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Jesus and Tiberius: An Examination of Source Reliability

Abstract

Since the introduction to the critical method of studying the Old and New Testament in the nineteenth century, doubt has been thrown on the historical reliability of the biblical narrative accounts, especially the four Gospels. Yet, far less scrutiny and denigration have been applied to historical sources written during the time of the Roman Empire. A comparison, then, is proposed. It would be beneficial to compare the sources that detailed the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, namely, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and the four sources which chronicled the life of Tiberius, emperor of the Roman Empire during the Ministry of Jesus. How do the sources compare as to their composition in proximity to their subject? Do the sources agree with one another? Is there a level of objectivity in the sources that allowed them to present the correct details of their subject? These questions will determine the reliability of the documents in question and whether the four Gospels measure up to critical examination.

Keywords

Jesus, Tiberius, Gospels, Historiography

Cover Page Footnote

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INTRODUCTION

In regards to the search for the Jesus of history, many have asserted that only the scantest of information is available to the modern scholar. Historical skeptics largely base this assertion on the unreliability of the Gospels. John Dominic Crossan, co-founder of the Jesus Seminar, dismissed the four canonical Gospels as predominantly unreliable, claiming that they were “neither histories nor biographies, even within the ancient tolerances for those genres.”¹ In a similar vein, Bart D. Ehrman, professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, has regarded them as preservations of traditions “that have been modified over time in their retelling, it is impossible simply to take these stories at face value and uncritically assume that they represent historically accurate information.”² However, it appears that other figures of history have lesser demands placed upon them than those demanded of Jesus. Therefore, a comparison is proposed: let the accounts of Jesus be compared to the chronicles about an historical contemporary, whom historians would agree has sound and ample evidence about his life, achievements, and significance. A suitable person for comparison would be the reigning Emperor of Rome during the ministry of Jesus, Tiberius Caesar.

Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (42 B.C.-37 A.D.), born Tiberius Claudius Nero, was the son Livia Drusilla, the wife of Augustus Caesar (r. 31 B.C.-14 A.D.). His mother’s marriage provided excellent connections which eventually propelled Tiberius to succeed Augustus as emperor.³ Tiberius reigned from 14 to 37 A.D. At first taking an active part in government in Rome, Tiberius eventually became disgusted with the various intrigues of the court and his own family. In 26 A.D., Tiberius departed for the island of Capreae at the age of sixty-seven and left the commander of the Praetorian Guard, Lucius Aelius Sejanus in charge of the day-to-day operations of the empire.⁴ Sejanus would eventually be replaced by Sutorius Macro in 31 A.D.,⁵ but Tiberius was never to return to Rome, dying at the villa of Lucullus in March 16, 37 A.D., at the age of seventy-eight.⁶

Tiberius’ contemporary lived under entirely different and far less privileged circumstances and died at a young age by crucifixion. He had no political influence or rights, lived in poverty, and spent his entire lifetime within one small region of the world. Yet, this contemporary, Jesus of Nazareth, founded a faith which spread throughout the Roman Empire and, eventually, throughout the world.

These two individuals lived vastly different lives. Yet, the question remains, “Is the historical testimony of one more reliable than the other?” The best way to

¹ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1991), xxx.

² Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 53.

³ David Shotter, *Tiberius Caesar*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.

⁴ Gregorio Maranon, *Tiberius: The Resentful Caesar*, trans. Warre Bradley Wells (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1956), 210.

⁵ Shotter, *Tiberius Caesar*, 54.

⁶ Frank Burr Marsh, *The Reign of Tiberius* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1959), 218.

answer the question is to examine the sources, the approximate dates of their composition, their preservation from antiquity to the modern era, their genre, their accuracy and agreement between one another, and their portrayal of the their subject, namely Tiberius and Jesus. After the comparison is completed, then the sources will be judged on their reliability.

THE SOURCES

For the historian investigating the lives of Jesus and Tiberius, information in the form of historical chronicles is available. The first was written by Velleius Paterculus, who served in the military under Tiberius and later in the Senate during Tiberius' reign, eventually rising to the rank of praetor. Paterculus' history is comprised of two volumes and has a far more personal tone than the other histories concerned with Tiberius.⁷ Considered to be the most reliable history of the Roman Empire in the first century is Publius Cornelius Tacitus' *The Annals of Imperial Rome*. Describing the events at the end of Augustus' reign to the death of Nero, Tacitus' *Annals* is regarded as his greatest work. Tragically, not all of this work survived, but what remains serves as a valuable resource. Tacitus served as a senator during the Flavian dynasty, primarily during the reign of Domitian (81-96 A.D.) and became consul in 97. He also served during the reign of Trajan (98-117) and became governor of the province of Asia fifteen years after his consulship.⁸

A third source, the *Life of Tiberius*, comes from a contemporary of Tacitus, Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus. During a majority of his life, Suetonius held the career of schoolmaster, but during Trajan's and Hadrian's reigns, he served in secretarial posts. This gave him access to the records needed for writing his biographies of the emperors. Beginning with Julius Caesar, Suetonius penned the lives of the rulers of the Roman Empire and finished with Domitian. Unfortunately, Suetonius' privileged status ended when he fell out of favor with Hadrian in 122. Once he lost access to the records of privileged to government officials, Suetonius' biographies declined in quality. The treatment of Tiberius is considered to be one of the stronger biographies.⁹ Cassius Dio Cocceianus, the Greek noble from Nicaea and author of *Roman History*, had a far more successful career, enjoying two consulships. The family Dio served under was the Severan dynasty, including the erratic and dangerous Caracalla (211-217). His history is composed entirely in Greek. He spent ten years researching his history and another twelve writing it.¹⁰

Concerning Jesus, the sources that provide detail of any significance are the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and the epistles of Paul of Tarsus. For the sake of brevity, only the Gospels will be investigated. The Gospel of Matthew has a much disputed origin among experts in the field of the New

⁷ Shotter, *Tiberius Caesar*, 82.

⁸ Michael Grant, "Translator's Introduction," in *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), 7-9.

⁹ Shotter, *Tiberius Caesar*, 86.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

Testament.¹¹ According to the Church father, Papias, the Gospel was written by the apostle and eyewitness of Jesus' ministry, Matthew. It is considerably longer than the Gospel of Mark and most scholars contend that Matthew relied upon Mark as a source. Also, Matthew is considered as having a better chronological order than Mark.¹²

Mark, the associate of Peter, wrote his Gospel from the oral recollections of the Apostle Peter. He therefore provided the Petrine perspective of the ministry of Jesus. This is important to recognize for Peter was an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry and direct recipient of His teachings.¹³ As evidence of Peter's influence upon this Gospel, New Testament professor, Richard Bauckham cites the numerous instances where Peter is present in Mark, which occur throughout the document (Mk. 1:16; 3:16; 8:29; 9:2; 14:66-72).¹⁴

The author of Luke, who most critics also believe wrote the Book of Acts, was an associate of Paul of Tarsus, the apostle. His use of the first person plural in the Acts narrative (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-16; 21:1-18) demonstrates his relationship with Paul. Evidence leans toward Luke the physician as the author.¹⁵ Because of his rigorous attention to detail, the author of Luke has been recognized by scholars as a historian and as a theologian.¹⁶

Though different from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), the Gospel of John represents a valid tradition of its own. Often dismissed as historically unreliable, C.H. Dodd has presented a robust argument for John containing solid and early material. Certainly the writer or evangelist was of Jewish origin and understood well the setting of Jesus' ministry. Of notable

¹¹ D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 66-68. Though there are objections to his proposal, Martin Hengel has made a strong case that the four gospels were never actually anonymous. He noted that Tertullian objected to Marcion submitting his own gospel without attaching his name to it. The Early Church, then would not accept documents without knowing the author and a title that included the author would be necessary to distinguish recognized documents from those not recognized by the Church. Therefore, the Church understood who the writers were or they would have never accepted Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The Early Church believed Matthew the Apostle to be the author of the first Gospel in the New Testament. Eusebius records Papias' comments on this Gospel, who stated that Matthew was the author.

¹² Ibid., 66-74.

¹³ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 179.

¹⁴ Ibid., 126. The Gospel of Mark has more references to Peter than any other gospel. Mark mentions Peter by name considerably more than Matthew, although Matthew has a specific interest in Peter. Luke also fails to mention Peter by name as much as Mark does. For instance, in the words of the angels at the empty tomb, Luke does not name Peter, but Mark does (Lk. 24:6-7).

¹⁵ Carson, Moo, and Morris, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 113-114. Several second century sources affirm Luke's authorship, namely Marcion in the middle of the second century, a prologue to the Gospel of Luke written near the end of the second century, and the Muratorian Canon. Furthermore, patristic theologians such as Ireneus and Tertullian assume Luke's authorship without a doubt. Bodmer Papyrus XIV, the oldest manuscript of Luke names the physician as the author.

¹⁶ Ibid., 122-123.

mention is the length of Jesus' ministry explained by Jesus' celebration of three Passovers. In the Synoptics, Jesus journeys to Jerusalem only to the end of His ministry. The geographical descriptions included in John are best understood as remembered details. Jesus' discourses in John find similarity in character to His sayings in the Synoptic Gospels.¹⁷ Such evidence leads some scholars, such as J.A.T. Robinson, G.R. Beasley-Murray, Martin Hengel, Ben Witherington, D.A. Carson and C.S. Keener to believe that the writer of John was one of the twelve and John the son of Zebedee and brother of James. While John the Apostle's authorship is far from universally accepted, more recent scholarship has drawn the conclusion that the writer of the Fourth Gospel was an eyewitness close to Jesus and to the events surrounding his ministry and life.¹⁸

DATING THE SOURCES

The time in which the sources were written weighs significantly on their reliability. The central factor behind dating sources concerns the number of years between time of the event or lifetime of the person and time the source was written. Thus, the smaller the number, the closer the source is to the subject matter. When probing the dates of Tiberius' historians, one finds a varied spectrum. Velleius Paterculus published his short account of Tiberius in 30 A.D. Though valuable for being composed during the reign of Tiberius, certain events, such as the denunciation and execution of Sejanus, had not yet occurred when Paterculus' work was completed. It would take eighty years before another history of Tiberius would surface. Cornelius Tacitus wrote his *Annals* between 106 and 117 A.D. His contemporary, Gaius Suetonius, finished the *Life of Tiberius* in the 120's. The last major source for Tiberius, *Roman History*, was composed by Dio Cassius in the 220's.¹⁹

Dating the Gospels has proven to be far more controversial than the Roman histories covering the life and career of Tiberius. The more critical New Testament scholars ascribe a later date to the Gospels. The Catholic scholar, Raymond E. Brown, for instance, has dated Matthew between 80 and 90 A.D.,²⁰ Mark between

¹⁷ James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, vol. 1 of *Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 166-67.

¹⁸ Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 410-411. The New Testament scholar states that "in the case of the Gospel of John these characteristics are linked with its claim to be entirely the testimony of an author who was himself an eyewitness. In this case, the whole historiographic process of eyewitness observation and participation, interrogation of other eyewitnesses, arrangement and narrativization in the formation of an integrated and rhetorically persuasive work... Thus, whereas scholars have often supposed that this Gospel could not have been written by an eyewitness because of its high degree of interpretation of the events and the words of Jesus, by contrast with the Synoptics, in fact the high degree of interpretation is appropriate precisely because this is the only one of the canonical Gospels that claims eyewitness authorship."

¹⁹ Shotter, *Tiberius Caesar*, 81.

²⁰ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 172.

65-75 A.D.,²¹ Luke at 85 A.D.,²² and John between 80 and 110 A.D.²³ However, capable conservative scholars have argued for earlier dates. A strong case has been made to date Matthew before 70 A.D. and possibly in the middle 60's.²⁴ Mark could safely be placed between the late 50's and middle 60's and Luke could have been written in the early 60's or as late as after 70 A.D.²⁵ Recent scholarship has placed John in the early 90's.²⁶

Based on the dating of the histories, the sources for Tiberius begin from a contemporary setting with Paterculus, to more than eighty years with Tacitus and Seutonius, and finally over two hundred years with Dio Cassius. In the case of Jesus, the accounts of His life are relatively close to one another in date. All of the

²¹ Ibid., 127.

²² Ibid., 226.

²³ Ibid., 334.

²⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew, The New American Commentary*, edited by David S. Dockery, 22 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1992), 41-42. Matthew can be dated before 100 A.D. due to the fact that Ignatius quotes from the Gospel around 110-115 and the *Didache*, dated in the late 90's, alludes to it. The most common reason for assigning a late to Matthew is Jesus' prediction of the fall of Jerusalem and the burning of the temple, which occurred in 70 A.D. To date Matthew after 70 for this reason demonstrates a refusal to accept the possibility of prophetic predictions and a presupposition against all things supernatural. Keeping this in mind, certain inclusions in Matthew appear to hint at a date earlier than 70, including references to the temple tax (Matt. 17:24-27), offerings (Matt. 5:23-24), and keeping the Sabbath in Judea (Matt. 24:20). All these references would have no relevance after the destruction of the temple. Though one cannot assign an early date with absolute certainty, to regard Matthew as a product in the 60's is within the parameters of possibility.

²⁵ John A.T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 116. While hardly considered to be a conservative evangelical, Robinson had no issue with placing the final composition of the Synoptic Gospels in the late 50's to early 60's. Addressing the objection that the Gospels presented too highly a developed theology to be written at such an early date, Robinson called this "precariously subjective." The entire Pauline corpus, which contains a highly developed Christology, he argues, was finished before 70 A.D. Also, James A. Brooks, *Mark*, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1991), 28. Brooks places Mark right before the Neronian persecution of Christians in Rome. Since both the external evidence of the Early Church fathers and the internal biblical evidence put the location of the writing of the Gospel in Rome, Mark would have some reference to the persecution if it was written during or after the event. No explicit reference is found, so date of 63 or the first half of 64 A.D. is most likely. Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1992), 24-26. The key to dating Luke is the dating of Acts. Some have suggested that because Paul's trial and execution were not recorded in Acts and because Acts was written after Luke (Acts 1:1), Luke had to have been written before 62 A.D. However, if Luke depended on Mark, as most Gospel scholars affirm, a later date better fits the evidence. Stein suggests some time after 70 A.D. because of the tradition relating the writing of Mark with the martyrdom of Peter circa 65-67. In addition, he considers Luke to be "looking back" on the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem, but he considers the Domitian persecution of 95-96 to be too late.

²⁶ Ben Witherington, *New Testament History: A Narrative Account* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 398. Though Witherington believes the Beloved Disciple, who wrote the Gospel was not one of the twelve original disciples, he does consider him to be an eyewitness of Jesus' Judean ministry. The Fourth Gospel's detail of Jesus' last Passover and His trial before the high priest clearly demonstrate first hand knowledge and therefore, had to have been written in the first century.

Gospels were written within a generation or two of Jesus' ministry, which places them close to the events they record.

THE EXTENT OF THE SURVIVAL OF THE SOURCES

It is no secret that a large number of ancient documents have not survived and of those that have survived, many have not completely survived. The modern researcher has at his disposal fragments of former complete works. The sources for Tiberius are no exception. Much of the earlier section Paterculus' two volume history is lost, but the chapters dealing with Augustus and Tiberius are still intact.²⁷ Certain sections of the *Annals* of Tacitus are also missing, including the entire reign of Caligula, half of the reign of Claudius, the last two years of Nero, and more than two years of Tiberius' rule in Rome.²⁸ The only work of Suetonius' to survive is his series of biographies of the first twelve Caesars. *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* has some missing components, but overall, has survived nearly complete.²⁹ Of all the chronicles on Tiberius, Dio's is the most fragmented and offers no more insight provided already by Tacitus and Suetonius, with the exception of the two years before the execution of Sejanus.³⁰

The preservation of the documents of the New Testament have been attested by the competent scholarship of textual criticism. New Testament scholar, Bruce Metzger, in *The Text of the New Testament* verifies the strong preservation of every New Testament document. Over 5,000 Greek manuscripts exist, which contain part or all of the New Testament. Because of the incredible volume of manuscripts, textual critics have been able to competently demonstrate that every book of the New Testament, including the four Gospels, have been preserved intact in their entirety.³¹ The codex Vaticanus, a fourth century manuscript, contains the Old and New Testaments, with some omissions, but the Gospels are completely intact.³² Therefore, no fragmentation of any of the four Gospels exists. They are intact and preserved.

THE SOURCES AS HISTORY

When evaluating the chronicles of the second emperor of the Roman Empire, historians determine whether or not the documents actually bear the qualities of a historical resource. Though dated within lifetime of Tiberius, historians value Paterculus' two volume compendium as the least dependable source. Criticism of Tiberius is utterly absent from Paterculus' account. His work is acknowledged more

²⁷ Robin Seager, *Tiberius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 266.

²⁸ Grant, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, 9.

²⁹ Seager, *Tiberius*, 262.

³⁰ Shotter, *Tiberius Caesar*, 90.

³¹ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text Of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 36.

³² *Ibid.*, 47-48.

as a eulogy rather than an objective chronicle, but Paterculus does insert details from the contemporary setting that were unavailable to the late historians.³³

In the comparison of sources chronicling the events of the first century, Tacitus' works are regarded as the purest form of history available to modern historians. His reputation as the greatest of Roman historians rests upon his *Histories* and *Annals*. Tacitus vigorously adhered to an annalistic format that progressed from year to year. Additionally, Tacitus applied detail throughout his work, attempting to create a dependable resource.³⁴ Though he did allow his own opinions to color his accounts, Tacitus attempted to provide an objective history. He states in the first chapter of the *Annals*, "I shall write without indignation or partisanship: in my case the customary incentives to these are lacking."³⁵

Suetonius, instead of providing a careful chronology, submitted epitaphs of famous persons. Epitaphs mentioned the affiliations of the persons, their public offices, and their military victories. Earlier instances of epitaphs included the virtues of the person in question. Taking this format, Suetonius added flesh to it with the insertion of questionable anecdotes and distorted examples.³⁶ When discussing the death of Tiberius, Suetonius lists three different rumors that declared that Tiberius was murdered and he placed these rumors within the realm of plausibility, without seeking to confirm them with evidence.³⁷ Another failing on the part of Suetonius is the lack of motive for explaining Tiberius' actions. From Suetonius, what historians consider valuable are the excerpts from Augustus' letters to Tiberius, Augustus' will, and the letters and speeches of Tiberius.³⁸

Dio attempted to provide a more detailed account than Suetonius, but it does not equal the work of Tacitus. Clearly, he used different sources than those available to Tacitus. He did seek to explain the confusing actions and twists of behavior displayed by the second emperor. As later historians would recognize, Tiberius possessed a complex personality and Dio attempted to explain this. More will be said of this later. Unfortunately, Dio's history did not possess the smooth chronological flow of Tacitus. He begins with a description of the early reign of Tiberius and follows it with a chronological list of what he deemed as important during Tiberius' rule. In this list, the German wars, which Tacitus describes in great detail, is not even mentioned. Primarily, Dio valued entertainment over accuracy, seeking to captivate his readers.³⁹ For this reason, exaggerations are found in Dio's history. In one instance, Dio states that Tiberius enriched a number of senators who desired to leave the senate on account of their poverty.⁴⁰ However,

³³ Shotter, *Tiberius Ceasar*, 82.

³⁴ A.J. Woodman, *Tacitus Reviewed* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 104.

³⁵ Grant, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, 32.

³⁶ Seager, *Tiberius*, 263.

³⁷ Suetonius, *The Life of Tiberius*, trans. J.C. Rolfe, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* (St. Petersburg: Red and Black Publishers, 2008), 73, 113.

³⁸ Seager, *Tiberius*, 264.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁴⁰ Cassius Dio, *Dio's Roman History*, trans. Ernest Cary (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), 57. 10, 136-37.

Tacitus recorded only one such instance of generosity, in the case of Marcus Hortensius Hortalus.⁴¹

In short, a wide variety exists among the sources of Tiberius' life. Each historian has his own style and each has his own strengths and weaknesses. One writer in particular, Tacitus, stands out as the most capable and understood his role as historian far better than the others. Among the many in the academic community, the Gospels have not had the reputation that Tacitus has had. Until two decades ago, the Gospels were not considered actual historical documents. During the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, many considered the Gospels to be of a particular type of genre invented by the early Church.⁴² However, because of the pioneering work of Richard Burridge, the Gospels are now seen by many New Testament scholars as a form of Graeco-Roman biography.⁴³

As proof for this thesis, Burridge notes that the primary focus of each Gospel is Jesus and not predominantly a promotion of the Christian message. A quarter of the verbs in Mark center on Jesus Himself and an additional fifth of the verbs come from His lips. In Matthew and Luke Jesus dominates the focus having a sixth of the verbs referring to Him.⁴⁴ John, though often regarded, as the least concerned with the activities of Jesus, has a surprising fifth of the verbs have Jesus as their subject.⁴⁵ Furthermore upon examining the content of the Gospels and comparing them with ancient biographies, Burridge states that "all four gospels share similar internal features of settings, topics and atmospheres with Graeco-Roman" biographies.⁴⁶ Though different from each other in approach and, to a degree, style of language, the Gospels fall into the category of historical documents.

MOTIVE AND BIAS IN THE SOURCES

Every historian operates from some degree of subjectivity in the recording of objective events.⁴⁷ This includes both ancient and modern historians; each having a particular motive for composing his work and each having a slant in the interpretation of events. Velleius Paterculus certainly had strong motives when writing his Roman history. Producing his work during the reign of Tiberius and

⁴¹ Tacitus, *Annals*, 4, 94-96.

⁴² Darrell L. Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus: A Guide to Sources and Methods* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 213.

⁴³ Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 105.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁴⁷ Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin: College Press Publishing, 1996), 260. They, in general, understand that history contains two factors: the actual events and the chronicling of those events. Therefore, the study of history involves the events and how they have been interpreted from observers as well as from subsequent generations of historians.

before the corruption of Sejanus was exposed, Paterculus deeply admired Tiberius. The purpose of his chronicle was to eulogize the current emperor.⁴⁸

Throughout Tacitus' work, a deep appreciation of the Roman Republic is clearly evident. Therefore, the principate, who held captive the actual powers of the Senate, fell under the disapproval of Tacitus.⁴⁹ In fact, he possessed a contempt for the Julio-Claudian line of emperors, despising their craving for power.⁵⁰ Though expressing a noble purpose of chronicling the nobility and wickedness of the notable people of Roman history, Tacitus clearly intended to reveal how the emperors trampled over the powers of the republic.⁵¹ For instance, when Augustus created the principate, it appeared to establish a system of justice and peace, but Tacitus stated that Augustus used bribery and bloodshed to fulfill his lust for power.⁵²

Cassius Dio wrote his *Roman History* as an expansion of an earlier work that detailed the emperor, Severus' rise to power. Severus appreciated this history and encouraged Dio to write on the overall scope of Roman history. Obviously, Dio described certain emperors, especially the dynasty during his lifetime, in favorable terms.⁵³

Without doubt, definite motives were behind the composition of the Gospels. Martin Hengel has declared that the Gospels were written expressly to present truth claims concerning Jesus. The Gospel writers intended to have them read in public settings, especially in the context of worship. The Gospels were for the entire Church so that Christians may understand the identity of Jesus and the purpose of His ministry.⁵⁴

The universal purpose of the Gospel writers was identical. However, each had additional motives for composing their accounts. For the writer of Matthew, it is assumed that he intended to address the needs of Christians in his own area and also to those living in other regions, but with a similar background. Succinctly put, Matthew intended to primarily address Christians with Jewish backgrounds.⁵⁵ Mark desired to record the eyewitness testimony of Peter and preserve it. He wanted to provide a testimony of Jesus' actions and words so that the Church would have them for posterity.⁵⁶

Luke is quite explicit about his purpose. In the prologue (Lk. 1:1-4), he addresses Theophilus, a Gentile believer who needed security in his understanding of the identity and actions of Jesus. Luke also desired to have his narrative read to

⁴⁸ Shotter, *Tiberius Caesar*, 82.

⁴⁹ Seager, *Tiberius*, 256

⁵⁰ Paul Barnett, *The Birth of Christianity: The First Twenty Years*, vol. 1 of *After Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 13.

⁵¹ Seager, *Tiberius*, 256.

⁵² Tacitus, *Annals*, 1, 38.

⁵³ Shotter, *Tiberius Caesar*, 88.

⁵⁴ Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels*, trans. John Bowden (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000), 116.

⁵⁵ Carson, Moo, and Morris, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 79.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

a larger audience of Gentile background. As the narrative unfolds, Luke reveals how God has fulfilled and continues to fulfill His promises (Lk. 1:17; 2:10-14; 4:14-21).⁵⁷ The writer of John wrote to non-Christians who were Diaspora Jews and Jewish proselytes. He focused in particular on the question of identity of the Son of God (Jn. 1:1-4, 14-18). Thus John was both an evangelistic work and an apologetic, striving to point the Way to Salvation (Jn. 14:6) and prove that Jesus is God's Son and the Messiah (Jn. 2:1-12; 11:43-45).⁵⁸

An overall and sincere desire surfaces from the evangelists writing the Gospels. They truly wanted to inform. Nothing is included to bring them glory or fame or exoneration. The Gospel writers wanted to proclaim their message.

THE ACCURACY OF AND AGREEMENT BETWEEN SOURCES

A crucial question that the historian must ask concerning the primary sources available to him is, "Do they agree with one another?" Oftentimes, they do not. Such is the case for the sources describing Tiberius. As stated earlier, Tacitus provided the most reliable histories and Suetonius and Dio's value lies in their ability to fill in the gaps of Tacitus' missing sections.⁵⁹ Paterculus' overly positive account cannot be considered reliable.

When comparing the sources, several discrepancies surface in reference to the life of Tiberius. Suetonius accused Tiberius of committing certain crimes for the purpose of stealing money. This included the execution of Vonones, the deposed king of the Parthians, who was killed so that Tiberius could take possession of his treasure.⁶⁰ Yet, Tacitus, giving a detailed description of the death of Vonones, does not mention Vonones' treasure as a motive nor does he link Tiberius with event.⁶¹ Apparently, Suetonius wanted to demonstrate the avarice of Tiberius and drew erroneous conclusions about the event.⁶² Dio did not use the same sources as Tacitus and though the two agree over certain details, they conflict in others. Portraying Livia, Tiberius' mother, as exerting considerable power, Dio stated that official letters from Tiberius included her name as well.⁶³ However, Tacitus describes Tiberius' animosity towards his mother, which would seem to negate his sharing of power with Livia.⁶⁴ These clear discrepancies reveal weaknesses in Suetonius and Dio and relative strength with regard to Tacitus. In short, the sources contradict one another and they are not always accurate.

⁵⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 203.

⁵⁸ Carson, Moo, and Morris, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 170-171.

⁵⁹ Marsh, *The Reign of Tiberius*, 272.

⁶⁰ Suetonius, *The Life of Tiberius*, 49, 104.

⁶¹ Tacitus, *Annals*, 1.5, 111.

⁶² Marsh, *The Reign of Tiberius*, 273.

⁶³ Dio, *Roman History*, 57, 141.

⁶⁴ Tacitus, *Annals*, 1.1, 41.

Skeptics have often asserted the same for the four Gospels. They claim that the narratives of concerning Jesus are contradictory and wildly inaccurate.⁶⁵ Closer investigation discloses a different story. The Synoptic Gospels especially have striking similarities. John the Baptist's sermon in Matthew 3:7-10 and Luke 3:7-9 have almost one hundred percent verbal agreement. The episode recorded in Mark 1:21-28 and Luke 4:31-37 of Jesus performing an exorcism does not have exact verbal parallel, but records the same details of the event.⁶⁶

The discrepancies that skeptics believe are contained in the Gospels can be accounted for by different perspectives and selection of information. Evangelists submit accounts of different lengths. An example of this is found with the description of the Pharisees confronting Jesus about the disciples plucking ears of corn on the Sabbath (Mt. 12:1-8; Mk. 2:23-28; Lk. 6:1-5). Matthew submits the longer version, while Mark and Luke give a version of similar length. None of the accounts disagree, but distribute various degrees of information.⁶⁷

When one reads the Gospels, it quickly becomes apparent that each writer approaches the subject with a different perspective. Readers observe this the most in the differences between the Synoptic Gospels and John. Such differences are invaluable for giving a fuller picture of Jesus. Matthew's and Luke's description of the healing of the centurion's servant serves as a perfect model (Mt. 8:5-13; Lk. 7:1-10). The heart of the story parallels almost exactly, but in Matthew, the centurion approaches Jesus on his own, while in Luke, the centurion sends servants to speak to Jesus. Obviously, Matthew chose to abbreviate the description of the occasion and dispensed with the secondary pieces of information. Differences like these in the Gospels cannot be counted as discrepancies and inaccuracies.⁶⁸

Perhaps the most glaring examples for skeptics hold to discrepancies between the four Gospels is the existence of different versions of accounts or discourses. The beatitudes listed in Matthew and Luke are clearly different (Mt.5:3-12; Lk. 6:20-23). Matthew presents a longer version both have a different order. The beatitudes that match do not match perfectly and are variants of one another. Though appearing as a significant problem at first glance, one can resolve the issue by accepting that both evangelists used the same source or one collection of Jesus' beatitudes. Each evangelist, however, selected and arranged the material to emphasize a particular point.⁶⁹

The Australian scholar, Paul W. Barnett, comparing the Gospel accounts of the events of Jesus' ministry, has noted striking similarities. For instance, careful comparison of texts of Mark and John reveal that the two Gospels are not dependent upon each other. However, they both contain numerous events in common, including the feeding of the five thousand (Mk. 6:30-44; Jn. 6:1-14), the

⁶⁵ James D.G. Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus: The Impact of Scholarship on Our Understanding of How Christianity Began* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 1.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 4-6.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

anointing of Jesus (Mk. 14:3-9; Jn. 12:1-8), Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Mk. 11:1-10; Jn. 12:12-19), Jesus' arrest (Mk. 14:42-50; Jn. 18:1-11), Peter's denial of Jesus (Mk. 14:66-72; Jn. 18:15-18), the trial of Jesus before Pilate (Mk. 15:1-15; Jn. 18:28-40), the mocking and abuse of Jesus by the soldiers (Mk. 15:16-20; Jn. 19:1-4), Jesus' crucifixion at Golgotha (Mk. 15:21-32; Jn. 19:17-24), and Jesus' burial in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb (Mk. 15:42-47; Jn. 19:38-42).⁷⁰ Though Mark and John are two entirely different sources in reference to style and perspective, they agree with the events in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Gospels as sources for the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus present a unified testimony from differing perspectives. Examining the four Gospels in depth enables the reader to see not vast differences, but striking parallels. With four distinct perspectives presenting a unified testimony, the arguments and messages delivered by the Gospel have a much stronger foundation.

THE HISTORIANS AND THEIR SUBJECTS

The reliability of the sources for Tiberius and Jesus has been examined, but one important avenue has yet to be explored. How do the historians view their subjects? Do they view them negatively or positively? The attitudes of the historian, especially an ancient historian, affect how the historical figure is perceived for generations. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how Tiberius and Jesus were perceived by their historians.

For Tiberius, with one exception, the historians showed little kindness. Only Paterculus gives praise to the emperor. As a contemporary living under the shadow of Tiberius and producing his work before the more disastrous years of his reign, Paterculus, for the most part, must be discounted.⁷¹ Tacitus presents Tiberius in five stages of life. Under the reign of Augustus, Tiberius lived a blameless life and enjoyed a fine reputation. While Germanicus, Tiberius' heir and Drusus, Germanicus' brother, still lived, Tiberius was corrupt inwardly, but outwardly appear noble in character. While his mother still lived, Tiberius still possessed a degree of virtue, but this disappeared after her death. When Tiberius exiled himself to Capreae, Sejanus' dictatorship hid Tiberius' detestable qualities. After Sejanus' death, Tiberius revealed his true nature as a criminal exhibiting the lowest of morality.⁷²

Suetonius depicted Tiberius as a cruel tyrant who enjoyed causing suffering to those around him. Tiberius, according to Suetonius, possessed a sensitive nature that, when affronted, demanded satisfaction. One instance Suetonius recorded

⁷⁰ Paul W. Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History*, ed. D.A. Carson, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1997), 104-5. An even closer study of the feeding of the five thousand reveals a strong agreement in the two Gospels. Although Mark and John share little vocabulary and the literary settings are different, they state similar facts that Jesus used five loaves and two fishes to feed five thousand men with their families in the springtime as they sat on green grass and had twelve baskets of additional food left over.

⁷¹ Shotter, *Tiberius Caesar*, 82.

⁷² Tacitus, *Annals*, 1.8, 227.

occurred when a fisherman approached the emperor to offer him a gift of mullet. Furious that the man approached him unexpectedly, Tiberius proceeded to punish the fisherman by scrubbing his face in the fish. The final and tragic testimony of Tiberius' life occurred at his death. When the news of his demise reached the Roman people, they rejoiced.⁷³

Cassius Dio also described Tiberius in unflattering terms, but he attempted to explain his behavior. The earlier Tiberius was decent in character, but the death of Germanicus became a pivotal moment in his life. Without the rival bidding his chance, Tiberius believed that he could do as he pleased. From then on, Tiberius transformed himself into a cruel tyrant.⁷⁴ Without question, the historians presented some positive aspects of Tiberius' reign and personality, but their concluding remarks and their descriptions of the latter years of his reign, displayed an outright denouncing of the character of Tiberius.

The Gospels present a far different and quite positive description of the character and achievements of Jesus of Nazareth. As stated earlier, the Gospels deliver a unified testimony. Their testimony proclaims Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah, Son of God, and Risen Savior.

Matthew writes that Jesus said of Himself, "I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of Heaven."⁷⁵ In the Gospel of Mark, God the Father declares, "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased."⁷⁶ Luke testifies of Jesus, "for today in the in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."⁷⁷ Finally, in John, Thomas, the doubting disciple, upon seeing Jesus risen from the dead declares, "My Lord and my God!"⁷⁸

All four Gospels present far more than flattery and admiration. They declare Jesus to be God in the flesh and worthy of worship. There are no discrepancies. The Gospels agree. They announce the deity of Jesus. They declare that He is the Messiah. The Gospels describe His terrible death (Mt. 27:33-54; Lk. 24:33-46) as the means of salvation for mankind. Jesus was the motive for their work. The message concerning His life and His actions was something that they were compelled to share.

CONCLUSION

The comparison between the sources that chronicle the life of Tiberius Caesar and those that detail the ministry and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth has revealed some startling results. The historians of Tiberius range from a contemporary setting to two hundred years after his lifetime. Tiberius had one notable and

⁷³ Suetonius, *The Life of Tiberius*, 57-75.

⁷⁴ Dio, *Roman History*, 57, 165.

⁷⁵ Mt. 26:64b (New American Standard Bible).

⁷⁶ Mk. 1:1 (NASB).

⁷⁷ Lk. 2:11 (NASB).

⁷⁸ Jn. 20:28 (NASB).

outstanding historian; Tacitus. Two others, Suetonius and Dio Cassius, left much to be desired, but did provide some useful information. The fourth chronicler named Vellius Paterculus did not even compose a history, but an overly positive declaration of admiration. Besides the testimony of Tacitus, inaccuracies and inconsistencies abounded among the sources. Yet, for the exception of Paterculus, they agreed in their disgust of the second emperor of the Roman Empire.

The four Gospels of the New Testament fare much better under intense scrutiny. They were written within one generation of Jesus' ministry. They demonstrate an overall agreement between one another. The Gospels reveal a strong attention to detail and a concern for accuracy. The narratives of Jesus were written by evangelists who had the agenda, not of self-preservation or the wish to despoil the reputations of certain individuals, but to correctly present the actions and words of the Master they followed.

Comparing the sources behind these two historical personalities reveals the strength of the accuracy of the four canonical Gospels. As documents for the historical portrayal of Jesus of Nazareth, the Gospels demonstrate a consistent faithfulness. Critics have found a modern lucrative enterprise in picking apart the Gospels, but they have been less vocal in placing the same strenuous examinations on other ancient sources. Through comparison of the Gospels with other ancient historical documents, one must admit that few can measure up to the standard of correctness seen within the passages of these New Testament narratives.

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