

Can We Trust the Gospels?

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What Do Non-Christian Sources Say?

It is hardly surprising that Christian texts are our main source of information about the origins of Christianity. Most books on archery, baseball, or cooking are by enthusiasts of those activities. Christians were the most enthusiastic about Christianity and naturally wrote more about it. The four Gospels were, of course, written by advocates of belief in Jesus as the promised deliverer. They may therefore be said to be biased, in the sense that they are not impartial records but ones aiming to foster belief in Jesus Christ.

However, their bias does not mean we should distrust their record. An innocent man accused of a crime may have a deep interest in proving his innocence, but this bias is not a reason to dismiss evidence he produces. The question, then, is not whether the Gospel writers had an agenda, but whether they reported accurately.

Some sources, however, cannot be accused of bias in favor of Christianity. These include non-Christians who wrote within

ninety years of the origins of Christianity and left us with records we can investigate. We will begin by considering three writers: Cornelius Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, and Flavius Josephus. Each of these had his own reason for writing, but in no case was it the promotion of Christianity. Tacitus and Pliny were, in fact, openly hostile to Christianity.

Cornelius Tacitus

Tacitus was born around the year AD 56. He held a series of distinguished Roman offices, including being a senator and a consul. He is now most famed for his writings, which include those shown in table 1.1.¹

Table 1.1. Writings of Tacitus

Short Title	Content	Length	Approximate Date
<i>Agricola</i>	About Tacitus's father-in-law, Julius Agricola, governor of Britain, including a description of Britain and its people	1 book	AD 98
<i>Germania</i>	A description of Rome's dealings with the Germanic tribes	1 book	AD 98
<i>Histories</i>	A narrative of Roman history covering the years AD 69–96	14 books	AD 109
<i>Annals</i>	A narrative of Roman history covering the years AD 14–68	16 books	AD 115–117

Tacitus certainly had biases. He recounted history in order to give moral instruction, praising those he approved of and often applying a whole armory of rhetorical strategies to damn those he disliked. However, his ability to record factual information is first-rate. He could accurately describe remote places he had never visited and was the first to provide literature on

1. Tacitus may also have written the *Dialogue on Oratory*, which has a somewhat different style.

the lochs in Scotland. He appears to have had access to sources that allowed him to relate detailed stories from more than four decades before he was born.² We therefore have little reason to doubt the broad facts underlying his account of the early Christians as found in his *Annals*. To quote the *Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, “The *Annals* in particular show Tacitus to have been one of the greatest of historians, with a penetrating insight into character and a sober grasp of the significant issues of the time.”³

Tacitus wrote about the Great Fire in Rome, which occurred in July AD 64. He told of how it was thought that the mad emperor Nero had started the fire and yet blamed the many Christians then in Rome, accusing them of arson. In his career in Rome, Tacitus would have been able to talk to many adults about its events and to have access to Rome’s official records. We therefore have every reason to treat the outline of facts he provides as reliable.

This is how Tacitus tells the story, using the common early spelling of *Christians* as *Chrestians*:⁴

2. See Ronald Syme, “Tacitus: Some Sources of His Information,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 72 (1982): 68–82.

3. M. C. Howatson, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 548.

4. The oldest manuscript of this passage, Codex Laurentianus Mediceus 68.2, has *Chrestianos*, which a later scribe has corrected to *Christianos* (accusative plural of *Christianus*). The spelling with *e* rather than *i* is extremely common in early centuries, but Tacitus learnedly states that while the “crowd” called the group *Chrestiani*, with *e*, the correct origin of the name was from *Christus*, with *i*. There is continual evidence of vowel confusion for the centuries following Tacitus. Justin Martyr (*First Apology* 4), writing in Greek to the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius in the mid-second century, makes a play on the name Christian and the word “good” (*chrēstos*). Around AD 200, Tertullian, *Apology* 3, complains that opponents wrongly call Christians *Chrestiani*. At the beginning of the fourth century, Lactantius, *Divine Institutions* 4.7, notes that Latin speakers sometimes mistakenly call Christ *Chrēstus*. In biblical manuscripts, although the spelling of Christ and Christian with *i* is attested early (see manuscript TM 61617 for *Christos*, and Papyrus 72 at 1 Peter 4:16 for *Christianos*), it is not clearly in a majority before the fifth century, especially since the name *Christ* is usually spelled in New Testament manuscripts as an abbreviation, which does not reveal the vowel. Though Greek pronunciation was also shifting, there is plenty of evidence from before the fifth century for the use of vowels other than Greek *iota*, which was the normal representation of an *i* sound. Codex

But neither human help, nor gifts from the emperor, nor all the ways of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order [of Nero]. Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd called *Chrestians*. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital [Rome] itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and become fashionable. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the clothes of a charioteer, or mounted on his chariot. Hence, in spite of a guilt which

Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus (both fourth century) are the earliest manuscripts for the three New Testament occurrences of the term *Christian* (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16). Vaticanus has *Chrestianos* (Greek, χρεϊστιανος), and Sinaiticus has *Chrestianos* (Greek, χρηστιανος). Vaticanus also spells *antichrist* and *pseudochrist* with *ei* (ει) and uses *ei* on the two occasions when it spells out the name *Christ* in full (see Matthew 24:24; Mark 13:22; 2 Corinthians 10:7; 1 Peter 1:11; 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). The form with *eta* is the main spelling in the earliest Coptic versions of the New Testament. The close alignment of *iota* and *eta* allows Greek word play on the word "good" (*chrestos*) and the word "Christ" (*Christos*) in 1 Peter 2:3. Some scholars distinguish the group mentioned in Tacitus from the later Christians, but this ignores widespread evidence for the vowel interchange in Latin and Greek and involves supposing that Tacitus was gravely confused. It also does not explain why Suetonius, *Life of Nero* 16, calls a group Nero punished at this time *Christiani*. Moreover, it invents an otherwise unattested group called the *Chrestiani*, who are present in Rome in large numbers and are persecuted at a time and in ways that later Christians remembered they were persecuted. These hypothetically widespread *Chrestiani* then disappear off the globe.

had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrifices not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man.⁵

The question should be raised how we know Tacitus actually wrote this. Is it not possible that the work of this pagan writer was tampered with by later Christian scribes? This has been the claim of a few scholars but has remained a marginal view for several reasons, of which I will give just two.

First, it should be remembered that *all* Greek and Latin literature transmitted to us from the classical period to the Middle Ages was handed down by *Christian* scribes. They preserved the references to Greek and Roman gods and faithfully copied religious ideas that differed from their own Christian views. In the last century or so, much-older manuscripts from before Christian times have been found in the dry sands of Egypt, and these show that scribes generally copied faithfully. The burden of proof is therefore on those who want to maintain that texts have been changed since classical times.

Second, Tacitus had a unique style of Latin, part of what is commonly called silver Latin, to distinguish it from Latin of the golden age of Cicero (107/106–43 BC). As every century passed, Latin changed, as all languages do. Medieval scribes were educated in medieval Latin and would not have been aware of all the differences between their own Latin and that of Tacitus. It would have been difficult for them to imitate Tacitus's style of Latin for more than a few phrases at the most. That is why classical scholars today treat this as a reliable account, at least in regard to the main events.

5. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44. Translation lightly adapted for readability from *Tacitus Annals Books 13–16*, Loeb Classical Library 322 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 283, 285. I have also adapted the translation to use the spelling *Chrestians* rather than *Christians*.

The narrative provides significant information. We obviously learn that Tacitus did not like Christians (he calls the religion a “disease”), and yet he helps us establish some useful facts. He uses the name *Christus*, the Latin word from which we get *Christ*. Tacitus regards *Christus* as the source of the name, and his followers were a group that others called *Chrestiani*, with the well-documented vulgar Latin substitution of *e* for *i*.⁶ We note that Tacitus says it was the crowd who named them Chrestians, not the followers themselves. This fits with the three occurrences of the word *Christian* in the New Testament (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16). The term was first applied by non-Christians and only later was adopted by Christians themselves.

Latin *Christus* is simply a transliteration of the Greek word *Christos*, which means “anointed” and is equivalent to the Hebrew word *Messiah*. As the Messiah was the promised deliverer whom many Jews were expecting, the name *Christian* tells us clearly of this group’s belief that the promised Jewish deliverer had come. As we will see, Christianity arose in the cradle of Judaism, and the further back we go in time, the more Jewish all our records of Christianity are. This means we are able to guess certain elements of the beliefs of this group even without considering their writings.

We may also establish certain other things. Tacitus tells us that Christ was put to death while Tiberius was emperor, thus between AD 14 and AD 37. Tacitus also tells us that this happened while Pontius Pilate was in charge of Judaea, which was between AD 26 and AD 36. Tacitus thus gives us an approximate fixed point for the founding events of Christianity.

6. For evidence of the interchange of *e* and *i* see E. H. Sturtevant, *The Pronunciation of Greek and Latin: The Sounds and Accents* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1920), 15–29, 120. It is common that initial contact with a group involves mispronunciation of their name, followed by subsequent correction. Thus in the West the less accurate spelling *Moslem* was only recently replaced by the more accurate spelling *Muslim*.

In addition to giving us this chronological framework, Tacitus helps us with geographical information. He tells us that the “disease” named after Christ started in Judaea, which is where all the Christian sources also claim Christianity started. Christian texts tell us that Jesus Christ was executed near Jerusalem, the spiritual center of Judaea. Tacitus tells us that at the time of the Great Fire in AD 64, there were many Christians in Rome. He uses the Latin phrase *multitudo ingens*, “vast multitude.” Christianity had clearly spread a long way, since the distance, as the crow flies, between Jerusalem and Rome is around 2,300 kilometers (1,430 miles), greater than the distance between Edinburgh and the north of Morocco, or between New York City and Havana.

Tacitus also explains how Nero treated the Christians cruelly and many of them were put to death for pursuing their religion. We may therefore conclude from Tacitus that Christianity spread far and fast and that being a Christian could be very difficult. The time span between the beginnings of Christianity and the Great Fire in Rome was considerably under forty years.

The rapid spread of Christianity may have relevance for investigating the reliability of the Gospels. Surely, the more widespread Christianity became, the harder it would have been for anyone to change its message and beliefs. This would have been particularly so if the Christians were paying a high price for their faith. Scholars who argue that core Christian beliefs, such as the idea that Jesus rose from the dead after his crucifixion, were innovations arising as Christianity spread by word of mouth need to suggest *when* this might have happened. The idea that core beliefs arose decades after Christianity began to spread does not explain why Christianity proved popular in the first place or how people who adhered to a version of Christianity without these beliefs later came to adopt them.

The later agreement of Christians that Jesus Christ was God's Son, prophesied by the Jewish Scriptures, crucified for sins, and raised from the dead by God is best explained by supposing that these and other central beliefs were established *before* Christianity began to spread.

Pliny the Younger

We come now to our second Roman witness, Pliny the Younger (born AD 61/62; died after AD 111). Toward the end of a distinguished career, during which he held many public offices, Pliny became governor of Bithynia and Pontus, a region in northwest Turkey. He governed there around 109–111.⁷ He wrote specifically to the emperor Trajan (ruled 98–117) on a number of occasions. Pliny's most famous letter is the one he wrote to Trajan asking for advice on how to deal with Christians (*Epistles* 10.96). He wrote:

It is my rule, sir, to refer to you all matters of which I am unsure. For who is more capable of guiding my uncertainty or informing my ignorance? Having never been present at any trials of the Christians, I am unacquainted with the method and limits to be observed either in examining or punishing them. I have also been in great doubt whether any difference is to be made on account of age, or any distinction allowed between the youngest and the adult; whether recanting allows a pardon, or whether if a man has been once a Christian it does not help him to recant; whether the mere profession of Christianity, albeit without crimes, or only the crimes associated with it are punishable.

In the meanwhile, the method I have observed towards those who have been denounced to me as Christians is this: I interrogated them whether they were Christians. If they

7. Or perhaps AD 111–13.

confessed it I repeated the question a second and a third time, adding the threat of capital punishment. If they still persevered, I ordered them to be led off to execution. For whatever the nature of their belief might be, I could at least feel no doubt that stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy deserved punishment. There were others also possessed with the same madness, but being citizens of Rome I directed them to be sent there.

These accusations spread (as is usually the case) from the mere fact of the matter being investigated and several forms of the mischief came to light. A placard was put up, without any signature, accusing a large number of persons by name. Those who denied that they were, or ever had been, Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered adoration, with wine and incense, to your statue, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose, together with the images of the gods, and who finally cursed Christ—all things it is said that no real Christian can be forced to do—I thought they should be discharged. Others who were named by that informer at first confessed themselves Christians, but soon after denied it, saying that they had been, but they had ceased, some three years ago, others many years ago, and a few as much as twenty years ago. They all worshipped your statue and the images of the gods, and cursed Christ.

They affirmed, however, the whole of their guilt or error was that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, and of singing in alternate verses a hymn to Christ as to a god, and of binding themselves by a solemn oath, not to wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor to deny a pledge when they were called upon to deliver it up. After this it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an

ordinary and innocent kind. Even this practice, however, they had abandoned after the publication of my edict, by which, according to your orders, I had forbidden political associations. I therefore thought it the more necessary to extract the real truth, with the assistance of torture, from two female slaves, who were called deaconesses: but I could discover nothing more than depraved and excessive superstition.

I have therefore adjourned the proceedings and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me well worth referring to you—especially considering the numbers endangered. Many persons of all ages and ranks and of both sexes are being and will be called to trial. For this contagious superstition is not confined only to the cities, but has also spread through the villages and rural districts. It seems possible, however, to check and correct this. It is certain at least that the temples, which had almost become deserted, are now beginning to be visited again; and the sacred rites, after a long interlude, are again being revived. There is a general demand for sacrificial animals, for which up to now only rarely were purchasers found. From this it is easy to imagine that a multitude of people may be reclaimed from this error, if a door is left open for them to change their minds.⁸

Trajan then replied more briefly to Pliny (whom he called Secundus; *Epistles* 10.97):

The method you have pursued, my Secundus, in sifting the cases of those denounced to you as Christians is proper. It is not possible to lay down any general rule which can be applied as the fixed standard in all cases of

8. My translation is freely adapted from William Melmoth, *Pliny, Letters*, rev. W. M. L. Hutchinson, vol. 2 (London: William Heinemann, 1924), 401–5.

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 an individual denies that he is a Christian, and gives proof of it, i.e. by adoring our gods, he shall be pardoned on the ground of repentance, even though he may have formerly incurred suspicion. Anonymous accusations must not be admitted in evidence against anyone, as it is introducing a very dangerous precedent, and by no means agreeable to our times.⁹

Large Numbers of Christians

We can draw several conclusions from this correspondence. One is that neither Pliny nor Emperor Trajan liked Christians. Another is that it was often difficult to be a Christian. A third is that there appear to have been large numbers of Christians in Pliny's area, a theme found also in Tacitus's *Annals*. Tacitus spoke of a "vast number" in Rome, and here the governor of Bithynia is writing to the emperor saying that so many people in his area had become Christians that temples were becoming nearly deserted, and sellers of sacrificial meat actually struggled to find purchasers. Of course, we can detect rhetorical flourish behind Pliny's depictions of deserted temples and rare purchasers of sacrificial meat. But despite this, he was writing to the emperor and certainly would not have wanted to risk giving Trajan the impression that he was reporting untruthfully on his province.

The situation in this non-Christian source is strikingly similar to one described in the book of Acts in the New Testament, which is relevant to the question of Gospel reliability, since the style of the book of Acts indicates that it was written

9. My translation is freely adapted from Melmoth, *Pliny, Letters*, 2:407.

by the same person who wrote Luke's Gospel. Acts 19 describes the situation further south in Ephesus, where a huge riot arose because so many people were turning to Christianity that the silversmiths were not able to sell their images of the gods.

The most natural reading of these sources together is that very large numbers of people were becoming Christians. The mere existence of many Christians does not for one moment have to mean that their beliefs were true. False belief can spread fast. The numbers do, however, make some explanations of early Christianity more difficult.

Those who might say that Christian belief arose by a gradual evolution usually maintain that some of the core beliefs arose only after a long time. But if core ideas, such as that Jesus Christ died as a sacrifice for sins and then rose again bodily, are only late additions to Christian belief, how do we explain the wide geographical distribution of Christians with these beliefs? Many independent early Christian sources contain these beliefs explicitly or implicitly. It is not really possible to account for the later uniformity in Christian belief on these matters if the vast numbers of earlier Christians did not also believe them. Nor can one suppose that in those days, when it was difficult and even dangerous to travel, it would have been possible for any group without political authority to *impose* a major change of beliefs on so large and widespread a set of adherents.

Just One God

A further feature of the correspondence is worth dwelling upon. Pliny and Emperor Trajan agreed on the test to be applied to suspected Christians: suspects had to show that they were not Christian by worshipping the Roman gods. The emperor dem-

onstrated an awareness of what Christians stood for when he wrote, “When an individual denies that he is a Christian, and gives proof of it, i.e. by adoring our gods . . .” Trajan knew enough about Christian belief to be satisfied that this was an adequate test.

Pliny himself had several tests. Other than cursing Christ, all the other tests revolved round worshiping the Roman gods (among whom the emperor was, in some ways, included). None of this is surprising, given what we know of later Christian belief in one sole God. This belief is reflected consistently in the earliest surviving Christian documents.¹⁰ Nor is it hard to find where this came from since everyone agrees that Christianity arose from within Judaism, which had a strong belief that there was only one God and that he alone should be worshiped. The simplest view of the evidence is that Christians *maintained* the earlier belief of the Jews that there was just one God, the Creator, who was absolutely distinct from everything he had created.

However, this is where Pliny’s letter to Trajan surprises us, because it reports an early Christian meeting, as described by those who had renounced Christianity three years, “many” years, or even as much as twenty years previously. Go back roughly twenty years from about the year AD 111, and we see that the governor of Bithynia was giving the emperor a description of a *first-century Christian meeting*.

Apart from the recurring emphasis on integrity in business and family and on general honesty, we also see that early Christians are depicted as assembling before dawn and *singing to Christ* “as to a god” in a way that it is hard to view as anything other than worship. There is no mention of singing to God; rather Christ is the focus of the early Christian

10. E.g., 1 Corinthians 8:6; Ephesians 4:6; 1 Timothy 2:5.

service. Since there is no indefinite article in Latin, Pliny's phrase *quasi deo* could mean "as if to God" or "as if to a god." But we have just seen that, according to the emperor, the foolproof test of whether someone was a Christian was whether he or she was prepared to worship Roman gods. Christians were *not* prepared to do so precisely because they retained the Jewish rejection of worship of any being except the Creator God.

How then could they worship Christ? The answer is as simple as it is mathematical.

In popular ideas of how Christianity arose, it is often suggested that worshipping Christ and treating him as God must have arisen through a gradual developmental process. A problem with this is that the Jewish monotheism from which Christianity arose maintained a sharp dichotomy between the one Creator and everything he created. There was a strict cap on the number of gods at just one. That means that those adhering to Jewish categories would not have imagined Christ as a demigod somewhere in a transition from merely human to fully divine. In Judaism there were no half gods, and so Christ would never have been considered halfway from human to divine, resulting in the impossible number of one and a half gods. In classic Jewish categories, there simply was no evolutionary path of gradually assigning more and more honor to a being until it was viewed as God.¹¹

Besides, even *after* Trajan heard of how the early Christians sang worship to Christ, he still maintained that mere worship

11. Rabbinic expert Daniel Boyarin claims that "many Israelites at the time of Jesus were expecting a Messiah who would be divine and come to earth in the form of a human." This position is controversial but still maintains that belief in Jesus's divinity was early. Boyarin says, "The idea of Jesus as divine-human Messiah goes back to the very beginning of the Christian movement, to Jesus himself, and even before that." See Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: New Press, 2012), 6, 7.

of the Roman gods was enough evidence that someone was no longer a Christian. So, as far as the emperor understood Christianity, he presumed that Christ was effectively the deity of the early Christians.

In summary, the picture we get from Tacitus and Pliny agrees in important ways with what we find within the New Testament. We can conclude that Christ was executed under Pontius Pilate and was shortly afterward treated as God by a group of people who retained the core Jewish belief in one God. Christianity also spread rapidly, and it was at times difficult to be a Christian.

All of this raises the question of why Christianity spread so quickly and how someone who had been publicly executed by the Romans, and thus shown to be a loser, could so soon be viewed as one to be worshiped. Jews were averse to worshipping mere humans, and though some non-Jews (Gentiles) admired the Jews, many did not. The spread of a religion that would have looked so Jewish among large numbers of non-Jews in the Roman Empire requires a convincing explanation.

Flavius Josephus

Our third non-Christian writer is the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. He was born around the year AD 37 or 38 and died some time after AD 100. Josephus was commander of the Jewish forces in Galilee during their initial rebellion against Rome in AD 66. He was captured by the Romans in 67 and claims to have predicted that Vespasian would become emperor in July 69. Josephus found favor with Vespasian and subsequent emperors, became a citizen of Rome, and took the name Flavius in accordance with Vespasian's family's name. During his later life in Rome, he wrote the works shown in table 1.2.

Table 1.2. Writings of Josephus

Short Title	Content	Length	Approximate Date
<i>Jewish War</i>	On the Jewish conflict with Rome, AD 66–73	7 books	AD 79
<i>Jewish Antiquities</i>	A history of the Jews, beginning with creation	20 books	AD 93
<i>Life of Josephus</i>	An autobiography focused on the Jewish conflict with Rome	1 book	AD 93
<i>Against Apion</i>	A defense of Judaism stressing its antiquity	2 books	AD 95

Josephus is the single most important historian for events in first-century Palestine, and is of particular interest since his history *Jewish Antiquities* speaks about Jesus Christ and also John the Baptist,¹² a major figure in the Gospels.

The Greek manuscripts of Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* mention Jesus Christ in two places, of which one is judged by many scholars to be a secondary addition (i.e., not by Josephus) or to have suffered contamination during textual copying.¹³ The other passage tells of how the Jewish high priest Ananus, making the most of a power vacuum while there was no governor in AD 62, acted as follows: “[Ananus] convened the judges of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man named James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned.”¹⁴ At the time of this report Josephus was an adult, and this event took place in his own city of Jerusalem, where he was probably then living. It confirms the statements in Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3 that Jesus had a brother called

12. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.116–19. See also the discussion under the heading “Two Wives,” beginning on p. 94.

13. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.63–64.

14. Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.200, Loeb Classical Library 456 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 107–9.

James.¹⁵ According to first-century Christians, James was the leader of the Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13; Galatians 1:19; 2:9). So it seems that the high priest Ananus was engaging in religious persecution of James and other Christians, perceiving them to be violators of the Jewish law.

The portrait of this situation given by Josephus fits well with what we have already seen from Tacitus and Pliny, as well as with the frequent accounts of persecution within the New Testament. The non-Christian sources basically agree with the Christian ones in recording the difficulties early Christians experienced.

However, the reference in Josephus is also rather different from references in Tacitus and Pliny. Those two classical writers give evidence for how far and how fast Christianity spread. Josephus, however, lets us see that even after Christianity had been going for several decades, there were still family members involved in the movement of Jesus's followers. This is interesting because, to have such a role, James would have had to believe, or at least pretend to believe, that his crucified brother was the promised Jewish deliverer, the Messiah, since that is what the name *Christ* means. Moreover, James's death for his faith makes it far more natural to assume his sincerity and that he genuinely believed his brother to be the Messiah.

Certain things follow from this. A brother, even a younger brother, is usually knowledgeable about the lives of other members of his family. For instance, James would most likely have grown up hearing about where his brother Jesus was born, something of his ancestry, and whether his parents presented Joseph as the biological father to Jesus. If James was both a family member and sincere in believing his brother to be the Messiah, his leadership of the church in Jerusalem would probably *not*

15. "Brother" could mean "half-brother," and in Matthew 13:55 the use of this title is presented as compatible with the view in Matthew 1:18–25 that neither Joseph nor any other man had contributed to Mary's pregnancy.

have provided an environment in which major new teachings were easily accepted.

Matthew and Luke, which are normally dated to the first century, testify to the belief that Jesus was born of a virgin in Bethlehem, the town the Old Testament prophet Micah had said would be the place from which the future ruler of Israel would arise (Micah 5:2). All four Gospels attest to the belief that Jesus was descended from David.¹⁶ Skeptical readers of the New Testament might naturally assume that these beliefs arose through exaggerations over time as word of Jesus as Messiah spread. The problem with this is finding a context in which such embellishments *could* spread.

It is actually most natural to assume that in the first thirty or so years of Christianity, more than one sincere member of the family of Jesus held a key role in the early church. According to 1 Corinthians 9:5 (written ca. AD 56) not just one brother, but “the brothers” of Jesus traveled with their wives, spreading the Christian message. This suggests a situation in which the sprouting of novel beliefs about the family origins of Jesus would have been hard.

But is it then likely that such beliefs arose after AD 62, when James had died? The problem with supposing that novel beliefs arose later is that, by then, Christianity had spread so far and so fast that it would have been difficult to introduce innovations. For a start, anyone wanting to spread a new doctrine would have had to travel widely to advance the belief, and would also have had to overcome resistance as he sought to displace the established belief.

16. In John 7:42, the belief that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and descended from David is conveyed using irony. For possible material evidence that some people at the time of the New Testament claimed that they could trace their genealogy back to David, see *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae*, vol. 1, *Jerusalem, Part 1: 1–704*, ed. Hannah M. Cotton, Leah Di Segni, Werner Eck, Benjamin Isaac, Alla Kushnir-Stein, Haggai Misgav, Jonathan Price, Israel Roll, and Ada Yardeni (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 88–90.

Take, for instance, the idea that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. If we ignore for the moment the remarkable nature of the claims that an individual who was descended from the founder of Israel's great royal dynasty was born of a virgin in the town from which a prophet had predicted a future ruler would arise, the most straightforward view of the documentary evidence would be that these beliefs were in place from when Christianity first started spreading. If a non-miraculous but otherwise similar set of beliefs was attested in documents as close to the events as were the Gospels and among people as widespread as were early Christians, few people would have any difficulty in believing these facts to be true. This would especially be the case if sincere family members were around for the opening decades of the spread of the message.

We will deal in chapter 8 with the question of the miraculous, which is a problem for some people in taking the Gospel accounts as historical. All I want to establish at this stage is that, were it not for the amazing nature of the claims made about Jesus, few would have any problem believing biographical details recorded so close to the alleged events.

We have now looked at three non-Christian writers and what they said about Jesus Christ or Christians. We have seen

- the confirmation of basic facts from the New Testament, such as Christ's death under Pontius Pilate in Judaea between AD 26 and AD 36,
- that Christ was worshiped as God early on,
- that Christ's followers often experienced persecution,
- that Christians spread far and fast,
- that some early Christian leaders would have known of Christ's family origins.

The
GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Matthew, composed by one of Jesus' twelve disciples, was written to show how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament, the Coming One who reverses the ravages of sin and death.

But this fulfillment is accomplished in surprising ways. Time and again throughout this Gospel, Jesus confronts and corrects those who know the Scripture best, such as the scribes and Pharisees. And time and again, it is the sinful and distraught who receive Jesus' gentlest embrace.

Matthew's Gospel contains large blocks of teaching from Jesus, showing that he is the true and final prophet, surpassing and fulfilling the ministries of all the prophets before him, such as Moses and Elijah. Among all the Gospels, this one also has the greatest concentration of parables, as Jesus explains to his hearers what the kingdom of heaven is like. In all of this we are being shown that in Jesus Christ the new world order, the new creation, has quietly broken out in the middle of history.

Through his birth, life, death, and resurrection, Jesus Christ has brought heaven down to earth. Those who

Introduction

repent of their sins and embrace Jesus as Savior and King are swept into this new creation and enjoy the new life it offers. This, and nothing less, is the astonishing claim of the Gospel of Matthew.

P R E F A C E

THE BIBLE

The words of the Bible are the very words of God our Creator speaking to us. They are completely truthful;¹ they are pure;² they are powerful;³ and they are wise and righteous.⁴ We should read these words with reverence and awe,⁵ and with joy and delight.⁶ Through these words God gives us eternal life,⁷ and daily nourishes our spiritual lives.⁸

THE ESV TRANSLATION

The English Standard Version® (ESV®) stands in the classic stream of English Bible translations that goes back nearly five centuries. In this stream, accurate faithfulness to the original text is combined with simplicity, beauty, and dignity of expression. Our goal has been to carry forward this legacy for this generation and generations to come.

The ESV is an “essentially literal” translation that seeks as far as possible to reproduce the meaning and structure of the original text and the personal style of each

¹ Ps. 119:160; Prov. 30:5; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18 ² Ps. 12:6 ³ Jer. 23:29; Heb. 4:12; 1 Pet. 1:23 ⁴ Ps. 19:7–11 ⁵ Deut. 28:58; Ps. 119:74; Isa. 66:2 ⁶ Ps. 19:7–11; 119:14, 97, 103; Jer. 15:16 ⁷ John 6:68; 1 Pet. 1:23 ⁸ Deut. 32:46; Matt. 4:4

Preface

Bible writer. We have sought to be “as literal as possible” while maintaining clear expression and literary excellence. Therefore the ESV is well suited for both personal reading and church ministry, for devotional reflection and serious study, and for Scripture memorization.

THE ESV PUBLISHING TEAM

The ESV publishing team has included more than a hundred people. The fourteen-member Translation Oversight Committee benefited from the work of fifty biblical experts serving as Translation Review Scholars and from the comments of the more than fifty members of the Advisory Council. This international team from many denominations shares a common commitment to the truth of God’s Word and to historic Christian orthodoxy.

TO GOD’S HONOR AND PRAISE

We know that no Bible translation is perfect; but we also know that God uses imperfect and inadequate things to his honor and praise. So to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and to his people—we offer what we have done, with our prayers that it may prove useful, with gratitude for much help given, and with ongoing wonder that our God should ever have entrusted to us so momentous a task.

To God alone be the glory!
The Translation Oversight Committee

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO
MATTHEW

THE ARRIVAL IN HISTORY OF
JESUS THE MESSIAH

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah,

and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

The Arrival in History of Jesus the Messiah

So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and
bear a son,
and they shall call his name
Immanuel”

(which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

The Arrival in History of Jesus the Messiah

“‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of
Judah,
are by no means least among the
rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people
Israel.’”

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then,

opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

The Arrival in History of Jesus the Messiah

“A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted,
because they are no more.”

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the

kingdom of heaven is at hand.” For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

“The voice of one crying in the
wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.’”

Now John wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up

children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God

descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written,

“‘Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from
the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,

“‘He will command his angels
concerning you,’