

THE FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY

CHAPTER 1:

THE EXISTENCE OF JESUS OF NAZARETH - ACCOUNTS -

IMPORTANT NOTICE:

This course is a revised traduction of the work "I Fondamenti del Cristianesimo" written by Rev. Piero Ottaviano and Didaskaleion.

The course is divided into units with a logical sequence. Therefore we suggest you to read them following their progressive order.

For further information, criticisms, suggestions please contact:

Didaskaleion - via Luserna 16 - 10139 TORINO (ITALY)

tel. 39+11+4340081;

segret. tel. 39+11+4341292;

fax 39+11+4334749;

e-mail: didaskaleion@murialdo.it

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1 THE EXISTENCE OF JESUS OF NAZARETH: OVERVIEW

In this section we shall examine:

What historians, mainly the non-Christian ones, would report about the origins of Christianity in the 1st and the 2nd Century.

Christianity originates from a man, Jesus of Nazareth, called the Christ¹ (= spokesman of God), who lived in Palestine in the 1st Century A.D.

1.1 PRELIMINARY NOTICE

Most non-Christian accounts will be fully quoted by means of an almost literal translation as provided by us.

On the other hand, (marked with *) only the essence will be quoted from Christian records, as someone might object to their being "biased" (...but then, can any historian really be unbiased?).

All documents will be quoted from in chronological order, according to the dates (whether certain or presumable) of their drafting.

1.2 RECORDS OF THE 1ST CENTURY A.D.

45-80 * Gospel according to Matthew, written in Greek, it is probably a reprise of a more ancient document that we do not have- written in some Semitic language.

50-65 * Gospel according to Mark, in Greek

50-67 * Pauline epistles, i.e., 13 letters written in Greek by Paul

55-62 * Gospel according to Luke, in Greek (some place it after 70 A.D.)

50-58 ? * Epistle of James, written in Greek

61-63 * Acts of the Apostles, in Greek (often placed after A.D. 70), in Greek

60-65 ? * 1st Epistle of Peter, in Greek

64-67 ? * Epistle to the Hebrews, in Greek

¹ Christ is the Greek word for the Semitic "Messiah", which means "anointed one" (with oil). Being regarded from the Jews as an undying symbol of God's benevolence, oil was used to consecrate the men who were regarded as "God's steady mouthpiece", namely kings and priests.

70-80 ? * Didaché (i.e. Doctrine of the Twelve Apostles)

* 2nd Epistle of Peter, in Greek

* Epistle of Jude, in Greek

80-100 John's writings, in Greek:

* The Gospel

* Three epistles

* Revelation (the Apocalypse)

93-94 - Jewish Antiquities by Josephus Flavius.

Josephus Flavius (A.D. 37-110) was a Jewish historian who became a pro-Roman into the service of Vespasian and his son Titus, who would later both become emperors. He wrote in Greek a number of history books, among which "Jewish Antiquities", a 20-volume work about Jewish history from Abraham until his times. An excerpt from book XVIII, § 63-64, is called "Testimonium flavianum" and was also quoted from by Eusebius of Caesarea in both "Ecclesiastic History" (1,11,7) and "The Demonstration of the Gospels" (3,5,105-106), as well as by Christian bishop Agapius (10th Century) in "Universal History", written in Arabic.

Let us quote the now universally accepted version:

"At about that time (A.D. 30) there lived Jesus, a wise man. His conduct was good and he was esteemed for his virtue. And he won many Jews and Greeks to him. Pilate condemned him to die on a cross. But they did not cease to love him the ones who had loved him from the first. They claimed that he appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive. Therefore, he was perhaps the Christ, whose wonders the prophets have long been telling."

95 * The first letter of Clement, Bishop of Rome, written in Greek and addressed the Christians in Corinth.

1.3 RECORDS OF THE 2ND CENTURY A.D.

96-138 * The letters of Barnabas, in Greek

105-7 * The letters of Ignatius of Antioch, in Greek, i.e., 7 letters telling the various Christian churches that he was about to call on them as he was being taken to Rome, where he was due to die a martyr about A.D. 110.

112 ? - Annales by Tacitus, written in Latin.

They are accounts of events occurring about the Roman Empire in the lapse of time between the death of Augustus and the death of Nero, namely between A.D. 16 and 68. Incidentally, with reference to the fire of Rome in A.D. 64, it was rumored that emperor Nero himself had commanded to raise the fire.

Considering such event, the Roman historian wrote thus:

"... To put an end to such rumours, Nero had the ones whom the mob would call Christians - because of their shameful convictions - to pass off as guilty, and to be subject to most refined punishment. The one called the Christ had been sentenced to death by order of procurator Pontius Pilate during Emperor Tiberius' rule.

Although it had been put down for a while, such ruinous superstition started spreading again not only in Judea, the origin-land of that pest, but also in Rome, where all things considered shameful and wicked would converge and be highly regarded. Therefore, in first instance, all were arrested who would avow their guilt; a great many people were thereafter condemned on their report, not so much for having started the fire as for hatred of mankind" (Annales, XV,44).

112 - Letter of Pliny the Younger to emperor Trajan, written in Latin (Epist. X,96)

Pliny was "legate, - with consul's power - to the Provinces of Pontus and Bithiny". We are quoting excerpts from this letter:

"I have never taken part in any preliminary investigations or action against Christians. Therefore I do not know what is customary in such case, namely, whether they are to be punished, or investigated, and to what extent. I have so far been following this procedure against the ones who were deferred to my opinion: in the first instance I would ask them whether they were Christians: if they so admitted, I would then question them three times threatening them with death; if they persisted, I would give orders to have them sent to the gallows. On the other hand, I had no doubt that, whatever they confessed, they did certainly deserve punishment for being so persistent and stubborn. There also were others, seized by the same folly, whom I had sent back to Rome for they were Roman citizens. As a result of this mere dealing of mine with these problems, the accuses soon increased, as it often happens, and I had the possibility to examine several cases.(...).

Others, who had been accused by delators, said that they were Christians and then, after a while, they denied it; they said that they had been Christian in the past, but had ceased to be - some about three years ago, some others at an earlier date, some even twenty years ago -. These, too, have then worshipped your image and our gods 'images, and cursed Christ.

Furthermore, they said that their guilt, or their mistake, consisted of the fact that they used to meet on a fixed day at daybreak and sing in alternating choir some hymn in honour of Christ - as if he were a god - and swear that not only would they ever commit any crime, but also that they would never get involved in any theft, fraud or adultery and that they would never fail to keep their word or grant a deposit, had they been asked to. As soon as they had done this, they had used to depart and meet themselves together again to take some food - which was anyway an ordinary and innocent one -. However, they had later given up this custom as a result of my edict, by which, in compliance with your orders, I have forbidden the constitution of etheria (associations) (...)

As a matter of fact, it seemed to me that the question deserve to be subject to your judgment, due particularly to the number of people involved in this threat: people of any age and rank, and even of either sex have been swayed into this danger, and others will be.

Not only in the city, but also in the suburbs and in the country have the contaminating effects of this deleterious superstition walked abroad; anyway it seems to me that it can still be stopped and brought to normality".

112 - The letter of Trajan replying to Pliny (Epist.X, 97)

"My dear Pliny, as regards the preliminary investigation for the trials of the people who were reported to you with the charge of being Christians, you have indeed followed the procedure you are to comply with. In fact, it is not possible to set a standard rule having, so to say, rigid features. They are not to be hunted; should they be accused and found guilty, they are indeed to be punished, but that should be done in such a way that he who should deny to be a Christian - and actually prove this by pleading for mercy before our gods - can be forgiven, even though he was suspect in the past, through his amendment".

120 - Lives of the Caesars by Suetonius, written in Latin.

In this book the Christians are mentioned twice:

a) in "Life of Claudius" (25,4), emperor Claudius is reported

"...to have expelled from Rome the Jews who, at Cresto's² instigation, were the cause of continual turmoil".

Such expulsion took place in A.D. 49 (cp. also Acts 18,2)

b) in "Life of Nero" (16,3), emperor Nero is reported

"to torture Christians, a race of people of a new and wicked superstition".

125 * An Apology by Quadratus, addressed to emperor Hadrian

125 - Letter of emperor Hadrian to Minucio Fundano, proconsul in Asia (as quoted from by Eusebius, Hist. Eccl. IV,9).

Since Christians were often lynched and many anonymous accusations against them were being put forward, the emperor thus reports, among other things:

"If the inhabitants of the Province can adduce well-grounded proofs against the Christians, so as to be able to support a charge before a court, they shall have to resort to such means only, and they are never to resort to any uproar or rough justice..."

If the accuser can prove that the Christians have broken any law, you shall decide for punishment according to the gravity of their crimes; but should you find the accuser acting out of calumny, then you shall inflict an exemplary punishment on him".

150 * The Shepherd, by Ermas: a collection of accounts of visions; written in Greek.

² In spite of these expressions, it is probable that Suetonius was referring to Jesus Christ and that by the word "Jews" he actually meant "Christians". To understand the reason of this way of writing, we need to know that in the 1st century the Greek words "christòs" (= anointed one) and "chrestòs" (= excellent, the best) had the same pronunciation. Perhaps Suetonius did not know that by "anointed" the Christian meant "consecrated through anointing", and so he might have got misled by deeming it more likely that the leader of a sect be called "the best", rather than "the anointed one".

155-165 - Justin, a Christian philosopher born in Nablus, Samaria - though not a Hebrew - wrote three books in Greek:

* two Apologies in defense of Christians (A.D. 155 and 165).

* A Dialogue with Triphon (A.D. 160)

The latter is an exchange of views between Justin and rabbi Triphon about Judaism and Christian faith. Here Triphon reports the following opinion about Jesus:

"Jesus, the Galilean, is the founder of an irreligious sect opposing the Law (of Moses). We have crucified him. During the night, his followers stole his body from the tomb and would then deceive people by claiming that he had risen from the dead and ascended to heaven".

This opinion about Jesus has spread over centuries and it is still supported today by Jewish scholars.

177 * Athenagoras' apology to emperor Marcus Aurelius.

180 - In The True Speech, (as quoted from by Origen in * Contra Celsum) philosopher Celsus wrote that:

"...Jesus was just a man; the prophecies (of the Old Testament) can fit thousands other people better than Jesus".

To conclude with, we would like to point out that, compared with the plenty of Christian sources, non-Christian sources relating to the origins of Christianity are very few, since "history" realizes a phenomenon only when it becomes of some importance. And, usually, that happens only long after the phenomenon actually occurred.

1.3 ACCOUNTS DATING BACK TO THE 1ST AND 2ND CENTURY

1.3.1 APOCRYPHAL³ BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT (MOSTLY GOSPELS).

They are "reconstructions" of the life of Jesus or of some other apostle. They were often ascribed to an apostle, so that they might get more credit, even though in some cases it is easy to find out that they are fake. This is why they are also called "pseudo-epigraph books" (= wrongly ascribed to).

They were written as a result of the wish to know something more about the Teacher-Founder and about the other founders of Christianity and they often clearly depend on the

³ The word apocrypha literally means "hidden - secret": these books were so called because they contained some doctrines that are not confirmed in the commonly accepted gospels, on the plea of conveying the secret teachings that Jesus would pass on to the apostles to whom the gospel in question was ascribed.

books of the New Testament: they try to fancily make up for the gaps occurring all over the official literature. It cannot be completely ruled out that some information be historical.

They are often hard to be dated.

We will herewith give a list of the most important ones, whose fragments we have come by.

- The Gospel according to the Jews, written in Aramaic and then translated into Greek
- The Gospel according to the Nazarites (language?)
- The Gospel according to the Aebionites, in Greek
- The Gospel according to the Egyptians, in Greek
- The Gospel according to Peter, in Greek
- The Gospel according to James, in Greek
- The Gospel according to Thomas, in Greek
- Acts of Pilate
- ...

1.3.2 THE TALMUD (3RD - 5TH CENTURY)

Literature of the official Judaism: they are interpretations of and commentaries on the Law of Moses. Two versions have actually reached us: the Jerusalem (which is shorter) and the Babylon Version (which is longer).

In such accounts, Jesus is reported to be a well-known figure.

In the Babylon Version we find this passage:

"This is what has been handed on: on the day of preparation to Passover, Jesus (other manuscripts add: of Nazareth) was hanged. A herald had been sent out: he had walked about for forty days before him, (saying): "He has to be stoned because he has practiced magic and has swayed and seduced Israel. Anybody knowing anything in his defence come and defend him." But nobody was found who would defend him and so he was hanged on the day of preparation of Passover" (Sanhedrin 43 a.).

One passage of the Jerusalem's Talmud reads as follows:

"Thus spoke R.Abbahu: He who says "I am God", is lying; he who says "I am the Son of Man" will eventually deny it; he who says "I will ascend to heaven" is saying mere words for but he cannot do it".(Taanit II,1 or II, 65,69).

These sentences are clearly referring to evangelic literature.

From other indirect passages of the Talmud, we also learn that Jesus was born to a hair-dresser by the name of Mary and to a passing Roman soldier named Pantera - or Pandera - (even the Talmud admits that Joseph was not Jesus' father!).

1.4 ESSENTIAL CONCLUSIONS

From non-Christian records it appears that:

- Jesus of Nazareth actually existed and he was executed in Palestine about A.D.30 by orders of Pontius Pilate during the rule of emperor Tiberius.
- His followers would maintain that they had seen Jesus alive again and recognize him as the Christ (or God).
- Jesus is portrayed as the founder of the Christian "sect".
- Christianity rapidly spread all over the empire and in Rome as well;
- The Christians were hated and persecuted.

1.5 FINAL REFLECTIONS

Why should we care about this man today?

Because he presents himself as the Messiah (=spokesman of God) and claims to give an answer - in God's name - to the "meaning of life" question.

The stakes being that high, it pays to ascertain whether this man is credible or not.

This is the reason for the following sections.