

Chapter #3

The Case for Christianity Apart from Scripture

As we have seen so far, apologetics is necessary because (1) we live among a people who need to know the truth of the Gospel; (2) Christianity is under attack by modern-day theologians and philosophers who deny that Jesus Christ ever even existed; and (3) it is our responsibility to "become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). We have an obligation to set the record straight and to help unbelievers overcome their intellectual obstacles to faith in Christ.

But note this: It is impossible to have a strong apologetic apart from the superior evidence offered by the Bible. In order to proclaim the truths that we enumerated in our last chapter, an appeal must be made to the claims of Scripture. And so we are in a dilemma. For those who deny that Jesus was ever more than just a great man, if in fact He ever existed at all, using the Bible to defend Christianity is almost useless. I say "almost" because I recognize that there is tremendous power in God's Word to melt the heart of even the most calloused skeptic. The grandeur and loftiness of what is written in the Bible can be overwhelming to the searching soul who actually reads it. One of our objectives in apologetics is to prove the dependability and reliability of Scripture so that our listener will accept it as a viable historical record of first century events. But there is a second dilemma: what criterion is required to prove the Bible is accurate? For any other ancient literary or historical work, the content of the work is considered reliable unless proven to be false. If statements concur with what is already known of a particular period or person, then there is no reason to doubt their trustworthiness. However, if known facts are recorded that contradict the manuscript in question, it is considered doubtful. But there is always a presumption of authenticity until proven otherwise. Not so with the Bible. For some reason, whenever scholars or historians are questioned about the Bible, they take the stance that it is suspect until it can be proven to be accurate. It is presumed unreliable until proven true. Every other work is "innocent until proven guilty," so to speak, but the Bible is "guilty until proven innocent." One of your first jobs in apologetics is to encourage the skeptic to use the same criterion for judging the Bible as he or she would for any other ancient work. The fact that people revere the Bible should make no difference in how it is treated.

What did secular writers say about Christianity?

Our goal in this chapter is to examine some of the corroborating evidence that supports the Christianity of the Bible. Starting from the presumption of "innocence" (the Bible is true unless proven otherwise), we don't have to find every fact of the New Testament repeated elsewhere, only enough reliable indirect evidence to make it probable that the rest is true (that is, that nothing reliable directly contradicts what is written there).

For the sake of the skeptic, this chapter will be confined only to secular sources that touch on the life of Christ or the nature of Christianity. Volumes were written by the followers of Christianity, the early church "fathers" (Barnabas, Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, etc.) and the apologists that followed them. We would expect that their views would mirror those of the Bible. In fact, all but 11 verses of the New Testament were quoted by the early church fathers. But what of the rest of the world? If Jesus really did exist as an historical figure in the first century, someone else should have noticed.

As you read through these quotations, you may be surprised by the small number of ancient references to Jesus. In actuality, very few manuscripts from the first century have survived, and no manuscript has survived from the 30's A.D., the period in which Jesus taught, performed miracles and was crucified and rose from the dead. Among the other works that have survived are some fables, some commentaries on the Old Testament (comparing it to Greek culture and philosophy), some treatises and letters, a book on agriculture, fragments of a novel, a history of Alexander the Great, books on oratory, a history of the Jewish wars from the Maccabean war to A.D. 70, etc.¹ You wouldn't expect Jesus to be mentioned in any of these sources. Keep in mind, also, that Jesus was basically insignificant, and Christianity was of very little interest to the Roman world.

ōFrom the point of view of Roman history of the first century, Jesus was a nobody. A man of no social standing, who achieved brief local notice in a remote and little-loved province as a preacher and miracle-worker, and who was duly executed by order of a minor provincial governor, could hardly be expected to achieve mention in the Roman headlines.ö²

ōGalilee and Judaea were at the time two minor administrative areas under the large Roman province of Syria, itself on the far eastern frontier of the empire. The Jews, among whom Jesus lived and died, were a strange, remote people, little understood and little liked by most Europeans of the time, more often the butt of Roman humour than of serious interest. Major events of Jewish history find their echo in the histories of the period, but was the life of Jesus, from the Roman point of view, a major event? The death of a failed Jewish insurrectionary leader was a common enough occurrence, and religious preachers were two a penny in that part of the empire, a matter of curiosity, but hardly of real interest, to civilized Romans.ö³

Very little of Jesus is recorded by Jewish sources, which is to be expected. For them, the less said, the better. We would reasonably expect that most of what was written was written by those keenly interested in the events that transpired. In fact, it is hard to imagine that, once one was aware of the central facts of Jesus's life, death and resurrection, anyone would remain an unbeliever. Consequently, we have very little extra-biblical information on the historical Jesus. But we do have reliable first-century proof that Jesus was not just a superstition or a figment of someone's wild imagination. He was a real, historical figure. That fact is better attested to than any other ancient person or event. We will examine just a few of the earliest historical references to Jesus.

1. **JOSEPHUS**, a Jewish historian born in A.D. 37, completed writing *The Antiquities of the Jews* in A.D. 93. Three passages refer to events recorded in the Bible. One is a passage on John the Baptist which substantiates John's righteousness, his preaching in the desert, his popularity, baptism, and death by Herod. Another confirms the martyrdom of James (the half-brother of Jesus) by stoning (an event not recorded in the Bible but mentioned by other Christian writers). He tells us, though, that James was the "brother of Jesus who was called the Christ,"⁴ thus verifying that Jesus was an actual, historical person. The third passage has been hotly debated, since many scholars believe Josephus's account was changed by later Christians to make it more compatible with their beliefs. Flavius Josephus's *Testimonium Flavianum* has come down to us as this:

ōAbout 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 messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection 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 the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.ö⁵

One eminent scholar has attempted to reconstruct Josephus's original words as follows (this version is agreed upon by scholars as the probable original reading):

ōNow there arose about this time a *source of further trouble* in one Jesus, a wise man who performed surprising works, a teacher of men who gladly welcome *strange things*. He led away many Jews, and also many of the Gentiles. He was the *so-called* Christ. When Pilate, acting on information supplied by the chief men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had attached themselves to him at first did not cease *to cause trouble*, and the tribe of Christians, which has taken this name from him is not extinct even today.ö⁶

A fourth-century Arabic translation of Josephus's *Antiquities*, reads as follows:

ōAt this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. And his conduct was good, and [he] was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive; accordingly, he was perhaps the messiah concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.ö⁷

Although some wording is in question, there is no doubt that this historian had verifiable evidence that Jesus was in fact a real person, and a source of trouble at that! Others considered Him the Christ. He was crucified on a cross and His followers, known as Christians, continued to follow Him. There is nothing here to contradict what we read in the Gospels. It is corroborating evidence.

2. **PLINY THE YOUNGER**, governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, left us with ten volumes of correspondence. One letter, written around A.D. 112 to Trajan, is of particular interest to Christians. He discusses with the emperor his interrogation of Christians and persecution of those who failed to recant.

“They affirmed, however, that the whole of their guilt, or their error, was that 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 perform any wicked deed, never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to make it good; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food – but food of an ordinary and innocent kind. Even this practice, however, they had abandoned after the publication of my edict, by which, according to your orders, I had forbidden political associations. I therefore judged it so much the more necessary to extract the real truth, with the assistance of torture, from two female slaves, who were styled deaconesses: but I could discover nothing more than depraved and excessive superstition.”⁸

Trajan responded to Pliny’s request for advice, saying that only those who deny Christ by invoking Roman gods should be pardoned. Otherwise, they should be sought out, convicted and punished.⁹

3. **TACITUS**, born between A.D. 52 and 55, a senator under the emperor Vespasian and later a proconsul of Asia and friend of Pliny the Younger, describes in his *Annals* (c. A.D. 116) Nero’s response to the great fire in Rome in A.D. 64. It was rumored that Nero had set the blaze himself. Notice what Tacitus writes about the incident that occurred when Christianity was only 30 years old.

“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.”¹⁰

Tacitus is careful throughout his writings to use the phrases “some have put it on record,” “as the general account goes” or “it is said” and “they say” when he is unsure of a statement’s reliability. But he doesn’t hedge in this account. The historicity of Jesus’ life and eventual death under Pilate were not questionable.

Several other sources corroborate what we know of early Christianity. Thallus (A.D. 52) and Phlegon (A.D. 140) both referred to the darkness (eclipse) accompanying Christ’s crucifixion. Suetonius (A.D. 120) records information confirming the expulsion of Jews from Rome (Acts 18:2) because of disturbances caused by “Chrestus” (a Greek name probably substituted for Christus, “anointed,” with which the Romans would have been unfamiliar). Hadrian (A.D. 117-138) echoes Pliny in his record of persecution of Christians. Lucian of Samosata (A.D. 170) mentioned the crucifixion of Jesus and that adherents to Christianity denied the Greek gods, worshiped Christ and lived under His laws. Syrian Mara Bar Serapion (A.D. 73) made reference to the Jews killing their wise king.¹¹

We can find many facts in these secular writings that give indirect evidence and corroboration to what we already know of early Christianity:

1. Jesus was a real person who founded Christianity in the region of Judaea.
2. Jesus was considered by many to be the Christ.

3. He was crucified on a cross by the Romans under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberias.
4. His followers ascribed to a high code of moral conduct.
5. The Gospel message eventually reached Rome itself.
6. Christians were hated and persecuted because of their commitment to Christ (their "superstitions" probably is a reference to their belief in the resurrection).

How does the testimony of the martyrs corroborate Christianity?

Perhaps no one thing testifies to the truth of Christianity more than the testimony of the martyrs. We saw in the passages above that within one generation of Christ's death and resurrection, Christians were being tortured and killed for their faith. Now, let me ask you, if you were facing the possibility of a horrible death for your beliefs, wouldn't you make every effort to verify whether or not what you had been taught was true? The martyrs had every reason to search for answers, and they had every resource at their disposal. There were hundreds of people who had seen the risen Christ and could substantiate the facts of the Gospel or refute it. They were not afraid to die because they knew as a fact that their belief was based on fact.

"Eusebius, considered to be generally accurate in what he reports, records the martyrdoms of Peter (crucified upside down), Paul (beheaded), James the brother of Jesus (stoned and clubbed), and James the brother of John (killed by the sword). Acts 12:2 is a much earlier source for the death of James the brother of John, and Josephus is a much earlier source for the death of James the brother of Jesus. Tradition holds that Thomas was killed by a spear and that Thaddaeus was put to death by arrows. Bartholomew is reported to have been flayed alive and crucified upside down. Tradition from the fourth century holds Luke to be a martyr. Other tradition has Mark dying a martyr's death in the eighth year of Nero. John is reported to have been boiled in oil but miraculously survived."¹²

The apostles, of all people, would have known for certain whether or not their belief was founded on truth or on a lie. There have been times in history when people have given their lives for a lie, thinking it was the truth. But no one dies for a lie if they know it is a lie. If the life, death and resurrection of Jesus had been a hoax, the disciples would have known it. In fact, they would have been the ones to have created it. It is irrational to hold that they would allow themselves to be brutally tortured and killed for absolutely nothing.

Ignatius, who was thrown to the lions in the Colosseum in Rome around 117 A.D., was a disciple of Peter, Paul and John. On his way to his death he penned these words:

"Jesus Christ, who was of the race of David, who was the Son of Mary, who was truly born and ate and drank, was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was truly crucified and died in the sight of those in heaven and those on earth and those under the earth; who moreover was truly raised from the dead, His Father having raised Him."¹³

"For if these things were done by our Lord in semblance, then am I also a prisoner in semblance. And why then have I delivered myself over to death, unto fire, unto sword, unto wild beasts? But near to the sword, near to God; in company with wild beasts, in company with God. Only let it be in the name of Jesus Christ, so that we may suffer together with Him. I endure all things, seeing that He Himself enableth me, who is perfect Man."¹⁴

Ignatius could face death without fear because he had no doubts. Neither did Polycarp (A.D. 69-155), a disciple of John and bishop of the church at Smyrna. He was burned at the stake in front of an angry crowd for his faith. Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-166) became a mighty proponent of Christianity after witnessing the fearlessness and steadfastness of martyrs. Justin supported all the historical facts recorded in the Gospels and maintained that all these claims were verifiable at the time. In A.D. 166, Justin and six others were scourged and beheaded because of their faith in Christ.

"It is very unlikely that a man of Justin's academic ability, living within 100 years of the life of Jesus, would die a martyr's death for historical facts which could not be verified. Modern critics and scholars, removed 1950 years from the life of Jesus and having nothing to lose (they think), may seek to explain away the life of Jesus as a myth or a legend. For Justin, the ample evidence that was available forced him to the conclusion that the gospel accounts of Jesus' life were reliable. More, that they were worth dying for."¹⁵

These men were not alone. The infamous Roman catacombs extended over 900 miles and are said to contain almost seven million graves, many of which hold the remains of martyrs. Throughout the centuries men and women have given their lives rather than deny what they have known to be true. This is powerful evidence of the truth of Christianity.

How does Christianity resolve the human predicament?

There are some questions that have plagued men and women of every generation and every culture from the beginning of time: "Who am I?" "Why am I here?" and "Where am I going?" For the atheist, the answer to the first question is: I am here because I am an accidental by-product of nature; there is no reason for my existence. For the atheist, then, life becomes absurd. It has no meaning, no purpose and the ultimate end is death. "Where am I going?" The atheist would answer, "Nowhere." In the end, all ceases to be. This view can lead only to despair.¹⁶

The Eastern religions that teach reincarnation also have trouble adequately answering these questions. "Who am I?" I am somebody else reincarnated. I am here because of someone else's bad karma. "Where am I going?" I am starting the whole process over in an endless cycle, unless, of course, I can somehow reach Nirvana (which is still a nothingness). The end result, again, is despair and hopelessness.

Only Christianity can adequately answer the basic questions of life. We were created by God and He knows us intimately. We have value and purpose as we seek to please Him and to fellowship with Him. He has our highest good in mind and has prepared a wonderful future for us — a future in which we will never experience pain or sadness and will live forever with Him. Christianity gives life meaning and purpose. No other religion offers such substantial answers.

Blaise Pascal looked at the dilemma of mankind another way. In evaluating people, Pascal noticed that everything in life is contradictions. On the one hand, we see the excellency of man. He has a brain to think and communicate, is capable of the highest good and achievement. And yet at the same time, we see in man a tremendous weakness and the greatest of evil and sloth and pride. How can people be both good and bad at the same time? Another contrast is in the external and internal nature of man: we have a physical body and nature, and yet there is something deeper within each one of us, a spiritual side that cannot be explained in physical terms. Christianity, says Pascal, is what brings harmony to all these contradictions. It makes sense out of who we are. The excellency of man, in Christianity, is still depraved, so that the righteous cannot be proud. And even the most ungodly man can receive God's grace, because He is valuable to Him. Grace and sin are common to all — they humble all men without causing despair; they exalt all men more than pride.¹⁷ Christianity identifies man's inherent problem as sin and offers a cure — through Jesus Christ. No other religion even pretends to do that.

Do these arguments prove conclusively that Christianity is true? No, they don't. But they should cause any thinking person to examine its claims. No one, until recently, has ever doubted the historicity of Jesus Christ. The evidence of secular writers in no way contradicts the basic tenets of Christianity; they verify that Jesus was an historical person who lived in the first century, was crucified, and left a following of Christians. The witness of early Christian martyrs, who had all the resources at their disposal to refute Christianity's claims, attests to the degree to which they were convinced of the veracity of these truths. The fact that Christianity answers man's greatest questions, provides a cure for the problem of sin, and lifts people out of selfishness into purposeful, charitable living, just adds to the evidence.

Because we have found nothing to discredit the Gospel accounts, either in ancient writings or in philosophical reason, the Bible should be presumed true. In the coming chapters we'll look at more evidence to prove the historical accuracy of the actual New Testament documents and the dependability of our current texts. It is only through the Bible itself that we learn who this Jesus really was and why He had such an impact on His followers and the world around Him. The proofs we have offered so far have only been a precursor to this. They are intended only to break down barriers so others are willing to at least consider the New Testament documents. They cannot convince anyone that Jesus is the Christ, nor that He died for *their* sins. Only by leading them to the Gospels themselves can you introduce them to the person of Jesus Christ. The best is yet to come.

End Notes

- ¹ Josh McDowell and Bill Wilson, *He Walked Among Us: Evidence for the Historical Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988), p. 26.
- ² R.T. France in "The Gospels as Historical Sources for Jesus, the Founder of Christianity," as quoted in McDowell, p. 27.
- ³ R.T. France in *The Evidence for Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), as quoted in McDowell, p. 27.
- ⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.9.1.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.3.3 (63-64).
- ⁶ F.F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), p.39.
- ⁷ Schlomo Pines, *An Arabic Version of the Testimonium Flavianum and its Implications* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Academic Press, 1971), p. 16.
- ⁸ *Epistles* 10.96-97.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.97.
- ¹⁰ Tacitus, *Annals*, Loeb Edition, 15.44.
- ¹¹ McDowell, p. 35-54.
- ¹² McDowell, p. 71-72.
- ¹³ Ignatius, *Trallians*, 9, quoted in McDowell, p.79.
- ¹⁴ Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans*, 4, quoted in McDowell, p. 80.
- ¹⁵ McDowell, p. 85.
- ¹⁶ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1984), p. 57.
- ¹⁷ Blaise Pascal in *Mind on Fire: A Faith for the Skeptical and Indifferent*, James Houston, Ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1989), p. 156.