

THE HISTORICAL JESUS OF ANCIENT UNBELIEF

DOUGLAS S. HUFFMAN*

I. INTRODUCTION

Christianity is not quite two thousand years young. The term “ancient” in this paper’s title, in view of history’s millennia prior to Christ’s birth, seems hardly applicable to studies of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. But “ancient” is used here as a relative term. The focus of this study is not what people of recent centuries have thought about Jesus as an historical figure. Rather, it concentrates on what people thought about him in the first few centuries AD.

In the early Church, Christians identified Jesus as Christ. Now, in the modern Church, many consider themselves believers in the Christ of faith (as developed by the teachings of the Church) without believing in the identity of that Christ as the actual, historical person of Jesus.

But this distinction between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history need not be accepted as a recent developmental stage in the life of the Church. Even in the early years of the Church, explanations were offered that considered Jesus to be just another man in the stream of history. It is these early interpretations of the historical Jesus that this paper seeks to examine as explanations of unbelief (i.e. not believing Jesus to be the Christ that the early believers—and Jesus himself—claimed him to be). Herman S. Reimarus (d. 1768) is considered to have begun in modern scholarship the so-called quest for the historical Jesus. Colin Brown, however, suggests several possible earlier influences in the thought of Reimarus that evoke from him Albert Schweitzer’s praise for his uniqueness.¹

Now I am suggesting even older explanations. It must be acknowledged that, perhaps generally speaking, explanations found in modern quests for the historical Jesus have been proposed for different reasons than those of ancient explanations. The ancient worldview allowed for belief in the supernatural, and naturalistic explanations were offered out of unbelief (“I do not want to believe that”). The post-Enlightenment world of the modern questers has largely been one that emphasizes the believable, and naturalistic explanations of the historical Jesus are motivated more by disbelief (“I find that hard to believe”). Nevertheless this paper seeks to show modern works

* Douglas Huffman is assistant professor of Bible at Northwestern College, 3003 North Snelling Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55113-1598.

¹ C. Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought, 1778–1860* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 29–55.

on the historical Jesus not as true innovations but as renovations (intentional or unintentional) of ancient unbelief. The seeds (or early versions) of the more believable explanations offered by modern questers lie further back in history—even to the beginning of the era.

II. THE LIFE OF JESUS

The NT documents—primarily the gospels—are taken to be ancient records of belief in Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ. One might suspect, then, that a study of unbelief in Jesus as Messiah would be a study of him as reflected in literature outside of the NT. While this paper does draw most significantly from extra-Biblical materials, it makes use of the Biblical writings as well. Just as there are ancient records of belief in Christ Jesus outside of the NT (e.g. apostolic fathers), so also there are records of unbelief in him inside the NT (e.g. some scribes, Pharisees and priests). Furthermore the extra-Biblical materials are usually studied for the evidences they lend to belief in Jesus' existence and to knowledge of the beginnings of Christianity. This paper, however, is not proposing a study of Jesus outside the gospels. Thus some important extra-Biblical sources attesting to Jesus and Christianity are not cited here, for they do not offer unbelieving explanations of the historical Jesus (e.g. *agrapha*, apocryphal gospels, QL, archeological findings).

This study focuses not on the existence of various attestations to Jesus' life but on the explanations of his life given by the various ancient sources. My remarks are organized around a broad outline of Jesus' life and do not exhaustively treat each ancient source one at a time. This approach admittedly results in a somewhat contrived picture of Jesus. Therefore the reader is reminded that this is not a portrait of Jesus from the perspective of one ancient author. Rather, it is a collage made up of bits and pieces contributed by people of different times, cultures and faiths. The contributors did not necessarily know one another, nor did any of them necessarily lay claim to the whole "life of Jesus" as it appears here. Indeed, some of the ancient positions of unbelief may disagree with each other. This collection of ancient views simply shows that the idea of an historical Jesus being other than the risen Christ of faith is nothing new. The significant viewpoints regarding an historical Jesus have existed for most of Christianity's own history.

1. *Jesus' birth.* "Then they asked him, 'Where is your father?' . . . 'We are not illegitimate children,' they protested" (John 8:19, 41). Some have speculated that certain Jews, by their words in the conversations recorded in John 8, were insinuating that Jesus was born illegitimately. Perhaps this also lay behind the questioning comments of Jesus' hometown citizens as they asked, "Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son?" (Mark 6:3). They did not identify Jesus as Joseph's son, as might be expected.

He fabricated the story of his birth from a virgin. . . . She was driven out by her husband, who was a carpenter by trade, as she was convicted of adultery. . . .

After she had been driven out by her husband and while she was wandering about in a disgraceful way she secretly gave birth to Jesus.²

The mother of Jesus . . . [was] turned out by the carpenter who was betrothed to her, as she had been convicted of adultery and had a child by a certain soldier named Panthera.³

In the third century AD, Origen wrote *Contra Celsum*, a reply to a presumably second-century polemic against Christianity by Celsus.⁴ While his actual work is not extant, Celsus is quoted extensively as Origen refutes him point by point.⁵ In the two citations above, Jesus is said to be the illegitimate son of a woman betrothed to a carpenter and a soldier named Panthera and to have fabricated the virgin-birth story himself.

Epiphanius explains that the Panthera name may have come from Jesus' family ancestry in that Joseph was the son of Jacob whose surname was Panthera.⁶ F. F. Bruce, following Joseph Klausner, favors the explanation offered by Nietsch and Bleek that the "most probable account of the matter is that Pantheras, with its variant forms [i.e. Pandira, Pantera, etc.], is a corruption of *parthenos*, the Greek word for 'virgin,' and arose from Christian references to Jesus as 'the son of the virgin.'⁷

Rabbi Eliezer said to the sages, "Did not Ben Stada bring spells from Egypt in a cut on his flesh?" They replied, "He was a fool and one does not prove anything from a fool." Ben Stada is Ben Pandira. Rabbi Hisda [a Babylonian teacher of the third century] said, "The husband was Stada, the paramour was Pandira." The husband was Pappos ben Jehudah, the mother was Stada. The mother was Miriam, the dresser of women's hair—as we say in Pumbeditha [a Babylonian town where there was a famous rabbinical college], "Such a one has been false to her husband."⁸

This quotation from the Talmud shows a similar explanation of Jesus' birth to that offered by Celsus. The mother Miriam (Mary) is said to have been false to her husband and thus the child is known as Ben Stada (perhaps meaning "son of one who went astray"). The actual father of the child was not the husband (Pappos ben Jehudah) but someone named Pandira (one of

² Celsus in Origen *Contra Celsum* 1.28.

³ *Ibid.* 1.32.

⁴ See H. Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum: Translated with an Introduction and Notes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1965) xxiv–xxix, for a discussion of the identity and date of Celsus; cf. also R. L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University, 1984) 94–95.

⁵ The main character of Celsus' book, "the Jew," is who Origen often refers to in his quoting of Celsus' work.

⁶ Epiphanius *Panar.* 78.7.5; cf. Hegesippus in Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.11; Chadwick, *Origen* 31 n. 3.

⁷ F. F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 57–58; cf. J. Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching* (New York: Menorah, 1979) 23–24. Bruce further notes that this "could be an unintentional testimony to belief in Jesus' virginal conception" (*Jesus* 175 n. 19).

⁸ *b. Šabb.* 104b as given in R. J. Hoffmann, *Jesus Outside the Gospels* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1984) 40. A parallel is found in *b. Sanh.* 67a as well.

the variant spellings of Panthera) so that the child became referred to as Ben Pandira (“son of Panther”).⁹ That this is a reference to Jesus is clearer in places where the full name is used: “Jesus ben Pandira.”¹⁰

(And remember) when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a word from Him whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto Allah). He will speak unto mankind in his cradle and in his manhood, and he is of the righteous. She said: My Lord! How can I have a child when no mortal hath touched me? He said: So (it will be). Allah createth what He will. If He decreeth a thing, He saith unto it only: Be! and it is.¹¹

The Muslim scriptures affirm the virgin-birth doctrine. Even so, the virgin birth in the *Qurʾān* does not imply Jesus’ deity (although he is described as “a faultless son” in Sura 19:19), only his being chosen by Allah. Between the two parallel accounts of Jesus’ birth is a passage where Allah confronts Jesus concerning claims to deity, which Jesus denies:

And when Allah said: O Jesus, son of Mary! Didst thou say unto mankind: Take me and my mother for two gods besides Allah? he saith: Be glorified! It was not mine to utter that to which I had no right. If I used to say it, then Thou knewest it. Thou knowest what is in my mind, and I know not what is in Thy mind. Lo! Thou, only Thou art the Knower of Things Hidden.¹²

2. *Jesus’ ministry.* “Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. ‘What are we accomplishing?’ they asked. ‘Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation’” (John 11:47–48).¹³ Jesus’ influential teaching ministry worried the Jewish leaders of his day, for they felt he would get their nation into further trouble with Rome—to the point of the loss of their nation. They saw Jesus as a politically dangerous figure.

Josephus (AD 37–ca. 100) speaks of James the Just as “the brother of Jesus, who was called the Christ.”¹⁴ This is not only an acknowledgment of Jesus’ existence but also a testimony that some messianic claim about him existed. The manner of the reference may cause the reader to ask if previous mention of Jesus had been made.¹⁵ There is indeed an earlier reference,

⁹ Hoffmann, *Jesus* 41.

¹⁰ *t. Hul.* 2.22–23; *y. Šabb.* 14b; *y. Abod. Zar.* 40d, 41a; R. T. Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (Clifton: Reference Book, 1966) 103–104. Noteworthy is G. H. Twelftree’s argument for Jesus not being Ben Stada, including a rabbinical quote that says as much (Rabbenu Tam in *t. Šabb.* 104b). On the other hand, Twelftree feels the evidence does support the identification of Jesus as Ben Pandira in rabbinic tradition (see “Jesus in Jewish Traditions,” *Gospel Perspectives: The Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels* [ed. D. Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1984] 5.317–318).

¹¹ *Qurʾān* Sura 3:45–47; cf. parallel in 19:16–35. All *Qurʾān* quotations are from M. H. Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qurʾān: Text and Explanatory Translation* (New York: Muslim World League—Rabita, 1977).

¹² Sura 5:116.

¹³ Cf. vv. 49–57; Mark 11:18; 14:1–2; Matt 26:3–5; Luke 19:47–48; 22:1–2.

¹⁴ Josephus *Ant.* 20.9.1 §200.

¹⁵ Bruce, *Jesus* 36.

but much debate has taken place over the authenticity of the testimony it gives to him. It has been called the *Testimonium Flavianum*.

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.¹⁶

Supported by some as authentic (e.g. Burkitt, Harnack, Barnes), this passage is judged by most scholars to contain definite Christian interpolations. For example, "He was the Messiah" is more abrupt than Josephus' later reference to Jesus as "the so-called Christ." And if Josephus really believed Jesus was the Messiah, why are these the only two times he mentions him?¹⁷ While Eusebius, the fourth-century bishop of Caesarea, quotes this paragraph as we have it, Origen, about a century prior to Eusebius, wrote that Josephus "did not believe in Jesus as Christ."¹⁸ From Josephus' *Jewish Wars* we learn that he may well have held Vespasian to be the Messiah.¹⁹ Furthermore the Arabic version of Josephus does not contain the pro-Christian remarks and thus testifies against their authenticity.²⁰

While a few scholars have rejected the entire paragraph as a Christian interpolation, much of the passage has an atypical perspective for Christians. Klausner, removing apparent pro-Christian additions, suggests the following reconstruction as more accurately capturing Josephus' paragraph on Jesus:

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise 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 . . . and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first ceased not [so to do], . . . and the race of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct even now.²¹

F. F. Bruce (with others) suggests not only the removal of the apparent Christian interpolations but the replacement of statements suspected to be made by Josephus that Christians would want to edit out (noted here in italics):

Now there arose about this time *a source of further* trouble in one Jesus, a wise man who performed surprising works, a teacher of men who gladly wel-

¹⁶ Josephus *Ant.* 18.3.3 §§63–64.

¹⁷ C. A. Evans, "Jesus in Non-Christian Sources," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. J. B. Green, S. McKnight and I. H. Marshall; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 364.

¹⁸ Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 1.11.7–8; cf. Eusebius *Demonstrations of the Gospel* 3.5.105; *Contra Celsum* 1.47; cf. 2.13; *Commentary on Matthew* 10.17.

¹⁹ Josephus *J.W.* 3.8.9 §§392–408; cf. Bruce, *Jesus* 33.

²⁰ Evans, "Jesus" 364–365.

²¹ Klausner, *Jesus* 55–56.

come *strange* things. He led away many Jews, and also many of the Gentiles. He was the *so-called Christ*. When Pilate, acting on information supplied by chief men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had attached themselves to him at first did not cease *to cause trouble*, and the tribe of Christians, which has taken this name from him, is not extinct even today.²²

The text emended by Klausner, with or without the additions suggested by Bruce, still stands as a testimony of Jesus' existence and the beginnings of Christianity. But Jesus is explained as a human leader, a popular "wise man" who performed wonders and who was condemned and killed by the local ruling government.

"The Christians, as it is, still worship that great man, who was crucified in Palestine for introducing this as a new religion into the world."²³ Lucian(us) of Samosata (ca. AD 120–190) was a satirist. In *Peregrinus*, written some time after AD 165,²⁴ he rather simply portrays Jesus as a great man who introduced a new religion into the world.

"However, he was a mere man, and of such a character as the truth itself makes obvious and as reason shows."²⁵ As might be expected, Celsus sees no deity in Jesus but explains him as a mere man of questionable character. "Jesus told great lies," he states bluntly.²⁶

"What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King? . . . Nor did the wise King die for good; he lived on in the teaching which he had given." A seventh-century Syriac manuscript in the British Museum contains a copy of a letter from a second- or third-century man named Mara bar Serapion.²⁷ In the letter he encourages his son to pursue wisdom and supports his advice with the examples of Socrates, Pythagoras and the Jews' "wise King" (Jesus). The writer is apparently not Jewish and, even though he refers to Jesus as "King," he makes no Christological statements that would make us think of him as a Christian either. Here again we see a description of Jesus as a wise teacher who lived on in his teaching.²⁸

O People of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter aught concerning Allah save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers, and say not "Three"—Cease! (It is) better for you!—Allah is only One God. Far is it removed from His transcendent majesty that He should have a son. His is all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And Allah is sufficient as Defender. The Messiah will never scorn to be a slave unto Allah, nor will the favoured angels.²⁹

²² Bruce, *Jesus* 39–40.

²³ Lucian *Peregrinus* 11 as quoted by C. R. Haines, *Heathen Contact with Christianity During Its First Century and a Half: Being All the References to Christianity Recorded in Pagan Writings During That Period* (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell, 1923) 81.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Celsus in Origen *Contra Celsum* 2.79.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 2.7 *et al.*

²⁷ Additional 14,658.

²⁸ Bruce, *Jesus* 30–31.

²⁹ Sura 4:171–172.

Already mentioned earlier, the *Qurʾān* portrays Jesus as denying deity of himself (and his mother Mary). Even though the virgin birth is supported and, here in Sura 4:171–172, Jesus’ identity as Messiah and God’s Word asserted, he is denied the title “Son of God.”³⁰ The passage here further denies the doctrine of the Trinity and explains Jesus as only one of several of God’s messengers. In Sura 5:76–79 is a similar description of Jesus saying he is only a messenger preceded by other messengers who had passed away before his time.

3. *Jesus’ miracles.* “And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons’” (Mark 11:18).³¹

As noted above, the ancient worldview more readily allowed for belief in the supernatural realm. Josephus mentioned Jesus as a doer of surprising works.³² In the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life, his ability to do miracles was not so much questioned as was the source of his power. Those who did not believe in him as coming from God claimed he did such things as cast out demons by the power of demons. They even claimed him to be possessed by demons or by the devil.

Because he was poor he hired himself out as a workman in Egypt, and there tried his hand at certain magical powers on which the Egyptians pride themselves; he returned full of conceit because of these powers, and on account of them gave himself the title of God.³³

Celsus explained Jesus’ ability to do miracles as tricks he learned in Egypt (perhaps an allusion to Jesus’ trip to Egypt as a child, Matt 2:13–23). Similar to the gospel accounts of unbelief, Celsus even calls Jesus a demon.³⁴

The case of R. Elʿazar ben Damah, whom a serpent bit. There came in Jacob, a man of Chephar Sama, to cure him in the name of Jeshuaʿ [Jesus] ben Pandira, but R. Ishmael did not allow it. He said, “Thou art not permitted, ben Damah.” He said, “I will bring thee a proof that he may heal me.” But he had not finished bringing proof when he died.³⁵

And a teacher has said, “Jesus the Nazarene practised magic and led astray and deceived Israel.”³⁶

The rabbinic tradition recognized some miracle-working power associated with Jesus. But his use of it was questionable, for he is considered to have been at least mistaken himself and a deceiver of his own people. The selec-

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.* 2:116; 17:111.

³¹ Cf. Matt 12:24; Luke 11:15; John 7:20.

³² Josephus *Ant.* 18.3.3 §§63–64.

³³ Celsus in *Contra Celsum* 1.28; cf. 1.67–68; 2.49.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 8.39.

³⁵ *t. Hul.* 2.22–23 as given in Herford, *Christianity* 103–104; cf. *y. Šabb.* 14d; *y. ʿAbod. Zar.* 40d, 41a; *b. ʿAbod. Zar.* 27b; *Qoh. Rab.* 1.8.

³⁶ *b. Sanh.* 107b as given in Herford, *Christianity* 51.

tion from *b. Šabb.* 104b referenced above reveals that, like Celsus, some rabbis held Jesus' magical powers to have originated in Egypt.

4. *Jesus' death.* "It was the third hour when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS. They crucified two robbers with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, 'So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!' In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself! Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.' Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him" (Mark 15:25–32).³⁷

The air was thick with unbelief on the day of Jesus' crucifixion. He was executed by way of religious instigation (even as Josephus mentions; see discussion above) due to his apparent breaking of Jewish religious law.³⁸ But Jesus was also executed for apparent political insurrection, because "anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar" (John 19:12) and "he stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching" (Luke 23:5).³⁹ Envy was a motive for the chief priests' actions against Jesus.⁴⁰ He was thought of as a troublemaker who (although insignificant in the judgments of Pilate and Herod⁴¹) had better be gotten out of everyone's way.

"Thallus, in the third book of his history, calls this darkness [i.e. at the crucifixion] an eclipse of the sun, but in my opinion he is wrong."⁴² Julius Africanus, a Christian historian whose work dates to ca. AD 221, cites an historian named Thallus as someone writing about the darkness at the crucifixion. Thallus' identity is uncertain, but his work falls somewhere between AD 29 and Julius Africanus' *History*. "As far as we know, then, Thallus was the first pagan writer to refer to Jesus."⁴³ We see in this surviving fragment of his work a natural explanation proposed for a detail of the Christian account of Jesus' crucifixion.⁴⁴

"They got their name from Christ who had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberias."⁴⁵ Marcus Cornelius Tacitus (ca. AD 55–120) was a Roman historian who served as proconsul of

³⁷ Cf. Matt 27:37–44; Luke 23:35–43; John 19:18–22.

³⁸ John 19:7; cf. Mark 14:61–64; Matt 26:63–66; Luke 22:70–71.

³⁹ Cf. vv. 1–4.

⁴⁰ Mark 15:10; Matt 27:18; cf. Lucian's comment.

⁴¹ Luke 23:13–15; Matt 27:24; John 19:6.

⁴² From a fragment of Julius Africanus' *History of the World*, preserved by Byzantine historian Georgius Syncellus as quoted by R. Dunkerley, *Beyond the Gospels* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957) 27–28.

⁴³ M. J. Harris, "References to Jesus in Early Classical Authors," *Gospel Perspectives* (ed. Wenham) 5.344.

⁴⁴ At the same time it must be admitted that God can use natural methods to perform miracles of timing. If Thallus were correct, that would not necessarily threaten the Christian message nor its historicity.

⁴⁵ Tacitus *Annals* 15.44 (as translated by Harris, "References" 5.348).

Asia. In writing the section of his *Annals* (ca. AD 115) about Nero's reign, Tacitus acknowledges the simple (political) fact of Jesus' death when making reference to Christians without making any statement of belief.

[It is] sophistry when they [Christians] say that the Son of God is the very Logos himself. . . . Although we proclaim the Son of God to be Logos we do not bring forward as evidence a pure and holy Logos, but a man who was arrested most disgracefully and crucified.⁴⁶

We do not regard this man as a god nor agree with you [Christians] that he endured these sufferings for the benefit of mankind.⁴⁷

But if he really was so great he ought, in order to display his divinity, to have disappeared suddenly from the cross.⁴⁸

Celsus saw no divine work of redemption in the death of Jesus. It was a disgraceful event in the history of a man. Very much like the people at the foot of the cross, Celsus suggests that Jesus should have displayed his deity, if he had any, and come off the cross.

A new representation of our god has quite recently been publicized in this city [Carthage]. . . . He displayed a picture with this inscription: "Onokoites, the god of the Christians." The figure had the ears of an ass, one foot was cloven, and it was dressed in a toga and carrying a book.⁴⁹

Second-century apologist Tertullian mentions this anti-Christian mockery of Christians worshipping a god with a donkey's head. *Onokoites* can be rendered "he who lies in the manger of an ass" or "the offspring of an ass"⁵⁰ and is perhaps reminiscent of the Christmas story's manger scene. A crude cartoon (second or third century) was found in Rome showing a man with a donkey's head being crucified and worshiped. Certainly this is no compliment to Jesus' character nor to the reason for his death.⁵¹

And it is tradition: On the eve of Pesah they hung Jesus [the Nazarene]. And the crier went forth before him forty days (saying), "[Jeshu the Nazarene] goeth forth to be stoned, because he hath practised magic and deceived and led astray Israel. Any one who knoweth aught in his favour, let him come and declare concerning him." And they found naught in his favour. And they hung him on the eve of Pesah. Ulla says, "Would it be supposed that [Jeshu the Nazarene] a revolutionary had aught in his favour?" He was a deceiver, and the Merciful hath said (Deut. 13:8), Thou shalt not spare, neither shalt thou conceal him. But it was different with [Jeshu the Nazarene], for he was near to the kingdom.⁵²

⁴⁶ Celsus in Origen *Contra Celsum* 2.31.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 2.38.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 2.68.

⁴⁹ Tertullian *Apology* 16.12.

⁵⁰ R. Arbesmann, E. J. Daly and E. A. Quain, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1950) 51 n. 9.

⁵¹ See also Minucius Felix *Octavius* 9.3.

⁵² *b. Sanh.* 43a as given in Herford, *Christianity* 83.

It is noteworthy that the Talmud agrees with John 19:14, 31 in that Jesus was crucified on the eve of a Jewish holy day. Important to our purposes here is that Jesus' death is explained as punishment for offenses against Jewish law, for sorcery, and for deceiving and leading people astray. Yet he was a man "near to the kingdom."

And because of their disbelief and of their speaking against Mary a tremendous calumny; and because of their saying: We slew the Messiah Jesus son of Mary, Allah's messenger—They slew him not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! those who disagreed concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain. But Allah took him up unto Himself. Allah was ever Mighty, Wise.⁵³

The *Qur'ān* claims that Jesus was not crucified or killed but survived the crucifixion and was raised to God (perhaps meaning that the taunts of the people for Jesus to save himself by coming down off the cross were in fact met). The Muslims now claim that Jesus died and was buried in India.

5. *Jesus' resurrection.* "While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, 'You are to say, "His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep." If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.' So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day" (Matt 28:11–15). One of the several unbelieving explanations for the empty tomb originated in Jerusalem only a few hours after the resurrection took place. The claim was that the body had been stolen by the disciples.

But we must examine this question whether anyone who really died ever rose again with the same body. Or do you think that the stories of these others [i.e. the wonder-workers Zamolxis, Pythagoras, Rhampsinitus, Orpheus, Protesilaus, Heracles and Theseus] really are the legends which they appear to be, and yet that the ending of your tragedy is to be regarded as noble and convincing—his cry from the cross when he expired and the earthquake and the darkness? While he was alive he did not help himself, but after death he rose again and showed the marks of his punishment and how his hands had been pierced. But who saw this? A hysterical female, as you say, and perhaps some other one of those who were deluded by the same sorcery, who either dreamt in a certain state of mind and through wishful thinking had a hallucination due to some mistaken notion (an experience which has happened to thousands), or, which is more likely, wanted to impress the others by telling this fantastic tale, and so by this cock-and-bull story to provide a chance for other beggars.⁵⁴

⁵³ Sura 1:157–158.

⁵⁴ Celsus in *Contra Celsum* 2.55.

If Jesus really wanted to show forth divine power, he ought to have appeared to the very men who treated him spitefully and to the man who condemned him and to everyone everywhere.⁵⁵

But when he would establish a strong faith after rising from the dead, he appeared secretly to just one woman and to those of his own confraternity. . . . When he was being punished he was seen by all; but by only one person after he rose again; whereas the opposite ought to have happened.⁵⁶

Celsus did not have all of his facts in line with the gospel accounts and appears to have forgotten about some of the other appearances of Christ (most notably the appearance to unbelieving Saul). He demanded more and better evidence for the resurrection. He contended that the disciples probably lied about the event to get attention. It is also important to note that in Celsus, as early as the second century, the naturalistic explanation of the resurrection appearances as hallucinations resulting from wishful thinking was already being proposed.

6. *Jesus' following.* "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. . . . 'What are we going to do with these men?' they asked. 'Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an astonishing miracle, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name.' Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:13, 16–18). "Then he [Gamaliel] addressed them: 'Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God'" (5:35–39). The Sanhedrin was worried about the continued influence of Jesus through his followers. Gamaliel, a respected Pharisee, suggested that they leave the disciples alone, for perhaps Christianity would prove to be just another trendy movement that would come to nothing.

Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from the city.⁵⁷

Punishments were also inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Ibid. 2.63.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 2.70.

⁵⁷ Suetonius *Claudius* 25.4.

⁵⁸ Suetonius *Nero* 16.2.

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (ca. AD 70–150) was a Roman historian known for his writings on the lives of the twelve Caesars from Julius Caesar to Domitian. He mentioned that Claudius (AD 41–54) expelled the Jews from Rome for rioting at the instigation of “Chrestus,” which is thought to be (although questioned by some) a reference to Christ. This is apparently the expulsion mentioned in Acts 18:2 under which Aquila and Priscilla left Italy.

Suetonius also mentions the persecution of the Christians, who were back in Rome during Nero’s reign (AD 54–68). A “new and mischievous religious belief” is his description of Christianity. Tacitus likewise acknowledged the presence of Christians (“hated for their vices”) in Rome during Nero’s reign prior to the Jewish revolt.⁵⁹ Josephus acknowledged that the Christian movement had still not died out at his time even after the revolt.⁶⁰

But they maintained that their guilt or error had amounted only to this: they had been in the habit of meeting on an appointed day before daybreak and singing a hymn antiphonally to Christ as a god, and binding themselves with an oath—not to commit any crime but to abstain from theft, robbery, and adultery, from breach of faith, and from repudiating a trust when called upon to honor it.⁶¹

Pliny the Younger (Plinius Caecilius Secundis, ca. AD 61–112) was an appointed official ruling in Bithynia and Pontus in the years AD 110–112. During that time he corresponded with the emperor Trajan regarding administrative problems in the province. In one such correspondence (*Epistles* 10.96) Pliny asks Trajan how to handle Christians, who are said to have disgraceful practices and perverse superstitions. He records the apostasy of some he was able to get to “curse Christ” and expresses his opinion that a “multitude of people” would “renounce Christianity” and return to the state religion if given the opportunity to do so. Trajan’s response is preserved in letter 97, where he explains that Christians need not be hunted down but should be asked to renounce Christianity when they do come to the fore. At any rate, the effect of Jesus believed in as the Christ was being felt and not appreciated.

III. CONCLUSION

All the elements of the quests for the historical Jesus of the last few centuries are to be found in even the meager records we have of the first few Christian centuries. The good-example/religious-genius/liberal Jesus (e.g. Lucian, the *Qurʾān*), the political-rebel Jesus (e.g. Gamaliel, Josephus, Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny the Younger) and the spiritual/mistaken/eschatological Jesus (e.g. Celsus, rabbinic tradition) can all be found to some extent in the words of ancient unbelievers. Let us caution ourselves against “parallelomania.” We cannot conclude that modern quests offering explanations of an historical Jesus as someone other than the Christ of faith are necessarily dependent on such ancient sources as those cited here.⁶² Nevertheless I think

⁵⁹ Tacitus *Annals* 15.44.

⁶⁰ Josephus *Ant.* 18.3.36 §§63–64 *supra*.

⁶¹ Pliny the Younger *Epistles* 10.96 (as translated by Harris, “References” 5.345–346).

we can agree with Qoheleth that in this matter “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl 1:9).

⁶² See E. Yamauchi’s brief survey of modern scholars who have tried to reconstruct an historical Jesus on the basis of the Dead Sea scrolls (“Jesus Outside the New Testament: What Is the Evidence?”, *Jesus Under Fire* [ed. M. J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995] 208–211).