

## **THE BIBLE: FROM CHRIST TO THE CHURCH**

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### **INTRODUCTION<sub>1</sub>**

It is a great privilege to again be associated with this congregation of the Lord's church here in Schertz, Texas! The writer considers it a great honor to be on this program with such learned, qualified men as in this study introducing various aspects of the Scriptures. The writer appreciates this congregation, her elders, and those men who serve her as preachers; likewise he appreciates this lectureship, now in her ninth year, and her constantly challenging subject matter. The study of this year, *The Bible: Salvation and History*, is a practical one needed so vitally in the church and out. The realization that the events of the Bible **are** history is one which must not go overlooked!

It is this writer's duty to contribute to this study a discussion on "The Bible: From Christ to the Church." Toward this end, the writer will notice a brief introduction to the Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and will consider how the Bible events of this period and just into the book of Acts are tied to the historical record. This study is one which should be both eye-opening and edifying to the honest student of the Bible.

### **THE BIBLE: FROM CHRIST TO THE CHURCH IN THE GOSPELS**

If the Bible contains genuine historical accounts, and It does, then an excellent place to begin a study of the events of the period at hand is in those books which deal particularly with the life of Christ. These are called the Gospels, for they reveal the "Good Message" (Strong) of Christ seen through His birth, life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension [which is also seen

in the book of Acts]. Each of the four Gospel accounts is an inspired record supplementing that found in the other accounts; accordingly, while the Holy Spirit was responsible for that written, He utilized the backgrounds, abilities, environments, aims, styles, and perspectives of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John so that a relatively (John 21:25) complete picture of the life of Christ could be presented. It is beyond the scope of this study to consider in detail the idea that Matthew, Mark, and Luke were synoptic (common in the sense that they used borrowed or shared material); suffice it to say that such a view is an attack upon not only inspiration by the Holy Spirit but also upon God Himself! These accounts are original, authentic, and authoritative!

Much of what is found in these books could be classified as history with some elements of prophecy intermingled (e.g. that contrasting the Destruction of Jerusalem of A.D. 70 [Mat. 24:4-35] and the Second Coming [Mat. 24:36-51]); however, the thrust of the Gospels is didactic, that is recording the teaching of Jesus. Therein Jesus was shown to have taught through parable (relating spiritual lessons in physical stories) as in Matthew 13, prophecy (accurately foretelling future events) as in the aforementioned Matthew 24 and the Revelation [which shall be considered in another lesson], challenge (testing the resolve of would-be disciples) as in Luke 18:18-23, name calling (answering fools according to their folly [Pro. 26:5]) as in Matthew 23:13-33, proof texting (quoting Scripture) as in Luke 24:44-47, and question and answer (asking and answering the questions of the sincere and insincere, at times even answering through the use of though provoking questions) as in Matthew 22:15-46.

## **Matthew**

This Gospel account was evidently written by Matthew, the tax-collector, according to Papias as confirmed by Irenaeus and Origen (ISBE). Irenaeus wrote that Matthew "took

particular pains to afford them [the Hebrews-DFC] convincing proof that Christ is of the seed of David" (*Ante-Nicene*, I.573). Since the writer "takes for granted a familiarity with Jewish customs, laws, and localities, to a far greater extent than the other [Gospel-DFC] writers" (Johnson), Matthew was likely writing from Judea to his fellow Jews in order to show them that their rejected countryman Jesus was both the prophesied King (Mat. 21:4-5) and Messiah (Mat. 16:16) of God's chosen people. He was writing early--Origen says first (*Ante-Nicene*, 9.366)--certainly before A.D. 70, perhaps as early as the A.D. 40s--though not too close time-wise to the crucifixion (Mat. 27:8; 28:15).

### **Mark**

This Gospel account was written by John Mark, at least such was "the unanimous opinion of Papias, Eusebius, Irenaeus, and" others (Dunn, 436). Clement of Alexandria wrote, "In order that thereby they [Peter's hearers who would have been Gentiles at least, and perhaps Roman in particular-DFC] might be able to commit to memory what was spoken by Peter, Mark wrote entirely what is called the Gospel according to Mark" (*Ante-Nicene*, II.573). This Mark may have been the "certain young man" of Mark 14:51-52. Some suggest that Mark wrote from Rome (2 Tim. 4:11); however, if he were with Peter he would likely have written from Babylon (1 Pet. 5:13) on the Euphrates. As there is no mention of the events of A.D. 70 as past, he must have written some time prior, although when exactly is not known.

### **Luke**

This Gospel account was written by the author of the book of Acts according to his own pen (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). This writer would have been Luke, the physician, according to Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and the Muratorian Fragment (Robertson). Irenaeus

words plainly read, "Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded the Gospel in a book" (*Ante-Nicene*, 1.414). From where Luke wrote this account is unknown, perhaps he wrote from Asia or Macedonia (Acts 16:10) or even from Rome (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11); his audience and purpose are more easily ascertained--he wrote to Theophilus (Luke 1:3) to provide an inspired account of Jesus' life (Luke 1:1-4).

### **John**

This Gospel was apparently penned by the "disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21:20) for "this is the disciple which testifieth of these things, and wrote these things" (John 21:24). Irenaeus wrote, "John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia" (*Ante-Nicene*, 1.414). John wrote late, perhaps as late as the mid A.D. 90s, for at least "according to Irenaeus, the pupil of Polycarp who was a friend and pupil of John, he wrote his account of the gospel from Ephesus, 'sixty years after the Ascension'" (Dunn, 447). John's account was written to show all men that Jesus was/is God (John 1:1; 20:30-31) and that His sacrifice was effectual for all (John 3:16; 12:32-33).

### **Acts**

Another study will cover, more substantially, the majority of the book of Acts; however, as the beginning of Acts closes the period of this study, this study shall note a few things concerning the book which portrays the last events of Jesus' life. This account from the pen of Luke to Theophilus (Acts 1:1) was probably written from Rome (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11) in the late A.D. 50s to mid A.D. 60s due to benchmark events in the book. As with his Gospel account, in this he obviously sought to provide an inspired account of the history of the early church.

## **THE BIBLE: FROM CHRIST TO THE CHURCH IN HISTORY**

One should not think that the only references to Christ or the period of history portrayed in the Gospel are found in the Bible or even among those early writers called "church fathers." It is important that this be understood, not to build faith [for that is the role of Scripture (Rom. 10:17)], but to be able to provide evidence for those critics who wholly reject that the Bible should stand of the witness stand in Its own defense!

### **Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37-c95 or 103)**

Perhaps the best known and most controversial extra-Biblical reference to Christ appears in Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*, XVIII.iii.3. This passage reads,

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.

This passage should not be taken to be wholly from the pen of Josephus; neither should it be wholly removed therefrom! A study of the life of Josephus reveals a man who was a greatly patriotic but equally realistic Jew who was both general and perceived traitor in the Jews' revolt against Roman occupation and rule. He was one who wanted to support the Jews, but who knew well the might of Rome and the obvious futility of the Jews' cause. He was proud of his heritage, defending the importance of his Jewish nation's history amid a Greco-Roman world in *Against Apion*. He could write about his nation's history from the beginning in *Antiquities of the Jews*. He could write somewhat defensively about the events leading up to the present struggles in *Wars of the Jews*. He was an opportunist who knew politics and therefore was able to secure his safety under the Roman generals and future emperors Vespasian and Titus. That is what he was; on the

other hand, he was not, in spite of his charisma for Hebrew history, a believer in miracles; neither was he a Christian (by any stretch or in any sense of the word).

Knowing these things, one can understand that Josephus could write the following: Jesus was "a wise man" and that Jesus "drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles" and that "when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him" and even that "the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day." Conversely, knowing these things, one can understand that Josephus would not have written the following: it may not be lawful to refer to Jesus as a man nor "he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure" nor that Jesus was the Messiah [Christ] nor that "he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him."

So, what happened, and what does that mean for the Bible student? What likely happened was that a copyist of Josephus' writings jotted a marginal note from his own mind and then that note was interpolated into another copyist's copy of Josephus--it should be remembered that the printing press would not come around until about A.D. 1440, so before that date all copies were by hand.

Josephus made another reference to Christ in addition to this one. He wrote, "Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the sanhedrim of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others ..." (*Antiquities of the Jews*, XX.ix.1)

Having seen these things, what is accepted as having come from the pen of Josephus regarding Jesus is enough to put a special man in a special place at a special time with a special people!<sup>2</sup>

While the passage on Jesus receives the lion's share of attention when thinking of Josephus and the New Testament, not to be ignored regarding Josephus and the history of the time of the Gospels are his mentioning of the Herods and of the governors of the Jews, including Pilate, and, especially his reference to John the Baptist in (*Antiquities*, XVIII.v.2):

Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the *Baptist*: for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness. Now when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late. Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure to him.

Regardless of what is argued regarding the passage of Josephus on Jesus as the Christ, here is a passage holding John as a legitimate part of first century Jewish history!

### **Mara bar Serapion (1st century A.D.)**

Mara bar Serapion, though not as recognizable a name as Josephus, lends to the historical record attestation to God's Word. Mara bar Serapion, a prisoner of Rome, wrote of wisdom to his son, Serapion some time after A.D. 73 (Bruce, 114). Why he was imprisoned is unknown; given what he wrote to his son, though, it is reasonable to consider that he may have been in prison for

his philosophical stance and thus encouraging his son with examples of others who had been persecuted for their philosophies. Regardless the reason, here is what the assuredly pagan, non-Christian prisoner wrote:

What advantage did the Athenians gain from putting Socrates to death? Famine and plague came upon them as judgment for their crime. What advantage did the men of Samos gain from burning Pythagoras? In a moment their land was covered with sand. What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King? It was just after that their kingdom was abolished. God justly avenged these three wise men: the Athenians died of hunger; the Samians were overwhelmed by the sea; the Jews, ruined and driven from their land, live in complete dispersion. But Socrates did not die for good; he lived on in the teaching of Plato. Pythagoras did not die for good; he lived on in the statue of Hera. Nor did the wise King die for good; He lived on in the teaching which He had given (ibid.).

One might wonder where this writing of Mara ben Serapion is found today: some unreliable internet source? some biased "Christian" book of wild assertions? some fraudulent pamphlet presented by zealots at the door? Actually, this writing is found at the British Museum (ibid.).

### **Lucian of Samosata (A.D. c125-c180)**

Lucian, in his satirical *Passage of Peregrinus* of about A.D. 170, wrote of Christ as originator of the "cult" of Christians (Free, 243). Lucian, a Syrian, referred to the titular Peregrinus as one who had worshipped "the man who was crucified in Palestine" and later referred to Christ as "that crucified sophist" (Evans, 300). "Lucian's description [of Peregrinus-DFC] balances attacking Peregrinus as a charlatan and portraying the Christians who welcomed him as lacking intellectual sophistication" (McKechnie, 118). "Lucian made light of the intellectual level of Christians, but he was in the humour business" (ibid., 121). It is ironic but appropriate that this critic confirms the existence of the Founder of "this new cult" (ibid., 118).<sup>3</sup>

### **Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (A.D. 61-c112)**



Pliny the Younger "governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan, asking his advice on how to deal with the troublesome sect of Christians" (Bruce, 119). Lewis writes that Pliny "regarded Christianity as a base and degrading superstition" (139). Pliny wrote of Christians that

they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang an anthem to Christ as God, and bound themselves by a solemn oath (*sacramentum*) not to commit any wicked deed, but to abstain from all fraud, theft and adultery, never to break their word, or deny a trust when called upon to honour it; after which it was their custom to separate, and then meet again to partake of food, but food of an ordinary and innocent kind (Bruce, 119).

Though he may have been a critic, Pliny nonetheless "bore witness to the innocent lives of Christians and their allegiance to Christ, their founder" (Free, 243).

#### **Gaius Suetonius Tranquilius (A.D. c70-c130)**

Suetonius connected the followers of Christ with persecution under Nero (VI.xvi); more importantly, though, he even specifically mentioned Christ when he wrote, "Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius-DFC] expelled them from Rome" (V.xxv). It should be remembered that to the Romans, Christianity was merely a sect of Judaism, and that the Jews including Aquila and Priscilla indeed were expelled from Rome according to Acts 18:2, in which Paul in Corinth "found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and came unto them."

#### **Publius (or Gaius) Cornelius Tacitus (A.D. c55-c117 to 120)**

Tacitus specifically named Christ in speaking of the Christian persecution under Nero. He wrote,

Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty [crucifixion-DFC] 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 (*Annals*, XV.44).

While the above quote is fairly commonly seen, less seen is Tacitus' accidental nod to Jesus' prophecy concerning A.D. 70. He wrote regarding the period preceding the Destruction of Jerusalem,

Prodigies had occurred, which this nation [the Jews-DFC], prone to superstition, but hating all religious rites, did not deem it lawful to expiate [appease-DFC] by offering and sacrifice. There had been seen hosts joining battle in the skies, the fiery gleam of arms, the temple illuminated by a sudden radiance from the clouds. the Doors of the inner shrine were suddenly thrown open, and a voice of more than mortal tone was heard to cry that the Gods were departing. At the same instant there was a mighty stir as of departure. Some few [Christians remembering Jesus' prophecy-DFC] put a fearful meaning in these events, but in most there was a firm persuasion, that in the ancient records of their priests was contained a prediction of how at this very time the East was to grow powerful, and rulers, coming from Judaea, were to acquire universal empire. The mysterious prophecies had pointed to Vespasian and Titus, but the common people, with the usual blindness of ambition, had interpreted these mighty destinies of themselves, and could not be brought even by disasters to believe the truth. I have heard that the total number of the besieged, of every age and both sexes, amounted to six hundred thousand. All who were able bore arms, and a number, more than proportionate to the population, had the courage to do so. Men and women showed equal resolution, and life seemed more terrible than death, if they were to be forced to leave their city. Such was this city and nation; and Titus Caesar [so named anachronistically], seeing that the position forbade an assault or any of the more rapid operations of war, determined to proceed by earthworks, and covered approaches. The legions had their respective duties assigned to them, and there was a cessation from fighting [giving the Christians opportunity and time to escape-DFC], till all the inventions, used in ancient warfare, or devised by modern ingenuity for the reduction of cities, were constructed (*Histories*, V.13).

Compare Jesus' prophecy to the first part of Tacitus' quote:

Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory (Mat. 24:29-30).

Note also Eusebius' writing on Christians' fleeing from Jerusalem:

Meanwhile, before the war began, members of the Jerusalem church were ordered by an oracle [perhaps the "prodigies" of Tacitus-DFC] given by revelation to those worthy of it to leave the city and settle in a city of Perea called Pella [in the foothills of the mountainous Transjordan (note Mat. 24:16)-DFC]. Here they migrated from Jerusalem, as if, once holy men had deserted the royal capital of the Jews and the whole land of Judea, the judgment of God might finally fall on them for their crimes against Christ and his apostles, utterly blotting out all that wicked generation (III.5).

As Eusebius wrote regarding the similarity between Jesus' prophecy and Josephus' account of the Jews' revolt against Rome, equally applicable is it to Tacitus' account: "Anyone comparing our Savior's words with the rest of the historian's record of the war cannot fail to be astonished or to confess the divine character of the Savior's prediction" (III.7).<sup>4</sup>

### **Thallus of Samaria (1st century A.D.)**

About A.D. 52, Thallus wrote regarding the "darkness which fell upon the land during the crucifixion of Christ" (Bruce, 113). While his writings are no longer extant as such, he was quoted by a third century writer, Julius Africanus, who wrote, "Thallus, in the third book of his histories, explains away the darkness as an eclipse of the sun--unreasonably, as it seems to me" (ibid.). Bruce writes that this was unreasonable "because a solar eclipse could not take place at the time of the full moon, and it was at the season of the Paschal full moon that Christ died (ibid.).

It is significant that an early "modernist" trying to explain away the miracles of Scripture should actually give credence to that which he was writing to attack.

### **Philo Judaeus of Alexandria (c20 B.C.-A.D. c50)**

While not mentioning Jesus Christ or any early Christians, Philo gives an insight into the character of the Gospels' Pontius Pilate. Philo wrote of a Pilate who feared the Jews' reporting on his conduct to Tiberius Caesar,

... he feared least they might in reality go on an embassy to the emperor, and might impeach him with respect to other particulars of his government, in respect of his corruption, and his acts of insolence, and his rapine, and his habit of insulting people, and his cruelty, and his continual murders of people untried and uncondemned, and his never ending, and gratuitous, and most grievous humanity ("On the Embassy to Gaius," 302).

This certainly explains Pilate's lack of resolve in Mark 15:15; Mat. 27:24; and Luke 23:25 even though he was procurator.

### **CONCLUSION**

When one reads the Gospels and the beginning of Acts and learns of events preceding and covering the life of Christ and the birth of the church, he should appreciate that he is reading authentic, historically accurate accounts of those whom many try to simply dismiss as fabrications of a Judeo-Christian mythology. This study has sought to provide some insight into the Bible's relation to this period of history using both Biblical and secular sources. May these things spur greater appreciation, understanding, and study of the Word of God!

### **ENDNOTES**

- <sup>1</sup>All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version unless otherwise indicated.
- <sup>2</sup>One wishing to look further into this matter and Josephus' references to other Biblical history would do well to read Wayne Jackson's "Josephus and the Bible," parts 1 and 2, in *Reason and Revelation*, XI.7 pp. 25-28 and XI.8 pp. 29-32, respectively.
- <sup>3</sup>For a fuller study of Lucian and Peregrinus, see McKechnie pages 117-119, 121,122.
- <sup>4</sup>For Eusebius' references to Josephus on the war of the Jews with Rome, see III. 6-8.

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