trajan, and many of those letters from the first decade of the second century still exist. In one of his letters, he seeks the Emperor’s advice on the Christian sect, which he briefly describes:

This is the plan which I have adopted in the case of those Christians who have been brought before me. I ask them whether they are Christians, if they say “Yes,” then I repeat the question the second time, and also a third—warning them of the penalties involved; and if they persist, I order them away to prison. . . .

There were others who showed similar mad folly, whom I reserved to be sent to Rome, as they were Roman citizens. . . . But they declared their guilt or error was simply this—on a fixed day they used to meet before dawn and recite a hymn among themselves to Christ, as though he were a god. . . .

I then thought it the more needful to get at the facts behind their statements. Therefore I placed two women, called “deaconesses,” under torture, but I found only a debased superstition carried to great lengths, so I postponed my examination, and immediately consulted you. . . . The contagion of this superstition has spread not merely through the free towns, but into the villages and farms.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Jewish Talmud, completed in A.D. 600, also made reference to Jesus. The portion called the Mishnah is particularly important, since it would have been completed around A.D. 200. One of the strongest references to Jesus, though understandably hostile, proves that Jesus was viewed as someone who lived in the place and time that the Gospels indicate:

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.^{iv}

None of these references to Jesus are from eyewitnesses, but the material reinforces that the Christian claims found in the New Testament were around from the earliest years of the church. Taken together, these non-biblical documents repeat seven convictions already found in the New Testament.

First, Jesus was a Jewish teacher. Few attempt to deny that Jesus ever existed, because early documents such as the New Testament and the *Antiquities* of Josephus clearly show that such a man lived and taught in the early decades of the first century. For Josephus to include Jesus in his history of the Jews is important corroboration of Jesus' ministry, since he wrote no more than sixty years after Jesus' crucifixion. Josephus described him as "a wise man" and "a teacher," which is also how the New Testament describes him. Jesus was often called "Teacher" or "Rabbi" by others, and they were "amazed at his teaching" (e.g., Matt. 8:19; Mark 9:5; Matthew 7:28).

Second, many regarded him as a healer and miracle-worker. Again, Josephus said Jesus "was a doer of wonderful works." This is in line with Scripture, where we find that Jesus "healed many who had various diseases" (Mark 1:34). Even the reference in the Mishnah to Jesus practicing "sorcery" is an indirect acknowledgment that many regarded him as someone who could perform wonders that could not be easily explained. According to the biographies of Jesus, his enemies did not deny his astonishing works, but they claimed that the power of Satan was behind Jesus' deeds (Matthew 12:24).

Third, he was rejected by the Jewish leadership and crucified under Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius. Josephus explained, "Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us . . . condemned him to the cross." Tacitus also explained in his *Annals* that "Christus . . . had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate." In the Mishnah, we are told Jesus was "hanged" (a reference to being suspended or crucified), and that he was killed on "the eve of Passover," as we also read in the Bible. He was executed, according to the Talmud, because "he enticed and led Israel astray." This is consistent with what we know of the Jewish leaders from the New Testament: they considered their countryman's claim that he was uniquely related to God to be blasphemy. According to the Gospel of John, when Pilate asked why Jesus should be executed, the leaders of Palestine replied, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God" (John 19:7).

Fourth, his followers believed he lived on after his death. Josephus wrote that, when Jesus was crucified, "Those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to

them alive again the third day.” Since Josephus was not a believer in Jesus, it is not clear whether this was simply a statement of what Christians claimed or if this was added to later copies of the *Antiquities*. Regardless, Tacitus referred to “the pernicious superstition” that at Christ’s death “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.” Pliny also referred to the “debased superstition” of the deaconesses he interrogated. What Tacitus and Pliny called “superstition” may be a summary reference to the convictions held by Christians, but it more likely refers to the specific Christian conviction that Jesus was raised from the dead. We know from Scripture how strongly people reacted to the resurrection claim. When Paul shared the story of Jesus among philosophers in Athens, they listened patiently until he got to the part about a dead man walking, at which point many “sneered” and ended the presentation (Acts 17:32). Likewise, as Paul shared the story of Jesus with the governor of Caesarea, Porcius Festus, when Paul got to the subject of the resurrection, Festus interrupted him with a shout: “You are out of your mind, Paul! Your great learning is driving you insane” (Acts 26:24).

Fifth, his followers believed he was the Messiah. When the Apostles’ Creed states, “I believe in Jesus Christ,” the word “Christ” is not Jesus’ last name. “Christ” is a title; it’s the Greek version of the Hebrew title “Messiah,” which means “Anointed One.” The Old Testament writers promised that, in the future, one would come who was uniquely anointed with the presence and the power of God. This “Anointed One,” or Messiah, or Christ, would be the central figure in God’s plan to set everything right in the created order. By the time of the first-century, anticipation for this Christ was at a white-hot fervor. Several had stirred up trouble and tragedy by claiming to be the Christ.

In the portion of the *Antiquities* quoted above, Josephus said of Jesus: “He was the Christ.” I’ve already noted that Josephus was not a believer and would not have stated this as a confession of faith. The statement is either a reference to what others believed, or was added by a later copier. Another section of the *Antiquities* is less disputed, however, where Josephus described the execution of James, and called him “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ.”^v This is consistent with the way the New Testament described Christian belief. According to the Bible, followers of Jesus called him “the Christ,” and he claimed this title for himself when his enemies point-blank asked him if he was the long-awaited Messiah (Luke 9:20; Matthew 26:63-64).

Sixth, his followers believed Jesus to be divine. Pliny described Christians to the Emperor in this way: “On a fixed day they used to meet before dawn and recite a hymn among themselves to Christ, as though he were a god.” This is consistent with New Testament teaching. It’s fashionable in some circles to claim that the Emperor Constantine imposed belief in Jesus’ divinity over three hundred years after the church began. In reality, it’s clear from comments both inside and outside of the New Testament that the divinity of Jesus was a belief held by the earliest Christians. In fact, the belief can be traced to the claims of Jesus himself. For more information about these claims to divinity, see Chapter 8 of *The Anchor Course*.

Seventh, Christianity spread rapidly through the civilized world. Pliny described the Christian faith as a “contagion” that had spread “not merely through the free towns, but into the villages and farms.” Even Roman citizens had become convinced of the Christian claims, and Pliny told Trajan he had sent many of these to Rome for trial. In the history written by

Tacitus, he also commented on how widespread Christianity had become. He referred to it as an “outbreak” that could be found “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.” This reference to the rapid spread of Christianity through all ranks of the Greco-Roman world is consistent with the descriptions we find in Scripture. For example, the New Testament book, *The Acts of the Apostles*, reported that after a “great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered, . . . those who had been scattered preached the word [about Jesus] wherever they went” (Acts 8:1 and 4). Slaves like Onesimus, scholars like Nicodemus, well-off business women like Lydia, and even Roman soldiers became believers. In fact, when referring to the church’s teaching about Jesus, the last word in the original Greek version of *The Acts of the Apostles* is the word we translate “unhindered” (Acts 28:31).

Conclusion

Even without a New Testament, we can learn these seven things about Jesus and the early Christian movement from the writings of non-believers in the first and second century. Added to what we know about Jesus from the New Testament, we have firmer historical attestations of Jesus than we have of any other founder of an ancient religion. The first biography of Buddha, for example, was not written until the first century A.D., nearly 700 years after he lived. In addition, the biography of Muhammad was not written until 767 A.D., over a hundred years after his death.^{vi} By contrast, the New Testament documents were written within a few decades—in some cases within a few years—after Jesus’ earthly ministry, and non-biblical references to Jesus reveal the same claims that Christians were making about Jesus. It’s important to remember the reliability of our earliest records of Jesus’ teaching and ministry.

ⁱ Antiquities, Book 18, chapter 3, paragraph 3. Located at <http://www.josephus-1.com/>, accessed October 6, 2004.

ⁱⁱ Tacitus, *Annals* 15. Located at <http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/annals.11.xv.html> /, accessed October 6, 2004.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pliny, *Letters* 10:96. Located at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/pliny-trajan1.html>, accessed October 6, 2004.

^{iv} http://www.answering-islam.de/Main/Shamoun/talmud_jesus.htm, accessed September 27, 2006.

^v Antiquities, Book 20, chapter 9, paragraph 1: “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: but as for those who seemed the most equitable of the citizens, and such as were the most uneasy at the breach of the laws, they disliked what was done.”

^{vi} Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1998, page 114.