



# E-Worship 4:23

*An online resource for officers and worship leaders in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*

*"A time is coming...when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks." - John 4:23*

## The Bible as History

*"We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty."*

*- 2 Peter 1:16*

**As Christians**, we are to have faith in God, but it is not a mindless faith. The Christ we serve is a historical Christ, who lived and breathed and walked among us, leaving his mark in history. Our faith does not depend on someone's 'opinion' or 'vision' of God, but rather on actual events lived in real time. In fact, the apostle Paul himself wrote that if Christ did not resurrect from the dead, then we are to be the most pitied (1 Cor. 15:12-19). But instead Paul confirms that more than 500 saw Christ alive after the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3-8). All of the writers of the New Testament were literally willing to stake their lives on that fact alone. And all the opponents of Christianity had to do to stop them was to produce Christ's corpse, which they were never able to do. For lack of evidence against Christianity, all they could do was try to torture and kill Christ out of the Christians. Ironically, for all their efforts, the torturers themselves eventually died, but Christ, and Christianity, lived on.

In fact, the existence of Christ was not disputed by any writers in the first centuries following Christ's death. (This has only been a recent 19th-20th century phenomenon). Did you know that, outside of the nine authors who composed the New Testament, we have 31 others, including eight non-Christian writers and four heretics, who wrote confirming the reality of Jesus' life and death, all within the first 150 years after His resurrection? This statistic shouldn't be taken lightly, for there is no other historical figure in the same time period with this much recognition. Even Tiberius Caesar, who was reigning at the time of Christ's crucifixion, is only mentioned by ten authors

in total within the same 150 year period (one of which was Luke's own gospel – Luke 3:1)!

We often forget that the New Testament we have today had to be compiled out of the multitude of writings about Christ that were circulating among Christians in the first few centuries after He lived. So how did our 'canon' of scriptures come to be, and how do we know we can trust them? Although the New Testament canon was not officially solidified until the Council of Hippo in 390 AD, all 27 books of the New Testament were first mentioned together as trustworthy scripture by Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria in a letter to all his churches in 367 AD. Prior to that most of the N. T. books were quoted as scripture in letters written by the earliest of Christian writers, including Ignatius (the Bishop of Antioch who was martyred in AD108), Polycarp (who was a disciple of the apostle John), Justin Martyr (a learned Greek philosopher who converted to Christianity in AD130, Irenaeus (a disciple of Polycarp who was born in AD120), Clement of Alexandria (theologian born AD150), Tertullian of Carthage (born AD155), and Origen (theologian born AD185 who cites from all 27 books of the N.T. in his writings).

Besides that, the New Testament writers themselves sometimes cite each other: Matthew and Luke quote extensively from Mark; Paul cites Luke's gospel as Scripture in 1 Timothy 5:18 (see Luke 10:7), and the apostle Peter equates Paul's letters with Scripture in 2 Peter 3:16.

So what criteria determined the canon of the New Testament at the Council of Hippo? 1) The writings had to have been written in the first century AD, closest to the time period when the events actually occurred. 2) All the accepted N. T. books had to be written by apostles who had been eye witnesses to the events, or by close associates of them. 3) The writing in consideration

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could not contradict the scriptures of the Old Testament. 4) The writing had to already be known and universally accepted by the Christian church at large as divinely-inspired scripture. 5) The writing had to confirm the apostolic witness to the historical Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and raised from the dead, and divinely exalted as Lord over all, with no hint of teachings of Gnosticism, Marcionism, Arianism, docetism, or the anti-Semitism that had crept into some branches of the Church over time.\*

It's so easy for people to dismiss the validity of Scripture without bothering to check out the historical evidence for it, often to avoid the repercussions should they realize the truth of the gospel's message. But it was Jesus who said that the first commandment is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your **mind**" (Matthew 22:37). We can know that if something is true, the evidence will be there to support it. We have no need to apologize for the gospel. It is a rock we can stand on intellectually, knowing that Christ purposely left us a mountain of evidence: All we need do is look for it.

\* **Gnosticism** taught that all matter was evil, and that a holy God would have nothing to do with it. So they believed that God created a being named Sophia, who gave birth to Demiurge (Jehovah) who then created the world. They taught that Christ's spirit did not enter into His body until His baptism by John the Baptist, and that it left again at His arrest, and that His role was not to provide salvation, but to reveal the knowledge of the Supreme God. Upon death those who had a seed of divinity implanted in them by Sophia would be reunited as spirits with the Supreme God.

**Marcionism** was founded by Marcion (born AD85), who taught that the Old Testament God and the New Testament God were different beings, the former being evil (the devil) and the latter good. Jesus came as a spirit to reveal this latter God to us, but not in the flesh, because all matter is evil. Marcion accepted the gospel of Luke and Paul's letters as scripture, but only after he removed all Old Testament references from them. His church eventually died out, primarily because he required all his members to be celibate!

**Arianism** began with Arius (AD250—336) who taught that Jesus was a lesser god created by God the Father, who in turn helped to create the Holy Spirit.

**Docetism** teaches that Jesus' appearance "in the flesh" was an illusion, and that He was really only in spirit form all along. As a spirit, He cannot die, so His death on the cross was also an illusion. This teaching began around 70 AD and lasted for about 100 years.

## Prominent Christians who wrote about Christ

- 1) **Clement I** (birthdate unknown, died AD110) - 3rd or 4th bishop of Rome after the apostle Peter. His letter to the Corinthian church almost made it into the New Testament Canon, but because he was not an original eyewitness to the events of Christ, it was ultimately rejected. His letter cites a number of Old Testament verses, and makes reference to several of the Pauline epistles, as well as Acts, James and 1 Peter.
- 2) **Papias** (c. AD69 - 155) was a disciple of John the Apostle and the Bishop of Hierapolis (now the city of Pamukkale, in Turkey). In his "*Interpretations of the Sayings of the Lord*" he affirms how carefully he recorded the teachings of the disciples Andrew, Peter, John, Phillip, Thomas, Matthew and James (Jesus' brother) to ensure their accuracy and truth. He also affirms that Mark precisely recorded his gospel as Peter told it to him, being careful not to record anything fictitious in his account.
- 3) **Polycarp** (c. AD70—156) was also a disciple of the apostle John and a friend of Papias. His letter to the Philippians has survived to us, and in it he quotes from almost every book of the New Testament canon. Polycarp died a martyr by being stabbed by the Romans after burning him at the stake failed to kill him.
- 4) **Ignatius of Antioch** (c. AD35 - 108) was yet another student of John the Apostle whose seven letters have been preserved to us, letters he wrote en route to Rome where he was to be thrown into the Colosseum and eaten by lions. His tomb is located at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. In his letters he affirms sixteen times that Jesus is the divine God, invisible, timeless, who became fully human in the flesh through a virgin birth, and who suffered and died on the cross for us.
- 5) **Justin Martyr** (c. AD100 - 165) was a learned Greek Philosopher whose dramatic conversion to Christianity in 130 AD led him to become one of the most influential Christian teachers in the 2nd century, and an eloquent defender of the Christian faith to its opponents. Three of his treatises survive today, through which he intelligently argues that Jesus (Logos) is the God of the Old Testament. In writing to the Emperor Antoninus Pius Justin refers to an Imperial report made by Pontius Pilate detailing not only the crucifixion of Christ but some of Christ's miracles as well. He writes to the Emperor "That these things happened you may learn from the 'Acts' which were recorded under Pontius Pilate." Justin was beheaded in AD165.



## Non-Christian Testimony to the Historicity of Christ.

**1. Flavius Josephus** was a famed Jewish historian and a Pharisee, born in AD37. He reports in his Antiquities *"Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call Him a man, for He was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to Him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was the Christ, and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned Him to the cross, those that loved Him at the first did not forsake Him, for He appeared to them alive again in the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning Him."* Josephus also records the death of Jesus' brother James, who is the author of the biblical epistle of that name, by stoning.

**2. Suetonius** was a Roman historian who wrote in AD120 *"As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus (Christ), he (Claudius) expelled them from Rome."*

**3. Pliny the Younger**, as Governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, wrote to the emperor Trajan in AD112 asking him how he should treat the Christians, writing that *"they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verse a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves to a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, adultery, never to falsify their word, not to deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up."*

**4. Cornelius Tacitus**, a Roman historian born in AD55, wrote in his Annals about the fire of 64AD that destroyed three-quarters of Rome and was started by the Emperor Nero himself. To divert the accusation against him (Nero), Tacitus writes, *"Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular."*

**5. Lucian of Samosata**, a Greek philosopher, wrote about Christians in the second century by saying *"The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day -- the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account... You see, these misguided creatures started with the general conviction that they are immortal for all time, which explains the contempt of death and voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them; and that it was impressed them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws. All this they take quite on faith, with the result that they despise all worldly goods alike, regarding them merely as common property."*

## Other early writers to investigate...

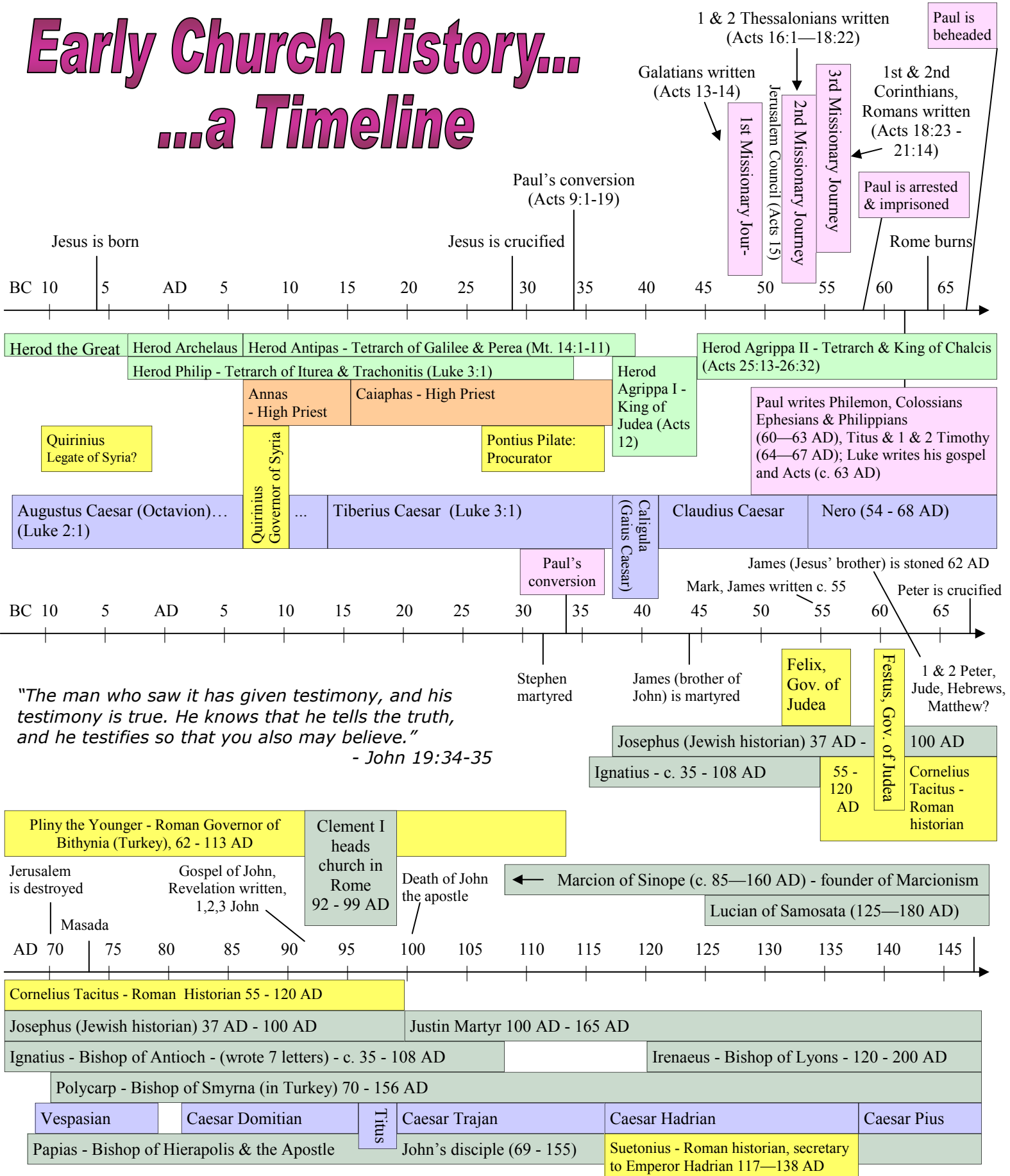
- Irenaeus of Lyons, a disciple of Polycarp and student at one of Justin Martyr's schools (AD125—202)
- The Shepherd of Hermas, an allegorical writing of the 2nd century that was considered on par with scripture by some Christians of the time period
- Tertullian of Carthage, a jurist-theologian who defended Christianity before the Roman authorities in Africa, wrote his account in AD197
- Clement of Alexandria (AD150—211) was a learned Greek Christian and theologian who headed the Catechetical School of Alexandria
- Origen (AD185—254) was an Egyptian student of Clement (above) who later headed the School of Alexandria. He died a martyr after being tortured during a persecution in Caesarea Maritima.
- Eusebius (AD260—339), a Palestinian-born theologian who became the Bishop of Caesarea, is called "the Father of Church History" due to his efforts to preserve the history of the early Christian church in his writings.
- Jerome (AD347—420) was a Christian apologist who became best known for translating the Bible into Latin: The Latin Vulgate became the primary Bible text used by the Christian church until King James published his English translation in 1611.
- Augustine of Hippo (AD354—430) was born in North Africa to a Christian mother and pagan father. After seeking truth through several philosophical ideologies, his dramatic conversion to Christianity at the age of 31 led him to become one of Christianity's forefathers by solidifying in writing many of the doctrinal anchors of the Christian church.

## For further study, visit

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## Early Church History... ...a Timeline



*"The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe."*  
- John 19:34-35