

Life of Christ

The Historicity of Jesus

(Note: This outline is taken from the book, *The Verdict of History* by Gary Habermas)

I. Misconceptions Concerning the Historicity of Jesus

A. Did Jesus ever live?

B. We can know very little about the historical Jesus

- The Gospels do not record Jesus' life, but what the early church wanted to believe was Jesus' life.
- This view asserts that the early church actually developed the Christian faith apart from Christ, then made Christ say and teach those very things that they made part of their theology.
- Support for this view is found in interpreting the Gospels according to the form-critical hermeneutic. This hermeneutic states that the Gospels writers were merely "editors" and that the Gospels have attained their current form only after going through many revisions.
- Some arguments against this viewpoint are:
 1. The Gospels are written in a style common to other early writers, writers whose writings are not even questioned by historians.
 2. No other early literature is treated in a form-critical approach as the Gospels.
 3. The Gospels are very close to the time the events in them transpired. There is hardly enough time for them to have gone through several revisions.

C. An historical Jesus without theology or miracles

- This is the approach of the Jefferson Bible, popularized by Thomas Jefferson.

D. There are no extra-biblical references to Jesus' life.

II. Popularistic Views of Jesus' Life

A. Fictitious lives

B. A charlatan as popularized by Shonfeld's *The Passover Plot*

C. Jesus the Essene

D. Jesus the gnostic

E. Jesus the world traveler

- This is having a resurgence in popularity because of the New Age movement. The New Age movement has Jesus traveling to India where he becomes a powerful guru.

III. Ancient Non-Christian Sources

A. Ancient Historians

1. Tacitus (ca. A.D. 55-120)

Consequently, to get rid of the report, 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 origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, 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, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. ¹

2. Seutonius

Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from the city. ²

After the great fire at Rome....Punishments were also inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief. ³

3. Josephus

Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats....He was (the) Christ....he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. ⁴

B. Government Officials

1. Pliny the Younger

They (the Christians) 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 any wicked deed, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food--but food of an ordinary and innocent kind. ⁵

¹ Tacitus, 15.44.

² Seutonius, Claudius, 25.

³ Seutonius, Nero, 16.

⁴ Antiquities, 18:3.

⁵ Letters, X:96, transl. by William Melmoth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,

2. Emperor Trajan

The method you have pursued, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those denounced to you as Christians is extremely proper. It is not possible to lay down any general rule which can be applied as the fixed standard in all cases of this nature. No search should be made for these people; when they are denounced and found guilty they must be punished; with the restriction, however, that when the party denies himself to be a Christian, and shall give proof that he is not (that is, but adoring our Gods) he shall be pardoned on the ground of repentance, even though he may have formerly incurred suspicion. Informations without the accuser's name subscribed must not be admitted in evidence against anyone, as it is introducing a very dangerous precedent, and by no means agreeable to the spirit of the age.⁶

3. Emperor Hadrian

I do not wish, therefore, that the matter should be passed by without examination, so that these men may neither be harassed, nor opportunity of malicious proceedings be offered to informers. If, therefore, the provincials can clearly evince their charges against the Christians, so as to answer before the tribunal, let them pursue this course only, but not be mere petitions, and mere outcries against the Christians. For it is far more proper, if any one would bring an accusation, that you should examine it.⁷

C. Other Sources

1. Lucian

The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day--the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account.⁸

2. Mara Bar-Serapion

What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King? It was just after that that their kingdom was abolished.⁹

1935), vol. II.

⁶ Ibid., X:97.

⁷ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV: IX, transl. but Christian Frederick Cruse (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969).

⁸ Lucian, the *Death of Peregrine*, 11-13, in *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, transl. by H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, 4 vols. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1949), vol. 4.

⁹ British Museum, Syriac Manuscript, Additional 14,658. For this text see Bruce, *Christian Origins*, p. 31.