

External Evidence for the Truth of the Gospels and Acts

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For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. 2 Peter 1:16

Introduction

Previous lecture: “Who Wrote the Gospels?”

The distinction between authenticity and genuineness

The external evidence strongly indicates that our four Gospels are the *genuine* works of the people whose names they bear

Our goals in this lecture:

To create a map of the external and internal evidence bearing on the *authenticity* of the Gospels

To explore some of the positive external evidence

A Map of the Material

	External	Internal
Positive Evidence	Non-Christian sources Incidental confirmations	Undesigned Coincidences Other internal clues
Objections	Alleged historical errors in the Gospels	Alleged contradictions between the Gospels

Two Types of External Evidence

1. We can look in non-Christian sources for confirmation of major events like the crucifixion. Or,
2. We can look in the Gospels and Acts for incidental allusions that reveal the authors' knowledge of the setting and their truthfulness in recounting matters of detail.

Relative merits of these two types of non-Christian evidence

1. The former sort of evidence, when it is available, is easy to recognize and can be very dramatic. (Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.3.3, etc.; Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44)
2. The latter sort of evidence, patiently collected, makes a far stronger argument for the authenticity of the New Testament; it shows that the authors of the New Testament were habitually truthful and well informed.

Two non-Christian writers

Tacitus

Publius (or Gaius) Cornelius Tacitus, a Roman senator and historian, was born around AD 56 and wrote his works early in the second century.

The principal reference to Christianity in his writings comes from *Annals* 15.44:

Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, . . . [A]n arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, a vast multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind.

Seven facts from Tacitus's report

1. There was a group known as "Christians"
2. Their name came from someone called "Christus"
3. He was executed under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius
4. The Romans considered the Christians superstitious
5. The Christians were much hated and were alleged to perform "abominations"
6. Their movement originated in Judea but spread to Rome
7. By 64, there was a "vast multitude" of them in Rome

Josephus

Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian, was born around AD 37 and wrote *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews* late in the first century.

In his *Antiquities*, Josephus refers to numerous people named in the New Testament, including Jesus, John the Baptist, and James the brother of Jesus.

Josephus on Jesus: the *Testimonium Flavianum* in *Antiquities* 18.3.3 (§64)

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.

Arabic version of the *Testimonium*, from Shlomo Pines (1971)

At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus, and his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon their loyalty to him. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive. Accordingly they believed that he was the Messiah, concerning whom the Prophets have recounted wonders.”

Scholarly consensus on the *Testimonium*

This passage has aroused a great deal of interest among scholars. . . . Most today regard the passage as authentic but edited.

—Craig Evans, “Jesus in Non-Christian Sources,” in Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans, eds., *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 466-67, emphasis added.

Josephus on John the Baptist: *Antiquities* 18.5.2 (§§116-119)

Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod’s army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man. . . Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion. . . Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod’s suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death.

(We will return to this passage shortly to view it from another angle.)

The evidence of incidental allusions

Non-Christian sources can confirm only the broad outlines of the Gospel story; nothing more can be expected.

But by examining how the Gospels deal with the details of contemporary history, we can test the *knowledge* and *honesty* of the four evangelists.

The political situation in 1st century Palestine

a double system of taxation,
a double administration of justice,
in some degree a double military command

Palestine from 6 BC to AD 44

A single united kingdom under a native ruler,
A set of principalities under native ethnarchs and tetrarchs,
A country in part containing such principalities, in part reduced to the condition of a Roman province,
A kingdom reunited once more under a native ruler,
A country reduced wholly under Rome and governed by procurators dependent on the president of Syria

Some points of contact

The Gospels and Josephus regarding the execution of John the Baptist (Matthew and Mark)

The Gospels and Acts on the kings and governors of Judea and surrounding regions (*passim*)

Archelaus and the return of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus from Egypt (Matthew)

The *denarius* and the *stater* (Matthew and Luke)

The accuracy of Acts

The way from Tyre to Capernaum (Mark)

The Execution of John the Baptist

Matthew 14:1-12 and Mark 6:14-29 also tell the story of Herod Antipas's execution of John the Baptist. The reason, according to the Gospels, was *not* just Herod's suspicious temper or his fear of an uprising; it was because of John's disapproval of Herod's marriage to his brother's wife.

Question: How should the Gospel writers know what Herod Antipas's motives were?

Answer: "... and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, ..." (Luke 8:3)

Jesus' followers had family in the higher ranks of Herod Antipas's employment.

Another question: According to Mark 6:27, Herod Antipas sent a *military* officer (σπεκουλάτωρ) to execute John the Baptist. Why would he not send a civil executioner?

Answer: According to Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.5.1 ff (§§109 ff), Herod was at war with his former father-in-law, Aretas IV, king of the Nabataeans. This explains why he had a military officer carry out the execution; he was at Macherus on a military campaign, not at home in his palaces in Galilee.

Those Kings and Governors

Thomas Paine's accusation:

[T]here could be no such person as *a King Herod*, because the Jews and their country were then under the dominion of the Roman Emperors who governed then by tetrarchs, or governors.

—Thomas Paine, "Examination of Prophecies," in Daniel Edwin Wheeler, ed., *The Life and Writings of Thomas Paine*, vol. 7 (New York: Vincent Parke and Co., 1908), p. 262.

Josephus and Matthew agree

Matthew 2:22 says, not that Archelaus *was* king, but that he was *reigning as king* (in Greek, βασιλεύει, "kinging").

His claim to the throne had not been certified by Caesar, and one of the complaints against him was that he had already taken the kingship over to himself, before Caesar had granted it to him. (*Antiquities* 17.9.5)

Josephus and Luke agree

There was no time during the previous thirty years, nor *ever* afterward, when there was a *king* at Jerusalem, *except* the last three years of the life of Herod Agrippa I. (See Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.6.10 and 19.5.1)

This is also borne out by the evidence of coins from the period.

Archelaus and the return from Egypt

But when [Joseph] heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. Matthew 2:22

Question: Since Herod the Great was dead, it was only natural that his eldest son, Archelaus, would take the throne. So why does this news cause Joseph to change plans and go into Galilee?

Answer: Herod the Great had died, and Archelaus had taken his place, not long before March of 4 B.C., when hundreds of thousands of Jews made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. (Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.9.3) As the feast approached there was a clash between some angry Jews in the Temple and a group of Roman soldiers in which some soldiers were killed. In panic, Archelaus sent a troop of armed horsemen to surround the Temple, with orders not to let anyone outside go in and not to let anyone inside get out. He then sent in soldiers and slaughtered 3,000 Jews in the Temple. **Passover was canceled.**

Having fled Judea in order to escape from one homicidal king, Joseph understandably decided that going back into the domain of another homicidal king was not a good idea.

The denarius and the stater

Luke 20:24-25—“Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have?” They said, “Caesar’s.” He said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

The inscription on the *denarius*

AUGUSTUS TI CAESAR DIVI AUG F
“Augustus Tiberius Caesar, **son of the Divine Augustus.**”

The value of the *denarius*

In Matthew 20:1-2, Jesus tells a parable about the owner of a vineyard who hires unskilled workers at the rate of a denarius for a day’s labor.

In *Annals* 1.17, Tacitus recounts a mutinous speech to some Roman soldiers in AD 14 in which it is suggested that they deserve a fair wage – namely, a denarius per day.

The temple tax, the *didrachma*, and the *stater*

Matthew 17:24-27 – Does Jesus pay the “two drachma” temple tax?

The *stater* has the value of *four* drachma – just enough to pay for both Jesus and Peter.

The accuracy of Acts

Colin Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1989), pp. 108-58, goes through the last 16 chapters of Acts almost verse-by-verse.

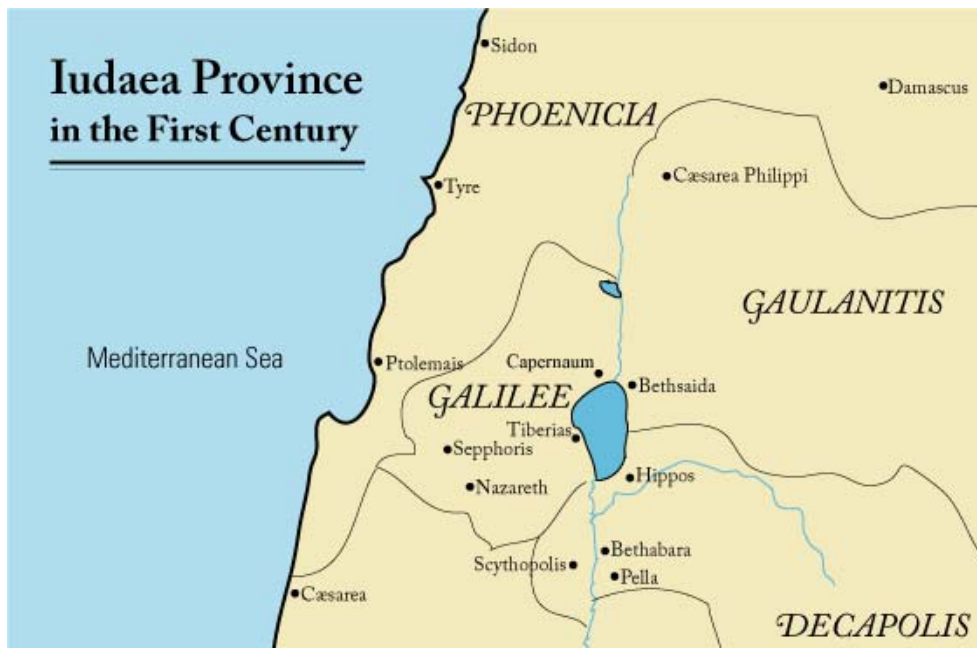
Hemer lists 84 specific facts from those 16 chapters that have been confirmed by historical and archaeological research—ports, boundaries, landmarks, slang terminology, local languages, local deities, local industries, and proper titles for numerous regional and local officials.

Five local titles that Luke gets right:

- The governor of Cyprus is called the ἀνθύπατος (proconsul) (Acts 13:7),
- . . . while the magistrates of Philippi were στρατηγοί (governors) (Acts 16:20, 22),
- . . . and those of Thessalonica are simply πολιτάρχαι (rulers) (Acts 17:6, 8),
- . . . the chief executive magistrate in Ephesus is a γραμματεὺς (town clerk) (Acts 19:35),
- . . . and the ruler of Malta is only a πρότος (chief man) (Acts 28:7).

The way from Tyre to Capernaum

Mark 7:31 – Then he [Jesus] returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.



A "critical" verdict

Many interpreters have noted this awkward route as evidence that Mark was unfamiliar with the geography of Palestine and Galilee. . . It seems difficult to believe that a person living in Galilee, who is educated enough to produce a gospel such as Mark, would be unfamiliar with the geographical relationship between Tyre and Sidon.

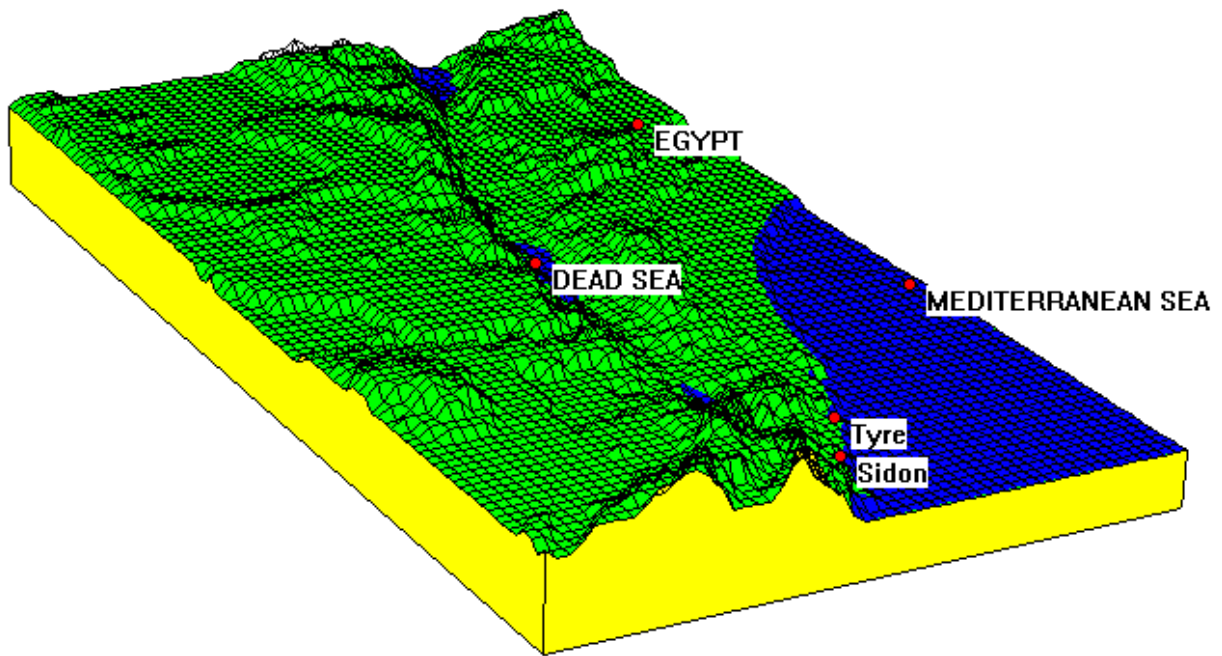
—Adam Winn, *The Purpose of Mark's Gospel* (2008), pp. 85-86.

A closer look at the geography



Note the elevation in Upper Galilee labeled 1208 meters; note also how this falls off (shown by the color gradient) if one goes north toward Lebanon before passing eastward.

Reorienting the map, looking southwest



The pass north and east of Mt Meron is visible as a dark line between Tyre and Sidon, along the northeastern side of the mountain.

Mt Meron, elevation 3,963 ft



This talk is the second in a series:

1. Who Wrote the Gospels? (January 23) – <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gldvim1yjYM>
2. External Evidence for the Truth of the Gospels
3. Internal Evidence for the Truth of the Gospels (February 27)
4. Alleged Contradictions in the Gospels
5. Alleged Historical Errors in the Gospels
6. The Resurrection of Jesus

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