

DOCTRINE OF CHRIST

Lesson 2

The Historicity of Christ

Some people deny that Jesus ever existed. Some deny that Jesus performed miracles or deny that He rose from the dead. Did Jesus really exist? What historical records prove He existed? Are there any non-biblical sources that mention Jesus? What do the historical records say about Jesus? Michael Gleghorn wrote, "*F.F. Bruce tells about a Christian correspondent who was told by an agnostic friend that "apart from obscure references in Josephus and the like," there was no historical evidence for the life of Jesus outside the Bible.*"¹ It is becoming more common every day to hear people say things like this.

The purpose of this study is not to prove that Jesus existed and is therefore the Messiah who we must believe in to be saved. The Bible settles the issue of Jesus' identity definitively. The purpose of this lesson is to investigate and examine Jesus Christ from a historical perspective in order to confirm and encourage believers that have already repented of their sins and placed their faith in Jesus Christ.

Believers must presuppose two important things, 1) that God exists, and 2) the Bible is God's Word. These are two fundamental issues which every believer must accept by faith. The Scriptures teach that a person must believe in Christ in order that he might know the truth. The reason for this is that God's Word is only understood by the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit (**I Cor. 2:10-15; I Jn. 2:27**). The Spirit is given to believers when they place their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. Once a believer has the Holy Spirit, they have what they need to know the truth. Hence, you must believe in order to know. Yet, once a person is saved it is encouraging to know that history confirms the Bible and the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was a real historical figure.

I. BIBLICAL WITNESS

A. The Hebrew Scriptures (The Old Testament) written from about 1,500 BC confirm Jesus' historicity

1. **Luke 24:27, 44** Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures. . . 44 Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."
2. **John 1:45** Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

¹Michael Gleghorn (<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/1304954/posts>) quoting F. F. Bruce in *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 13.

3. **John 5:39** “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me;

4. **Acts 10:38, 43** “You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. . . 43 “Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.”

5. **Acts 26:22-23** “So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; 23 that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.”

6. **Acts 28:23** When they had set a day for Paul, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening.

What we learn from the New Testament texts above is that the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament predict and talk about the coming of Christ before He is even born. In fact, one of the most prominent themes of the Old Testament is God’s plan of salvation through a single man, Jesus, the Messiah.

The Messiah is first mentioned in **Gen. 3:15** as the “*woman’s seed.*” The last verse of the last book of the Old Testament, the book of Malachi, predicts that the forerunner of the Messiah will come in the spirit and power of Elijah. In between these two book ends are many, many references to the Messiah (the Greek word is “Christ”). Thus, we have 39 books, written over a time span of about 1,400 years, by more than 30 different authors, who lived in different locations, and they made many predictions about the coming Messiah. They made so many predictions in fact that it would be impossible for any one person to fulfill them all, short of a miracle. Yet Jesus did! This makes Jesus unique in history as there are historical records of Him before He was even born. In another lesson we will look at some of the key prophecies fulfilled by Jesus Christ, but for now, we will move on to look at New Testament Scriptures which verify the historicity of Jesus Christ.

B. The New Testament Scriptures, which happen to be the most reliable ancient document known to man, also confirm the historicity of Jesus.²

1. **Matt. 1:1, 18; 2:1; 3:13; 4:1; etc.** The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham: . . . **18** Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. . . **2:1** Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, . . . **3:13** Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. . . **4:1** Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

2. **Mark 1:1** The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

3. **Luke 1:1-4** Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; 4 so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

4. John's gospel labors to defend Jesus' historicity
 - a. *Jesus true identity 1:1-5* 1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. 4 In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. 5 The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

 - b. *Jesus notarized by John 1:6-8* There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light.

²If you are interested in learning about the reliability of the Bible as compared to other ancient books and writings, see the "Doctrine of the Bible" series (not to be confused with "Basic Bible Doctrine") on the Calvary Bible Church web site www.calvarybiblechurch.org. Click on the classes tab, then click the series "Doctrine of the Bible," then click on the links entitled "Ancient Books and Extra Biblical Texts;" "The Preservation and Dramas of Ancient Biblical Texts," and "How do we know the Bible is Reliable?"

- c. *Jesus verified by 1:14* And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.
 - d. *Jesus testified by Jesus Himself 1:19-20* This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."
5. **Acts 1:1-2** The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen.

The New Testament contains 27 different books written by some 9 different authors, from different locations, educational backgrounds, and professions. These writers were all eyewitnesses and friends of eyewitnesses of Jesus of Nazareth. They were called by Him, saw Him, lived with Him, witnessed many of His miracles first hand, were eye witnesses that He fulfilled every Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah's first coming. Most of the authors of the New Testament died martyrs because they refused to deny that Jesus was the long awaited Christ, the Son of God.

Most remarkable of all is the personal story and testimony of Saul of Tarsus, later to be know as the Apostle Paul. Paul was a member of the strictest Jewish sect called the Pharisees. He was so zealous for Judaism that he set out to destroy Christianity. But after a miraculous encounter with the resurrected Christ, he gave his life to the very thing he had once set out to destroy. Paul became the most prolific writer of the New Testament, suffered greatly for the cause of Christ and died a martyr. He fearlessly proclaimed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, the long awaited Messiah.

Many others also died for Jesus Christ, the first being Stephen (**Acts 7**), who was stoned to death after he told the Jews that they had killed their own Messiah. The fact that thousands died as martyrs in the first century AD is very compelling evidence of Jesus' historicity. James the brother of John was falsely accused and executed. His executioner was so amazed at his courage and cheerfulness in the face of death that he himself was converted and executed with James. The Apostle Phillip was imprisoned, scourged, then crucified. Matthew was cut down with the sword. Mark had his feet tied together and was drug through the street, thrown in prison, and then burned to death the next day. James, the half brother of Christ, was attacked by a mob, who beat and stoned him to death.

Matthias, the apostle chosen to replace Judas who betrayed Christ, was first stoned then beheaded in Jerusalem. Andrew, the brother of Peter, was hung on a cross for three days and although he was in serious pain continued to tell people about Jesus from the cross. Many bystanders were converted and pleaded with the Roman officials to cut him down. They agreed. But when the last rope was cut, Andrew silently fell to the ground dead. Peter, the leader of the apostles, was crucified upside down in Rome by Nero. Paul was beheaded with the sword. Jude was crucified. Bartholomew was slain by idolaters some said with the sword, others by being beaten to death. Doubting Thomas was run through with a spear. Simon the Zealot was crucified. All these men were eye witnesses of Jesus Christ. All of them could have escaped death by denying Jesus. It is highly unlikely that all these men suffered cruel deaths and torture for a man who never existed.³

II. EXTRA BIBLICAL CHRISTIAN WITNESS

- A. **Early Martyrs for Jesus Christ Testify to His Historicity.** The martyrs listed above are just the tip of the iceberg. Thousands of other martyrs were killed in the first century alone under Nero and Dionysius because they would not deny Jesus Christ, a historical individual, who fulfilled Old Testament prophecy, performed many convincing miracles, died, was buried, and rose again on the third day. Since then, history has recorded the martyrdom of thousands of other followers of Christ.⁴
- B. **Early Documents from the First Three Centuries after Christ Attest to His Historicity.** These early writers are often referred to as the “Early Church Fathers.” Men such as Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John (69-155), Irenaeus (about 100 to 200), Ignatius (35-107), Justin Martyr (100-165), Clement of Rome (about 40-99), Clement of Alexandria (150-216), Hippolytus of Rome (150-235), Origen (185-254), Cyprian (200-258), etc., who all lived in the third century or earlier.⁵ They wrote about Jesus, quoting biblical and extra biblical resources which mention him more than 32,000 times!⁶ It is only a stubborn denial against mountains of historical witness to say that Jesus wasn’t a historical figure or that he wasn’t who he claimed to be.

³Information taken from *Foxes Book of Martyrs*, pgs. 26-35.

⁴For more information on early Christian Martyrs I recommend Harold Chadwick’s *The New Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* or Mark Walter’s *Encyclopedia of Christian Martyrs*.

⁵Josh McDowell’s, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, pgs. 51 & 81.

⁶Geisler & Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, pg. 429.

III. EXTRA BIBLICAL NON-CHRISTIAN WITNESS

Not only do we have verification of the authenticity and existence of Christ from the early church fathers, we also have the witness of those who were not believers in Jesus Christ at all. One would expect those who professed to be Christians to talk about Jesus, but why would those who do not believe in Jesus as the Messiah talk about him and his followers? Because they knew Jesus Christ to be a historical figure, though they did not trust Him as their Savior.

A. **Cornelius Tacitus**, a Roman historian (54 -117), unsympathetically mentions Nero's persecution of Christians saying:

Nero fastened the guilt . . . 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 . . . 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. . .⁷

B. **Lucian of Samosata** (120-180) mentions Jesus Christ, His crucifixion, and Christians:

The Christians . . . worship a man to this day--the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account. . . . [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.⁸

C. **Josephus**, a Jewish historian of the early second century, not at all sympathetic to Christianity, mentioned Jesus several times. In his most famous quotes concerning Jesus, Josephus said:

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 among 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 in 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.⁹

⁷Michael Gleghorn (<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/1304954/posts>) quoting Tacitus, Annals 15.44, cited in Lee Strobel's, *The Case for Christ*, 82.

⁸Michael Gleghorn (<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/1304954/posts>) quoting Lucian, *The Death of Peregrine*, 11-13, in *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, transl. by H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949), vol. 4., cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 206.

⁹*Josephus's Essential Writings*, pgs. 264-265. While a striking statement about Jesus and fully in agreement with the Bible, it is for this reason that people have disputed the legitimacy of this particular quote of Josephus and have argued that it must be a forgery. The other option is that Josephus accurately recorded the truth of history about Jesus.

Josephus also says:

Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, . . .¹⁰

- D. **Plinus Secundus** (also Pliny the Younger), Governor of Bythynia (AD 112), mentions the followers of Jesus when writing to the emperor Trajan about how he should treat Christians. He tells Trajan that he had been killing anyone, even children, who confessed to be followers of Christ. He had killed so many that he was wondering if he should continue the practice or just kill key individuals. He explained how he would make them bow down to the statues of Trajan and curse Christ, but that the genuine believers could not be induced to do so. Plinus explained in his writings that the reasons Christians were killed was not that they committed any wicked deed, but that they met on a certain day to read a verse and sing a hymn to Christ, believing Him to be a god.¹¹ Pliny wrote:

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.¹²

- E. **Suetonious** (69-140) another Roman Historian in his *Lives of the Caesars* said:

Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition.¹³

- F. **Julius Africanus** (160-240) was a celebrated orator during the reign of Emperor Alexander Severus. The Emperor, impressed with Julius' learning, appointed him to build the library at Pantheon. His most famous writing is *Chronographia*. where he forcefully argues that the world was created 5,500 years before Christ and would end 5,500 years after. In one of his orations he

¹⁰Flavius Josephus, translated by William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996, c1987), Ant 20.200.

¹¹ *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, pg. 83.

¹²Michael Gleghorn (<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/1304954/posts>) quoting Pliny, *Letters*, transl. by William Melmoth, rev. by W.M.L. Hutchinson (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1935), vol. II, X:96, cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 199.

¹³ Suetonius, *De Vita Caesarum – Nero*, section XVI (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/suet-nero-rolfe.html>).

refers to the writings of Thallus and Phlegon concerning the darkness that occurred during the crucifixion of Jesus:

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. . . 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.¹⁴

G. The Jewish Babylonian Talmud, an ancient Jewish text written about 70-200 AD, is a text that reads:

On the eve of the Passover Yeshu [Jesus' Hebrew name] was hanged [Jewish reference to crucifixion see Gal. 3:13; Lk. 23:39]. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald . . . cried, "He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy [Jews thought Christianity was a source of sorcery and referred to Jews who became Christians as apostates]."¹⁵

What are we to do with all of these historical references of Jesus? We are to know they exist and be encouraged by them. We are to be thankful they confirm what the Bible teaches, but we are not to use them as a means to argue people into the kingdom. Yes, we may use these to silence critics, but not as the sole means of evangelism. At some point the gospel must be shared, for without the gospel no one gets saved.

IV. APPLYING WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT THE HISTORICITY OF JESUS

- A. You are talking to someone from work during a lunch break and mention that you are a Christian. They look at you and say, "*I don't believe in Jesus. I don't believe He ever existed. I think He is nothing more than a myth that has slowly evolved over the centuries.*" What might be a good way to respond to this person?
- B. A college student comes to you flustered and anxious. They tell you that they met someone at college and wanted to share the gospel with them, but as soon as they started to talk about the Bible and Jesus the person interrupted and denied the reliability of the Bible as a historical document and that Jesus ever existed. The college student asks you what to do. Should they argue with the person about the historicity of Jesus, or should they just tell them about Jesus? What approach should they take in evangelizing this person?

¹⁴Julius Africanus, "The Extant Fragments of the Five Books of the Chronography," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. VI, in the section entitled "On the Circumstances Connected with Our Saviour's Passion and His Life-Giving Resurrection," ECF 1.6.2.1.3.25, electronic edition, Logos Bible Software.

¹⁵Michael Gleghorn (<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/1304954/posts>) quoting *The Babylonian Talmud*, transl. by I. Epstein (London: Soncino, 1935), vol. III, Sanhedrin 43a, 281, cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 203.

- C. You are wanting to share the gospel with a college professor you know. He is very smart and has a long string of degrees. You stop by his office one day and tell him that you would like to talk to him about your faith in Jesus Christ and Christianity. He smiles condescendingly and tells you that though many have claimed to have been changed by Christianity and knowing Christ, it is no different than people being changed by Santa Claus. He says Jesus is nothing more than an ideal, a concept, the utopian man, but there isn't any more evidence for Jesus having ever existed than Big Foot or the Loch Ness Monster. He tells you that he is glad that Christianity is important to you, but he could never believe in the myth called Jesus. How should you respond?

New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce has said:

Some writers may toy with the fancy of a "Christ-myth," but they do not do so on the ground of historical evidence. The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar. It is not historians who propagate the "Christ-myth" theories.¹⁶

The evidences above from the first three centuries alone are historically compelling. Most historians believe in other historical figures based on far less information which is less reliable. The real issue is that they don't want to believe in Jesus because they don't want to submit to Jesus. There is much more that could be presented for the historicity of Jesus. The Encyclopedia Britannica devotes over 20,000 words to the question of Jesus' historicity. Our calendar system is built upon a belief in Jesus with "BC" (before Christ) and "AD" (Anno Domini – Latin for "in the year of our Lord") as testifying to Jesus' existence. Have no doubt, Jesus was a real person, the Messiah, the Savior. There are over 80,000 ancient manuscripts and pieces of manuscripts of the New Testament which testify to Jesus' historicity. It is beyond rational dispute that ***the Bible and its claims about Jesus is more reliable than any other ancient fact.***

¹⁶F. F. Bruce quoted by Mark Water, *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* (Alresford, Hampshire: John Hunt Publishers Ltd, 2000), 177