

WHO WAS JESUS?

Evidence for the historicity of Jesus and the Gospels

(cf. Chapter 5 p. 84)

Most of our evidence for the life of Jesus comes from the gospels. Some of this evidence is corroborated by extra Biblical sources such as Roman and Jewish historians, archaeology, science and social history.

1. Non-Christian references to Jesus

There is not much non-Christian historical evidence for Jesus, but this is not surprising. Very little of historical or other writing has survived from his time. Even a major History such as that by Tacitus, a Roman historian writing c.115 CE, has only survived in two manuscripts containing probably less than half of what he wrote.

Furthermore, Jesus in his lifetime was not an important figure at all. He was only a Jewish preacher in a minor province of the vast Roman Empire. He had no political power, and were it not for the people later called Christians who followed him he would have remained unknown.

Even so there are a few references to him. Tacitus, when referring to Nero's persecution of Christians in Rome in 64 CE speaks of "Christus being executed by Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius".

The Jewish historian, Josephus, writing about the struggle of his people against the Romans, twice mentions Jesus. He was not particularly friendly-disposed towards Christians and refers to Jesus as the "so-called Messiah". In the course of his narrative however he also says: "Jesus was a wise man, a doer of amazing deeds and popular with Jews and Greeks. He was convicted by leading members of society and crucified by Pontius Pilate."

2. Indirect support from general archeological and historical evidence

This is circumstantial evidence about the kind of world in which Jesus lived and the people he might have met. This gives us a huge amount of information about the context of Jesus's life even though it doesn't mention Jesus. What is impressive is the degree to which the Christian writings about Jesus - chiefly the gospels - accurately reflect this world unearthed by archeological, linguistic and sociological research. Discoveries such as of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, and work on what Galilee and Judaea were like in the first century CE, explain many references in the gospels. e.g. The gospels, for example, say that Pilate was in Jerusalem for the Passover feast but his headquarters were in Caesarea. Archeological research has revealed much information about Caesarea. The harbour remains are visible from the air, as well as remains of an aqueduct bringing water to the city from the north. Evidence of a street plan and buildings have enabled a reconstruction of the city to be modelled by a computer. The Roman theatre has been rebuilt and is in use today. In the lifetime of Jesus Sepphoris, a town 4 miles from Nazareth, was brutally destroyed by the Romans, giving clear evidence of the extent of Roman settlement in Galilee as well as of the brutality of the Roman occupation that is reflected in the gospels.

3. Evidence in the gospels of many strands of sources, written and oral

The main source of information about Jesus is to be found in the gospels. Here it is significant that the work of scholars over the last two centuries has shown how these gospels reflect many different strands of tradition - much of it by word of mouth to begin with, and then written down by many different people and copied and compiled into longer documents. The fact that there are conflicting passages in the gospels shows that those responsible for them didn't get together in a conspiracy to ensure there were no mistakes.

When historians meet this kind of material they rate the chances of its being basically true much higher than a single carefully-produced straightforward account. People wanting to invent a historical person to become the centre of a cult would not have gone to so much trouble to make things difficult, with so many different strands of tradition often unclear, and sometimes, conflicting.

4. The Rise of Christianity

People sometimes think that Jesus was a figure largely made up by Christians. Yet this makes little historical sense at all. Christianity is a religion which certainly started around 33 CE after Jesus was crucified. Nero's persecution of Christians in Rome in 65 CE shows the extent of the movement. Yet these Christians did not worship some mythical figure like Osiris who had never actually been a human-being. They claimed then, and ever since, that Jesus was a real person.

The notion is unbelievable that his dispirited followers, who had no political, economic or social standing, could create a new religion by imagining that this crucified man was the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. The rise of Christianity at all is the best evidence for the historicity of Jesus.