

# The Evidence of Early Jewish Writings

by F.F Bruce

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*The sermon explores the evidence of early Jewish writings, including the Mishnah and Talmud, and the historical accounts of Josephus, to provide independent confirmation of the events and figures described in the New Testament.*

**Scripture:** Acts 11:28

**Topics:** "Jewish History", "Christian Apologetics"

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## Description

F.F. Bruce delves into the Rabbinical Writings and Josephus' historical accounts to shed light on the context and references to Jesus in Jewish literature. The Pharisees, led by Yohanan the son of Zakkai, played a crucial role in reconstructing religious law after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. The Talmud, a compilation of Mishnah and Gemara, contains references to Jesus, portraying Him as a transgressor who practiced magic and was hanged for heresy. Josephus, a Jewish historian, independently mentions figures like John the Baptist, James the brother of Jesus, and Jesus Himself, affirming key aspects of the Gospel narrative.

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## Transcript

### I. The Rabbinical Writings

When the city of Jerusalem fell in AD 70, together with the temple, the dominion of the priestly families and the supreme court of the Sanhedrin fell with them. The only party in Judaism which was capable of undertaking the necessary work of reconstruction was that of the Pharisees, and this they did, not on a political but on a spiritual basis. Led by Yohanan the son of Zakkai, they made their headquarters at Jabneh or Jamnia, in the southwest of Palestine. Here they reconstituted the Sanhedrin as a supreme court for the organization of the whole range of religious law, with Yohanan as its first president in its new form. A great body of case law, 'the tradition of the elders' mentioned in the New Testament, had been handed down orally from generation to generation, increasing with the years. The first step towards codifying all this material was now taken. The second step was taken by the great Rabbi Akiba, who was the first to arrange it according to subject matter. After his heroic death in AD 135, on the defeat of BarKokhba's rebellion against Rome, his work was revised and continued by his pupil Rabbi Meir. The work of codification was brought to completion about AD 200 by Rabbi Judah, president of the Sanhedrin from 170 to 217. The whole code of religious jurisprudence thus compiled is known as the Mishnah.

This completed Mishnah itself became an object of study, and a body of commentary grew up around it in the rabbinical schools both of Palestine and of Babylonia. These commentaries or Gemaras formed a sort of supplement to the Mishnah, and Mishnah and Gemara together are usually known as the Talmud. The 'Jerusalem Talmud', consisting of the Mishnah together with the accumulated Gemara of the Palestinian schools, was completed about AD 300; the much larger Babylonian Talmud continued to grow for two centuries more, before it was reduced to writing about the year 500.

As the Mishnah is a law code, and the Talmuds commentaries on this code, there is little occasion in these writings for references to Christianity, and what references there are hostile. But, such as they are, these references do at least show that there was not the slightest doubt of the historical character of Jesus.

According to the earlier Rabbis whose opinions are recorded in these writings, Jesus of Nazareth was a transgressor in Israel, who practiced magic, scorned the words of the wise, led the people astray, and said he had lot come to destroy the law but to add to it. He was hanged on Passover Eve for heresy and misleading the people. His disciples, of whom five are named, healed he sick in his name.

It is clear that this is just such a portrayal of our Lord we might expect from those elements in the Pharisaic party which were opposed to Him. Some of the names by which He is called bear witness directly or indirectly to the Gospel record. The appellation Ha-Taluy ('The Hanged One') obviously refers to the manner of His death; another name given to Him, Ben-Pantera ('Son of Pantera'), probably refers, not (as has sometimes been alleged) to a Roman soldier named Pantheras, but to the Christian belief in our Lord's virgin birth, Pantera being corruption of the Greek parthenos ('virgin'). This does not mean, of course, that all those who called Him by this name believed in His virgin birth

About the end of the first century AD and beginning of the second, there seems to have been a controversy some Jewish circles as to whether some Christian writings should be recognized as canonical or not. These writings, whatever they were, went by the name Euangelion, the Greek word for 'Gospel'. The Euangelion in question was most probably an Aramaic form of the Gospel according to Matthew, the favorite Gospel of the Jewish Christians in Palestine and the adjoining territory. Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Meir are said to have made unfriendly puns on the word Euangelion by altering its vowels to make it read 'Awengillayon or 'Awongillayon, meaning something like 'Iniquity of the Margin' or 'Sin of the Writing tablet'. These obscure references indicate that there was some contact between the orthodox Pharisee and the Jewish Christians, which is not surprising if we remember that according to the New Testament the early Palestinian church included believing members of the Pharisaic party and several thousand Jews who were 'all zealots for the law' (Acts xv. 5, xxi. 20). After AD 70, indeed, these Jewish Christians may have had more contact with other Jews than with members of the Gentile churches, who were increasingly inclined to write off the Jewish Christian communities as heretical and sub-Christian. In particular, there are grounds for thinking that those refugees from the Jerusalem church who settled in Transjordan about the year 70 made common cause with certain Essene groups, possibly including the remnants of the Qumran community.

## 2. Josephus

But we have earlier and more important Jewish literature for our purpose than anything found in the Talmuds. The Jewish historian Josephus was born of a priestly family in AD 37. At the age of nineteen he joined the Pharisaic party. On a visit to Rome in AD 63 he was able to take stock of the might of the Empire. On the outbreak of the Jewish War in AD 66 he was made commander of the Jewish forces in

Galilee, and defended the stronghold of Jotapata against the Romans until further resistance was useless. He then escaped to a cave with forty others, and when this new refuge seemed likely to be taken they arranged a suicide pact. Perhaps more by good management than by good luck Josephus found himself one of the last two survivors. He persuaded his fellow survivor that they might as well give themselves up to the Romans, and when they had done he contrived to win the favor of Vespasian, the Roman commander, by predicting his elevation to the imperial purple, a prediction which was fulfilled in AD 69. Josephus was attached to the Roman general headquarters during the siege of Jerusalem, even acting as interpreter for Titus, Vespasian's son and successor in the Palestinian command, when he wished to make proclamation to the beleaguered inhabitants. After the fall of the city and crushing of the rebellion, Josephus settled down comfortably in Rome as a client and pensioner of the emperor, whose family name Flavius assumed, being thenceforth known as Flavius Josephus.

Naturally, this variegated career did not tend to make him popular with his fellow countrymen, many of whom did-and still do-look on him as a double dyed traitor. However, he employed his years of leisure in Rome in such a way as to establish some claim upon their gratitude, by writing the history of their nation. His literary works include a History of the Jewish War, from 170 BC to AD 73, written first in Aramaic for the benefit of the Jews on the easternmost confines of the Empire, and then published in a Greek version; an Autobiography, which he defends his conduct against another Jewish historian, Justus of Tiberias, who in his account of the war had taken a poor view of the part played by Josephus; two books Against Apion, in which he defends nation against the anti-Semitic calumnies (some of which sound quite modern) of Apion, an Alexandrian schoolmaster, and other writers; and twenty books of Antiquities of the Jews, recording the history of his nation from the beginning of Genesis down to his own day. However little he may have deserved to survive downfall of his nation, we may well be glad that he I survive, for without his historical works, in spite all their imperfections, we should be almost incredibly poorer in sources of information about the history of Palestine in New Testament times.

Here, in the pages of Josephus, we meet many figures who are well known to us from the New Testament: the colourful family of the Herods; the Roman emperors Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero; Quirinius, the governor of Syria; Pilate, Felix, and Festus, the procurators of Judaea, the high priestly families-Annas, Caiaphas, Ananias, and the rest; the Pharisees and Sadducees; and so on. against the background which Josephus provides we can read the New Testament with greater understanding and interest.

When Gamaliel, in Acts v. 37, speaks of Judas the Galilean who led a rising in the days of the taxing, we turn to the pages of Josephus, and find the story of this rising both in his War (ii. 8) and in the Antiquities (xviii. 1). Josephus also tells of an impostor named Theudas (Ant. xx. 5.1) who appeared shortly after AD, 44, but the Theudas mentioned by Gamaliel flourished before Judas the Galilean an (AD 6), and in any case Gamaliel's speech was made between 30 and 33. It is unnecessary to think that Luke perpetrated an anachronism through misreading Josephus (the weight of evidence is against Luke's having read Josephus); Josephus himself tells us that about the time of the death of Herod the Great (4 BC) there were ever so many such troubles in Judaea, and the activity of Gamaliel's Theudas (which was not an uncommon name) may belong to this period.

The famine in the days of Claudius (Acts xi. 28) is also referred to by Josephus; if Luke tells us how the Christians in Antioch sent help to the Jerusalem church on this occasion, Josephus tells us how Helena, the Jewish queenmother of Adiabene, which lay northeast of Mesopotamia, had corn bought in Alexandria and figs in Cyprus to relieve the hunger of the Jerusalem populace on the same occasion.'

The sudden death of Herod Agrippa I, narrated by Luke in Acts xii. 19-23, is recorded also by Josephus (Ant. xix. 8. 2) in a form agreeing with Luke's general Outline, though the two accounts are quite independent of each other. This is the story as told by Josephus:

'When Agrippa had reigned three full years over all Judaea, he came to the city of Caesarea, which was formerly called Strato's Tower. There he exhibited shows in honour of Caesar, inaugurating this as a festival for the emperor's welfare. And there came together to it a multitude of the provincial officials and of those who had been promoted to a distinguished position. On the second day of the shows he put on a robe all made of diver, of altogether wonderful weaving, and arrived in the theatre at break of day. Then the silver shone as the sun's first rays fell upon it and glittered wonderfully, its resplendence inspiring a sort of fear and trembling in those who gazed upon it. Immediately his flatterers called out from various quarters, in words which in truth were not for his good, addressing him as a god, and invoking him with the cry, "Be propitious! if hitherto we have revered thee as a human being, yet henceforth we confess thee to be superior to mortal nature."

'The king did not rebuke them, nor did he repudiate their impious flattery. But looking up soon afterwards he saw the owl sitting on a rope above his head, and immediately recognized it as a messenger of evil as it had formerly been a messenger of good,' and a pang of grief pierced his heart. There came also a severe pain in his belly, beginning with a violent attack.... So he was carried quickly into the palace, and the news sped abroad among all that he would certainly die before long.... And when he had suffered continuously for five days from the pain in his belly, he departed this life in the fifty fourth year of his age and the seventh of his reign.'

The parallels between the two accounts are obvious, as is also the absence of collusion between them. Luke describes the king's sudden stroke by saying, in biblical language, that 'the angel of the Lord smote him'; it is unnecessary to think that there is any significance in the fact that the Greek word for 'angel' in Luke's account (angelos) is the same as the word for 'messenger' applied to the owl by Josephus, though some early Christian Fathers seem to have thought so. The Tyrians may well have taken advantage of this festival to be publicly reconciled to the king.

In general, we may sum up the comparison of the two accounts in the words of an unbiased historian, Eduard Meyer: 'In outline, in data, and in the general conception, both accounts are in full agreement. By its very interesting details, which are by no means to be explained as due to a "tendency" or a popular tradition, Luke's account affords a guarantee that it is at least just as reliable as that of Josephus.'

More important still, Josephus makes mention of John the Baptist and of James the brother of our Lord, recording the death of each in a manner manifestly independent of the New Testament, so that there is no ground for suspecting Christian interpolation in either passage; In Ant. xviii. 5. 2 we read how Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee, was defeated in battle by Aretas, king of the Nabataean an Arabs, the father of Herod's first wife, whom he deserted for Herodias. Josephus goes on:

'Now some of the Jews thought that Herod's army had been destroyed by God, and that it was a very just penalty to avenge John, surnamed the Baptist. For Herod had killed him, though he was a good man, who bade the Jews practice virtue, be just one to another and pious toward God, and come together in baptism.' He taught that baptism was acceptable to God provided that they underwent it not to procure remission of certain sins, but for the purification of the body, if the soul had already been purified by righteousness. And when the others gathered round him (for they were greatly moved when they heard his

words), Herod feared that his persuasive power over men, being so great, might lead to a rising, as they seemed ready to follow his counsel in everything. So he thought it much better to seize him and kill him before he caused any tumult, than to have to repent of falling into such trouble later on, after a revolt had taken place. Because of this suspicion of Herod, John was sent in chains to Machaerus, the fortress which we mentioned above, and there put to death. The Jews believed that it was to avenge him that the disaster fell upon the army, God wishing to bring evil upon Herod.'

There are striking differences between this and the Gospel account: according to Mark i. 4, John 'proclaimed a baptism of repentance for remission of sins', whereas Josephus says that John's baptism was not for the remission of sins; and the story of John's death is given a political significance by Josephus, whereas in the Gospels it resulted from John's denunciation of Herod's marriage to Herodias. It is quite likely that Herod thought he could kill two birds with one stone by imprisoning John; and as for the discrepancy about the significance of John's baptism, the independent traditions which we can trace in the New Testament are impressively unanimous, and besides being earlier than the account in Josephus (the Antiquities were published in AD 93), they give what is a more probable account from the religious-historical point of view. Josephus, in fact, seems to attribute to John the baptismal doctrine of the Essenes, as known to us now from the Qumran texts. But the general outline of the story in Josephus confirms the Gospel record. The Josephus passage was known to Origen (c. AD 230) and to Eusebius (c. AD 326).'

Later in the Antiquities (xx. 9. 1), Josephus describes the high-handed acts of the high priest Ananus after the death of the procurator Festus (AD 61) in these words:

'But the younger Ananus who, as we said, received the high priesthood, was of a bold disposition and exceptionally daring; he followed the party of the Sadducees, who are severe in judgment above all the Jews, as we have already shown. As therefore Ananus was of such a disposition, he thought he had now a good opportunity, as Festus was now dead, and Albinos was still on the road; so he assembled a council of judges, and brought before it the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ, whose name was James, together with some others, and having accused them as law-breakers, he delivered them over to be stoned.'

This passage, like the previous one, was also known Origen and Eusebius. The story of the death of James the Just (as the Lord's brother was called) is told greater detail by Hegesippus, a Jewish Christian writer of c. AD 170. The account in Josephus is chiefly important because he calls James 'the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ', in such a way as to suggest that he has already made some reference to Jesus. And we do find a reference to Him in all extant copies of Josephus, the so-called Testimonium Flavianum in Antiquities xviii. 3. 3. There Josephus narrates some of the troubles which marked the procuratorship of Pilate, and continues:

'And there arose about this time Jesus, a wise man, if indeed we should call him a man; for he was a doer of marvelous deeds, a teacher of men who receive the truth with pleasure. He led away many Jews, and also many of the Greeks. This man was the Christ. And when Pilate had condemned him to the cross on his impeachment by the chief men among us, those who had loved him at first did not cease; for he appeared to them on the third day alive again, the divine prophets having spoken these and thousands of other wonderful things about him: and even now the tribe of Christians, so named after him, has not yet died out.'

This is a translation of the text of this passage as it has come down to us, and we know that it was the same the time of Eusebius, who quotes it twice.' One reason why many have decided to regard it as a Christian interpolation is that Origen says that Josephus did not believe Jesus to be the Messiah nor proclaim Him such.' That Josephus was no Christian is certain in any case. But it seems unlikely that a writer who was not a Christian should use the expressions printed above italics. Yet there is nothing to say against the passage the ground of textual criticism; the manuscript evidence is as unanimous and ample as it is for anything in Josephus. It may be, however, that Origen knew the passage in an earlier form, which lacked the italicized sections. Since the text of Josephus has been transmitted by Christians and not by Jews, it is not surprising if his reference to Jesus should have acquired a more Christian flavour in the course of time.

If, however, we look more closely at these italicized sections, it may occur to us to wonder if it is not possible that Josephus was writing with his tongue in his cheek. If indeed we should call him a man' may be a sarcastic reference to the Christians' belief in Jesus as the Son of God. This man was the Christ' may mean no more than that this was the Jesus commonly called the Christ. The same reference is in any case implied by the later statement that the Christians were called after Him. As for the third italicized section, the one about the resurrection, this may simply be intended to record what the Christians averred. Some acute critics have found no difficulty in accepting the Testimonium Flavianum as it stands.' The passage certainly contains several characteristic features of the diction of Josephus, as has been pointed out by the late Dr. H. St. John/Thackeray (the leading British authority on Josephus in recent years) and others.

It has also been pointed out that the omission of words or short phrases is characteristic of the textual tradition of the Antiquities, which makes it easier to accept a suggestion that the word 'so-called' has dropped out before 'Christ', and some such phrase as 'as they said' or possibly 'as they say' after 'for he appeared to them'. Both these suggested emendations are attractive, the former especially so, because the very phrase 'the so-called Christ' occurs in the passage where Josephus related the death of James.

Two other emendations have much to commend them. One is a suggestion of Thackeray, that instead of 'the truth' (Greek *alethe*) we should read 'strange things' (Greek *aethe*). The other is a suggestion of Dr. Robert Eisler, that some words have fallen out at the beginning of the passage, which originally commenced: 'And there arose about this time a source of new troubles, one Jesus.' If, then, we adopt these emendations of the text, this is what we get as a result:

'And there arose about this time a source of new troubles, one Jesus, a wise man. He was a doer of marvelous deeds, a teacher of men who receive strange things with pleasure. He led away many Jews, and also many of the Greeks. This man was the so-called Christ. And when Pilate had condemned him to the cross on his impeachment by the chief men among us, those who had loved him at first did not cease; for he appeared to them, as they said, on the third day alive again, the divine prophets having spoken these and thousands of other wonderful things about him: and even now the tribe of Christians, so named after him, has not yet died out.'

The italics in this time mark the emendations. This version of the Testimonium has got rid, by one or two very simple devices, of the difficulties of the traditional while it preserves (or even enhances) the worth of the passage as a historical document. The flavour of contempt is a little more marked as a result of the additions; and the closing reference to 'the tribe of Christians' is not inconsonant with a hope that though they have not yet died out, they soon may. We have therefore very good reason for believing that Josephus did make reference to Jesus, bearing witness to (a) His date, (b) His reputation as a wonderworker, (c) His

being the brother of James, (d) His crucifixion under Pilate at the information of the Jewish rulers, (e) His messianic claim, (f) His being the founder of 'the tribe of Christians', and probably (g) the belief in His rising from the dead.

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