

Reliability of the Gospels – Part 01: External Testimony about the Life of Jesus

Account of Jesus' outside the Bible

- As with the book of Acts, there are many "apocryphal" gospels which start showing up in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. These books do not contain much narrative material compared to the four biblical gospels. As we said with the apocryphal acts, it is possible that some real historical material about Jesus has made its way into these books, but it is generally not possible to verify it, and it does appear that much material is legendary or fanciful.
 - e.g. The gospel of Thomas; Gospel of Peter.

Mentions of Jesus outside the Bible

- There are a small number of 1st century writers whose works have survived. But it is clear that most writers are not interested in Jesus. They are concerned generally with other topics and have no need to discuss him. Most references are the "sect" which bears his name, and when Jesus is mentioned, it is usually incidental.

- Tacitus. Annals of Imperial Rome. 15:44

"[Concerning the fire of Rome]...neither human help, nor imperial munificence, nor all the modes of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order. Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians.

"Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone *the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus*, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely *in Judaea, the home of the disease*, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue.

"First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man."

- Josephus. *Antiquities of the Jews*.

- 18:3.3 Testimonium Flavium (disputed)

"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, 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."

- 18.5.2. John the Baptist.

"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 would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away of some sins, but for the purification of the body: supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness. Now when others came in crowds about him; for they were very greatly moved 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 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."

- 20.9.1 James, the brother of Jesus

"Cesar, upon hearing the death of Festus, sent Albinus into Judea, as procurator. But the King deprived Joseph of the High Priesthood; and bestowed the succession to that dignity on the son of Ananus, who was also himself called Ananus... 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..."

- Babylonian Talmud. Sanhedrin 43a (among other references)
"On Passover Eve they hung the corpse of Jesus the Nazarene after they killed him by way of stoning. And a crier went out before him for forty days, publicly proclaiming: Jesus the Nazarene is going out to be stoned because he practiced sorcery, incited people to idol worship, and led the Jewish people astray. Anyone who knows of a reason to acquit him should come forward and teach it on his behalf. And the court did not find a reason to acquit him, and so they stoned him and hung his corpse on Passover eve."
- Thallus , quoted by Julius Africanus. *Chronography*. 18:1
"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. " Africanus identifies this with the darkness during the crucifixion, and then argues that Thallus is wrong to call the event a solar eclipse.