

Review: John Dickson, *The Christ Files: How Historians Know What They Know About Jesus*, Blue Bottle Books, Sydney, NSW, 2006

Pages: 101

Undeniable Evidence

This short book well summarises the extra-Biblical evidence for the existence of Jesus as well as corroborating some of the main claims of the Bible. This is powerful because the witnesses were hostile pagans and had no incentive to lie about what they didn't believe in.

From the author's 'disclaimer', he is not writing from a Christian perspective and seeks to look at the evidence from a 'neutral' position. Nevertheless, when confronting atheists, Christians would do well to know that Jesus has excellent historical support outside of the Bible.

Foreword (pp. v-vii)

Introduction: The Da Vinci Code Factor? (pp. 1-5)

I) The Game of Scholarship: How to Read Between the Headlines
(pp. 7-16)

The only authority for the authenticity of the Gospel of Judas is a lawyer and antiquities dealer Mario Roberty. No historian would authenticate this mid-second century text.

The three scholarship 'camps' are *sceptical*, *mainstream*, and *apologetic*.

Peer reviews requires reading by at least two independent international scholars.

‘Beyond reasonable doubt’ is not certainty since historical sources are incapable of proving or disproving events.

II) The Troublemaker: Jesus in Ancient Pagan Writings (pp. 17-24)

Thallos, AD55, in the third volume of his *Histories* mentions a darkness coinciding with the crucifixion. This is only known by way of Sextus Julius Africanus’ *History of the World* (AD160-240) whom he quotes.

A private letter by a pagan Mara bar Serapion in Syriac dates shortly after the fall of Jerusalem in AD70: “...What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King?...Nor did the wise king die altogether; he lived on in the teaching which he had given.”

Cornelius Tacitus (AD56-120) in his *Histories* and *Annals* (15.44) wrote: “Christians derived their name from a man called Christ, who during the reign of Emperor Tiberius had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate.”

Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (Pliny the Younger) (AD61-113) in his letters (Book 10, Letter 96): “ ...They had met regularly before dawn on a determined day, and sung ...an hymn to Christ as to a god.”

Circa AD120, Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus wrote in *Life of Claudius* 25.4: “Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome, because of the riots they were causing at the instigation of Chrestus.”

Greek satirist Lucian of Samosata (AD115-200) in *The Death of Perigrinus* (11-13): “...the one whom they still worship today, the man in Palestine who was crucified because...they transgress and deny the Greek gods and begin worshipping that crucified sophist and living by his laws.”

Celsus was a second century Greek intellectual and c175AD wrote *True Doctrine*, which Origen quotes in his Third Century work *Against Celsus* (1.32-33). Celsus said Jesus was the illegitimate

offspring of Mary and a Roman soldier Panthera and His miracles were really Egyptian sorcery: “having tried his hand at certain magical powers, Jesus returned from there, and on account of those powers gave himself the title of God.”

III) Deceiver and Magician: Jesus in Ancient Jewish Writings (pp. 25-32)

Josephus in *Jewish Antiquities* 18.63-64 wrote that Jesus was a wise man, a doer of startling deeds, and a teacher of people who gained a following both among Jews and Greeks. Pilate condemned him to the cross. At that time the “tribe of Christians” had not yet died out.

In *Antiquities* 20.200, “James” is described as the “brother of Jesus”, Ananus assembled the Sanhedrin and brought before them the brother of Jesus the “so-called Messiah-Christ” (James) and delivered him to be stoned to death.

In the Talmud (*baraita Sanhedrin* 43a-b) cAD100-200 it says, “On the eve of Passover Jesus was hanged (on a cross)...he has practised sorcery and enticed and led Israel astray.

baraita Shabbat 104b (c3C AD) says Jesus was the product of an affair with a Roman soldier named Pantera.

IV) Behind the New Testament: Earliest Christian Sources (pp. 33-56)

The councils of Rome (AD382) and Carthage (AD397) codified the New Testament.

In 332AD Emperor Constantine commissioned fifty copies of the Bible.

The Didache, Epistle of Barnabas and Shepherd of Hermas did not make it into the New Testament.

It is believed that Mark did not know about Paul's writings.

Historians rely on the *criterion of multiple attestation*.

Paul's letters were written AD48-64 and there are about 600 Greek manuscripts.

The Epistle of James was written AD50-62, the Gospel of Mark AD65-75

A contemporary of Mark named Papias (AD60-120) was bishop of Hieropolis and said he became Peter's interpreter.

"Markan Priority" relies on the fact that Matthew is about 80% of Mark and Luke 60%. The mythical "Quelle" [Q] is meant to account for both Mark and the missing pieces of Matthew and Luke.

There is also an "L" (AD40-70) or "Luke's special source" which supposedly accounts for a third of Luke, including the Prodigal Son, Good Samaritan, and Pericope Adulterae.

Other historians' criteria are: coherence, dissimilarity [i.e. Jesus' teachings cannot have been derived from Judaism]; archaic style; embarrassment; memorability; date [the closer to the event the more reliable the source].

V) Before the Gospels: Jesus in Oral Tradition (pp. 57-70)

In ancient cultures a gap of forty years was not considered lengthy due to the strong tradition of oral conveyance.

Records of Siddhartha Gautama (448-368BC) only appear 350 years after his death.

Before the printing press societies were mainly *aural*.

In AD200 Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi collated the ‘traditions of the elders’ into the Mishna (“repetition”). It contains quotes from about 150 rabbis and is over a thousand pages.

Oral tradition is capable of both forgetting details and deliberately removing them from transmission.

The gospels were really written down *so soon* because of Christianity’s rapid spread.

VI) Jesus in Context: Background Sources for the Study of Jesus (pp. 71-98)

Tullius Cicero Marcus (106-43BC) described crucifixion as the “ultimate punishment”.

Archaeologists made findings of the town of Nazareth in the 1950s which had Jewish-style tombs. Jewish periodical texts describe its region as “Galilee of the Gentiles”.

Even the larger Galilean cities which were Greco-Roman in architecture remained Jewish in culture. Pig bones are conspicuous in their absence.

The Nag Hammadi collection was discovered in Egypt in 1945 and is dated to the 2ndC AD. It includes the Gospel of Thomas which contains 114 verses (only four of which scholars *may* think are genuine).

The Gospel of Philip is dated to the 2nd or 3rdC AD.

Conclusion) Reading the Gospels Seriously (pp. 99-101)