



Corroborating Evidence: Is
there evidence for Jesus outside
of the biographies in the Bible?

Case for Christ (Ch.4)
Lee Strobel

Definition of Corroborate

- To make more certain; confirm (Webster)
- Corroborate evidence supports other testimony; it affirms or backs up the essential elements of an eyewitness account.
- The more corroborative evidence, the stronger and more secure the case.
- * Are there writings outside of the gospels that affirm or support any of the essentials about Jesus or early Christianity?

Jewish Historians: Josephus

- He was an important Jewish historian of the 1st century.
- He was born in A.D. 37, and he wrote most of his four works towards the end of the 1st century
- He was a priest and a Pharisee
- His writings, particularly about the Jewish War, have proved to be very accurate. They have been corroborated through archeological excavations and other historians, so he is considered a very reliable source.

The Antiquities

- In his writings, *The Antiquities*, he refers to James, the brother of Jesus, and to Jesus himself

“He convened a meeting of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man named James, the brother of Jesus, who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned.”

(The Christ which means “the Anointed One” or “Messiah”.)

Testimonium Flavianum

“About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Christ. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affections for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him. And the tribe of Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.”

Testimonium Flavianum (cont.)

- Controversial passage
- Most scholars today say that it is authentic, although there may be some interpolations

-Interpolations: early Christian copyists inserted some phrases that a Jewish writer like Josephus wouldn't have written

Ex. "...if indeed one ought to be called a man...he was the Christ...on the third day he appeared to them restored to life"-all three show clear signs of belief that were not likely a part of Josephus' original writing

- Even with these interpolations, Josephus corroborates important information about Jesus

Why did Josephus have so little to say about Jesus?

- Some critics argue that Josephus had so little to say about Jesus, while giving greater details to figures like John the Baptist, that perhaps the Jesus that is mentioned is not the same as that in the Bible.
 - Josephus was more interested in political matters and the struggle against Rome, so for him John the Baptist seemed to pose more of a political threat than did Jesus.

Are there other Jewish Accounts of Jesus as a historical figure?

- There are references to Jesus in the Talmud (A.D.500), though they considered him to be a heretic and his powers to come from sorcery.
- They do verify that Jesus was a healer and miracle-worker, that he was a teacher, and that he had disciples.

Corroborating Early Details

- Paul wrote many of his letters before the gospels were written, and they contain very early reports concerning Jesus- so early that nobody can make a credible claim that they had been seriously distorted by legendary development.
- Paul refers to facts like Jesus was descendant of David, that he was Messiah, that he was betrayed, that he was tried, crucified, and buried, and that he rose again on the third day and was seen of many people.
- This figure is especially important due to Paul's monotheistic Jewish background, since some claim that the monotheistic beliefs were imported into Christianity later by Gentile believers.

Roman Historians: Tacitus

- The most important Roman historian in the 1st century
- Recorded what is considered to be the most important reference to Jesus outside the New Testament.

“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 origins, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, 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... 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.”
- Tacitus

Tacitus (cont.)

- Provides us with the following facts:
 - Crucifixion was the most abhorrent fate that anyone could undergo
 - That there was a movement based on this crucified man has to be explained
 - *How can one explain the spread of a religion based on the worship of a man who suffered the most abhorrent death possible? The Christian answer is that he was resurrected. Others have to come up with alternative theories and they aren't very persuasive.
- This is important testimony by an unsympathetic witness of the success and spread of Christianity, based on the historical figure-Jesus.

Pliny the Younger

- Also referred to Christianity in his writings, around A.D. 111.
- His writings concern Christians that he had arrested, and attests to the rapid spread of Christianity, both in the city and in rural areas, among every class of people (mentions “slave-women” and “Roman citizens”). It also talks about the worship of Jesus as God, and that Christians maintained high ethical standards, and were not easily swayed from their beliefs even when facing the threat of execution.

The Day the Earth Went Dark

- When the Bible speaks of the crucifixion and mentions that the earth went dark during part of the time that Jesus was on the cross, is this just a literary device or is there a mention of this happening outside of the Bible?
- Historian names Thallus makes mention of this event in A.D. 52 but explains it away as an eclipse of the sun
- Later historians found this to be unlikely
- Writings around A.D 137 by Phlegon report that there was “the greatest eclipse of the sun” and that “it became night in the sixth hour of the day [i.e., noon] so that the stars even appeared in the heavens. There was a great earthquake, in Bithynia, and many things were overturned in Nicaea.”
- Tertullian reported it was a “cosmic” or “world event”.

Pontius Pilate

- Critics claim that the Bible makes Pontius Pilate to be a weak ruler who easily gave in to the pressure of the Jewish mob, while history records him as obstinate and inflexible. They claim this shows how inaccurate the gospels truly are.
- In a study done by Paul Maier, he reports that Pilate's protector, Sejanus, fell from power about A.D. 31 for plotting against the emperor, which would have made Pilate's political position very weak in A.D. 33. So it would be understandable the Pilate didn't want to offend the Jews and get into further trouble with the emperor.

Why is there not more evidence outside of the Bible about Jesus?

- Not many documents even exist from the 1st century
- As with most religious movements, it's often not until later generations that people record things about them.
- There is still better historical documentation for Jesus than for the founder of any other ancient religion.
- Writings about Jesus are found as early as the same century that he lived. Other religious movements (Buddha, Mohammad, etc.) do not have recorded writings until at least a century after they lived, and many are several centuries later.

Summary of Corroborating Evidence about Jesus from Outside the NT

- 1) Jesus was Jewish teacher
- 2) Many people believed that he performed healings and exorcisms
- 3) Some people believed he the Messiah
- 4) He was rejected by the Jewish leaders
- 5) He was crucified under Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius
- 6) Despite his shameful death, his followers, who believed that he was still alive, spread beyond Palestine so that there were multitudes of them in Rome in A.D.64
- 7) All kinds of people from city and countryside, men and women, slave and free- worshiped him as God.