

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of biblical theology today by finishing our examination of extra-biblical evidence that corroborates the Bible. We ended last time by looking at few Old Testament prophecies about Jesus Christ. Dr. Spencer, where do you want to begin today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to first refer to the discussion we had back in Session 7, where I pointed out that the New Testament is the best attested book from antiquity by a huge margin. We have extremely good manuscripts for every part and that, combined with the science of textual criticism, which I also discussed in that session, allows us to have great confidence that we know what the original manuscripts said. Also, I want to lay to rest a notion that is, unfortunately, not uncommon today.

Marc Roby: What's that?

Dr. Spencer: It is the nonsensical view of some professing Christians that the New Testament does not have to be historically factual for the Christian faith to be meaningful. Some will say that it doesn't even matter if Jesus actually lived or not, all that matters is the good moral teaching that is credited to him. If you put that teaching into practice, then you are a Christian. But, to claim that the good moral teachings of Jesus, or of some mythical figure called Jesus, are all that matter is to completely eviscerate the gospel message.

The Christian faith is founded on historical fact. Let me quote the apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 15:14 he wrote that "if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith."¹ In other words, if the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a real historical event, the Christian faith is useless. And you can extend this argument very easily. If the New Testament is not true in every detail, then our faith has no solid objective foundation. We are left with pure subjectivism.

Marc Roby: I couldn't agree with you more.

Dr. Spencer: But, praise God, the reality is that Jesus Christ *is* the eternal Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity. He came to earth in the man Jesus of Nazareth, born of a virgin. He lived a perfect life of obedience and willingly gave himself as a sacrifice of atonement on the cross to pay for the sins of his people, and he was raised from the dead on the third day as foretold in the Bible. He then appeared to many people. And after he ascended into heaven he sent his Holy Spirit down on the apostles and they preached the good news of the forgiveness of sins in his name, which is called the gospel. Through that preaching, the Christian church was started and grew rapidly.

And what was true then is still true today; unless and until we come to know the real, historical Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior, we are dead in our trespasses and sins and bound for eternal hell. But, if we confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts

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that God raised him from the dead, we are saved and bound for heaven. Although, as we discussed in Sessions 12 through 16, that simple statement of faith is loaded with meaning and we must guard against a false, easy type of faith.

So, what I want to do today is to provide a sampling of the extra-biblical evidence we have that corroborates the New Testament.

Marc Roby: OK. What would you like to examine first?

Dr. Spencer: I first want to note that Dr. Stephen Meyer, in his video series “*Is the Bible Reliable?*”² does a good job of presented a significant amount of detailed evidence showing that the New Testament is historically accurate. For example, it gets the names of places and people just right. We have noted before that getting details right is a significant sign of historical accuracy and is not as easy as one might suppose. Let me give just one example.

Marc Roby: Please do.

Dr. Spencer: In Romans 16:23, which the apostle Paul wrote from Corinth, he sent greetings from a man named Erastus, whom Paul said was the “city's director of public works”. Now, this is not some major figure in history, so it is quite surprising that an inscription was found on an old Roman road in Corinth that names him.³ F.F. Bruce, in his excellent, but somewhat old, book “*The New Testament Documents, Are they Reliable?*”, mentions this same inscription.⁴

Marc Roby: That is pretty incredible to find such a minor figure from so long ago.

Dr. Spencer: It is incredible, and getting such a minor detail right is strong evidence of historical reliability. There are two others items that Meyer brings up in his video that I think it is worthwhile to mention, even though they are both disputed. They are both ossuaries, which are boxes the Jews used to re-bury bones after the body had decayed.

Marc Roby: That sounds a bit macabre.

Dr. Spencer: You're right, it does. In any event, this process of digging up a grave and re-burying the bones was only practiced for about a hundred years, from roughly 20 BC to 70 AD. One of the ossuaries was found in an official archaeological dig in 1990, so there is no question about its being authentic, the question is about whether or not the person named is the person from the Bible. The ossuary is very ornate and the inscription, when translated, reads “Joseph, son of Caiaphas”, which many think is the High Priest Caiaphas mentioned, for example, in Matthew 26 in connection with Jesus' trial.⁵

Marc Roby: That would be pretty incredible if true, and given the time period, the location and the fact that it was such an ornate ossuary, it certainly seems probable.

² *Is the Bible Reliable?*, Dr. Stephen Meyer, The Truth Project, Focus on the Family

³ Ibid

⁴ F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents, Are they Reliable?*, Eerdmans, 6th Ed., 1981, pg. 96

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caiaphas_ossuary

Dr. Spencer: I agree. But the other ossuary is potentially even more incredible. It is a very simple one that came to light from the antiquities market, so no one knows for sure when or where it was found or by whom. No one doubts that it is a first-century piece, the question is whether or not the entire inscription is first century, or whether some of it is a modern forgery. The inscription reads, when translated, “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus” and so this is called the James ossuary. If the entire inscription is legitimate, this would almost certainly be the ossuary for James, the half-brother of Jesus Christ, because all three names are correct, the period is correct, and you wouldn’t name a brother unless he was extremely prominent.

The evidence for this inscription being entirely legitimate has gone back and forth over the years as different types of testing have been done. The most recent testing was in 2008 and seems to confirm that it is genuine.⁶ One thing is certain, if the inscription has been added to by a modern forger, the person who did it was extremely good and very, very knowledgeable. So, over all, I’d have to say I think it is most likely genuine.

Marc Roby: That would be amazing. But, even if it turns out to be a forgery, we don’t need to worry too much, because we have a lot of other extra-biblical evidence to corroborate the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was a real person who was crucified by the Romans and whose followers started the Christian church.

Dr. Spencer: We certainly do. In fact, I would say that there is no serious basis for anyone to doubt the existence of Jesus Christ, or the fact that he was crucified, or the fact that his disciples said he was raised from the dead. For example, the Jewish-Roman historian, Flavius Josephus, whom we’ve talked about before, mentions Jesus twice in his *Antiquities* in Books 18 and 20, and he also mentions John the Baptist in Book 18.⁷ The *Antiquities* was written near the end of the first century AD, which is only about 60 years or so after the death of Christ. The account about Jesus in Book 20 also mentions his brother James, it says that the high priest Ananus “assembled the sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James”⁸. Now listening to that quote without being able to see the commas might be a bit confusing. James is called the brother of Jesus, and it is Jesus, we are told, who was called Christ.

Marc Roby: What about the other reference to Jesus?

Dr. Spencer: That one is a bit more problematic. We have several copies of it and the most famous one has pretty clearly, and regrettably, been modified by Christians, it has Josephus, who was certainly not a believer, calling Jesus the Christ, which is not believable. However, in 1971 a 10th-century Arabic version came to light, which still has the same basic material, but with a few key word changes. For example, instead of saying Jesus “was the Christ”, it says Jesus “was believed to be the Christ”. Since this version was in Arabic hands, there is no reason to suspect

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Ossuary

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josephus_on_Jesus

⁸ *Antiquities of the Jews*, 20.9.1, from *The Complete Works of Flavius Josephus*, Translated by William Whiston, 1737, see also Bruce, op. cit., pg. 109

that it was modified to be better evidence for Christianity, so most scholars think it is genuine, and it still provides clear evidence for Jesus.

Marc Roby: Do we have other extra-biblical sources mentioning Jesus Christ?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. The Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus wrote a history of the reign of Emperor Nero in about 112 AD, and in that history he notes that it was rumored that Nero himself started the great fire in Rome in 64 AD and then he writes that, in order to stop the rumor, Nero “substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, from whom they got their name, had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate when Tiberius was emperor; and the pernicious superstition was checked for a short time, only to break out afresh, not only in Judea, the home of the plague, but in Rome itself”.⁹

Marc Roby: Wow. Tacitus was clearly not a friend of Christians! He said that they were “loathed for their vices” and called Christianity a “pernicious superstition” and a “plague”.

Dr. Spencer: It is pretty clear alright that he didn’t think much of Christianity. But that makes this quote all the more valuable. I’m confident that he would not have wanted to provide evidence that would support Christianity! But, I suppose that since he knew what had happened, he probably didn’t think there would come a time when people would try to deny the basic facts.

Marc Roby: Well, if you’re right about that, he could not have been more wrong. But, I guess he can be forgiven for not foreseeing the deep animosity of modern anti-Christian, so-called scholars.

Dr. Spencer: He certainly can be forgiven. The great fire of Rome and Nero’s resulting persecution of Christians is also mentioned by Suetonius.¹⁰ And all of this is written within less than 100 years of the crucifixion of Christ, so we are not talking about oral traditions being blown up into a legend.

Marc Roby: Alright. What else do you have?

Dr. Spencer: F.F. Bruce, in the book I mentioned before, quotes from a letter written by a man named Mara Bar-Serapion to his son, also named Serapion.¹¹ The letter was written sometime after 73 AD, and, although we don’t know the exact date, most scholars think it was fairly soon thereafter.¹² In any event, this man was in prison and wrote to his son to encourage him to pursue wisdom. In doing so he mentions three wise men who were put to death; Socrates, Pythagoras, and – although he doesn’t name him – Jesus. He wrote, “What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King? It was just after that that their kingdom was abolished. ... Nor did the wise King die for good; He lived on in the teaching which He had given.” It seems clear that

⁹ Bruce, op. cit., pp 120-121, see also Meyer, op. cit., and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tacitus_on_Christ

¹⁰ Bruce, op. cit., op. cit., pp 121-122

¹¹ Ibid., pg. 117

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mara_bar_Serapion_on_Jesus

since this letter was written not long after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD it is referring to Christ. Meyer also mentions this letter in his video.¹³

Marc Roby: It sounds like this man was very modern – he viewed Jesus solely as a great philosopher!

Dr. Spencer: That’s true. But, as with Tacitus, the fact that he carried no brief for Christianity makes his comments more valuable. They show us that the basic facts about the life, death, resurrection and following of Christ were widely known.

Marc Roby: That is an important point. What do you want to present next?

Dr. Spencer: The next thing I want to mention is very important. Around 156 AD a man named Justin Martyr wrote a defense of Christianity to the Roman Emperor Pius.¹⁴ F.F. Bruce notes a very important detail in this defense. Martyr wrote that “the words, ‘They pierced my hands and my feet,’” are “a description of the nails that were fixed in His hands and His feet on the cross; and after He was crucified, those who crucified Him cast lots for His garments, and divided them among themselves; and that these things were so, you may learn from the ‘Acts’ which were recorded under Pontius Pilate.” Notice that last statement! Martyr knew that there had been a record of these events made, which he calls the “Acts” and that this record was available to the emperor! This is again clear evidence that what happened to Jesus was well known. And it is not credible to claim it was a legend that grew because this letter was written less than 130 years after Jesus’ crucifixion and it bears witness to the fact that there were written descriptions of what had happened that were available from the original timeframe.

Marc Roby: Very interesting. What else do you have for us?

Dr. Spencer: I’d like to present just one more quote that makes it clear that even secular scholars who do not believe at all in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, if they are being honest, find the New Testament to be a reliable presentation of history. In a book called *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, published in 1963, the British academic Mr. Sherwin-White, who very obviously does not believe in Christ, wrote the following about the book of Acts in the New Testament; “For Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. ... any attempt to reject its basic historicity even in matters of detail must now appear absurd.”¹⁵

Marc Roby: That is a rather strong statement. Are you done with the evidence you want to present?

Dr. Spencer: Yes I am. We could go on for a very long time talking about the evidence we have and the fact that we have so many things written so close to the time of the events they describe. We can clearly put to rest the different wrong ideas people have about Jesus of Nazareth. The idea, for example, that there is only a tiny core of truth in the New Testament and the rest is

¹³ Meyer, op. cit.

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Apology_of_Justin_Martyr

¹⁵ A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1963, pg. 189

legend that developed over time is simply preposterous and unbelievable. Sherwin-White points out in the book I just mentioned that legends take time to develop and there simply was nowhere near enough time between the events and the written descriptions we have of them for a legend to develop.

There is just so much more that could be said, and I again encourage those who are interested to look into some of the resources I've mentioned. But, the bottom line is that there really is no evidence, none, that clearly demonstrates any part of the Bible to be in error. Which should strike any reasonable person as a complete miracle given that the Bible is over 2,000 years old and has had many serious enemies for that entire time! It simply could not be true unless the Bible is exactly what it claims to be, the word of the sovereign Lord of the universe. The main reason people have for rejecting the Bible is very simple; they don't want to accept the fact that there is a Creator who is going to hold them accountable for how they have lived their lives.

Marc Roby: I completely agree with that assessment. So, what do you have planned for our next session?

Dr. Spencer: I want to start going over systematic theology; which is an examination of what the entire Bible teaches us about different topics.

Marc Roby: I look forward to starting on that. I also want to remind our listeners that they can send a question to us by sending an email to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org.