

The Case for Christianity

Lesson 2C – Are the Scriptures Trustworthy?

“Can They Be Externally Corroborated”

“The characters and events depicted in the bible are fictitious. Any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.” — Penn and Teller (Comedians and magicians)

“How do we know that our holy books are free from error? Because the books themselves say so. Epistemological black holes of this sort are fast draining the light from our world.” - Sam Harris (neuroscientist, speaker, and author of *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*)

Is There Supporting Evidence Outside the Bible That Can Help Validate the Gospels?

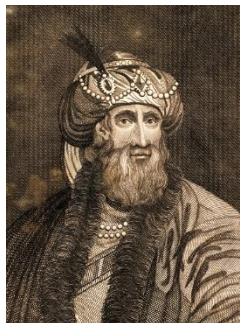
Many skeptics and critics of Christianity argue there is no evidence of the life of Christ, or any of his teachings outside of the New Testament. External corroboration of what we read about in the New Testament simply cannot be found in any other historical records. As a result, the Gospels simply cannot be viewed as anything other than fiction.

In his book, “The Case for Christ”, author Lee Strobel quotes from Charles Templeton’s book, “Act of God”. This particular quote does a pretty good job of summing up popular skepticism of the accuracy of New Testament scripture...

“The Christian church bases its claims mostly on the teachings of an obscure young Jew with messianic pretensions who, let’s face it, didn’t make much of an impression in his lifetime. There isn’t a single word about him in secular history. Not a word. No mention of him by the Romans. Not so much as a reference by Josephus.” (*“Act of God”, New York: Bantam, 1979, p. 152*)

External Corroboration – Non Biblical Eyewitnesses Corroboration of the Gospels

A number of ancient observers and writers who were hostile to Christianity have reluctantly admitted several key facts that corroborate the claims of Christian eyewitness testimony found in the Gospels. They have done so, even though they were hostile to Christianity and denied that Jesus was who He claimed to be.



Josephus (AD 37 - CA 100)

Titus Flavius Josephus (AD 37 – CA 100) born Joseph ben Matiyahu, was a first-century Roman-Jewish scholar, historian and hagiographer, who was born in Jerusalem to a father of priestly descent and a mother who claimed royal ancestry.

Josephus recorded Jewish history, with special emphasis on the first century and the First Jewish–Roman War, including the Siege of Masada. His most important works were *The Jewish War* (c. 75) and *Antiquities of the Jews*. “The Jewish War” recounts the Jewish revolt against Roman occupation (66–70). “Antiquities of the Jews” recounts the history of the world from a Jewish perspective for an ostensibly Roman audience. These works provide valuable insight into first century Judaism and the background of Early Christianity.

Josephus Described Jesus - Josephus described Christians in three separate citations in his “Antiquities of the Jews”. In one of these passages, Josephus describes the death of John the Baptist, in another he mentions the execution of James (the brother of Jesus), and in a third passage he describes Jesus as a “wise man.”

Some controversy exists regarding some of the copies of Josephus's writings due to apparent alterations that were made to amplify references to Jesus. However, in 1971, Shlomo Pines, scholar of ancient languages and distinguished professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, published a tenth-century Arabic text written by a Melkite bishop of Hierapolis named Agapius. This Arabic leader quotes Josephus and did so without the overtly Christian references that are seen in other ancient versions of Josephus's accounts. As a result, scholars believe this version best reflects Josephus's original text:

"At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. 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." (Shlomo Pines, *An Arabic Version of the Testimonium Flavianum and Its Implications* (Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities: Jerusalem, 1971), Kindle edition, Kindle locations 9– 10, 16.)

This brief and conservative version of Josephus's text reluctantly admits a number of key facts about Jesus. From this text, we can conclude that:

- Jesus did live.
- Was a wise and virtuous teacher who reportedly demonstrated wondrous power.
- Was condemned and crucified under Pilate.
- Had followers who reported that He appeared to them after His death on the cross, and was believed to be the Messiah.

Mathew 27:45-54 (ESV) ⁴⁵ Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. ⁴⁶ And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ⁴⁷ And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, "This man is calling Elijah." ⁴⁸ And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹ But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." ⁵⁰ And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. ⁵¹ And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵² The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, ⁵³ and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴ When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"



Thallus (CA. AD 5 - 60)

THALLUS (CA. AD 5– 60)

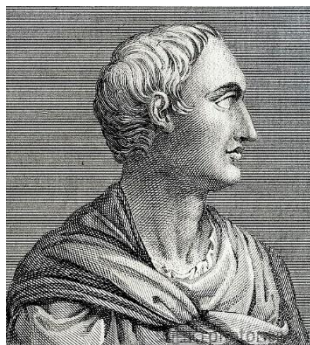
Thallus was a Samaritan historian who wrote an expansive (three-volume) account of the history of the Mediterranean area in the middle of the first century, only twenty years after Jesus's crucifixion. Like the writings of many ancient historians, much of his work is now lost to us.

However, another historian, Sextus Julius Africanus, wrote a text entitled "History of the World" in AD 221, and Africanus quoted an important passage from Thallus's original account. Thallus chronicled the alleged crucifixion of Jesus and offered an explanation for the darkness that was observed at the time of Jesus's death. Africanus briefly described Thallus's explanation...

“On the whole world there pressed a most fearful darkness; and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down. This darkness Thallus, in the third book of his History, calls, as appears to me without reason, an eclipse of the sun.” (Quoted in Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 9, Irenaeus, Vol. II— Hippolytus, Vol. II— Fragments of Third Century (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1870), 188.)

In offering an explanation for the darkness, Thallus “reluctantly admitted” important details that corroborated portions of the Gospels. Even though Thallus denied that the darkness at the point of the crucifixion was caused supernaturally, he inadvertently corroborated that...

- Jesus was indeed crucified.
- Darkness covered the land when he died on the cross.



Tacitus (AD 56-CA. 117)

TACITUS (AD 56– CA. 117)

Cornelius Tacitus was known for his analysis and examination of historical documents and is among the most trusted of ancient historians. He was a senator under Emperor Vespasian and was also proconsul of Asia.

In his Annals of AD 116, he described Emperor Nero’s response to the great fire in Rome and Nero’s claim that the Christians were to blame...

“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 Judaea, 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.” - (Cornelius Tacitus, Works of Cornelius Tacitus. Includes Agricola, The Annals, A Dialogue concerning Oratory, Germania and The Histories (Boston: MobileReference, 2009), Kindle edition, Kindle locations 6393– 6397.

Tacitus, in describing Nero’s actions and the presence of the Christians in Rome, reluctantly admitted several key facts related to the life of Jesus. Tacitus corroborated that...

- Jesus lived in Judea.
- He was crucified under Pontius Pilate.
- He had followers who were persecuted for their faith in Him.



Mara bar Serapion (AD 70 - Unknown)

MARA BAR-SERAPION (AD 70– UNKNOWN)

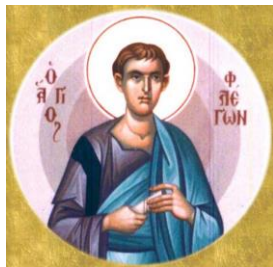
Sometime after AD 70, a Syrian philosopher named Mara Bar-Serapion, writing to encourage his son, compared the life and persecution of Jesus with that of other philosophers who were persecuted for their ideas. The fact that Mara Bar-Serapion described Jesus as a real person with this kind of influence is important...

“What advantage did the Athenians gain from putting Socrates to death? Famine and plague came upon them as a 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 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.” – (“Letter from Mara Bar-Serapion to His Son,” quoted in Bruce, *New Testament Documents*, Kindle locations 1684– 1688.)

Although Mara Bar-Serapion does not seem to place Jesus in a position of preeminence (he simply lists Him alongside other historic teachers like Socrates and Pythagoras), Mara Bar-Serapion does admit several key facts...

- Jesus was a wise and influential man who died for His beliefs.
- The Jews played a role in Jesus’s death.
- Jesus’s followers adopted and lived lives that reflected Jesus’s beliefs.



Phlegon (AD 80 - 140)

PHLEGON (AD 80– 140)

In a manner similar to his citation of Thallus, Sextus Julius Africanus also wrote about a historian named Phlegon who penned a record of history in approximately AD 140. In his historical account, Phlegon also mentioned the darkness surrounding the crucifixion...

“Phlegon records that, in the time of Tiberius Caesar, at full moon, there was a full eclipse of the sun from the sixth hour to the ninth.” - (Quoted in Ante-Nicene Christian Library, eds. Roberts and Donaldson, vol. 9, 188.)

Origen, the Alexandrian-born, early church theologian and scholar, also cited Phlegon several times in a book he wrote in response to the criticism of a Greek writer named Celsus...

“Now Phlegon, in the thirteenth or fourteenth book, I think, of his Chronicles, not only ascribed to Jesus a knowledge of future events (although falling into confusion about some things which refer to Peter, as if they referred to Jesus), but also testified that the result corresponded to his predictions. So that he also, by these very admissions regarding foreknowledge, as if against his will, expressed his opinion that the doctrines taught by the fathers of our system were not devoid of divine power. And with regard to the eclipse in the time of Tiberius Caesar, in whose reign Jesus appears to have been crucified, and the great earthquakes which then took place, Phlegon too, I think, has written in the thirteenth or fourteenth book of his Chronicles. He imagines also that both the earthquake and the darkness were an invention; but regarding these, we have in the preceding pages made our defence [sic], according to our ability, adducing the testimony of Phlegon, who relates that these events took place at the time when our Saviour suffered.” – (Origen, “Origen Against Celsus,” *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 4, Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1885), 437, 445, 455. For more information related to Origen’s quotations of Phlegon, refer to www.newadvent.org/fathers/04162.htm or William Hansen, *Phlegon of Tralles’ Book of Marvels*, University of Exeter Press: Exeter Studies in History (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1997)).

Although Phlegon was not a follower of Jesus and denied many of the claims of the gospel writers, his statements did reluctantly admit that...

- Jesus had the ability to accurately predict the future.
- Was crucified under the reign of Tiberius Caesar.

These late first-century and early second-century writers were not friends of Christianity. In fact, they were largely indifferent to the fledgling Christian movement. In spite of this, they all provided important corroborating details of Jesus's life, even if they did so reluctantly.

If all the Christian documents had been destroyed, we would still be able to reconstruct a modest description of Jesus from these writers. The ancient (and "reluctant") nonbiblical description of Jesus would include these facts...

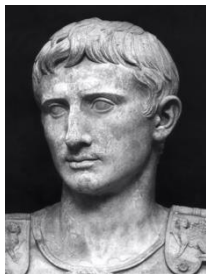
- Jesus was a true historical person and a virtuous, wise man.
- He worked wonders, accurately predicted the future, and taught His disciples.
- His teaching drew a large following of both Jews and Gentiles.
- He was identified as the "Christ," believed to be the Messiah, and widely known as the "Wise King" of the Jews.
- His disciples were eventually called Christians.
- His devoted followers became a threat to the Jewish leadership, and as a result, these leaders presented accusations to the Roman authorities.
- Pontius Pilate condemned Jesus to crucifixion during the reign of Tiberius Caesar.
- A great darkness descended over the land when Jesus was crucified.
- An earthquake shook a large region surrounding the execution.
- Following his execution, a "mischievous superstition" spread about Him from Palestine to Rome.

This description of Jesus, although incomplete, is remarkably similar to the description offered by the gospel writers. **Early, external, non-Christian sources corroborate the testimony of the New Testament authors!**

Archeology Continues to Support the Gospels

Because Christianity makes historical claims, archaeology ought to be a tool we can use to see if these claims are true. The archaeological efforts of the past two centuries have confirmed several details that skeptics used to highlight as areas of weakness in the case for Christianity. There are a large number of biblical passages that are now corroborated by both ancient non-Christian witnesses and archaeological evidence. Let's take a look at some of them...

Quirinius Has Been Corroborated



Luke wrote that Joseph and Mary returned to Bethlehem because a Syrian governor named Quirinius was conducting a census.

Luke 2:1–3 (ESV) *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town.*

Josephus confirmed the existence of this governor, but Josephus recorded Quirinius's governorship from AD 5 to AD 6. This period of time is too late, however, as Matthew wrote that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great (who died nine years prior to Quirinius's governorship as recorded by Josephus).

For many years, skeptics pointed to this discrepancy as evidence that Luke's gospel was written late in history by someone who was unfamiliar with the chronology of leaders. Archaeological discoveries in the nineteenth century have provided additional information to remedy this apparent contradiction, however, revealing that Quirinius (or

someone with the same name) was also a proconsul of Syria and Cilicia from 11 BC to the death of Herod. Quirinius's name has been discovered on a coin from this period of time, and on the base of a statue erected in Pisidian Antioch. Archaeology now corroborates the early existence of Quirinius as a governor at the time of the census recorded by Luke. (Jerry Vardaman, from an unpublished manuscript (The Year of the Nativity: Was Jesus Born in 12 B.C.? A New Examination of Quirinius [Luke 2:2] and Related Problems of New Testament Chronology) as cited in John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), Kindle edition, Kindle locations 6332–6334) ALSO, (Sir William Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (Primedia eLaunch, 2011), Kindle edition, Kindle locations 3446–3448.

LYSANIAS HAS BEEN CORROBORATED

Luke also described a tetrarch named Lysanias and wrote that this man reigned over Abilene when John the Baptist began his ministry

Luke 3:1 (ESV) *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene*



Josephus also recorded the existence of a man named Lysanias, but this man was a king who ruled over the region from 40 to 36 BC (long before the birth of John the Baptist). Skeptics once again used this apparent discrepancy to cast doubt on Luke's account.

As before, archaeology appears to have resolved the issue and corroborated Luke's claim. Two inscriptions have been discovered that mention Lysanias by name. One of these,

dated from AD 14 to 37, identifies Lysanias as the tetrarch in Abila near Damascus. This inscription confirms the reasonable existence of two men named Lysanias, one who ruled prior to the birth of Jesus and a tetrarch who reigned in the precise period of time described by Luke. (John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), Kindle edition, Kindle locations 2091–2095.) ALSO, (Sir William Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (Primedia eLaunch, 2011), Kindle edition, Kindle locations 3630–3658.)

THE POOL OF BETHESDA HAS BEEN CORROBORATED

John wrote about the existence of a pool of Bethesda and said that it was located in the region of Jerusalem, near the Sheep Gate, surrounded by five porticos.



John 5:1–4 (ESV) *After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed.*

For many years, there was no evidence for such a place outside of John's gospel; skeptics again pointed to this passage of Scripture and argued that John's gospel was written late in history by someone who was unfamiliar with the features of the city.

In 1888, however, archaeologists began excavating the area near St. Anne's Church in Jerusalem and discovered the remains of the pool, complete with steps leading down from one side and five shallow porticos on another side. In addition, the twentieth-century discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls also provided us with ancient confirmation of the pool's existence. The Copper Scroll (written between AD 25 and AD 68) described a list of locations in Jerusalem that included a pool called "Beth Eshdathayin" located near a porch.

Once again, the claims of a gospel writer were corroborated by archaeology. (Bruce, *New Testament Documents*, Kindle locations 1393–1400.) **Also**, (Shimon Gibson, *The Final Days of Jesus: The Archaeological Evidence* (New York: HarperCollins e-books, 2009), Kindle edition, Kindle location.) **Also**, (John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), Kindle edition, Kindle locations 2537–2543.)

THE POOL OF SILOAM HAS BEEN CORROBORATED

John also wrote about the "pool of Siloam" and described it as a place of ceremonial cleansing.

John 9:1–12 (ESV) *As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.*



Although the pool is also mentioned in the Old Testament (in Isa. 8:6 and 22:9), John was the only other ancient author to describe its existence. Scholars were unable to locate the pool with any certainty until its discovery in the City of David region of Jerusalem in 2004.

Archaeologists Ronny Reich and Eli Shukrun excavated the pool and dated it from 100 BC to AD 100 (based on the features of the pool and coins found in the plaster). This discovery corroborated the reliability of Christian Scripture and the testimony of John. (Gibson, *The Final Days of Jesus*, Kindle location 71.)

Many other gospel details have been corroborated by archaeology; such discoveries continue to validate the claims of the gospel writers from the "outside in." Even when the written accounts of ancient nonbiblical writers seem to contradict the testimony of the gospel authors, archaeological findings continue to resolve the apparent contradictions by confirming the claims of the New Testament.