

Evidence for Jesus

Lesson 3: What People Outside the Bible Said about Jesus

Vocabulary:

secular	martyrdom (martyr)	to tear apart	magic
persecution	to fast	to respect (adj. respected)	to mock
to suffer (n. suffering)	police officer	reliable	torch
to record (n. record)	enemy	to debate	to expel
to torture (tortured)	to deny	account	constantly
to flog (n. flogging)	to refuse	reference	to complain
to reject (rejection)	appearance	to confirm	likely
majesty	condemnation	senator	sacred
to drown	to praise	capital punishment	to vow
to mention	to unify (adj. unified)	superstition	to curse
resurrection	passion	witchcraft	

Discussion

In Lessons 1 and 2, we examined in the Bible the claims that Jesus made about himself and the testimonies of eyewitnesses who knew Jesus. Yet is the Bible the only evidence we have of Jesus? Do we have any other written testimonies about Jesus or his followers from people outside the Bible? If yes, what do they say? Are there any **secular** writings about Jesus or any of his followers to show that the events surrounding Jesus really happened? The answer is “yes.” Here are just a few:

Christian Writings

Clement of Rome

Born in 35 C.E. near the time of Jesus’s death, Clement of Rome learned about Jesus Christ through Peter, a close follower and eyewitness of Jesus. Clement’s name is found in the Bible’s book of Philippians as one who worked with Paul (4:3). In 96 C.E., Clement wrote a letter to the Corinthian church. His letter was never included in the Bible, but it was read among the early Christian churches. In this letter,¹ Clement speaks about the **persecutions, suffering,** and death of Peter and Paul, who were killed for their faith (Clement 1, 5). Clement **records** the high number of Christians who were **tortured** and died for their beliefs in Jesus (6). He writes about Jesus’s humility and his teachings on righteousness and loving one another (20, 49). Clement records how Jesus suffered through **flogging, rejection,** and death for our sins. He testifies to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and speaks of his return in the future (16, 24). Clement worships Jesus with his words, “Jesus Christ our Lord,” worthy of honor forever for his “glory and **majesty**” (20). He calls Jesus the Son of God who sits at God’s right hand (36). Fourth century C.E. church records state that Emperor Trajan **drowned** Clement in 101 C.E. for sharing his faith in Jesus with others.²

¹ Translation referenced by chapter: “Clement of Rome, First Epistle: Letter of Clement to the Corinthians,” trans. Robert Donaldson, *Early Christian Writings*, ed. Peter Kirby, 2021, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/1clement-roberts.html> (Accessed: Jan. 14, 2021).

² “Clement I,” *Liber Pontificalis (The Book of Popes)*, James T. Shotwell, et al, Ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916).

In what ways is Clement's testimony about Jesus valuable?

Polycarp

Born near 69 C.E., Polycarp lived during the lifetimes of the first twelve followers of Jesus. Polycarp is never mentioned in the Bible, and his writings were never placed in the Bible, but he was mentioned in many of the early Christian writings. Polycarp was known as a friend of Jesus's closest friend, John, and other eyewitnesses of Jesus.³ The leader of the church in Smyrna (located in modern-day Turkey), Polycarp performed many miracles through the power of Jesus's name. In his letter to the Philippian church, Polycarp describes Paul as a strong leader in the church and suggests that he knew Paul personally. He agrees with Paul in his teachings to the churches,⁴ and gives Jesus the title "Lord and God Jesus Christ."⁵ Throughout his letter, Polycarp discusses many areas of Jesus's life: Jesus's teachings, his life of love, his claim to be the Son of God, his death for the forgiveness of sins, and his resurrection from the dead.⁶

Why is Polycarp's testimony about Jesus valuable?

Pionius, a second-century Christian writer, records the last events of Polycarp's life in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*.⁷ In his writings, Pionius says that while Polycarp was fasting and praying for several days, he experienced a vision that his pillow was on fire. When Polycarp awoke, he realized that he was going to be burned alive for his faith. When Polycarp was eighty-six years old, police officers came for Polycarp to arrest him. To show Christ's love, Polycarp cooked food for the men and asked if he could pray for one hour. In front of his enemies, Polycarp prayed to God for all the people he knew and for the churches. Many of the officers left when they saw Polycarp's heart, faith toward God, and his old age. Other officers tried to convince Polycarp to deny his faith in Jesus, worship Caesar, and save himself. Polycarp refused, so they burned him alive.⁸

Why is Polycarp's death important to his testimony about Jesus?

Ignatius

Ignatius, taught by John and a friend of Polycarp, wrote letters to the churches and to the other leaders of the churches. At the end of his letter to Polycarp, Ignatius gives Jesus the title of God.⁹ In his letter to the church in Ephesus (located in modern-day Turkey), he gives Jesus the titles Son of Man and Son of God.¹⁰ In his letter to the church in Smyrna, Ignatius records Jesus's virgin birth, Jesus's baptism, his crucifixion for our sins by Pontius Pilate, his resurrection for our eternal life, and his physical appearance

³ Irenaeus, "Fragment 2," *Fragments from the Lost Writings of Irenaeus*.

⁴ Polycarp, *The Epistle of Polycarp*.

⁵ Polycarp 12:2, *Ibid*.

⁶ Polycarp, *Ibid*.

⁷ Pionius's document on Polycarp's death is based on copies of records of Irenaeus, church leader and friend of Polycarp. See Pionius, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*.

⁸ Pionius, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*.

⁹ Ignatius of Antioch, *The Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp*.

¹⁰ Ignatius of Antioch, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*.

to men after his death. He speaks of the eternal **condemnation** of those who do not believe in Jesus.¹¹ While in prison, Ignatius wrote a letter to the Roman Christians while waiting to be tortured and killed by wild animals. In his letter, he **praises** Jesus as the holy Son of God, and speaks about Christ's message of love. He honors the Church, describing them as **unified** by their faith, committed to Jesus's teachings, and made spiritually clean because of Christ's death. Ignatius speaks about his **passion** to die for his faith so that he could honor Jesus in the same way that Jesus had honored him. With his body **torn apart** by wild animals, Ignatius died for his faith in 108 C.E.¹²

Why is Ignatius's testimony about Jesus valuable?

Secular Writings

Josephus

Born in 37 C.E., near the time of Jesus's death and during the time of the earliest church, Josephus was a Pharisee, or highly educated Jewish leader, and a **respected** Roman Jewish historian. In his writing *The Antiquities*, Josephus records how Herod the Great, King of Judea, cut off the head of John the Baptist, Jesus's cousin (18.5.2). This same event is also found in Matthew 14:1-12. Josephus documents that the Jewish high priest Ananias stoned Jesus's brother James and other Christians for following Jesus, "who is called Christ" (20.9.1). Josephus's writings about King Herod and Ananias, the high priest, appear to be **reliable** because there are no historical records that **debate** Josephus's statements.

Why are Josephus's testimonies about John the Baptist, James, and other Christians valuable?

In *The Antiquities*, Josephus also records Jesus's crucifixion by Pontius Pilate and his resurrection. Josephus refers to Jesus as a "wise man," "teacher," and "Christ," who caused both Jews and Greeks to believe in him (18.3.3). Because of Josephus's strong Jewish background, historians doubt that Josephus believed in Jesus or followed him. While some parts of Josephus's **account** are debated, Josephus's **references** to Jesus's crucifixion by Pontius Pilate, as well as his ability to win over Jewish and non-Jewish followers, is well-accepted,¹³ since other outside writings **confirm** the same information.

In what ways does Josephus's background and account provide evidence for Jesus?

Tacitus

Born in 56 C.E., Publius Cornelius Tacitus, a Roman **senator**, is known as one of the greatest historians. His work *The Annals* written between 109-117 C.E. documents Roman history from 14-68 C.E.¹⁴ In his

¹¹ Ignatius of Antioch, *The Epistle of St. Ignatius of Antioch to the Smyrnaeans*.

¹² Kirby, Peter, *Ignatius of Antioch*, Early Christian Writings, 2020, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/ignatius.html> (Accessed: Nov. 8, 2020)

¹³ Olsen's research holds the debated quotes of Josephus's writings. The topics listed are not included in those debated statements. See Olsen, Ken, "A Eusebian Reading of the Testimonium Flavianum," Center for Hellenistic Studies, Harvard University, <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/5871.5-a-eusebian-reading-of-the-testimonium-flavianum-ken-olson> (Accessed: Oct. 29, 2020).

¹⁴ McDonald, Alexander Hugh "Tactius." Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tacitus-Roman-historian> (Accessed Nov 17, 2018).

account, Tacitus records how Pontius Pilate put *Christus* to death by using the highest form of **capital punishment** in the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire crucified *Christus* to put an end to his followers' "superstition" and **witchcraft**.¹⁵ To the Romans, the Christians' belief in a Messiah and their ability to perform miracles likely looked like **magic**. When the Roman rulers thought they had put an end to this "evil" or "disease," the beliefs suddenly spread throughout Judea, all the way to Rome. This secular record suggests that some major event caused many people to believe in Jesus after his death. Similarly, the Bible records that after Jesus's resurrection, Jesus appeared to many people, causing them to believe in him as Lord and follow him as the Messiah.

Tacitus records that under Roman Emperor Nero, many followers were arrested, **mocked**, and killed. They were falsely accused of causing a fire in 64 C.E. and for hating mankind. The Christians were likely accused of hatred since they condemned anyone who did not turn from their sins and put their faith in Jesus. Tacitus discusses how Nero tortured Christians: Covered in the skin of wild animals, Christians were torn apart by dogs, crucified, or burned alive. Their bodies were used as **torches** for Nero's evening parties. Yet Tacitus confirms that the more Christians he killed, the faster the religion spread (Annals 15.44).

In what ways is Tacitus's background and description important to his testimony about Jesus called *Christus* and to the testimony of Jesus's followers?

How does Tacitus's testimony help us to believe in the resurrection of Jesus?

Suetonius

Roman historian Suetonius confirms the historical writings of Tacitus Nero's persecution of Christians in *The Life of Nero* (Nero 16), a section found in his work *The Lives of the Caesars*, written in 121 C.E. Suetonius also wrote *Life of Claudius*, where he records that the Roman emperor Claudius (41-54 C.E.), **expelled** the Jews from Rome for **constantly complaining** to the government about *Chrestus*, another **likely** reference to Christians or Christ. According to Christian records in Acts 18:2, Claudius commanded all Jews, including those who followed Christianity, to leave Rome. Paul claims that during this time, many Jews complained to the government about the Christian message and demanded that Christians be killed (Acts 18:6).

In what ways is Suetonius's testimony of Nero and Claudius important evidence for Jesus?

Pliny the Younger

A Roman governor and a friend of Tacitus, Pliny records his own punishment of Christians who would not deny their faith in Jesus. In his letter to Emperor Trajan in 112 C.E., Pliny accuses Christians of being a part of a "superstitious" and insane group of men and women of all ages and social positions. From Pliny's letter, we learn that the Christians of the first century C.E. attended secret, hidden meetings for worship and a **sacred** meal, now called communion. At this meeting they sang a song to Christ "as though he were a god," **vowed** not to sin, steal, commit adultery, or deny their faith. They then

¹⁵ See f.n. 2 in C. Suetonius Tranquillus, *Nero*, Alexander Thomson, Ed. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:abo:phi,1348,016:16> (Accessed: Nov. 4, 2020).

promised to attend the next meeting. In his account, Pliny announces his goal to stop Christianity, a disease that had spread quickly to people of all ages throughout the cities, towns, and countryside of the Roman Empire. He documents that the religious sacrifices at the temples of the Roman gods had almost stopped because of these new teachings. This problem was causing the Roman government to lose money, so Pliny commanded Christians be arrested, deny their faith, **curse** Christ, and worship the emperor and other gods. Christians who refused were tortured and killed. Out of fear, many turned away from their faith. Pliny did not punish these people who denied Jesus, because in his view, they were not true Christians. He records that true followers of Christ would never curse Jesus or worship other gods. These were the Christians he wanted to kill. *(Pliny's Letter to Trajan)*

In what ways is Pliny's background important to his testimony about Jesus and the Christians who followed him?

From Pliny's testimony, what do we learn about Jesus's teachings and what it means to follow Jesus?

How do these testimonies impact your faith? In what ways do you want to grow?

This Week:

Write in your journal:

1. Continue reading about Jesus in one of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. After each chapter, write down in a notebook the teachings you learn.
2. Think about ways in your life that you can begin to follow Jesus's teachings. Pray to the Lord to help you know where you can grow and follow what Jesus taught.
3. If you want to learn more about the points discussed in this lesson, you can also read the references or ask a librarian for additional, reliable resources.
4. Continue studying the Bible and English through more Connect the Nations classes!