

10. Is The New Testament Historical?



Ossuary of Caiaphas

The New Testament claims to be the written record of Jesus' ministry, his teachings and the formation of his church. How can these claims be validated? The New Testament proclaims itself as truth, meaning its words should correspond with fact. The Gospels and Epistles are filled with individual names, places and events. Do these New Testament records correspond with historical facts? If the New Testament is not true but fictitious, why should we rely on its contents for spiritual truth?

The New Testament was written by 10 different authors who witnessed and reported the events in their day. One simple test is to compare the New Testament with verifiable historical records.

With the rise of humanism and skepticism the scriptures and their historicity came under sharp attack in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries. Late dates of authorship, and reports of historical errors were attributed to the New Testament. Sir William Ramsay (1850's) regarded as one of the greatest archaeologists ever was a skeptic of the early dates attributed to the books of the Bible. He dated Acts and Luke to the mid 2nd century. After doing a topographical study of Asia Minor and using the writings of Luke, he was forced to change his mind. He wrote, "I found myself brought into contact with the 'Book of Acts' as an authority for the topography, antiquities and society of Asia Minor. It was gradually borne upon me that in various details the narrative showed marvelous truth".

How Archeology confirms the Bible?



The life of Jesus and his disciples is filled with concrete facts that can be verified in history and archeology. In 1986 after a severe drought the water level of the Sea of Galilee dropped. And the outline of a boat was revealed in the mud just 5 miles from Capernaum. Capernaum was the center of Jesus' ministry and where Peter's house was located. The boat was carbon dated between 40 BC and 40 AD. The boat was 26.5 feet long, 7.5 feet wide and 4 feet high and could be rowed or sailed. This corresponds with the gospel accounts of Jesus and his disciples on the sea of Galilee. In Luke 5:1-7 we see this type

of a boat in service. So we are able to verify the words with facts. This attests to the historicity of the book.



Another example, the coins at use during the time of first century are also concrete pieces of evidence that attest to the historicity of the books. Jesus' reference to the widow offering (Mark 12:42-44) two copper coins can be attested to both by the coins' existence as well as the confirmation of Roman and Jewish non-Christian writers during this time. The ability to compare physical evidence with claims allows us to validate the writers. The validation of the New Testament records does not in itself prove inspiration. What it does prove is the historical accuracy of the writer.

We are not able to verify every fact, because some historical records are lost, and not all archeological finds have been uncovered. But each verified fact and event gives added credibility to the author as being truthful. This evidence counters those who challenge the New Testament as being a fabrication of 2nd and 3rd century writers, "The Higher Criticism". The details of some of the facts are so specific and regional that unless the writer had intimate knowledge of the details, names, places and words used during the specific period they would be proven false. In 70 AD when the Temple was destroyed and the Jews dispersed everything changed, along with the ability to create the scenes without specific knowledge.

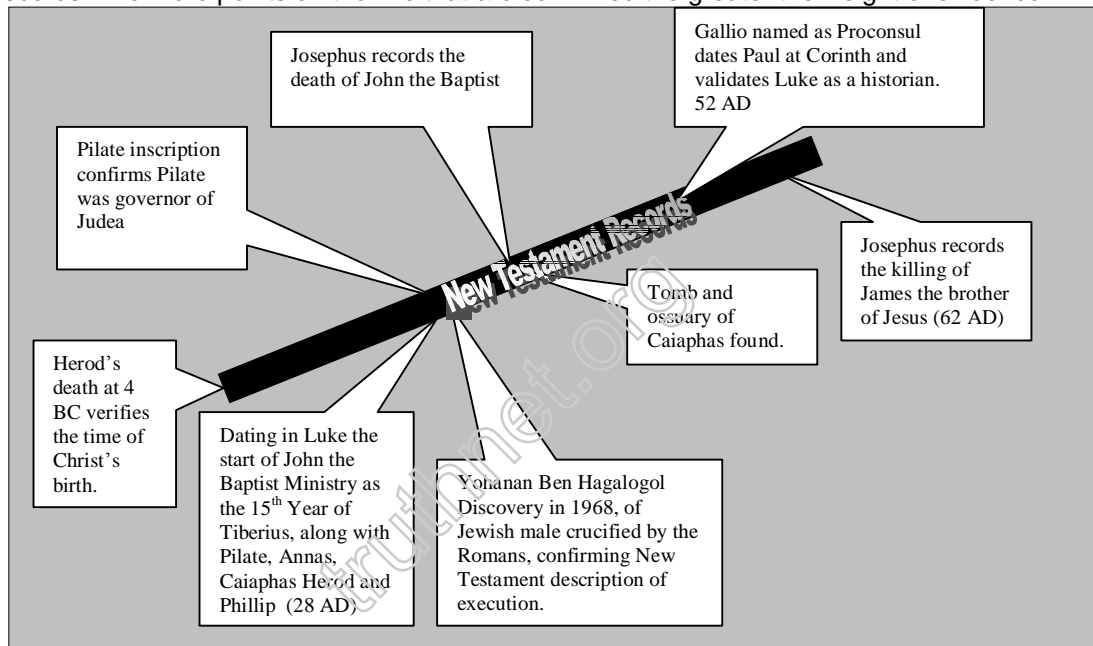
Luke in Acts 18:12, calls Gallio “Proconsul”, this was questioned by critical scholars but Luke was proven correct. When the Delphi inscription was found it verified some very specific history which before had been questioned. On the inscription it read:

“As Lucius Junius Gallio, my friend, and the Proconsul of Achaia”¹

Gallio only held the post of Proconsul for one year from July 1, 52 AD and that one year overlapped with Paul ministry in Corinth. This specific information verified the title of Gallio and also the year of Paul ministry in Corinth. This one example is repeated and time again as history and archeology continue to verify the New Testament. Examples such as this have caused many skeptics and critics of the New Testament to completely change their viewpoints.

Anglican critic, who started the “Death of God” movement, John A. T. Robinson, wrote the book, “Redating the New Testament” after he realized the incredible archeological evidence contradicting his earlier position. He re-dated Matthew to 40 to 60 AD, Mark at 45 to 60, Luke at before 57 to after 60 and John from before 40 to after 65.

This discovery of evidence can be extrapolated over a time line of New Testament records. The more points on the line that are confirmed the greater the weight of evidence.



Extrapolating New Testament Evidence

What types of evidence validates the historicity of the New Testament?

In examining the historical evidence for the New Testament the types of evidence can be categorized into three types, *Historical*, *Archeological* and *Documentary*. Each piece of evidence can be used to fill in and extrapolate the evidence.

As we compile the various pieces of evidence both from writers who lived (*Documentary Evidence*) during the time of Jesus and physical evidence (*Archeological Evidence*) that verifies events (*Historical Evidence*) in the bible we can conclude the New Testament is historically truthful.

But the history of the New Testament is not on trial rather it is the contents of its claims. The claims the New Testament makes about Jesus are incredible. So if we conclude the writers

¹ The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict, Josh McDowell, 1999, Thomas Nelson, Pg. 65

are correct about the "History" then we are forced to answer, are they correct about the person of Jesus?

Documentary Evidence

There are two types of Documentary evidence we can examine; Christian and Non-Christian. The Christian documentary evidence is overwhelming and in its scope and volume compared to other manuscripts.

Christian Documentary Evidence:

A. Greek New Testament Manuscripts are numbered at 5366 and date from within 50 years of the autograph for the earliest fragments.

Author	Book	Date Written	Earliest Copies	Time Gap	No. of Copies
Homer	Iliad	800 BC	C. 400 BC	400 years	643
Herodotus	History	480-425 BC	C. 900 AD	1350 years	8
Thucydides	History	460-400 BC	900 AD	1300 years	8
Plato		400 BC	900 AD	1300 years	8
Demosthenes		300 BC	900 AD	1300 years	7
Caesar	Gallic Wars	100-44 BC	900 AD	1000 years	10
Livy	History of Rome	59-17 AD	4 th Century (Partial), Mostly 10 th Century	400 years	1 partial
				1000 years	19 copies
Tacitus	Annals	100 AD	1100 AD	1000 years	20
Pliny Secundus	Natural History	61-113 AD	850 AD	750 years	7
New Testament		50-100 AD	114 Fragments 200 (Books) 250 (Most NT) 325 (Complete NT)	50 years 100 years 150 years 225 years	5366

B. Translations of New Testament writings into other languages.

The New Testament was translated into other languages as Christianity spread out from the Roman Empire.

1. Syriac Versions

- Syriac Peshitta, translated AD 150-250, there are more than 350 manuscripts dating from the 5th century.
- Palestinian Syriac AD 400-450 AD
- Philoxenian (AD 508)
- Harkleian Syriac (AD 616)

2. Latin Versions

- African Old Latin (Codex Babbienensis 400 AD)
- Codex Corviensis (AD 400-500)
- Codex Vercellensis (AD 360)
- Codex Palatinus (AD 500-600)
- Latin Vulgate (Meaning common or popular) translated by Jerome at the request of Damascus bishop of Rome (AD 366-384)

3. Coptic (Egyptian Versions)

- Sahidic. Beginning of the third century
- Bohairic 4th Century
- Middle-Egyptian Fourth or fifth century.

4. Other Translation

Armenian: (400 AD)
 Gothic: Fourth century
 Georgian: Fifth century
 Ethiopic: Sixth century
 Nubian: Sixth century

C. Early Church Lectionaries

The second largest group of NT Greek manuscripts are the Lectionaries² which number 2396 dating from the 6th to the 9th century. They contain all the New Testament many times with the exception of Revelation and Acts.

D. Early Church Father Quotations

The quotations from the NT manuscripts are so numerous and so widespread by the early church fathers that if there did not exist any NT manuscripts, one could be reproduced from the writings of the early church fathers. This validates the the transmission, and authority of the NT manuscripts.

Writer	Gospels	Acts	Pauline Epistles	General Epistles	Revelation	Totals
Justin Martyr (133 AD)	268	10	43	6	3 (266 allusions)	330
Irenaeus (180 AD)	1038	194	499	23	65	1819
Clement (150-212 AD)	1107	44	1127	207	11	2406
Origen (185-253 AD)	9231	349	7778	399	165	17,992
Tertullian (166-220 AD)	3822	502	2609	120	205	7258
Hippolytus (170-235 AD)	734	42	387	27	188	1378
Eusebius (324 AD)	3258	211	1592	88	27	5176
Grand Total	19,368	1352	14,035	870	664	36,289

The Specificity of History

One way the historicity of the NT is validated is through the specific historical citations which would be difficult if not impossible if the writer was not in the time period. For example Chapters 13 to 28 in Acts, authored by Luke lists over 43 specific places, locations and names. The list below is a sampling of the 43 items, listed from Bakers Encyclopidia of Christian Apologetics.³

1. A natural crossing between correctly named ports (13:4-5). Mount Casius, south of Seleucia, stands within sight of Cyprus. The name of the porconsul in 13:7 cannot be confirmed, but the family of Sergii Pauli is attested.
2. The proper river port, Perga, for a ship crossing from Cyprus (13:13)
3. The proper location of Lycaonia (14:6)
4. The unusual but correct declension of the *Lystra* and the correct language spoken in Lystra. Correct identification of the two gods associated with the city, Zeus and Hermes (14:12).
5. The proper port, Attalia, for returning travelers (14:25)
6. The correct route from the Cilician Gates (16:1)
7. The proper form of the name *Troas* (16:8)
8. The proper identification of Philippi as a Roman colony. The right location for the river Gangites near Philippi (16:13)

² Lectionaries were the weekly church reading of the Gospels and Epistles. This system was copied from the Synagogue system of the systematic reading of the Torah and Prophets. The Lectionary manuscripts are documents from which someone would read.

³ Unshakable Foundations, Geisler, 2001, Pg. 275-276, Bethany House

9. Association of Thyatira with cloth dyeing (16:14). Correct designations of the titles for the colony magistrates (16:20,35,36,38).
10. The proper locations where travelers would spend successive nights on this journey (17:1)
11. The presence of a synagogue in Thessalonica (17:1) and the proper title of *politarch* for the magistrates (17:6).
12. The correct explanation that sea travel is the most convenient way to reach Athens in summer with favoring east winds (17:14).
13. The abundance of images in Athens (17:16), and reference to the synagogue there (17:17).
14. Depiction of philosophical debate in the *agora* (17:17). Use in 17:18-19 of the correct Athenian slang epithet for Paul, *spermologos*, and the correct name of the court (*areios pagos*). Accurate depiction of Athenian character (17:21). Correct identification of altar to "An unknown god" (17:23). Logical reaction of philosophers who deny bodily resurrection (17:32). *Areoprites*, the correct title for a member of the court (17:34).
15. Correct identification of the Corinthian synagogue (18:4). Correct designation of Gallio as proconsul (18:12). The *bema* (Judgment seat) can still be seen in Corinth's forum (18:16).
16. The cult of Artemis of the Ephesians (19:24,27). The cult is well attested, and the Ephesian theater was the city meeting-place (19:29)
17. Correct title *grammateus* for the chief executive magistrate and the proper title of honor, *Neokoros* (19:35). Correct name to identify the goddess (19:37). Correct designation for those holding court (19:38). Use of plural *anthupatoi* in 19:38 is probably a remarkably exact reference to the fact that two men jointly exercised the functions of proconsul at this time.
18. Use of precise ethnic designation *Beroiaios* and the ethnic term *Asianos* (20:4).
19. The permanent stationing of a Roman cohort in the Fortress Antonia to suppress disturbances at festival times (21:31). The flight of steps used by guards (21:31,35)
20. The correct identifications of Ananias as high priest (23:2) and Felix as governor (23:24).
21. Explanation of the provincial penal procedure (24:1-9)
22. Agreement with Josephus of the name *Porcius Festus* (24:27)
23. Note of the right legal appeal by a Roman citizen (25:11). The legal formula of *de quibus cognoscere volebam* (25:18). The characteristic form of reference to the emperor (25:26).
24. Precise name and place given for the island of Cauda (27:16). Appropriate sailors' maneuvers at the time of a storm (27:16-19). The fourteenth night judged by experienced Mediterranean navigators to be an appropriate time for this journey in a storm (27:27). The proper term for this section of the Adriatic Sea at this time (27:27). The precise term, *bolisantes*, for taking soundings (27:28). The position of probable approach of a ship running aground before an easterly wind (27:39).
25. The proper title *protos (te nesou)* for a man in Publius's position of leadership on the islands (28:7)

Non-Christian Documents




From early non-Christian historians and writers we can confirm specific information about Jesus and the early church. Norman Geisler writes the following;⁴



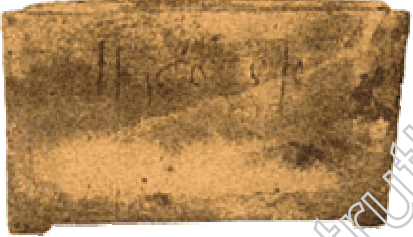
1. Jesus was from Nazareth;
2. he lived a wise and virtuous life;
3. he was crucified in Palestine under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius Caesar at Passover time, being considered the Jewish king;
4. he was believed by his disciples to have been raised from the dead three days later;
5. his enemies acknowledged that he performed unusual feats they called "sorcery";
6. his small band of disciples multiplied rapidly, spreading even as far as Rome;
7. his disciples denied polytheism, lived moral lives, and worshiped Christ as Divine.

This picture confirms the view of Christ presented in the New Testament Gospels.

These writers include Josephus a Jewish Historian, (37-100 AD), Thallus a Samaritan (52 AD), Tacitus (52 AD), Pliny the Younger (112 AD) the governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor and others.

⁴ Unshakable Foundations, Geisler, 2001, Pg. 269, Bethany House

Graphic	Importance	Quote
	<p>The Pilate Inscription In 1961 an Italian archaeologist, discovered an inscription at Caserea Maritima. The inscription in Latin contained 4 lines translated as follows: "Tiberium Pontius Pilate Prefect of Judea" The stone was probably used in a foundation of a Tiberium (temple for the worship of Tiberius)</p>	<p>The inscription clarifies the title of Pontius Pilate as "prefect" at least during a time in his rulership. Tacitus and Josephus later referred to him as "procurator". The NT calls him "governor", a term incorporating both titles. This inscription is the only archaeological evidence of both Pilate's name and this title.</p>
	<p>The James Ossuary Researchers may have uncovered the first archaeological evidence that refers to Jesus as an actual person and identifies James, the first leader of the Christian church, as his brother. The 2,000-year-old ossuary—a box that held bones—bears the inscription "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." Until now, all references to the three men have been found only in manuscripts. Andre Lemaire, a paleographer at the Sorbonne University in Paris dates the box, which was empty, to 63 A.D.. Scientists at the Geological Institute of Israel examined the box, which is made of Jerusalem limestone, and judged it to be about 2,000 years old. The inscription is written in Aramaic, in a form that further narrows the possible time frame. "The script is very important for the date because the Aramaic script changed over time in ways we could measure," said P. Kyle McCarter, a paleographer at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. "It's the most important criterion for dating this object, and the script is consistent with a date in the middle of the first century A.D."</p>	<p>This gives us one more piece of evidence outside of the Bible that these are real people, and that they're important people, and provides a small confirmation for the claims made about James as the brother of Jesus" What is highly unusual is the mention of a brother." So far, with all the inscriptions we have, only one other has mentioned a brother," said Lemaire. "This is a very important point for the problem of identification. There would need to be a special reason to mention the brother. It suggests the brother was also prominent, an important person." Jesus and Joseph were fairly common names of that era; James, slightly less so. Statistical analysis suggests that the possibility of these three names occurring in the given relationships (son of Joseph, brother of Jesus) is very small.</p>
	<p>Caiaphas Ossuary From the Caiaphas family tomb in Jerusalem, this ossuary bears the inscription "Yehosef bar Qafa: (Joseph, son of Caiaphas), and it is dated to the Second Temple Period. Caiaphas is the name of the High Priest who presided over the trial of Jesus (Matthew 26:3,57)</p>	<p>The Ossuaries system ceased after 70 AD. The box contained the bones of 4 children and an adult women and the bones of a man aged about 60. The ornate decorations mean that he was a significant person. Archeologists feel this may be the High priest during the time of Christ. Josephus refers to him as "Joseph who was called Caiaphas of the high priest"</p>

	<p>Yohanán —Crucified Victim In 1968 an ancient burial site was uncovered containing about 35 bodies. One named Yohanán Ben Ha'galgol had a 7 inch nail driven thru both feet. Evidence also exists that similar spikes were used in his arms. Yohanán's legs were crushed by a blow consistent with the common use of Roman crucifragium (John 19:31-32)</p>	<p>Each of these details confirms the New Testament description of Crucifixion.</p>
	<p>Matthias Tomb A first century stone coffin is marked with the sign of the cross on its lid and a single name on its front: "Matthias". Scholars believe this may be the final resting place of one of Jesus' twelve Apostles. (Acts 1:23)</p> <p>Prof. Sukenik, the father of Prof. Yigael Yadin who was the legendary scholar famed for his extensive work on the Dead Sea Scrolls, believed that he had unearthed one of the earliest records of Christian faith found.</p>	<p>Confirms the early establishment of Christianity in Palestine. And verification of new testament figures.</p>
	<p>Simon Barsabas Tomb An ossuary, found near the tomb of "Simon Barsabas" (Acts 1:21 & 15:22) is inscribed with the dedication: "[T]o Jesus, the Lord." Scholars believe this is the earliest record of Christian faith ever found. The burial cave, where the stone coffin was discovered, was sealed not later than the year 42 A.D., more than a decade before any part of the New Testament was written. What Sukenik discovered were the remains of a family burial cave (catacomb) dating to the early part of the first century. It included several stone ossuaries (coffins) marked with the sign of the cross and with numerous inscriptions, included several dedications to "Jesus."</p>	<p>Confirms the early establishment of Christianity in Palestine. And verification of new testament figures.</p>



The Nazareth Decree
 A slab of stone found in Nazareth in 1878, inscribed with a decree from Emperor Claudius (AD 41-54) that no graves should be disturbed or bodies extracted or moved. With the offender being sentenced to Capital punishment on the charge of violation of a sepulcher.

A likely explanation is that Claudius having heard of the Christian doctrine of resurrection and Jesus' empty tomb while investigation the riots of AD 49, decided not to let any such report surface again. This would make sense in light of the Jewish argument that the body had been stolen (Mat. 28:11-15) This is early testimony to the strong and persistent belief that Jesus rose from the dead.



The Erastus Inscription
 On a slab of limestone which was a part of the pavement near the theater in Corinth, a Latin inscription was found which translates, "Erastus, in return for the aedileship, laid the pavement at his own expense"

In Romans 16:23 Paul writing from Corinth mentioned an Erastus and identified him as a city official.



Leper remains of the First century
 In Jerusalem at Hinnom Valley, the 2000 year old remains of a person with Hansen's disease (Leprosy) has been found. According to Shimon Gibson, an Israeli Archaeologist, This is the first example of Hansen's disease in the Middle East. Prior to this the earliest examples of Hansen was dated to the 5th century.

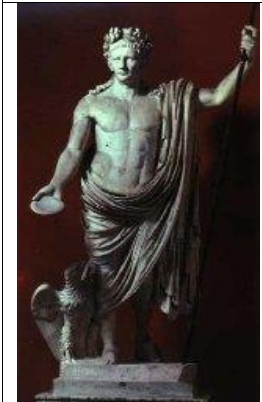
This finding confirms the records of the Gospels about the existence of Hansen's disease (Lebrosy) and the attitude toward those who had it.

Non-Christian Witness

Quote

Thallus
 Wrote about 52 AD. None of his writings exist but fragmented citations are preserved. Julius Africanus, who wrote in AD 221 quotes Thallus in a discussion about the darkness that followed the crucifixion of Christ:

"On the whole world there pressed a most fearful darkness, and the places in Judea and other districts were thrown down. This darkness This darkness Thallus, in the third book of his History, calls, as appears to me without reason, an eclipse fo the sun."



Suetonius 117-138 AD
 Was chief secretary to Emperor Hadrian (117-138 AD) He confirms the report in Acts 18:2 that Claudius commanded all Jews (among them Priscilla and Aquila) to leave Rome in 49 AD.

He writes,
 "As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome."
 (Suetonius, Life of Claudius, 25.4)
 On the great fire of Rome he writes,
 "Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a body of people addicted to a novel and mischievous superstition."
 (Suetonius, Life of Nero, 16)
 Who



Tacitus 109 AD
 The 1st century Roman historian is considered one of the most accurate of the ancient world. He give an account of the great fire of Rome for which some blamed the Emperor Nero:

He writes
 'To dispel the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and treated with the most extreme punishments, some people, popularly known as Christians, whose disgraceful activities were notorious. The originator of that name, Christus, had been executed when Tiberius was emperor, by order of the procurator Pontius Pilatus. But the deadly cult, though checked for a time, was now breaking out again not only in Judea, the birthplace of this evil, but even throughout Rome, where all the nasty and disgusting ideas from all over the world pour in and find a ready following.' (Tacitus, A, 15.44)



Josephus (37 A.D.-100 A.D.)
 Was a Pharisee of the priestly line and a Jewish Historian. He was an eyewitness to the Roman capture of Jerusalem.
 He wrote two major works The Jewish Wars (77-78 AD) and Antiquities of the Jews (94 AD).
 Josephus writes about New Testament Individuals. James, Brother of Jesus
 John the Baptist
 Jesus (Questioned)

James brother of Jesus
 He Writes, "He assembled the Sanhedrin of the judges and brought before them the brother of Jesus who was called Christ, whose name was James" Josephus, AJ, 20.9.1)
John the Baptist
 He writes, "Now, some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and very justly, as a punishment of the what he did against John, who was called the Baptist; fro Herod slew him who was a good man and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue...and so come to baptism (AJ 18.5.2)



Pliny the Younger
 Pliny the Younger was a Roman author and administrator. In a letter to the Emperor Trajan in about 112 AD, Pliny describes the early Christian worship practices:
 This reference provides hard evidence that Jesus Christ was worshipped as God from an early date by Christians who continued to follow the practice of breaking bread together, as reported in Acts 2:42,46

"They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as a to a god, and bound themselves by solemn oath, not to do any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and them then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind" (Pliny the Younger, L 10:96).

	<p>Emperor Trajan 98-117 AD In reply to Pliny's letter, Emperor Trajan gave the following guidelines for punishing Christians:</p>	<p>"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 the party denies himself to be a Christian, and shall give proof that he is not (that is by adoring our gods) he shall be pardoned on the ground of repentance even though he may have formerly incurred suspicion." (Pliny the Younger, L, 10:97)</p>
	<p>Talmud Talmudic writings of most value concerning the historical Jesus are those compiled between 70 — 200 AD. The Tannaitic Period. The most significant text is Sanhedrin 43a. New Testament details confirmed by this passage include the fact and the time of the crucifixion, as well as the intent of the Jewish religious leaders to kill Jesus.</p>	<p>"On the eve of Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, "He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Any one who can say anything in his favor let him come forward and plead on his behalf." But since nothing was brought forward in his favor he was hanged on the eve of the Passover!" (Babylonian Talmud)</p>
	<p>Lucian 165 AD Lucian of Samosata was a second century Greek writer whose works contain sarcastic critiques of Christianity He writes,</p>	<p>"The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account...You see, these misguided creatures start with the general conviction that they are immortal for all time, which explains the contempt of death and voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them; and then it was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws. All this they take quite on faith, with the result that they despise all worldly goods alike, regarding them merely as common property (Lucian of Samosata, DP,11-13)</p>



Mara Bar-Serapion

A Syrian, Mara Bar-Serapion wrote to his son Serapion sometime between the late first and early third centuries the letter contains an apparent reference to Jesus:

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 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 (British Museum)

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