

II

*Ad Fontes:*¹

Sources, Analysis and What Classical Historians Do

If classical history consists largely of the analysis of complex puzzles with most of the pieces missing, then we will do well to think carefully about the precious few pieces we have available to us. To make sense of the puzzle of the last days of Jesus, we need to examine the nature of those pieces and consider some methods for putting them together in a manner that fits the historical context.

The pieces of the puzzle are what historians call ‘primary sources’, that is, evidence of any sort from the time and place under examination.² The evidence available to us is both unwritten and written. The unwritten evidence includes discoveries via excavations (archaeology). Inscriptions (epigraphy) and coins (numismatics) discovered through excavations combine elements of written and unwritten evidence. The written evidence comprises primarily the surviving texts of Philo, Josephus, Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio Cassius, Rabbinic literature, and the New Testament. Specific archaeological, epigraphical, and numismatic evidence appears in the chapters where it is germane to our inquiry. For now, let us examine the primary pieces of written evidence.

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1. *Ad fontes* was a favourite theme among scholars of the Italian Renaissance. It literally means ‘[back] to the sources’, capturing the passion of learned humanists who sought to explore the wisdom and beauty of classical antiquity.
 2. ‘Secondary sources’ are produced later in time and are dependent on primary sources. Philo is a primary source; this book is a secondary source. This distinction becomes convoluted when considering a source like Josephus, a primary source for events from his own period, but a secondary source, dependent on other primary sources, when writing about Jewish history that occurred before his time.

Philo Judaeus (c. 20 BC-AD 50): Philo Judaeus, a contemporary of Jesus, Annas, Caiaphas, and Pilate, was a highly influential Jewish scholar, philosopher, and commentator from Alexandria, Egypt. Philo is important for our purposes due to two of his works: *On Flaccus* and *Embassy*. *On Flaccus* gives us a helpful picture of Jewish-Roman relations in the Roman province of Egypt, including the terrible abuses and persecution of the Jews under Flaccus, the prefect of Egypt. *Embassy*, addressed to the Emperor Claudius, is the account of a group of Jews led by Philo, who had travelled to Rome to lodge a protest before Claudius's predecessor, the Emperor Caligula. Their protest centred on two grievances: the persecution of Jews in Alexandria, and Caligula's decree that his statue should be set up in the guise of Apollo in the Holy of Holies in the Temple of Jerusalem. In *Embassy*, Philo provides the only evidence for Pilate's Affair of the Shields.¹

Both of these works share a common perspective. In *On Flaccus*, Philo details the abuses of Flaccus, complaining that it had long been the custom of Roman governors to prevent such violence. In former years, prefects and emperors had treated Jews with respect and deference, even granting them a degree of autonomy under a council of Jewish elders. From Philo's perspective, not only did Flaccus fail to fulfil his traditional role as keeper of the peace and purveyor of Roman justice, but he exchanged protection for pogrom, exacerbating the persecution by crucifying Jewish elders in the theatre while celebrating the birthday of Augustus. Philo expects his audience to be repulsed by Flaccus's violence and violations of Roman mores.

The heart of Philo's argument in *Embassy* is similar: that Claudius should learn from Caligula's errors, emulating instead the statesmanship of Augustus and Tiberius. They understood the importance of respecting local traditions and the religious freedom that Roman law and government had long granted to Jews. Philo hearkens back to the reign of Tiberius and his relationship with Pontius Pilate, focussing on the Affair of the Shields. These shields, which Pilate set up in his palace courtyard in Jerusalem, bore inscriptions that some Jews considered offensive. This act resulted in a modest Jewish protest, a letter of complaint sent to Rome, and a stern rebuke from Tiberius to Pilate. In the pages of Philo's *Embassy*, Pilate serves as something of a foil. For Philo, a good emperor like Tiberius favours the Jews, even in little things, and takes his governor to task when the latter

1. See Chapter III for detailed discussion.

does not. Tiberius's rebuke of Pilate serves to make Tiberius a positive example. By contrast, Caligula's grievous offence against the Jews demonstrates how far he has removed himself from the venerability of his predecessors.

In addition to this one incident, Philo makes several derogatory comments about Pilate which need to be understood in their rhetorical context. Philo suggests that Pilate was a man of 'inflexible, stubborn, and cruel disposition', whose administration was characterised by violence, corruption, abusive behaviour, needless executions, and savage ferocity.¹ The language Philo employs for Pilate closely parallels his descriptions of Flaccus's misrule in Alexandria. Moreover, the aim of Philo's criticism is less to describe the governor than to depict Tiberius in the best possible light as an example of proper Roman statesmanship for Claudius. Tiberius did things right, Philo argues, by taking Pilate to task and ensuring that local Jewish sensibilities were honoured by Roman government. Because of this rhetorical context, it is difficult to know how much Philo actually knew about the administration of Pilate or how seriously to take his characterisation of the man when his specific vocabulary closely parallels Philo's stereotypical critique of any leader he dislikes. Another possible purpose of Philo's negative references to Pilate in his *Embassy* may be to urge Claudius to return Judaea to Herodian rule under Herod Agrippa, to whom Philo was related by marriage.

As a contemporary of Jesus and Pilate, Philo is one of our earliest sources of first-generation evidence about Jewish-Roman relations.² His

1. *Embassy* 299-305.

2. When applied to historical evidence, I employ the term 'first generation' in a particular sense – to refer to a source that was written within the lifetime of at least some people who were alive at the time of the events discussed in the source. While life expectancy was considerably shorter in antiquity than in modernity, the difference is to a large degree based on infant and child mortality. Bear in mind that we have no census data, so any calculation of life expectancy is an extrapolation from little evidence. While a high proportion of the population died by the age of ten (some suggest up to fifty percent), anyone who survived childhood must have had a very strong immune system. Once a person reached adulthood, death at a ripe old age was not uncommon, assuming one did not die in battle or childbirth. When we hear estimates of life expectancy pointing to one's thirties, this number represents an average age of death, not an average age of adult death. If life expectancy was around thirty, and some fifty percent of children died by the age of ten, then the average age of adult death must have been somewhere well above thirty. People who reached their fortieth birthday were not considered senior citizens, just reasonably

rhetorical strategies, biases, and penchant for sensationalist language do not detract from the value of the evidence he provides, though we must account for them in our analysis.¹

Flavius Josephus (c. AD 37-98): Josephus was an elite Jewish priest, general, apologist, and historian, who was born near the time Jesus was executed. In the early stages of the Jewish Revolt of 66-73, Josephus led Jewish forces against Rome until he was captured by the general

mature. Life expectancy probably differed considerably among men and women, slaves and free, and likely varied depending on one's social status, but we have little evidence available to test such claims. Most of what we know about the age of adult death comes from inscriptions in cemeteries and literary sources; that is, mostly from the upper classes. For our purposes, that narrow lens is sufficient, for it was the upper classes who were most literate and therefore the most likely to read a written text. A few examples will suffice to demonstrate how long potential readers would live. In the Roman Republic, minimum age for election to the consulship was forty-one or forty-two. Julius Caesar was assassinated at the age of fifty-six; Socrates was executed at seventy; Augustus, though ill much of his life, expired at age seventy-seven; Eusebius lived to about eighty; Sophocles died at ninety or ninety-one; St. Anthony, the desert father, may well have lived over a hundred years. Closer to the subject at hand, Herod the Great died at age sixty-nine; Josephus, Philo, Yohanan ben Zakkai, and Caiaphas, at about sixty; Tiberius at seventy-nine; Rabbi Akiva somewhere between eighty-five and ninety-five. Claudius was assassinated at age sixty-four. Annas, given the fact that he had a son who was old enough to be appointed high priest in AD 16, would have been in his late sixties, if not his early seventies, at the time of the trial of Jesus. It is thus reasonable that a source written within about sixty to sixty-five years of the events it describes would be read by at least some people who experienced the events themselves. That probability drops off thereafter, as do those who experienced the events. I therefore employ the term 'first-generation source' to describe texts that were written within about sixty-five years of the events they discuss. Relative to the lifetime of Jesus, both the later writings of Josephus and the Gospel of John, usually dated to the 90s, would qualify as later first-generation sources. For discussion of how Greeks, Romans, and Jews viewed the elders in their midst, see M. Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations* (New York: Vantage, 2007), 344ff.

1. For further discussion on Philo, see H.K. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); K. Schenck, *A Brief Guide to Philo* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); P. Van der Horst, *Philo's Flaccus: The First Pogrom* (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2003).

and future emperor Vespasian (69-79). Thereafter, Josephus predicted that Vespasian would become emperor – a prediction that may have saved Josephus's life. In time, Vespasian and his son Titus came to view Josephus as a valuable resource, kept him in tow, and eventually brought him to Rome, where they put him up in a family villa and patronised his career as a writer. It was under the sponsorship of the imperial family, therefore, that Josephus wrote *The Jewish War*, *Antiquities of the Jews*, *Against Apion*, and his autobiographical *Life*, all in the last decades of the first century. He penned his first work, *The Jewish War*, about the late 70s. Because of his personal experience, Josephus had a unique vantage point from which to appreciate both Jewish and Roman cultural perspectives. For these same reasons, his writings have been variously appreciated, utilised, distrusted or vilified ever since. Josephus shares to a large degree the perspective of Philo that Rome had a long history as a largely tolerant and at times benevolent presence in Jewish life. For much of Roman history, Jews were accorded a significant degree of regional autonomy and deference and their religious sensibilities were respected. In light of this relatively favourable perspective on Roman governance, Josephus, like Philo, presents any Roman abuses of power as aberrations. Josephus places the blame for conflict between Jews and Romans both on incompetent or hot-headed Roman governors who violated long-standing Roman policy and on Jewish Zealots spoiling for a fight.¹

As a Jewish priest and aristocrat, Josephus brings an unusual perspective to bear on everything he writes. As a result, he is a particularly helpful source for understanding the values and perspectives of the high priestly family of Annas since, to a large degree, he shares their view of the world. On the other hand, the perspective of Josephus is far removed from the bulk of the contemporary Jewish population.

Josephus is our sole source for three important events in the career of Pilate: the Affair of the Standards, the Aqueduct Riot, and the violent crackdown on the Samaritans that ultimately ended his career as prefect of Judaea. Josephus also makes two references to Jesus in his *Antiquities*. One consists merely of a brief mention of the name

1. Goodman also argues persuasively that Josephus provides ample evidence demonstrating the combination of problems caused by factionalism and the failure of the ruling class of Judaea to provide effective leadership in the midst of growing crisis (*Ruling Class of Judaea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt against Rome A.D. 66-70* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987]). Josephus himself belonged to this ruling class.

of Jesus in Josephus's account of the execution of James the Just.¹ The second is the famous *Testimonium Flavianum*, the 'Flavian Testimony' about the life of Jesus. Here is the passage, which occurs in the context of Josephus's longer discussion of the career of Pontius Pilate:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who performed surprising deeds and was a teacher of the kind of people who accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had at first come to love him did not abandon 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 marvellous things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, named after him, has still to this day not disappeared.²

Most scholars agree that at least some of this text has undergone what textual critics call interpolation. It appears that some Christian scribe made creative additions to the text of Josephus in the early stages manuscript copying, though there remains some disagreement over how much of this passage retains Josephus's original language. Most agree, however, that the central sentence, which mentions Pilate and 'men of the highest standing among us', accords well with Josephus's grammar and vocabulary elsewhere, and therefore probably represents Josephus's authorship.³ If this is correct, Josephus provides substantial corroboration of other sources concerning the trial and execution of Jesus.

The Pilate who emerges from the pages of Josephus is arrogant, stubborn, and contemptuous towards his subjects and their customs, gravely underestimating their courage and the strength of their religious convictions. Josephus is in no better position than Philo to understand the motives of Pilate, but his portrayal of Pilate's actions is exceedingly important for our purposes. As with Philo, the actions of Pilate in Josephus also serve as a foil for his rhetorical agenda and biases. What Pilate did or thought was far less important for Josephus than how Jews responded. In the Affair of the Standards, Josephus has a perfect example of successful non-violent Jewish resistance to unreasonable behaviour from a Roman ruler. At the beginning of his administration, Pilate's soldiers brought

1. *Antiquities* 20.200.

2. *Antiquities* 18.63-4. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

3. Cf. *Jewish War* 6.300-305.

into Jerusalem military standards featuring ‘graven images’, which were prohibited by Jewish law. Jews protested and, ultimately, Pilate relented, moving that particular contingent of soldiers out of Jerusalem. With the Aqueduct Riot, however, Josephus provides a counter-example: the unsuccessful and deadly results of violent resistance. In this case, Pilate built an aqueduct using funds from the Temple treasury in Jerusalem. Some Jews staged a violent protest and Pilate’s efforts at crowd control resulted in a number of injuries and deaths.¹ Theologically speaking, for Josephus, God blesses passive resistance but rejects violent rebellion. As with Philo, the rhetorical and theological biases and agendas of Josephus do not detract from his value as evidence, but they must be taken into consideration. While Josephus was writing significantly later than Philo, he is still a crucial first-generation source for Jewish-Roman relations, Roman provincial administration, and the prefecture of Pontius Pilate.²

Tacitus (c. AD 56-120): Writing in the early second century, the Roman historian Tacitus is one of our most important sources for understanding the early emperors of Rome, especially Tiberius and his relationship with Sejanus, his praetorian prefect. Tacitus, therefore, helps us understand the details of Roman administration as well as the family issues and power struggles that shaped the career of Pilate, who appears only once in his pages. Tacitus, who anachronistically refers to Pilate as ‘Procurator’, makes this singular reference in the context of his infamous explanation of Nero’s response to the fire of Rome in 64. To deflect a widespread rumour that Nero himself had set the fire:

Nero invented scapegoats – and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians (as they were popularly called). Their originator, Christ, had been executed in Tiberius’s reign by Pontius Pilatus, the Procurator of Judaea. But in spite of this temporary setback the deadly superstition had broken out afresh, not only in Judaea (where the mischief had started), but even in Rome.³

Even though Tacitus is not a first-generation source and tells us little about Jewish-Roman relations until later in the century, he does provide a detailed, elitist senatorial perspective on the early empire. He also

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1. For detailed discussion of both the Affair of the Shields and the Aqueduct Riot, see Chapter III.
 2. For further discussion, see H. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); S. Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003).
 3. *Annals* 15.44.

provides helpful evidence about Roman provincial administration in his *Annals*, *Histories*, and *Agricola*, the latter of which details the career of his father-in-law, who served as governor of Britannia. Tacitus also corroborates at points the earlier evidence from Josephus, Philo, and the New Testament.

Suetonius (c. AD 69-140): Like Tacitus, Suetonius wrote from an elite, senatorial perspective in the early second century. He is therefore not a first-generation source either, but his *Lives* of Caesar, Augustus, and Tiberius help to fill gaps and to corroborate evidence from Tacitus concerning the administration of the early empire. Suetonius has an unfortunate tendency to revel in malicious gossip whose substance we cannot corroborate. At times this tendency mars what is otherwise helpful, if heavily biased, evidence.

Cassius Dio (c. AD 163-235): Cassius Dio (also called Dio Cassius or just Dio), a Greek from Bithynia, wrote his mammoth *Roman History* mostly in the early third century. Of the eighty original books, ranging from the Trojan War to Dio's own day, only those dealing with the late republic and the early empire have survived more or less intact. For our purposes, Dio provides helpful information and occasional corroboration concerning the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius, all from a provincial perspective.

Rabbinic Literature: Rabbinic literature makes some references to the families of earlier high priests, including that of Annas and Caiaphas. In addition, it offers some evidence concerning the high priesthood and Sanhedrin of Jerusalem. We should exercise due caution, however, when drawing on Rabbinic literature to understand issues in the early first century, for while it doubtless preserves many authentic traditions from that period, it is difficult to date individual sections, and all of it was written down many generations after the events took place (*Mishnah* c. 200, *Tosefta* c. 300, *Jerusalem Talmud* c. 400, *Babylonian Talmud* c. 500). Anachronisms and idealisations abound, in which later traditions and ideas are retrojected back into earlier centuries, or the past is treated uncritically. The line between authentic tradition and anachronism is often impossible to detect.¹

The Gospel of Peter: Eusebius of Caesarea twice refers to the existence of a Gospel attributed to Peter which in his day (c. AD 300) was considered spurious.² In another context, Eusebius quotes Serapion,

1. For discussion of the challenges with using rabbinic literature as historical evidence for events of the first century, see Sanders, *Judaism Practice and Belief 63 BCE-66 CE* (London: SCM, 1992), 458-72.
2. That is, Eusebius believed that this text was not written by Peter and was not written in the age of the Apostles. There were several such late Gospels

Bishop of Antioch (c. 200), who also mentions a *Gospel of Peter*.¹ None of these references quotes any text from the Gospel. In 1886, excavators at a Christian cemetery at Akhmîm, Egypt, found a fragment of a Gospel in a coffin. Many have identified this Gospel with the *Gospel of Peter* mentioned by Eusebius, though this identification is by no means certain. Years later, three papyri, two from Oxyrinchus and one from Fayyum, were tentatively identified with that same Gospel.² Even if these identifications are all correct, they indicate, as most scholars have concluded, that the *Gospel of Peter* was likely written c. 150–190. The text from Akhmîm depends significantly on the four canonical Gospels of the New Testament. Attempts to argue that the *Gospel of Peter* contains fragments of a primitive ‘Cross Gospel’ have failed to win scholarly assent. While there is some possibility that the *Gospel of Peter* contains some primitive traditions, its dependence on the Gospels of the New Testament, combined with a lack of confirming evidence among early Christian writers, renders even that doubtful. The primary value of the *Gospel of Peter* for our inquiry is to provide corroboration of earlier materials.

The New Testament: Much of the evidence available to us that deals with the last days of Jesus comes from the Gospels in the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.³ We need to understand the date of their composition and their relationship to one another if we are to utilise them with proper care. Immense scholarly effort has been expended on this topic, so here I will offer only a brief introduction from a classical historian’s perspective.

The date of the writing of the Gospels is important for our inquiry. Nowhere is the unfortunate division of labour between historical Jesus scholars and ancient historians more evident. It is commonplace in the pages of historical Jesus research for interpreters to complain about how late the Gospels are as sources. This complaint is rather curious from the perspective of the ancient historian, for we inhabit a scholarly world in which first-generation evidence is rare and priceless. We are most grateful if we have available a single first-generation source, let alone more than one. The Gospels are, relative to the material regularly utilised

ascribed to Apostles in existence by the time of Eusebius. *Church History* 3.3.1–4; 3.25.6.

1. *Church History* 6.12.3–6.

2. *Oxyrinchus Papyrus* 2949; 4009; *Papyrus Vindobensis* G.2325.

3. Paul also provides corroboration for many aspects of the passion of Jesus. For further discussion, see D. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 392–423.

by ancient historians, very early sources, and the fact there are four is a form of riches rare in our profession. They are also, of course, biased documents, each with its own agenda – a characteristic shared by all the written evidence we have already considered. Our analysis will need to consider the evidence and account for biases and agendas with care.

How early are the Gospels of the New Testament? That is a complicated topic, the full exploration of which is beyond the scope of this study, but a summary is in order. Let us grant, as most scholars do, that Mark was the first of the four Gospels to be written. Matthew and Luke followed, both of them borrowing liberally and creatively from Mark, as well as contributing their own material. Most also agree that the Gospel of John is largely independent of the other three ‘synoptic Gospels’ and written some time later.¹ Thus far, there will be little controversy over these claims. If these common assumptions are correct (and they are not without problems), then the dating of the first three is an interdependent question centring on when the first, Mark, was written. It is common to date the Gospel of Mark shortly after the sack of Jerusalem in 70. If that is accurate, then it follows that the authors of Matthew and Luke would need time to get their hands on Mark and compose their own Gospels, with the result that they are commonly dated somewhere in the 80s. Some argue for even later dates. While many would agree with this reconstruction, from the perspective of the ancient historian, this scheme of dating is problematic, for it depends on relatively weak evidence, while not sufficiently considering more substantial evidence.

Many scholars date Mark after the destruction of the Temple because of this passage:

As he came out of the Temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!’ Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’²

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1. ‘Synoptic Gospels’ refers to Matthew, Mark, and Luke because of their close literary similarities. Most scholars also believe that Matthew and Luke had access to an earlier source: Q, though that question is not germane to our inquiry, given our focus on the trial and execution of Jesus. Some scholars suggest that John may have had access to, even if he did not depend on, one or more of the synoptic Gospels.
 2. Mark 13.1-2. All quotations from the Bible are from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.

The common argument is that this specific prediction of Jesus could have been made only after the Temple had actually been destroyed; it is *vaticinium ex eventu*, a prediction of what has in fact already happened. That is one possible interpretation, but it assumes that a prediction of the destruction of the Jewish Temple would be unimaginable in the time of Jesus, an assumption not grounded in evidence. The Temple had already been destroyed once by the Babylonians; Pompey had entered it; Crassus had forcibly removed its treasury; and Judaea had suffered its share of turbulence. That Jesus lived in such a historical context renders this common assumption anything but compelling. It is not at all surprising that someone who did not hold the status quo in high regard would predict its future demise at some unspecified time in the future. There is nothing specific about this prediction, either in detail or in terms of time, that would point to an event already past. One can easily imagine a Philo or a Yehuda of Gamla making such a prediction from a very different perspective: if abuses of power and rebellious rhetoric continued unchecked, it would be only a matter of time before Jerusalem lay in ashes and the Temple was destroyed.¹ It did not require supernatural prescience to suggest that the deteriorating state of affairs in Roman-controlled Jerusalem would likely not stand the test of time. In fact, we have a good example of just that from a few years later (in the AD 60s), at what Josephus calls a time of peace and prosperity: another Jesus, son of Ananias, predicted the destruction of Jerusalem, and in particular, the sanctuary.² The common interpretation of Mark's text as an *ex eventu* prediction is thus a possible but not at all a necessary inference.³ From a historian's perspective, dating the Gospel of Mark post-70 is possible but somewhat dubious.

Much stronger evidence to the contrary comes from Luke-Acts (both written by the same author), in particular, the ending of the Acts of the Apostles. According to the narrative structure of that text, Paul was arrested, imprisoned for some time in Caesarea, and then shipped off to Rome for a hearing before the emperor himself.

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1. Yehuda of Gamla (Judas of Galilee), according to Josephus, rebelled against Rome at the time of the Roman census of AD 6. For further discussion, see Chapter III and Appendix I.
 2. *Jewish War* 6.300-305.
 3. One might also expect that an *ex eventu* prophecy would make specific reference to the more spectacular events surrounding the destruction of the Temple, especially the fire which consumed it, described strikingly by Josephus.

The narrative pace of the last several chapters of the text slows down, and the content becomes rich in local detail. In the final chapter of the book, Paul is awaiting his hearing, under house arrest in Rome, receiving kindly treatment at the hands of his guards, and freely entertaining visitors. The last two verses are startling in their tone and simplicity:

He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.¹

Many scholars have found this ending confusing if not troubling. One might think from the end of this text that much is good with the world. Paul is being treated well by the Roman authorities, he is about to get his hearing before the emperor, and there is a good chance he will be exonerated (as later Christian tradition affirms). All of that makes sense, and it fits well with one of the themes of Luke-Acts, which is the portrayal of Christians as good, loyal citizens and subjects who do not pose a threat to Rome. The problem is that the emperor at the time, who would eventually hear Paul's appeal, was Nero. Paul was not waiting to visit with the benevolent Augustus; he was waiting to encounter one of the most vicious persecutors of Christians in history. The crux of the matter is the date, for Nero launched his persecution of Christians only after the great fire of Rome in 64. If Acts was written before 64, its ending makes perfect sense, for Christians had no reason to fear him. If, however, Acts were written after 64, the ending becomes confusing, if not actively misleading. In response to these singular facts, many have argued that the ending of Acts was created for literary effect – to leave the reader with a reinforcing sense that respectful accommodation between Rome and Christians is possible, that conflict is not inevitable. Perhaps, if the book was completed by 63. But if the book was written any time after 64, such a literary effect would be self-defeating. From the time Nero began his persecution of Roman Christians, he haunted the pages of Christian writings for centuries beyond his death.² He served as the model of the evil ruler, the paradigm for all future persecutors; fear that he would rise from the dead was widespread. The closest parallel in the modern world would likely be Hitler.

1. Acts 28.30-31.

2. The New Testament book of Revelation is a case in point.

Change the context to Nazi Germany and the problem might become clearer.¹ Imagine writing a story whose purpose is, in part, to show how Jews and Nazis can develop respectful accommodation. Then end that story with the Jewish hero in prison, well-treated by his German guards, awaiting a hearing before Hitler. If this story were written in the early 1920s, shortly after Hitler's release from prison, a reader might, in a stretch, conceivably grant the possibility that the hearing before Hitler could go well and accommodation between Jews and Hitler could be possible.² If, however, this same story were written after the Holocaust became public knowledge, or even after Kristallnacht, the ending would be self-defeating; the very idea of a Jew facing a hearing before Hitler would be charged with anxieties and memories of pillaging, riots, ghettos and gas chambers in the minds of readers. No such book was written, and for good reason. While no analogy is perfect, this one does suggest why it is very probable that Acts was composed before 64 and almost inconceivable that it was written after. The best explanation of the ending of Acts, therefore, is that the author wrote up to his present time and then concluded no later than 63.

If Acts was written at the latest in 63, because it is the second volume of Luke-Acts, Luke must have been written at least a little earlier.³ If

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1. While there is no meaningful comparison between the Neronian persecution of Christians and the Holocaust, Nero did take on, in the early Christian mind, a symbolic status in some ways analogous to that of Hitler.
 2. Readers of *Mein Kampf* would certainly doubt such an assertion, but that is precisely the point. Because, in retrospect, we know about *Mein Kampf*, and we know what happened later, it is difficult for us to imagine there ever being a possibility of positive relations between Jews and Hitler. The same would be true of any Christian reading a text after 64 involving Nero. If, however, we were living in the early 1920s and had little knowledge of Hitler and no knowledge at all of *Mein Kampf*, it would not be nearly so difficult to imagine such a possibility. Our imaginations are forever blinkered only a few years later.
 3. A possible objection arises from Luke 21.20. There Luke redacts Mark's 'abomination of desolation' (13.14) into 'Jerusalem surrounded by armies' (cf. Luke 19.43). Might not that redaction be evidence that Luke was writing after the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70? That is a possible but by no means a necessary inference, for there are other ways to account for Luke's detailed language. This whole discourse begins with a reference to the future destruction of the Temple. When the Babylonians destroyed the first Temple, it was the result of a military siege. It is quite natural to think that a future destruction would also result from Jerusalem being surrounded by armies. Moreover, Hebrew prophets had used similar language to

the author of Luke had a copy of Mark when composing his Gospel, then Mark must have been written early enough to have been copied and disseminated to the extent that it fell into the hands of the later Gospel writer. All of this places the composition of Mark in the late 50s or early 60s; that is, about twenty-five years after the execution of Jesus.¹

Like Luke, Matthew could have been written any time after the late 50s, but now we can turn the argument about the destruction of the Temple on its head: Matthew quotes that same prediction from Mark almost verbatim.² One might expect that if Matthew were written after 70, he might have added some detail based on his *post eventum* knowledge. If he's simply borrowing directly from Mark, that suggests that the Temple was still standing when Matthew was written. This last is, admittedly, not a strong argument, but it is no weaker than the argument usually adduced for dating Mark after 70. Those who date Matthew post-70 also point to Matthew 22.7, suggesting that the burning of the city by the troops of an enraged king is a reflection of the sack of Jerusalem. Those who argue for a pre-70 date turn to 17.24-27, suggesting that this story about the Temple tax would be irrelevant had

foreshadow other destructions of Jerusalem, such as Isaiah 29.3; 37.33; Ezekiel 4.1-4, including detailed references to siege ramps, battering rams, and circumvallation walls. As we have already seen, after Jesus was executed, another Jesus also predicted the destruction of the Temple. A prediction that Jerusalem would be surrounded by armies and that the Temple would be destroyed thus hardly requires supernatural prescience or personal experience of Titus's siege. A simpler and more consistent explanation of Luke's redaction of Mark's 'abomination of desolation' is that Luke was following his usual practice of translating technical Jewish terms into terms his broader audience would understand. To the extent that Luke was following his standard procedure, this particular reference may have no bearing on the date of composition and the text as a whole poses no problems for an earlier date.

1. Patristic sources are mostly consistent with this assessment. See, for example: Papias, as quoted in Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History* 3.39.15; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Chronicon* 183 (Helm); Clement of Alexandria as quoted in Eusebius, *Church History* 6.14.5-7; cf. 2.14.6; 2.17.1; Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 8. Some have argued that Mark was only written after Peter died, but this rests on unnecessarily forced translations of Eusebius, *Church History* 3.39.15, 5.8.1-5, and Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1. For detailed discussion, see R.H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 1026-45.
2. Matthew 24.2.

Matthew been written after the destruction of the Temple. Because none of these arguments is conclusive, Matthew could have been written any time between the 60s and the 80s.

The date of the Gospel of John rests on even weaker evidence, which need not detain us here. Some have argued for an early date based on the Jewish flavour of the book and its lack of reference to the Temple's destruction, but most scholars suggest a date in the 90s. We know that it cannot have been written much later than 90 because of the John Rylands Papyrus. This may be the oldest known manuscript of the New Testament, dating from early in the second century. The existence of the John Rylands Papyrus, discovered in Egypt, requires the Gospel of John to be written, copied, and disseminated across much of the Roman Empire before about 120. Appropriately for this study, it contains a portion of text from John 18, the narrative of the trial of Jesus before Pilate. A date much later than 90 thus becomes increasingly untenable.

For purposes of the present analysis, I will assume that Mark was probably written in the late 50s or early 60s, Luke before 63, Matthew in the 60s to 80s, and John in the 80s to 90s. While each of these dates is subject to dispute, and this short overview is insufficient to address many of the technical challenges, we can have some confidence that all Gospels of the New Testament are first-generation sources, written during the lifetime of at least some people who were alive at the time of Jesus's execution. These sources are quite early compared to the evidence ancient historians usually encounter.¹

The date of these writings is of particular significance for our inquiry because the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 represents not only a watershed in Jewish history, but a turning point in the relationship between Jews and Christians. Before then, and especially before 64, it was advantageous for Christians to be considered merely another sect of Judaism, particularly when dealing with Roman authorities, for there was the venerability of antiquity and legal protection to be had under the

1. It is important to note that my analysis of the final days of Jesus does not depend on early dates for the Gospels of the New Testament. While these dates are the most probable based on my consideration of the evidence, more 'orthodox' dates for the composition of the Gospels between the 70s and 90s would have little bearing on our understanding of Jesus's trial and execution, so long as these texts were written within the lifetime of at least some who experienced the events under consideration. Classical historians do not commonly have the luxury of any first-generation sources on which to base their analyses. The availability of at least four for our analysis is both rare and precious.

Jewish umbrella. Once out from under that umbrella, Christians were at risk of being considered a novel religion, which would cause them to lose the legal protections Rome had provided to Jews. When Jews revolted against Rome, however, there was no longer protection to be found under the guise of Judaism. Christians began increasingly to part ways from their parent faith. Moreover, in time, Gentile Christians began to outnumber Jewish Christians. After 70, there is far more probability that anti-Jewish sentiment and the desire to differentiate themselves would begin to inform various Christian communities, sentiments that may be reflected in later Gospels. Before 70, however, such sentiments were rare and unlikely to affect the earlier Gospels.

The Gospels of the New Testament are not only early but also represent multiple strands of evidence. Their interrelationships are complex and require some introduction. Because we have four first-generation sources, we have the opportunity to revel in our evidentiary riches. We can compare these sources with one another to see where they agree, where they conflict, and where their individual biases and agendas lead them in different directions. That is a welcome luxury, but one which raises its own challenges. Multiple lines of evidence create opportunity for corroboration, one of the most potent tools of historical analysis. But not all corroborations are created equal. For example, there is no evidence that Josephus drew from Philo when writing about Pilate. Evidence from Josephus which corroborates that of Philo is thus very strong, and the probability of the event under investigation increases considerably. Similarly, the Gospels of Mark and John seem to represent distinct lines of tradition; therefore, when one corroborates the other, the result is a substantial increase in probability. The Gospels of Mark and Luke, however, have a different kind of relationship, since the author of Luke likely had a copy of Mark when composing his Gospel. When Luke corroborates a claim that appears in Mark, therefore, it is a weaker form of corroboration. The author of Luke did make the choice to include some material from Mark, so in some sense he agrees with it, or at least does not disagree with it, but the nature of the corroboration increases the probability of the event only modestly.

In his important recent study, R. Bauckham has argued that the Gospels of the New Testament rely heavily on eyewitness testimony as the preferred form of ancient historiography. Those eyewitnesses in turn, so long as they lived, travelled, and communicated among early Christian communities, provided a source of information as well as a reasonable check on creative retellings of Jesus stories. These stories, then, formed the core of the literary composition of the Gospels, whose

authors edited and shaped these testimonia to suit their particular objectives. If Bauckham is right, then any corroboration among the Gospels would point to a high degree of probability.¹

This discussion of the Gospels as historical evidence should not cause us to forget that each Gospel is a literary creation in its own right. With the Gospels as much as with Philo or Josephus, each text has its own perspectives, objectives and biases. Mark's fairly straightforward narrative emphasises an 'apology for the cross'.² Recognising that crucifixion was viewed as a shameful way to die in the Roman world, Mark's narrative is shaped to reassure his readers that Jesus did not die as a shameful criminal. Rather he predicted his death in some detail, thus demonstrating that the cross was merely a part of a larger divine strategy. Matthew depicts Jesus as a new and greater Moses, as well as the long-awaited Messiah.³ Moreover, Matthew is concerned with providing support for a Christian community that was probably facing persecution and therefore emphasises Jesus as the fulfilment of Hebrew prophecy and the rightful heir to the line of David. Matthew is utterly uninterested in matters of chronology and geography. Luke's Gospel, meanwhile, is written with the larger world in mind, stressing the universal nature of the ministry of Jesus. His emphasis on women, the poor, Samaritans, and others who get little ink in the other Gospels demonstrates his concern to portray the broad reach and relevance of Jesus. The addition of the book of Acts as a second volume extends that universality. Luke's theology emphasises the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church and the responsibility of Christians to live as peaceful and law-abiding subjects of the Roman Empire. In addition to his theological concerns, Luke is a researcher at heart, as he articulates in the first page of his Gospel. He is unusual among ancient authors in his scrupulous attention to details that most other writers ignore. He goes to great lengths in his attempt to provide chronological synchronicity with the greater Roman world. He cares a great deal about chronology, geography, and the niceties of Roman provincial administration, even undertaking the research required to discover the proper and

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1. R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). I find his central arguments compelling and concur that evidence from early Christian sources such as Papias and Irenaeus should be taken much more seriously than is common in Biblical Studies circles.
 2. Gundry, *Mark*.
 3. D.C. Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

distinctive title for each Roman governor in Thessalonica, Malta, and Philippi.¹ Where we can check him, the evidence he provides for Roman chronology, geography, and governance fits coherently with other sources (and I have checked him thoroughly).²

Finally, John emphasises Jesus as the Son of God, and the importance of belief in him. Many scholars believe that his Gospel seems to be written in a supplementary fashion to the synoptics, but at times he departs from that role. His portrayal of the words of Jesus is also quite different from the other Gospels.

In the broadest strokes, all these generalisations simply represent the omnipresent reality of all ancient written sources: Every literary text has its own agenda and its own biases, and it is the job of the historian to understand them and take them into account when analysing the evidence. Biased sources do present challenges, but these challenges are anything but unusual and they do not present insuperable difficulties. Whether theological, moral, personal, ideological, or cultural, biases do not detract from the value of the texts as historical evidence, though they should certainly shape how we interpret the evidence. Indeed, we can learn a great deal of importance from the biases themselves. The fact that Suetonius and Josephus and Philo are all biased against Caligula does not necessarily mean that the many negative things they say about Caligula are fabrications. There is nothing to suggest that they invented,

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1. With respect to geography, I refer primarily to the Roman Empire as it appears in Acts. Luke's geographical handling of the life of Jesus leaves something to be desired.
 2. Sherwin-White, a classical historian, demonstrated this point long ago (*Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963]). It is remarkable that many reputable scholars have not done such checking, with the result that Luke's unusual concern for chronological, geographical, and political detail is often impugned. See Appendix I for more detailed discussion, especially with reference to the census of Quirinius. There is, however, one passage that is problematic: the reference to 'Theudas' in the speech attributed to Gamaliel in Acts 5.36. Josephus mentions a magician of some note by the name of Theudas who cannot fit into this chronological context, since Josephus places him around AD 44 (*Antiquities* 20.97-98). If Luke is referring to this same Theudas, this reference is anachronistic. It is possible, however, that he is referring to another otherwise unknown Theudas who led an earlier rebellion. There were plenty of small rebel leaders surrounding the death of Herod the Great. Unfortunately, the name of Theudas is not terribly common. Here is one of those places where we would dearly wish to have another puzzle piece, but the benefit of the doubt, given his record, must remain with Luke.

for example, Caligula's order to place his statue in the Temple in Jerusalem. On the other hand, the scurrilous gossip about Caligula they report, which is unsubstantiated and not corroborated, is more likely to be embellished. Similarly, the theological and literary agendas and biases of the Gospels do not detract from their value as historical sources, but they must be taken into account when analysing the texts.

All of this discussion represents an oversimplification of an enormously complex field, but it is enough to allow us to begin to analyse the evidence.

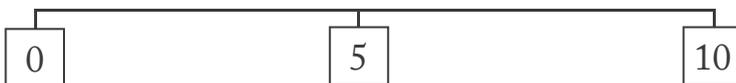
In the end, it is always the goal of historians to put the evidence to the question, to determine to the best of our ability what probably happened and why, in a manner that does justice to all the evidence available from the historical context – all the while recognising that any narrative reconstruction is subject to the nature of the evidence, the perspective of the analyst, and the nature of the question under investigation. Because most of the pieces of any ancient puzzle are missing, we must acknowledge at the outset that the level of probability of any reconstruction is modest.

Now that we have examined some of the more important pieces of our puzzle, we must consider how we can put them together so that they make sense together in context. We therefore turn our attention to the issue of historical methodology.

What Classical Historians Do

Classical historians have, over centuries of painstaking investigation, developed methods for thinking through complex puzzles and dealing with a dearth of evidence. We long ago gave up the idea that we could 'prove' anything. Our goals are more modest, and we would do well to abandon the idea of certainty at the outset. Rather, our task is to think in terms of probability.

Classical historians, most fundamentally, interrogate ancient sources. Either a source provides no evidence to answer a question, or it provides some. Improbability, whatever that might mean, is not a concept utilised by historians. It might be easiest to picture a continuum of probability ranging from 0 to 10, where 0 represents no probability and 10 represents the highest possible level of probability – near certainty.



A probability level of 0 means that we have nothing to talk about, for historians know nothing without evidence. A probability level of 10 would be exceedingly rare, and occurs nowhere in the field of ancient history. Since, when dealing with antiquity, we almost always encounter more gaps than evidence, the probability level of any historical analyses or reconstructions will usually range around 4-6 on our scale. When classical historians analyse the lives of prominent ancient figures like Tiberius or Pericles, everything we say about them is a reconstruction based on the limited availability of biased evidence and, therefore, characterised by modest probability. This is the simple reality for all classical historians. It is relatively rare that we have available a single piece of first-generation evidence, let alone multiple sources. Often our evidence is fragmentary, slanted, and distant from the time of the events or people to which it refers.¹

Some historical Jesus scholars treat their quest like a criminal case in the American legal system. The ‘burden of proof’ falls upon anyone who would attempt to find any historical content in the Gospels or any other sources concerning the life of Jesus. Unless Jesus can be ‘proven’ to have done or said something beyond a reasonable doubt, he probably did not do or say it.² Classical historians, however, think more along the lines of civil cases in which claims are substantiated by a preponderance of the evidence – evidence that makes it slightly more likely that an event happened than not. Very little evidence from the ancient world would rise to the ‘beyond a reasonable doubt’ standard, while much would reach the level of preponderance. I am not fond of legal analogies with history, but this one can facilitate at least some understanding of the disciplinary difficulties. Classical historians are scrupulous and critical, but not highly sceptical, in the classical sense of that term. They take a relatively generous approach to evidence

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1. For a thoughtful analysis of the nature of the evidence for the ancient historian and the problem of the lack of primary sources, see M.I. Finley, *Ancient History: Evidence and Models* (New York: Penguin, 1985).
 2. R.W. Funk and R.W. Hoover, *The Five Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 1-38. This treatment of assumptions and methods represents the convictions of the highly influential Jesus Seminar, now absorbed into the Westar Institute. Such assumptions inform the voting mechanisms that lie at the basis of the colour-coding of the *Five Gospels*. Red represents words that Jesus ‘unequivocally’ or ‘undoubtedly’ said, or at least something very like them. Pink represents words Jesus probably or might have said. Grey represents words that Jesus probably did not say and black represents words he did not say.

and do their analyses and reconstructions with the full knowledge of the limitations of their evidence and therefore the modest level of probability they can hope to attain. We never prove anything, but we do put the evidence to the question, probing and cross-examining it from multiple angles, hoping to make sense of the puzzle before us to the highest level of probability feasible.

With this understanding, the first question of any classical historian is: 'What is the nature of the evidence?' Under that head many sub-questions emerge, such as who wrote the source? What was her or his perspective, status, objective(s), bias(es), agenda(s)? Who benefits from this source? What was this person in a position to know? When was the text written? Where? Under what circumstances? For what intended audience? What is the literary genre and why choose that genre? What was happening in the world around this author that might inform our understanding? Answers to questions such as these help us analyse and interpret the evidence in its context while accounting for its uniqueness. Once we get a handle on such questions, we must recognise that certain answers increase or decrease the probability of our conclusions. I will here present some basic operating principles that all historians share when analysing sources. In particular, we will discuss five: proximity, corroboration, consistency, *cui bono* ('to whose good'), and authorial intent.

1. *Proximity*. To put it simply, earlier evidence is usually better. The closer in time and place a source is to the people and events it describes, the more its potential probability. Close proximity leaves little time for memories to fade or for legendary accretions to develop. In particular, there is a significant watershed between first-generation sources, written during the lifetime of at least some who knew the person or experienced the event in question, and sources from subsequent generations. One needs only to compare the Gospel of Mark with the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* to understand the difference. Contrary to the assumptions of many historical Jesus scholars, it is most difficult for legendary accretions to develop in first-generation sources. They can develop but they take time, well beyond the first generation.¹ During the first

1. For fuller discussion, see Sherwin-White, 186-93. Of course, proximity, even in the first generation, does not guarantee consistency among sources. On the contrary, inconsistencies among first-generation sources are not uncommon, but they grow out of differences in perspective, genre, intent, redaction, or bias, not wholesale fabrication. First-generation sources do on occasion make theological claims about such things as the origins or destiny or significance of their subjects, but these are quite different from legendary

generation, eyewitnesses to events are still alive and, at least potentially, actively talking about the things they saw, heard, or remembered. While memories can fade or become distorted over time, the living presence of such individuals serves as a powerful check on fabrication.¹

There is also, with first-generation sources, the possibility of falsifiable evidence. For evidence to be falsifiable, the event in question must be public, and some of those who witnessed the event must still be alive. Any claims about this public event by a first-generation source are subject to the immediate review of those who were there. Any author making claims contrary to the public memory of those who experienced the event in question would be committing reputational suicide. Falsifiable evidence, while quite rare in the ancient world, provides an extremely high level of probability.² When Josephus, for example, writes of the Aqueduct Riot, that evidence is falsifiable.

2. *Corroboration.* Multiple pieces of corroborating evidence, of any sort, are better than a single primary source. When we can cross-examine multiple sources, our interpretations are likely to attain higher levels of probability. Strong corroborations are agreements between different types of evidence, such as numismatics and literary evidence, or two independent strands of literary evidence, while weaker corroborations exist among sources that have some sort of connection. John agreeing with Mark or Josephus agreeing with Tacitus is strong corroboration. Weak corroboration is when Matthew agrees with Mark. Since Matthew likely used Mark as a source, his agreement with Mark may be merely a matter of copying from a text (in which case, it is hard to speak of corroboration at all), but it may also be that Matthew's agreement with Mark signals his acknowledgment that his own received tradition agrees with Mark. Bear in mind that Matthew's editing of Mark includes the intentional omission of some material. When he excludes this material, he does so for a reason, and usually the application of some basic redaction criticism (the analysis of how authors edit their sources) reveals his theological or

fabrication of events. Cf. N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 426.

1. For detailed discussion, see Bauckham. At least a few such witnesses likely continued to be meaningful sources up to about sixty years after the time of the event. It is important to distinguish fabrication from bias, agenda, perspective, theological reflection, and redaction, all of which are common in first-generation sources. Eyewitness evidence, of course, presents challenges of its own, for it is a legal commonplace that multiple eyewitnesses tell different stories that can sometimes be difficult to reconcile.
2. Falsifiable evidence is, by its nature, also verifiable by the original readers.

literary motives. On the other hand, Matthew's omission of some element of Mark's material could represent disagreement between Matthew's received tradition and what he reads in Mark. I will employ the term 'weak corroboration' to acknowledge these difficulties. Corroboration of any sort is most welcome to classical historians, for it increases the probability of our interpretations and it provides the opportunity for comparative analysis from multiple perspectives.

3. *Consistency*. Classical historians always ask: 'Is this piece of evidence consistent with all other relevant pieces of this particular puzzle, in this particular linguistic, historical and cultural context?' If so, the probability of the analysis rises; if not, we begin to ask other questions about the reasons for any inconsistency. Perhaps the problem lies with the bias of the source? Or with the assumptions of the historian? Perhaps we should look at the whole puzzle from a different angle? The principle of consistency, and grappling with inconsistencies among sources, keep the discipline of classical history honest and fresh.

4. *Cui bono?* Historians always ask of their sources, *cui bono?* or 'who benefits?' Historians have long given up the Enlightenment idea of scientific objectivity as impossible and misleading. Every source has its biases and agendas, and no modern historian is wholly objective, try as we might to keep our cherished notions and preconceived ideas at arm's length. Postmodern thought, despite occasionally going to self-referential extremes, has done historians a great service by bringing these concerns into focus. One of the ways historians grapple with the biases in every source is to raise the *cui bono* question.

One example should suffice: Josephus engages in a great deal of self-justification. This is understandable given the awkward fact that he is Jewish but writing under the patronage of the Roman imperial family, just after a major war between Romans and Jews. He benefits when he is able to demonstrate that reasonable Jews and Romans can get along. For this reason, his description of an episode like the Affair of the Standards, where non-violent Jewish resistance against Pilate results in a peaceful and beneficial conclusion, fits his bias perfectly. This bias does not mean that Josephus invented the event, but there can be little doubt that he has portrayed it in a manner that justifies his own position.

The *cui bono* principle is helpful in many respects, enabling historians to detect and counter biases among sources. The proximity of first-generation sources helps limit the effect of the *cui bono* principle. For sources farther removed from the events they record, in the second generation and beyond, the *cui bono* principle can also be helpful in raising questions concerning possible legendary embellishment or fabrication.

5. *Authorial Intent.* This principle is an essential tool, if a tricky one for the historian to employ effectively. To the extent that this can be discerned (and that is not easy and sometimes impracticable), the intent of an author can have a great deal of impact on how we weigh a source as historical evidence. For example, the intent of inscriptions, by their nature, is for someone in a position of power to announce something in public in a particular place. The intent of coinage, especially in the Roman Empire, grows out of the reality that coins are the only form of mass media in antiquity. Emperors thus used coins to send messages to their subjects. They could even subdivide their audiences by sending different messages on gold coins than on bronze or different messages via different regional mints. The intent of literary authors determines to a large degree their choice of literary genre. As we have seen, Josephus intended not only to grapple with the Jewish War, but to justify his own position. I think the evidence is fairly clear that Matthew had little interest in chronology or geography. Rather, his intent was to portray parallels between Jesus and Moses as well as how Jesus fulfilled Hebrew prophecy, among other things. Luke, on the other hand, cared a great deal about chronological and geographical accuracy, along with other distinctive themes like Jesus's concern for the poor and marginalised. Even these few examples demonstrate the importance of grappling with authorial intent before employing a source as historical evidence. Coins can tell us a good deal about how an emperor wanted to portray his accomplishments, but they tell us little about his subjects. Josephus can tell us much of historical value about the context and events of the Jewish War, but his account is consistently self-serving. Matthew can tell us a good deal about the life and teachings of Jesus as well as early Christian interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, but we would be unwise, as is too often the case, to take a literal reading of his infancy narrative in preference to that of Luke.¹

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1. See Appendix I for more detail. In my judgment, Matthew is making few historical claims in his infancy narrative, but rather composing a haggadic Midrash, a form of creative storytelling that would immediately be recognised by his contemporary Jewish readers, though it is often lost on modern interpreters. The purpose of this Midrash is to draw parallels between Moses and Jesus. The creative nature of this kind of Midrash pays little heed to historical events, something an informed audience would appreciate and enjoy. To interpret a midrashic text as if it were making historical claims is to disregard the intent of the author. For further discussion, see R.H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 32-7; 54; 78ff; cf. Allison, *Moses*.

These basic principles should provide sufficient abstractions in terms of how classical historians approach evidence and practice their craft. The astute reader will notice, however, that there are several assumptions and methods regularly employed by some historical Jesus scholars that do not appear here, including a firm distinction between theological writing and historical writing, the use of Form Criticism, and the employment of the Criterion of Dissimilarity.¹

Classical historians do not grant a firm distinction between history writing and theological writing. For example, it is common for some historical Jesus scholars to make the argument that if a particular statement in a Gospel can be shown to be theologically motivated, or at least consistent with the theological perspective and agenda of the author, then the statement in question is not historical or is at least improbable. That is, historical claims and theological agendas are incompatible. Classical historians certainly recognise the importance of grappling with the biases, political, philosophical, or theological agendas of authors under examination, but they do not grant this firm distinction. Take, for example, our discussion above of Josephus's account of the Affair of the Standards. One of Josephus's primary theological motifs is that God blesses his people when they engage in non-violent resistance, but they suffer terrible consequences when they turn to violence, as was the case with the disastrous Jewish revolt of 66-73. Since Josephus is making a theological point in recording this event, if we were to wield the firm wedge commonly employed by some scholars, we would need to conclude that the Affair of the Standards was probably not a historical event. Classical historians would not be inclined to jettison

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1. Discussions of historical methodology, assumptions, and 'criteria of authenticity' abound among historical Jesus scholars. A few of the more important include: J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), vol. 1; B. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); L.T. Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997); B. Witherington, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2010); N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992); C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2007), and C.A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2006); R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); D. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010); C. Keith and A. Le Donne, *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

such important first-generation evidence for such reasons, though we certainly recognise the function of Josephus's theological biases, not to mention those of the Gospels of the New Testament.

Classical historians seldom if ever employ the tools of Form Criticism and the Criterion of Dissimilarity, which are more properly applicable to literary criticism than historical method. Further, the use of these particular tools in the discipline of classical history would have the unwelcome effect of eliminating most, if not all, evidence from consideration.¹

The discussion above should be sufficient in terms of abstractions. We could multiply such generic principles or argue the virtues of various methods or criteria for many pages, but the central methodological considerations must do justice to the fact that classical historians have to deal with evidence of all types across the entirety of the ancient world. Methodology is constrained by the nature of the evidence. Let us take a couple of examples, with a view toward elucidating the realities classical historians commonly encounter. In addition, please bear in mind our discussions of Philo and Josephus above, for the same issues apply to them. We will engage in a brief examination of two case-studies which demonstrate the kinds of issues concerning evidence and probability that classical historians encounter regularly: Alexander the Great and Apollonius of Tyana.

Alexander the Great. Any student of the historical Alexander the Great has encountered some of the typical problems faced by the classical historian. The nature of the evidence regarding the life of the great conqueror of Macedon is complex. Non-literary evidence consists of a number of coins and a few inscriptions. Literary sources are extremely problematic. There were several first-generation sources, but none of them survived the intervening centuries except in fragments or quotations by later authors.² Even these fragments are precious as evidence, but fragments are always fragmentary – removed from their original context and often freely edited by the authors quoting them.

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1. Form criticism identifies individual units of text according to genre and literary form and then attempts to trace the literary and oral stages of transmission of that unit. The criterion of dissimilarity, employed by some New Testament scholars, assumes that sayings and actions attributed to Jesus may be accepted as authentic only if they can be shown to be dissimilar to characteristic emphases of both ancient Judaism and early Christianity. The application of the latter assumes that only the completely independent Jesus, who has no connection with Judaism or Christianity, is the authentic Jesus.
 2. E.g. the *Ephemerides*, Chares of Mytiline, Marsyas of Pella, Aristobulus, Nearchus, Callisthenes, and Cleitarchus.

Because the first-generation sources have not survived, all analyses of the historical Alexander depend on ancient sources from later generations. Among these, the most important are Diodorus Siculus, who wrote in Sicily in the first century BC; Strabo, the Greek geographer and contemporary of Augustus; Quintus Curtius Rufus, who composed his *History of Alexander the Great* in Latin in Rome in the first century AD; Plutarch of Chaeronea, who composed his Greek *Parallel Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* in the early second century AD; Lucius Flavius Arrianus, better known as Arrian, who, a generation after Plutarch, wrote his *Anabasis of Alexander*; and Marcus Junianus Justinus (Justin), who wrote his *Epitome* sometime between the second and fourth centuries AD.

Anyone who wishes to analyse the life of the historical Alexander must depend primarily on sources dated to anywhere from three to six hundred years after Alexander's death. Because the later sources depended in part on earlier sources, there are complex historical and literary interrelationships among them, not unlike the synoptic problem increased by an order of magnitude.¹ The serious student must come to terms with these issues as part of any attempt to understand the historical Alexander. After our best efforts, it remains quite difficult to ferret out the first-generation evidence embedded in these later sources, much less to reconstruct Alexander's life.

This complex web of relatively late extant sources which in turn depend upon earlier sources is fairly typical of the types of puzzles classical historians regularly encounter. Moreover, each of these later sources is biased and shaped according to the rhetorical, philosophical, political, and religious agendas of the individual authors. The same can be said of the earlier sources upon which these later sources depended. We must therefore be honest about the difficulties and the reality that any reconstruction based on such evidence will not rise to a very high level of

1. Diodorus primarily used Cleitarchus, as did Curtius, who also borrowed from Ptolemy. Plutarch based his *Life of Alexander* on Ptolemy, Aristobulus, and Cleitarchus. Arrian's use of sources concentrated upon Ptolemy, Aristobulus, and Nearchus. Justin wrote an *Epitome* (abbreviation) of the first century BC work of Pompeius Trogus. Cleitarchus is particularly problematic as a source, engaging in pretentious, melodramatic language, fanciful settings and superficial psychologising, although even he did not present a mythological Alexander. For the fragments of Cleitarchus, see Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (Leiden: Brill, 1950), IIB/1, 741-52; IID/1, 484-98. For analysis, see W.W. Tarn, *Alexander the Great: Sources and Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950); cf. N.G.L. Hammond, *Sources for Alexander the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

probability. Because of the nature of the evidence, virtually anything we can say about the historical Alexander represents much lower probability than just about anything we can say about the historical Jesus. Classical historians do not throw up their hands in the face of such evidence; rather, such evidence calls upon the best of historical sleuthing, creativity, and problem-solving.

Apollonius of Tyana. I begin my course on Jesus in History and Archaeology by studying the historical Apollonius, for an analysis of the evidence for his life provides a bit of perspective that is most helpful when later studying the life of Jesus. In part, I do this exercise for the common reasons – that there are interesting parallels (real or imagined) between two men from roughly the same era who were renowned for their holiness. More importantly, I start this way in order to give students a chance to experience the evidentiary challenges that characterise the discipline of classical history.

Apollonius hailed from Tyana, southern Asia Minor, during the second half of the first century AD, but the nature of the evidence for understanding the historical Apollonius is problematic. Modern study of Apollonius depends almost entirely on a single, highly rhetorical, highly biased source: the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* by Philostratus, who flourished in the first half of the third century, some hundred and fifty years after the time of his subject. There are also some letters purported to have been written by Apollonius, but scholars consider most of them spurious creations of at least a century after his death, and thus of limited historical value. Philostratus claims that he had access to some writings of Apollonius, some local traditions, and the written works of Maximus of Aegae, Damis of Nineveh, and Moeragenes, but none of these are still extant.

In a way, analysing the historical Apollonius creates challenges not unlike the historical Alexander. Philostratus is a very late source relative to the lifetime of Apollonius, but not as late as many of the sources for Alexander. On the other hand, at least for Alexander, we have multiple late sources which provide some opportunity for cross-examination. The fact that we are so dependent on a single source for Apollonius largely denies us such opportunities.¹

Beyond modest corroborations of the existence of Apollonius, one must analyse Philostratus with care to gain any historical traction, all the while acknowledging that we can almost never check him

1. We do, however, have a few testimonia, also from late sources, that attest to the life and writings of Apollonius: Dio 67.18.1, 4; *Life of Severus Alexander* 29.2.

against other sources. Because of these limitations, any reconstruction of the life of the historical Apollonius will always be haunted by relatively low probability. In this case, we have barely twenty pieces of our one thousand piece puzzle, most of which are tarnished by time. Nevertheless, this kind of challenge is commonplace for ancient historians. We must adapt our methods to deal with the nature of the evidence and recognise that modest probability is the best we can hope for.¹

This brief survey of the nature of the evidence for two historical figures from the ancient world gives a good sense of the types of challenges regularly encountered by classical historians and how our methods must adapt to the nature of the evidence.

We could multiply examples, but these should suffice to clarify why many of the rigid and restrictive assumptions, methodologies and criteria employed by some historical Jesus scholars will not work if we hope to approach the study of the historical Jesus like any other historical issue. It turns out that some of what is today called historical Jesus scholarship bears only modest similarity to what classical historians actually do when they study other ancient persons.

The discipline of history is a complex interaction between historians and evidence in which we bring our own experiences with life, culture, literature and the broader scope of history to the task of interrogating ancient evidence. The types of questions we ask grow out of those experiences, and every new question we ask has the potential to cause us to view complex puzzles from alternative vantage points. For these reasons, the discipline of history is never rigid in its handling of evidence. The methods we employ must necessarily adapt to the types of questions we ask and the nature of the evidence available to respond to our inquiries. In the end, classical history is a challenging, analytical, energising, creative, and humble discipline in

1. For a helpful survey of the evidence for Apollonius see the online article by Jona Lendering at www.livius.org/ap-ark/apollonius/apollonius01.html. See also the excellent recent text, introduction, and translation by C.P. Jones, *Philostratus: Apollonius of Tyana* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), *Loeb Classical Library* 458, in 3 Volumes; the third includes the letters attributed to Apollonius as well as Eusebius's *Against Hierocles*. The standard edition and analysis of the letters is R.J. Penella, *The Letters of Apollonius of Tyana: A Critical Text with Translation and Commentary*, *Mnemosyne Supplement* 56 (Leiden, 1979). Sherwin-White provided similar evidence from Plutarch, Herodotus, and Thucydides (186-93).

which we must inevitably be happy with modest probability wrapped in meaning, insight, and stimulating dialogue with fellow historians and colleagues in related disciplines.¹

Given the nature of the evidence for the last days of Jesus and the historical methods commonly employed among classical historians, I will seek to examine first those areas where we encounter significant corroboration among our earliest sources, for these represent the points of highest probability. Second, where corroboration is weaker or lacking, we will keep our focus on the earliest sources available to us. When we examine the career of Pilate, for example, Josephus and Philo will be most important to us, but when it comes to the details of Jesus's arrest and trial, our attention will largely be drawn to the Gospel of Mark. Matthew and Luke, because they are mostly dependent on Mark in this portion of their respective texts, provide primarily weak corroboration except where they differ from Mark in a manner that suggests the use of other early sources. Since the Gospel of John seems to preserve a separate strand of tradition about these events, we will utilise it in a complex manner, at times to complement our analysis, at times to challenge our understanding based on the earlier evidence, and at times to illuminate our analysis from a unique angle. Moreover, because of John's inclusion of a number of vivid, incidental details, it is conceivable that his evidence was to some degree based upon an eyewitness, with all the strengths and weaknesses of such testimony. By following these basic methods of classical history, we will be in a position to understand and interpret the fascinating puzzle of the final days of Jesus to the highest degree of probability feasible given the nature of the evidence.

Now, with a firm grasp on the texts and historical methodology, let us pack up our evidence and travel back to the Roman province of Judaea, to the palatial Jerusalem home of the prefect of Judaea.

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1. For a helpful introduction to the relationship between classical historians and their sources as well as the range of questions historians pursue, see M. Beard and J. Henderson, *Classics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: University Press, 1995). For a more detailed discussion of historical methodology and the nature of the evidence that classical historians regularly encounter, see C.W. Hedrick, *Ancient History: Monuments and Documents* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006). The discussion of methodology by N.T. Wright, while philosophical in focus, more closely approximates that of the classical historian than any other I've encountered by a Biblical scholar, perhaps hearkening back to his initial degree in Classics from Oxford: *The New Testament and the People of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992), 81-120.