

## **How do we know Jesus Christ existed?**

By Jim Denison

The poet claims of Jesus Christ, "All the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that have ever sailed, all the parliaments that have ever sat, and all the kings that have ever reigned, put together, have not changed life on this earth as much as has that one solitary life." There are more Christians on the planet than adherents of any other faith, so the universal significance of the Christian position regarding the existence and deity of Jesus is clear. But is it justified?

We believe that Jesus is Lord because the Bible teaches that it is so. But the Koran teaches that Allah is the only God. Buddhists follow their own sacred writings, as do Hindus and scores of other religions. Do we have any other evidence to support our commitment to Christ as the King of Kings? And how do we refute the claim that the divinity of Jesus was a doctrine which evolved centuries after his life and death?

### **Non-Christian evidence for Jesus**

If we had no New Testament, we could reconstruct the Christian doctrine that Christ is Lord on the basis of non-Christian writings, nearly all as old as the New Testament books themselves. Here is a brief survey of the evidence, in chronological order.

Thallus the Samaritan (A.D. 52) wrote a work tracing the history of Greece from the Trojan War to his own day. In it he attempts to explain the darkness of the crucifixion of Jesus as an eclipse of the sun. This is the earliest pagan reference to Jesus' existence and death.

Mara bar Serapion (writing after A.D. 70, as he describes the Fall of Jerusalem) adds: "What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King? It was just after that their kingdom was abolished." His letter is on display in the British Museum today. It shows that the first Christians saw Jesus not just as a religious teacher, but as their King.

The Roman historian Suetonius (AD 65-135) later records, "Punishments were also inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief" (*Nero* 16.2). Note that the Empire would not punish people who followed a religious teacher, only one who made him Lord in place of Caesar.

Tacitus (AD 55-120) was the greatest ancient Roman historian. Around AD 115 he writes, "Christus...suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition broke out" (*Annals* XV.44). His description of Christian belief as "superstition" makes clear the fact that Tacitus considered the followers of Christus to believe something supernatural or miraculous, not simply that he was a great human teacher.

Pliny the Younger was a Roman administrator and author, governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor; two volumes of his letters are extant today. The tenth of his correspondence books (written ca. AD 112) contains the earliest non-biblical description of Christian worship: "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 to a god." Note that believers worshiped Christ as God in AD 112, not centuries later after their beliefs "evolved," as some critics claim.

Flavius Josephus, the noted Jewish historian (AD 37/38—97), records: "Ananias called a Sanhedrin together, brought before it James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, and certain others...and he caused them to be stoned" (*Antiquities* 20.9.1). Thus the Christians called Jesus the Christ, the Messiah.

Finally, consider Josephus' most famous statement about Jesus (*Antiquities* 18.3.3): "Now, there was about this time, Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works,—a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day." While most historians do not believe that this paragraph represents Josephus's own faith commitment, it does document the beliefs of the Christians regarding Jesus. And note that it was written before the end of the first century.

### **Early Christian beliefs**

The earliest Christians believed Jesus to be Lord, as their letters and other writings make clear. For instance, the *Didache*, written before AD 100, repeatedly calls Jesus "the Lord." It ends thus: "The Lord shall come and all his saints with him. Then shall the world 'see the Lord coming on the clouds of Heaven'" (16.7-8). Clement of Rome, writing in AD 95, repeatedly refers to the "Lord Jesus Christ." And he promises a "future resurrection" on the basis of his "raising the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead" (24.1).

Ignatius, writing between AD 110 and 115, refers to "Jesus Christ our God" (introduction to his letter to the Ephesians). To the Smyrnaeans he adds, "I give glory to Jesus Christ, the God who has thus given you wisdom" (1.1). And Justin the Martyr (ca. AD 150), repeatedly refers to Jesus as the Son of God (cf. *Apol.* 22). He describes the fact that God raised him from the dead and brought him to heaven (*Apol.* 45).

### **Conclusion**

The Empire persecuted Christians because they claimed no King but the Lord Jesus. The radical faith and courage of the first apostles, and the rapid spread of the Christian movement, have no other explanation except that the living Lord Jesus changed their lives and empowered their witness. Multiplied thousands died because of their commitment to this One. And men don't die for a lie.