

Notes on Pantera

Origen, *Against Celsus* (response to “On the True Doctrine”) c. 170 CE

Let us imagine what a Jew—let alone a philosopher—might put to Jesus: ‘Is it not true, good sir, that you fabricated the story of your birth from a virgin to quiet rumors about the true and unsavory circumstances of your origins? Is it not the case that far from being born in royal David’s city of Bethlehem, you were born in a poor country town, and of a woman who earned her living by spinning? Is it not the case that when her deceit was discovered, to wit, that she was pregnant by a Roman soldier named Panthera she was driven away by her husband—the carpenter—and convicted of adultery? Indeed, is it not so that in her disgrace, wandering far from home, she gave birth to a male child in silence and humiliation? What more?’ (*Contra Celsum* 1.32)

Common view: A slanderous Jewish pun, or malapropism, on the Greek word *parthenos*/virgin

In our *earliest texts* referring to Jesus as “Yeshua ben Pantera”—*Jesus son of Pantera*—there was *no pejorative connotation* whatsoever. They are set in the streets of Sepphoris in the late first century—just four miles NW of Nazareth.

1. Rabbi Eleazar ben Dama, who was bitten by a snake. A man named Jacob of Sikhnaya (or Sikhnin) came to heal him “in the name of Yeshua ben Pantera.” Rabbi Ishmael, who heads the Pharisees, objected, since Jesus, or Yeshua, was seen as a heretic by the rabbis. Before Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Eleazar ben Dama could finish their debate over the permissibility of such a prayer, Ben Dama died. Rabbi Ishmael attributed the death to giving any credence to a figure like Jesus who had “broken through the fence” of the Torah.

2. Rabbi Eliezar, one of the most prominent rabbis of the late first century, was walking on the streets of Sepphoris and met a certain Jacob of Sikhnin. Jacob told him about a teaching of a certain Yeshua ben Panteri—clearly Jesus of Nazareth—as the later version in the Babylonian Talmud makes clear. This teaching from Jesus involved a technical question of Jewish Law: What was to be done with money brought to the house of God that had been earned by a male or female prostitute? Jesus had said it should be received, but then used to build toilets and bath houses, pointing out “from filth it came and to filth it should go,” quoting Micah 1:7. The answer pleased Eliezar very much, and for that Eliezar was arrested on suspicion of sympathizing with heretics, since the teachings of Jesus, however wise or appealing, were *anathema* to the rabbis at that time.

Epiphanius, an early fourth-century Christian writer, claims the name is from Joseph’s side of the family.

John of Damascus, a sixth-century AD church father, introduces the name into the genealogy of Mary, stating that she was the daughter of Joachim, who was the son of a certain Bar Panther, who was the son of Levi, presumably surnamed Pantera.

The sixth-century AD Jewish Christian author of the *Teachings of Jacob* quotes a Jewish teacher from Tiberius who claims to know the genealogy of Mary. He writes she is “the daughter of Joakim, and her mother was Anna. Now Joakim is son of Panther, and Panther was brother of Melchi, as the tradition of us Jews in Tiberias has it, of the seed of Nathan, the son of David, of the seed of Judah.

We also know of a Jewish tomb in Jerusalem with a Greek ossuary inscription that reads:

[Iō]sepou pentherou [Dr]osou. This translates either as:
Of Joseph Panthera...of Drosus or as: *Of Joseph [who is] son of Panthera...of Drusus.*

Outside Israel the name Pantera is relatively common as a Roman *cognomen* or surname, with several examples referring to Roman soldiers. One in particular caught my attention—a tombstone of a first-century Roman soldier named Pantera near the Roman camp at Bingerbrück on the Rhine River in Germany. Here is the Latin with English translation:

Tib. Iul. Abdes. Pantera.	Tiberius Julius Abdes Pantera
Sidonia. Ann. LXII.	of Sidon, aged 62
Stipen. XXXX. Miles. Exs.	A soldier of 40 years' service,
Coh. I. sagittariorum.	of the 1 st cohort of archers,
h. s. e.	lies here

We read that Jesus traveled to Sidon, had connections there, healed people, and had crowds of followers who came from Sidon down to the Galilee to hear him preach and to be healed (Luke 6:17). The gospel of Mark, our earliest source, even reports a scene in which Jesus takes a trip from the Sea of Galilee to the region around Tyre and Sidon. Mark writes that he “entered a house and would not have anyone know it; yet he could not be hid” (Mark 7:24-30). This reference to a specific house in the area is only in Mark, our earliest gospel.

Jesus also declared that the region of Tyre and Sidon, in contrast to Jewish cities of his own homeland along the Sea of Galilee that were not as hospitable to him, would fare better on the coming Day of Judgment (Luke 10:13). He once reminded his townspeople from Nazareth—who found him too familiar to be anyone important—that in the days of Elijah only one woman was provided for by God supernaturally—a widow from Sidon (Luke 5:25-30).

It appears that Pantera’s cohort of archers was transferred in the year AD 6 from Syria to Dalmatia (Croatia today), and then to the Rhine River in the year AD 9. If Jesus was born in 5 BC, he would have been ten years old when this soldier was shipped off to Europe. Pantera was a soldier in an auxiliary cohort who enlisted at age twenty-two as a provincial or foreigner. At any rate, he would have obtained his citizenship after twenty-five years of military service—indicated by his acquiring the *praenomen* and *nomen*, Tiberius Julius, after the emperor Tiberius (AD 14-37). Subsequently, he reenlisted for another twenty-five years, cut short by his death at age sixty-two. This puts his forty years of military service squarely in the lifetime of Mary (b. 10 BC, d. AD 48). This juxtaposition of this young Roman soldier with Mary’s general time and place seemed more than a bit uncanny.

27 BC Birth of Pantera

19 BC Birth of Mary

5 BC Birth of Jesus (Pantera is 22 and Mary is 14)

6 AD Pantera is 32 (Cohort moved to Dalmatia)

9 AD Pantera is 35 (Cohort moved to Rhine)

21 AD Pantera is 47 (25-years-service, citizenship; enlists for 25 more years)

36 AD Pantera is 62 (Dies on the Rhine with 15 more years of service; Mary is 54)

48 AD Traditional date of Mary's death at age 66