

Is There Any Evidence for Jesus Outside the Bible?

Hostile Non-Biblical Pagan Accounts

There are a number of ancient classical accounts of Jesus from pagan, non-Christian sources. These accounts are generally hostile to Christianity; some ancient authors denied the miraculous nature of Jesus and the events surrounding His life:

Thallus (52AD)

Thallus is perhaps the earliest secular writer to mention Jesus and he is so ancient his writings don't even exist anymore. But Julius Africanus, writing around 221AD does quote Thallus who previously tried to explain away the darkness occurring at Jesus' crucifixion:

"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, Chronography, 18:1)

Tacitus (56-120AD)

Cornelius Tacitus was known for his analysis and examination of historical documents and is among the most trusted of ancient historians. In his "Annals" of 116AD, he describes Emperor Nero's response to the great fire in Rome and Nero's claim that the Christians were to blame:

"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 Judea, 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."

Mara Bar-Serapion (70AD)

Mara Bar-Serapion refers to Jesus as the "Wise King":

"What benefit did the Athenians obtain by putting Socrates to death? Famine and plague came upon them as judgment for their crime. Or, the people of Samos for burning Pythagoras? In one moment their country was covered with sand. Or the Jews by murdering their wise king?...After that their kingdom was abolished. God rightly avenged these men...The wise king...Lived on in the teachings he enacted."

Phlegon (80-140AD)

In a manner similar to Thallus, Julius Africanus also mentions a historian named Phlegon who wrote a chronicle of history around 140AD. In this history, Phlegon also mentions the darkness surrounding the crucifixion in an effort to explain it:

"Phlegon records that, in the time of Tiberius Caesar, at full moon, there was a full eclipse of the sun from the sixth to the ninth hour." (Africanus, Chronography, 18:1)

Phlegon is also mentioned by Origen (an early church theologian and scholar, born in Alexandria):

“Now Phlegon, in the thirteenth or fourteenth book, I think, of his Chronicles, not only ascribed to Jesus a knowledge of future events . . . but also testified that the result corresponded to His predictions.” (Origen Against Celsus, Book 2, Chapter 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 . . . ” (Origen Against Celsus, Book 2, Chapter 33)

“Jesus, while alive, was of no assistance to himself, but that he arose after death, and exhibited the marks of his punishment, and showed how his hands had been pierced by nails.” (Origen Against Celsus, Book 2, Chapter 59)

Pliny the Younger (61-113AD)

Early Christians were also described in early, non-Christian history. Pliny the Younger, in a letter to the Roman emperor Trajan, describes the lifestyles of early Christians:

“They (the Christians) 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.”

Suetonius (69-140AD)

Suetonius was a Roman historian and annalist of the Imperial House under the Emperor Hadrian. His writings about Christians describe their treatment under the Emperor Claudius (41-54AD):

“Because the Jews at Rome caused constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus (Christ), he (Claudius) expelled them from the city (Rome).” (Life of Claudius, 25:4)

This expulsion took place in 49AD, and in another work, Suetonius wrote about the fire which destroyed Rome in 64 A.D. under the reign of Nero. Nero blamed the Christians for this fire and he punished Christians severely as a result:

“Nero inflicted punishment on the Christians, a sect given to a new and mischievous religious belief.” (Lives of the Caesars, 26.2)

Lucian of Samosata: (115-200 A.D.)

Lucian was a Greek satirist who spoke sarcastically of Christ and Christians, but in the process, he did affirm they were real people and never referred to them as fictional characters:

“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 that 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)

From this account we can add to our description of Jesus: *He taught about repentance and about the family of God. These teachings were quickly adopted by Jesus' followers and exhibited to the world around them.*

Celsus (175AD)

“Jesus had come from a village in Judea, and was the son of a poor Jewess who gained her living by the work of her own hands. His mother had been turned out of doors by her husband, who was a carpenter by trade, on being convicted of adultery [with a soldier named Panthéra (i.32)]. Being thus driven away by her husband, and wandering about in disgrace, she gave birth to Jesus, a bastard. Jesus, on account of his poverty, was hired out to go to Egypt. While there he acquired certain (magical) powers which Egyptians pride themselves on possessing. He returned home highly elated at possessing these powers, and on the strength of them gave himself out to be a god.”

Hostile Non-Biblical Jewish Accounts

Josephus (37-101AD)

In more detail than any other non-biblical historian, Josephus writes about Jesus in his “the Antiquities of the Jews” in 93AD.

“Now around this time lived Jesus, a wise man. For he was a worker of amazing deeds and was a teacher of people who gladly accept the truth. He won over both many Jews and many Greeks. Pilate, when he heard him accused by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, (but) those who had first loved him did not cease (doing so). To this day the tribe of Christians named after him has not disappeared”

Jewish Talmud (400-700AD)

While the earliest Talmudic writings of Jewish Rabbis appear in the 5th century, the tradition of these Rabbinic authors indicates they are faithfully transmitting teachings from the early “Tannaitic” period of the 1st Century BC to the 2nd Century AD.

“Jesus practiced magic and led Israel astray” (b. Sanhedrin 43a; cf. t. Shabbat 11.15; b. Shabbat 104b)

“Rabbi Hisda (d. 309) said that Rabbi Jeremiah bar Abba said, ‘What is that which is written, ‘No evil will befall you, nor shall any plague come near your house’? (Psalm 91:10)... ‘No evil will befall you’ (means) that evil dreams and evil thoughts will not tempt you; ‘nor shall any plague come near your house’ (means) that you will not have a son or a disciple who burns his food like Jesus of Nazareth.” (b. Sanhedrin 103a; cf. b. Berakhot 17b)

“Our rabbis have taught that Jesus had five disciples: Matthai, Nakai, Nezer, Buni and Todah. They brought Matthai to (to trial). He said, ‘Must Matthai be killed? For it is written, ‘When (mathai) shall I come and appear before God?’” (Psalm 92:2) They said to him, “Yes Matthai must be killed, for it is written, ‘When (mathai) he dies his name will perish’” (Psalm 41:5). They brought Nakai. He said to them, “Must Nakai be killed? For it is written, “The innocent (naqi) and the righteous will not slay” (Exodus 23:7). They said to him, “Yes, Nakai must be killed, for it is written, ‘In secret places he slays the innocent (naqi)’” (Psalm 10:8). (b. Sanhedrin 43a; the passage continues in a similar way for Nezer, Buni and Todah)

And this, perhaps the most famous of Talmudic passages about Jesus:

“It was taught: On the day before the Passover they hanged Jesus. A herald went before him for forty days (proclaiming), “He will be stoned, because he practiced magic and enticed Israel to go astray. Let anyone who knows anything in his favor come forward and plead for him.” But nothing was found in his favor, and they hanged him on the day before the Passover. (b. Sanhedrin 43a)

Conclusions

Now in spite of the fact that the ancient Jews who wrote this did their best to argue for another interpretation of the life of Christ, they did make several claims here about Jesus. This passage, along with several others from the Toledot tradition, confirm:

- *Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, healed the lame, said Isaiah foretold of His life, was worshipped as God, arrested by the Jews,*
- *beaten with rods, given vinegar to drink, wore a crown of thorns, rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, was betrayed by a man named Judah Iskarioto, and had followers who claimed He was resurrected and ascended, leaving an empty tomb.*

Let's review what we've learned from hostile pagan and Jewish sources describing Jesus. We'll do our best to discount the anti-Christian bias we see in the sources, just as we discounted the pro-Christian bias we think might exist in some versions of the writing of Josephus. Many elements of the Biblical record are confirmed by these hostile accounts, in spite of the fact they deny the supernatural power of Jesus:

- *Jesus was born and lived in Palestine.*
- *He was born, supposedly, to a virgin and had an earthly father who was a carpenter.*
- *He was a teacher who taught that through repentance and belief, all followers would become brothers and sisters.*
- *He led the Jews away from their beliefs.*
- *He was a wise man who claimed to be God and the Messiah.*
- *He had unusual magical powers and performed miraculous deeds. He healed the lame. He accurately predicted the future.*
- *He was persecuted by the Jews for what He said, betrayed by Judah Iskarioto. He was beaten with rods, forced to drink vinegar and wear a crown of thorns.*
- *He was crucified on the eve of the Passover and this crucifixion occurred under the direction of Pontius Pilate, during the time of Tiberius.*
- *On the day of His crucifixion, the sky grew dark and there was an earthquake. Afterward, He was buried in a tomb and the tomb was later found to be empty.*
- *He appeared to His disciples resurrected from the grave and showed them His wounds.*
- *These disciples then told others Jesus was resurrected and ascended into heaven. Jesus' disciples and followers upheld a high moral code. One of them was named Matthai.*
- *The disciples were also persecuted for their faith but were martyred without changing their claims.*
- *They met regularly to worship Jesus, even after His death.*

Not bad, given this information is coming from ancient accounts *hostile* to the Biblical record. While these non-Christian sources interpret the claims of Christianity differently, they affirm the initial, evidential claims of the Biblical authors (much like those who interpret the evidence related to Kennedy's assassination and the Twin Tower attacks come to different conclusions but affirm the basic facts of the historical events). Is there any evidence for Jesus outside the Bible? Yes, and the ancient non-Christian interpretations (and critical commentaries) of the Gospel accounts serve to strengthen the core claims of the New Testament.

Taken from J. Warner Wallace's "Cold Case Christianity"

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