

THINK BIBLICALLY

Lesson 3: Evidence for Reliability

Can We Trust the Bible?

In Lesson 1, we addressed the development of the Canon – the list of all books or writings that properly belong in the Bible. But even accepting that the 66 books of the Bible should all be a part of the Bible, and no other books or writings should be part of the Bible, the question remains whether these books and writings are reliable. In Lesson 2, we addressed the theological concepts of “inspiration” (scripture is God-breathed) and “inerrancy” (scriptures do not affirm anything contrary to fact). But what of the evidence outside the Bible? What do science, archaeology, history, and other fields of study affirm or deny about the reliability of the Bible. Volumes of books are filled on this subject and are beyond what we can cover in one or even a dozen lessons. But to get an introduction, we will address two questions: (1) do extra-biblical records affirm that Jesus actually existed? (2) do the New Testament writings provide reliable evidence for an empty tomb, and ultimate, a resurrected Jesus?

1. **Skeptic:** “Historically it is quite doubtful whether Christ ever existed at all, and if He did we do not know anything about Him.” (Bertrand Russell)
2. **Historian:** “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.” (F.F. Bruce)
3. **Extra-Biblical References to Jesus:** There are numerous ancient references, some valuable and others not. Two of the most helpful are those of Cornelius Tacitus, generally considered the greatest Roman historian (AD 56-120), and Flavius Josephus, a Jewish politician, soldier and historian (AD 37-100). See the back page for pertinent quotes.
4. **Ancient Documents as Evidence:** The NT writings, like all ancient documents, are “evidence” of historical facts, but the question is do we have reason to accept the NT writings as reliable historical evidence. We should consider (1) do we have one or more eyewitness accounts? (2) how long after the event was the account written? (3) what is our oldest extant copy of the ancient documents? (4) are different accounts consistent? (5) is it obviously embellished?
5. **Empty Tomb:** The gospels affirm an empty tomb. Reliable?
 - Mark 15:43-16:6 corroborated by John 19:38-20:8
 - no embellishment like the “Gospel of Peter”
 - no one would use “Joseph of Arimathea” in fake story
 - no one would rely on female witnesses; as Josephus wrote of the Jewish rules for admissible testimony, “Let not the testimony of women be admitted...”
 - the first Jewish polemic was Matthew 28:11-15 where they tried to explain away, but not deny, the empty tomb
6. **What are the implications of an empty tomb?**
7. **What To Do With the Evidence?** Skeptics have preferred (1) the conspiracy hypothesis, (2) apparent death hypothesis, (3) displaced body hypothesis, (4) hallucination hypothesis.
8. **Resurrection Hypothesis:** There is substantial historical evidence not only for the existence of Jesus, but for his death, an empty tomb, and resurrection. See 2 Peter 1:16. Our faith is not blind faith or mere preference, but a reasoned faith in a living savior.

On the fire in Rome in AD 64, Tacitus wrote in his *Annals*: “Therefore, to squelch the rumor, Nero created scapegoats and subjected to the most refined tortures those whom the common people called “Christians,” hated for their abominable crimes. Their name comes from Christ, who, during the reign of Tiberius, had been executed by the procurator Pontius Pilate. Suppressed for the moment, the deadly superstition broke out again, not only in Judea, the land which originated this evil, but also in the city of Rome, where all sorts of horrendous and shameful practices from every part of the world converge and are fervently cultivated.”

Josephus, in *Antiquities* 20.200 wrote: “the high priest Ananus, 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 Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others . . . he delivered them to be stoned.” (widely held as reliable)

Josephus, in *Antiquities* 18.63 wrote: “At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one should call him a man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. He was the Messiah. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. For he appeared to them on the third day, living again, just as the divine prophets had spoken of these and countless other wondrous things about him. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out.” (widely contested but good reason to accept at least most as reliable)