

Jesus: Fact or Fiction?

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Did Jesus exist? As the song says, 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.' But, in today's world of secular scepticism, saying 'The Bible says...' is no longer considered sufficient evidence. The general feeling is that Biblical evidence for the existence of Jesus is biased, because it was written by committed believers. But we do not only have the Bible and other Christian sources. There is also plenty of evidence from Greek, Roman and Jewish sources.

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Secular Witnesses on The Existence of Jesus

Each of the following examples is accepted by secular historians and tells us something about the historical Jesus. They can be regarded as 'hostile witnesses' to Christ. Hostile witnesses are important because, while they may misunderstand or make harsh statements about the church, they are those sources least likely to knowingly endorse fabrications.

Roman: Pliny the Younger (61 - 113 AD)

Pliny was a Roman civilian, an author, a lawyer and magistrate of Ancient Rome. He corresponded with many significant figures in the Roman world, and many of his letters have survived. While serving as an imperial magistrate, he wrote to Emperor Trajan about the trial and punishment of Christians. In the letter, he connects the Christians to their founder, Christ, and describes their worship.

'They had been accustomed to meet before daybreak and to recite a hymn among themselves to Christ, as though he were a god, and that so far from binding themselves by oath to commit any crime, their oath was to abstain from theft, robbery, adultery, and from breach of faith, and not to deny trust money placed in their keeping when called upon to deliver it. When this ceremony was concluded, it had been their custom to depart and meet again to take food, but it was of no special character and quite harmless...'¹

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Pliny the Younger provides ten or more historical facts relevant to Christ and the early church. But most importantly, he speaks of Christ and how the Christians worshipped Him as God.

Roman: Cornelius Tacitus (c.56 - 120 AD)

Tacitus was a Roman senator, orator, ethnographer and one of the best Roman historians. His last major work includes a biography of Emperor Nero. During the 64AD fire of Rome, Nero diverted blame from himself to the church. Tacitus records for us those events.

'Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself...'²

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Not only does Tacitus speak of Christ as an historical figure and confirm He founded the movement of Christians, he also verifies that Christ was executed by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea during the reign of Tiberius, exactly as the Bible says.

Greek: Lucian of Samosata (c.125 - 180s AD)

Lucian was a Greek Syrian satirist of the 2nd Century. In his account of the life of a cynic philosopher, Proteus Peregrinus, he gives us one of the earliest records of Christianity written by a pagan. In speaking of how Peregrinus was welcomed into the Christian community, he says, 'they ... set him down as a protector, next after that other, to be sure, whom they still worship, the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced this new cult into the world.'³

Although Christ here is referred to only as 'that other', the details correlate with Jesus of Nazareth, crucified in Palestine and founder of the Church.

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Lucian goes on to describe the remarkable charity of the church community: how they looked after those arrested for their faith, shared everything in common, and willingly gave themselves up to imprisonment. 'The poor wretches have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence of which they despise death and even willingly give themselves into custody; most of them. Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another...'³

This brief glimpse of teaching in the early church (and that it is credited right back to Jesus) is,

again, totally consistent with Scripture.

Jewish: Flavius Josephus (c. 37 - 100AD)

Josephus served as a Jewish military commander in Galilee in the early days of the revolt against Rome. However, after he became a prisoner of war, he gained favour with his conqueror, Vespasian, who went on to become emperor of Rome. Josephus took the name Flavius, Vespasian's family name, but, though popular in Rome, he was viewed by Jews as a traitor. Like the Roman and Greek sources, he can be regarded as a hostile witness to Christ.

Josephus writes about the death of James, also known as 'James the Just' - Jesus' brother. 'Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he [Ananus] assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others ...'⁴

Here, Josephus uses Jesus, the more famous brother, to describe James. But the description of Jesus is very brief. This is because there is a more detailed passage about Jesus earlier in Josephus' writing.

'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 amongst 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 the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.'⁵

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This passage, known as the Testimonium Flavianum, is believed to have suffered from some interpolations. That means phrases may have been added by well-meaning Christian scribes. While the overall content is believed by scholars to be authentic, the phrases they believe may have been tinkered with are, 'if it be lawful to call him a man', and some of the lines about Jesus' resurrection appearances.

However, even if we concede these objections, and take a reduced or 'restored' version of the Testimonium Flavianum, Josephus still gives us Jesus as an historical figure, a wise man, a worker of startling deeds, and a teacher of truth, condemned by leading Jews. He also connects Jesus with the name Christ and with founding the "tribe" of Christians. Some scholars would even allow that he provides evidence for divinely-foretold, third day resurrection appearances.

If Jesus Did Exist?

It is trendy these days to question or deny the historical Jesus. The Internet has made it possible for those with no significant evidence to once more put forward ideas long ago rejected in academic circles. However, even in this brief look at recorded history, we can see there is no reason to doubt that Jesus really existed - that He lived in Palestine at the time the Bible claims and that He died at the hands of Pontius Pilate. History also teaches us that there is no reason to doubt that His

disciples believed they saw Him risen, and that this fact gave rise to the Christian Church.

For anyone who appreciates history, there is no question about the historical Jesus. As agnostic atheist, Bart Ehrman says, 'Jesus did exist, as virtually every scholar of antiquity, of biblical studies, of classics, and of Christian origins ... in the Western world agrees'.⁶

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The real question is: knowing He did exist, what do we do with this knowledge? How should I respond to Jesus' life and teaching? How should I respond to His claim to be God? And how should I respond to the witness of His disciples, who say that, though He was crucified and dead, on the third day they saw Him alive again?

(This article is a companion to [Jesus, Dead or Alive.](#))

Credit: This article owes a debt to the scholarship of Dr. Gary R. Habermas.

¹Pliny the Younger, Letters, book 10, letter 96, translated by J.B.Firth, 1900

²Tacitus, Annals, translated by J. Jackson, 1925

³Lucian, Passing of Peregrinus, translated by A.M. Harmon, 1936

⁴Flavius Josephus, The Antiquities of the Jews, Book XX, translated by William Whiston, 1895

⁵Flavius Josephus, The Antiquities of the Jews, Book XVIII, translated by William Whiston, 1895

⁶Ehrman, Bart D. – Did Jesus Exist?: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth, 2012