Reference To Ancient And Modern Sources, Which Assess The Historical Validity Of Jesus Of Nazareth: Old And New Testament Analysis

With reference to ancient and modern sources, assess the historical validity of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus of Nazareth is a person written about in history. It is debatable about what he did, and whether the documents contained in the Bible are good historical sources or not. In this essay, I will discuss the evidence for and against the validity of Jesus of Nazareth and what different historians say about him. I will also try to find evidence for and evidence against what the Biblical sources say.

Jesus was a figure in history. Ancient pagan writings point towards there being a figure called Jesus. Here, I have more sources. Thallos, Mara bar Serapion, Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, Lucian of Samosata, and Celsus are all ancient pagan historians. We will start with what Thallos had to say about Jesus. In AD 55, Thallos mentions darkness coinciding with the crucifixion. Yet he does not describe it as a supernatural event, merely an eclipse of the sun. Similar to what the Bible says when Jesus was crucified, except that the darkness was of supernatural presence.

At the sixth hour [during Jesus' crucifixion] darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour.

Though Thallos' statement does not prove that there was an eclipse when Jesus died, it confirms only that reports of these events were adequately well known for a pagan to mention them.

Another person on the list was Cornelius Tacitus. He was Rome's greatest historian and was an orator and public official. He mentions both the death of Jesus and the flourishing of a movement in his name.

Christians derived their name from a man called Christ, who, during the reign of Emperor Tiberius had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontus Pilate.

This excerpt is mentioned in the New Testament documents when Pontius Pilate executed Jesus in the reign of Emperor Tiberius Caesar.

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus was another Roman historian. He reports that:

Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome (in AD 49), because of the riots they were causing at the instigation of Chrestus.

In the opinion of most Roman historians and the New Testament scholars, Suetonius had made the mistake of confusing the slave name 'Chrestus' with the Jewish title Christ. This too is

supported by the New Testament documents..

There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome.

From these ancient pagan writings, it is clear that Jesus was believed to be a figure in history.

My third point is that he was written about in ancient Jewish writings. One of the most well-known writers is Flavius Josephus. He was also a military writer. He talks about the governorship of Pontius Pilate and his treatment of Jesus.

At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man [if indeed one should call him a man]. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of the people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. [He was the Messiah-Christ]. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. [For he appeared to them on the third day again alive, just as the divine prophets had spoken of these and countless other marvellous things about him]. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out.

Another ancient Jewish source is from the Talmud, from a section called the Baraitha Sanhedrin, where we find a report of Jesus' crimes, trial and execution:

On the eve of the Passover Jesus was hanged (on a cross). For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, 'He is going forth to be stoned because he has practised sorcery and enticed and led Israel astray. Anyone who can say anything in his favour, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.' But since nothing was brought forward in his favour, he was hanged on the eve of Passover.

These details are also seen in the New Testament sources. Jesus' "sorcery" in the gospels, for example, are miracles. The timing of his crucifixion is also in accordance with the New Testament says. In the gospels, Jesus is crucified near the Passover festival and the Roman authorities played a decisive role.

Australian historian John Dickson notes that, from non-Christian texts alone, we gather:

The name 'Jesus'

The place and time-frame of his public ministry (Palestine during Pontius Pilate's governorship, AD 26-30)

The name of his mother (Mary)

The name of one of his brothers (James)

His fame as a teacher

His fame as a miracle worker/sorcerer

The attribution to him of the title ‘Messiah/Christ’

His ‘kingly’ status in the eyes of some

The time and manner of his execution (crucifixion around the Passover festival)

The involvement of both Roman and Jewish leadership in his death

The coincidence of an eclipse at the time of his crucifixion

The report of Jesus’ appearances to his followers after his death (if the second reconstruction of Josephus’ comments is accepted)

The flourishing of a movement that worshipped Jesus after his death.

Another group of sources is the New Testament. The New Testament is a collection of primary sources written by different people about the life of Jesus. These sources are all primary sources as they were written close to the events they describe. These sources describe what Jesus ' public ministry in some detail. New Testament documents are important sources. As seen from above, the non-christian sources agree with the New Testament documents, making them reliable. Their general reliability can be confirrmed by criteria that historians use to assess such documents. Over the last century, Jesus-historians have developed several ‘criteria of authenticity,’ rules by which material in the Jesus tradition can be evaluated for its historicity. These criteria support the general reliability of the stories contained in the New Testament documents.

The Criterion of Coherence

When an episode of the Gospel fits in well with what we confidently already know about Jesus’ life, this makes that particular episode more plausible.

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

This story fits well with what historians already know about Jesus and scholars are confident that this event happened and that the Jerusalem rulers ordered the arrest and execution of Jesus. So Christian and non-christian sources affirm this.

The Criterion of Dissimilarity

If Jews were not likely to write something about Jesus, and early Christians did not say it, then the information is more likely to have been original to Jesus. For example, Jesus’ reference to himself as the “Son of Man”.

The Criterion of Embarrassment

Parts of the Gospels that would probably have caused some embarrassment to the Christians who recorded the event are generally given greater weight. Therefore, it is unlikely that the stories were made up. A good example is when Jesus rebukes the apostle Peter, one of the heroes of the early church.

But Jesus, turning and looking at His disciples, rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind Me, Satan! For you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

Another example is that women were the first to witness Jesus’ resurrection. In those days a woman’s testimony was not as valued as today. If the followers of Jesus were making it up and wanted the story to be believed, they would have used a person who was highly regarded by the community, such as the apostle Luke, who was a doctor at the time.

The Criterion of Memorability

Sayings of Jesus recorded in the gospels which are inherently memorable are more likely to have been passed on accurately by his disciples.

If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Others are not memorable just because they are surprising but because they have been formed mnemonically - a view to ongoing memorisation - a common practise in ancient teaching.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,

where moths and vermin destroy,

and where thieves break in and steal.

But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,

where moths and vermin do not destroy,

and where thieves do not break in and steal.

There are several other criterion-The Criterion of Date, The Criterion of Literary Strata, The Criterion of Multiple Independent Attestation, The Criterion of Immediate Context, The Criterion of Aramaic Context, and The Criterion of Lack of Theological Point. All these criteria of Authenticity support the general historical reliablity of the New Testament documents and suggest that Jesus was a figure in history.

In opposition to the reliability of ancient sources, historian Bart Ehrman writes that these sources were written too long after the events of Jesus to make them credible. However, these sources were written within living memory of eyewitnesses. Specific names of witnesses are mentioned so that sceptics, reading the sources during the time they were written, could go and ask the people if what is written about them is true. For example, in Romans 16:13, Paul sends

a greeting to Rufus. Who is Rufus? Mark 15:21 says Rufus was the son of Simon, who carried Jesus’ cross. If Simon had not carried Jesus' cross, Rufus would have said that what these followers of Jesus are saying about his father is not true, discrediting Mark (cf. 1 Corinthian 15). Some of the non-Christian sources were also written within living memory of the events they describe.

Historians have given convincing evidence that Jesus of Nazareth did exist. Even without any reference to the New Testament documements, a Jesus-like figure can be put together from other ancient sources. That Christianity exists today, after two-thousand years, suggests that it has a corresponding factor without which it would be “inexplicable” just like the Roman Empire would be inexplicable without Julius Caesar and Augustus. The effect that Jesus of Nazareth had on the world and other controverisal parts of his life story are a topic for another essay.