

JESUS AND OTHER NEW TESTAMENT PERSONS IN NON-CHRISTIAN SOURCES

Though Jesus dominates the pages of the New Testament there is little *direct* hard archaeological data mentioning His name or ministry. This has led some critical scholars in the past to dismiss Him as a historical figure. Still others, such as the English logician and philosopher Bertrand Russell in his *Why I Am Not a Christian*, believe that Jesus lived but did not accomplish all the things mentioned about Him in the Gospels. Russell adds that Christ was not the best and wisest of all men, but would grant Him a very high degree of moral goodness.

For the most part, Russell's opinion characterizes the vast majority of opinions concerning the historicity of Christ. Despite these attempts, arguments denying the existence of Jesus of Nazareth have fallen out of favor due to the growing body of documentary evidence from Jewish and Greco-Roman sources that speak of Jesus and the events surrounding His life and ministry. From these early non-Christian sources (Flavius Josephus, the Babylonian Talmud, Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, Mara Bar-Serapion, Suetonius, Thallus, Lucian, Phlegon, and Celsus) we may reconstruct the salient features of the life of Christ without appealing to the New Testament. These features include the following:

1. Jesus lived during the reign of Tiberius Caesar.
2. He lived a virtuous life.
3. He was a wonder-worker.
4. He had a brother named James.
5. He was claimed to be the Messiah.
6. He was crucified under Pontius Pilate.
7. He was crucified on the eve of Passover.

8. Darkness and an earthquake occurred when He died.
9. His disciples believed He rose from the dead.
10. His disciples were willing to die for their belief.
11. Christianity spread as far as Rome.
12. Christian disciples denied the Roman gods and worshipped Jesus as God.

If Jesus was an actual figure of history, we would expect some evidence to be left behind by early historians and chroniclers. Indeed, this is exactly what scholars have discovered. From these discoveries emerge over 30 New Testament individuals (including Jesus) mentioned in Scripture who have been corroborated as historical figures by non-Christian sources, some of which, naturally, have more credibility than others.

Documentary References to Jesus

Following is a survey of the more prominent documentary references to Christ.

Titus Flavius Josephus

The first-century AD Jewish historian was educated in law and history. After surrendering to Vespasian's Roman army in AD 70 at Jotapata, Josephus was quickly employed by the Roman government to be the spokesman and translator for Emperor Titus. In the early 90s, Josephus wrote his *Antiquities of the Jews*, which contain several statements about Christ, including a passage describing the judicial session convened by "Annas" where James "the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ" was charged before the Sanhedrin "and handed over to be stoned to death."¹ Josephus adds another reference to Christ, known as the "Testimonium Flavianum," when he writes,

About this time arose Jesus, a wise man (if indeed it be right to call him a man). For he was a doer of marvelous deeds, and a teacher of men who gladly receive the truth. He drew to himself many persons, both of the Jews and also the Gentiles. (He was the Christ.) And when Pilate, upon the indictment of leading men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him at the first did not cease to do so (for he appeared to them alive on the third day—the godly prophets having foretold these and ten thousand other things about him). And even to this day the race of Christians, who are named from him, has not died out.²

It is important to note that the genuineness of Josephus's words has been challenged by some, since it would be doubtful that a non-Christian Jew would write about Jesus in this manner.* Some have suggested the passage as it stands above contains interpolations by later Christian writers. It is argued that descriptions such as "if indeed it be right to call him a man," "he was the Christ," and "for he appeared to them alive on the third

* See Origen's *Contra Celsum*, 1:47, which tells us that Josephus did not believe Jesus to be the Messiah.

day—the godly prophets having foretold these and ten thousand other things about him” are uncharacteristic of Josephus.

Analysis of the passage has confirmed the core historical nature of the Testimonium, though some scholars still believe there has been a slight degree of tampering. After an examination of the text by Josephan scholars such as Steven Mason and Christopher Price,³ and by historical apologist Gary Habermas,⁴ there emerge several reasons why the genuineness of the passage can be maintained:

1. There is no precedent for Christian copyists fabricating whole stories.
2. An examination of the Syriac, Arabic, and Greek, and the texts of Ambrose and Jerome, affirm the passage as possessing an authentic core. According to Schlomo Pines, the tenth-century AD Arabic text titled *Kitab al-Unwan* contains the core passage without the disputed phrases.⁵
3. There is no textual evidence against Josephan authorship of the passage since it is written in the style of Josephus.
4. Josephus makes no connection between John the Baptist (also mentioned in *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18) and Jesus, an association Christian interpolators would certainly do.
5. Even if the disputed phrases identified above were removed from the text, there would still remain a core historical passage identifying Jesus that is supported by most scholars.⁶
6. The passage fits the context both historically and grammatically.
7. The mention of Jesus in *Antiquities of the Jews*, 20 in relation to James seems to presuppose an earlier mention of Jesus, which one would assume to be the Testimonium in *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.

Distinguished New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce said of the text, “There is nothing to say against the passage on the ground of textual criticism; the manuscript evidence is unanimous and ample as it is for anything in Josephus.”⁷

The Testimonium Flavianum is a valuable witness to Christ’s life, death, and remarkable influence. It clearly declares, despite the Christian interpolations, that Jesus was known to be wise and of good moral conduct (virtuous); that He had Jewish and Gentile disciples, that Pilate condemned Him to be crucified, and that His disciples reported that Jesus had risen three days later, and that this was something the prophets had foretold.

The Babylonian Talmud

In addition to the Jewish writers of the New Testament and Josephus, the Talmud is another early Jewish, but non-Christian, witness to Jesus. Compiled between AD 70 and 200 during what some call the *Tannaitic Period* (from *Tannaim*, the scribal group responsible for transmitting the Scripture at the time), the Talmud mentions Jesus in an

early tractate (*Sanhedrin* 43a). It declares that “Jesus was hanged on Passover Eve” and “he [Jesus] practiced sorcery and led Israel astray and enticed them into apostasy.” Also, it asserts, “As nothing was brought forward in his defence, he was hanged....” It continues in the same tractate that “Jesus... was near to the kingship” (probably a reference to His descent from David) and early rabbis taught that “Jesus had five disciples....”

Some rabbis have attempted to argue against the historical features in this tractate as referring to the Jesus of the New Testament, claiming that the compilers of the Talmud were simply reacting to the much earlier Gospel portrayals of Jesus as receiving an unfair trial, and the tractate has actually nothing to do with Jesus’ historicity.⁸ According to these critics, many of the features do not line up with the biblical record, such as Jesus being “hanged” rather than crucified. However, these arguments seem unconvincing for several reasons.

First, Jesus is attested in at least nine other historical documents besides the Gospels, and therefore, independent historical corroboration exists that Jesus was indeed historical.

Second, if the descriptions of Jesus were not historical, the Talmud could have simply denied the historical nature of the “unfair trial.” But such a denial is absent from the Talmudic text.

Third, Habermas explains that “hanged” is used of Christ’s crucifixion (Galatians 3:13, *kremamenos*) and is the same root term applied to the two malefactors crucified with Jesus (Luke 23:39, *kremasthenton*).⁹ Though *stauros* is the more common word used for crucifixion (Matthew 27:31), *kremamenos* (hanged) is an adequate term for the same manner of death.¹⁰

Though other references to Jesus in the Talmud are of much later origin and of questionable historical value, the mentioning of Jesus in this early tractate of the Talmud by those who opposed His ministry offers corroboration of the biblical testimony.

Cornelius Tacitus

A Roman historian, Tacitus (c. AD 56–117) wrote concerning the affairs of several Roman emperors in his *Annals of Imperial Rome* (AD 108). He is best known for his record of how Emperor Nero responded to Christians after the great fire in Rome—specifically, how Nero attempted to extricate himself from a report that he was responsible for the fire. Some of his entries record events involving Christians, including Christ Himself. He writes of this event in the *Annals*, 15.44:

To suppress this rumour, Nero fabricated scapegoats—and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians (as they were popularly called). Their originator, Christ, had been executed in Tiberius’ reign by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. But in spite of this temporary setback the deadly superstition had broken out afresh, not only in Judea (where the mischief had started) but even in Rome. All degraded and shameful practices collect and flourish in Rome. First, Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large

numbers of others were condemned—not so much for incendiarism [that is, arson] as for their anti-social tendencies. Their deaths were made farcical. Dressed in wild animal skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight. Nero provided his gardens for the spectacle, and exhibited displays in the circus, at which he mingled with the crowd—or stood in a chariot, dressed as a charioteer. Despite their guilt as Christians, and the ruthless punishment it deserved, the victims were pitied. For it was felt that they were being sacrificed to one man's brutality rather than to the national interest.¹¹

In addition to providing the rich body of information that confirms the life of Christ, as well as His death at the hand of Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius, Tacitus apparently possessed knowledge of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 by the Romans. According to Habermas, this information was originally penned in Tacitus's *Histories* but, having unfortunately been mostly lost, is now found in the records of Sulpicius Severus (*Chronicles* 2:30.6).¹²

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus

As the leading secretary of Emperor Hadrian (AD 117–138), the Roman historian known commonly as Suetonius wrote two brief statements referencing Christ and Christians. First, “Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at instigation of *Chrestus*, he [Emperor Claudius] expelled them from the city.”¹³ This historical nugget is consistent with Acts 18:2, where we are told that Priscilla and Aquila were among those expelled from Rome by Claudius.* In addition, Suetonius refers to Nero's persecution of Christians: “Punishments were also inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief.”¹⁴

From these statements we understand that there was an acceptance of the existence of a man named *Chrestus* (Christ) in the first century; that some Jews caused disturbances related to Christ (severe enough for Claudius to expel every Jew from Rome in AD 49); that Christianity was unique (new); and that Christians were persecuted (see Acts 26:9–11).

Pliny the Younger (Gaius Plinius Secundus)

Pliny was an imperial legate in the Roman province of Bithynia (in Asia Minor at the southwest corner of the Black Sea). One of his letters (c. AD 112) to Emperor Trajan describes the economic and social problems involving Christians, along with some of their unique worship practices. In *Letters*, 10:96, Pliny writes,

They [Christians] were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day

* Suetonius, “Claudius,” 25:4, in *The Twelve Caesars*, tr. Robert Graves (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1957). *Chrestus* is an alternative spelling of *Christ*; Habermas agrees and views it as the same Latinized spelling that Tacitus uses. H. Wayne House sees *Chrestus* as a Latin variant of the Greek *Christos*.

before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to do any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.

We learn from Pliny's passage that Christianity had reached Bithynia, that Christians regularly met together, that worship was offered to Christ in recognition of His deity, and that the Christians were bound to a high moral code and regularly partook of a common meal. Later in Pliny's letter we learn there was a rapid increase in the Christian population in Bithynia and Pontus (the province to the east); this growth threatened the pagan temples, which were mostly going unpatronized, and those who profited from the sale of pagan religious images; and that genuine Christians could not be made to renounce their faith even under the penalty of death.

Emperor Trajan's reply to Pliny asserted that "no search should be made" for Christians, but when guilty Christians are discovered they are to be punished for not worshipping the Roman gods. In support of the historical events found in these letters, the early Church Father Tertullian mentions the interaction between Pliny and Trajan, recounting essentially the same information found in Pliny's letters.¹⁵ Those who repented of their Christianity by worshipping Roman gods might be pardoned and released. Only when Pliny has punished (executed and imprisoned) enough Christians does he write of the people's return to the pagan worship system in his province.

Further, we learn from fourth-century Christian historian Eusebius that Emperor Hadrian wrote to his representative in the province of Asia, Minicius Fundanus, allowing the punishment of Christians in a more temperate way.¹⁶

Mara Bar-Serapion

Sometime between the late first and early third century, the Syrian Mara Bar-Serapion writes to his son Serapion describing the senselessness of the Jewish plot to kill Jesus when he asserts, "What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise king? It was just after that their kingdom was abolished."¹⁷ From this text we learn that Jesus was considered by many to be the king of Israel, that He was killed by His own countrymen, and that the Jews were dispersed from their land.

Thallus, Phlegon, and Lucian

Thallus (*Histories*), Phlegon (*Chronicles*), and Lucian (*The Death of Pelegrine*) write of the various cosmic disturbances, earthquakes, and darkness and the crucifixion and Jesus' postresurrection appearances.

Though the works of Thallus (who wrote a history of the eastern Mediterranean world from the Trojan War to his own time—AD 52) are no longer extant, Julius Africanus (AD 221) preserves the words written in the third book of Thallus's *History*:

On the whole world there pressed a most fearful darkness; and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down. This darkness Thallus, in the third book of his *History* calls, as appears to me without reason, an eclipse of the sun.¹⁸

Both Julius Africanus (*Extant Writings*, 18) and Origen in his *Against Celsus* confirm Phlegon's record of Christ's death and resurrection in the latter's no longer extant *Chronicles*. Origen states of the resurrection,

Jesus, while alive, was of no assistance to himself, but that he arose after death and exhibited the marks of his punishment, and showed how his hands had been pierced by nails.¹⁹

Origen continues with his description of the cosmic disturbances at Christ's crucifixion when he reports, "And with regard to the eclipse in the time of Tiberius Caesar, in whose reign Jesus appears to have been crucified, and the great earthquakes which then took place, Phlegon too, I think, has written in the thirteenth or fourteenth book of his *Chronicles*."²⁰

Lucian of Samosata, a second-century AD Greek writer critical of Christianity wrote in *The Death of Peregrine*,

The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel writes, and was crucified on that account. . . . You see, these misguided creatures start 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 then it was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment 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.²¹

Toledoth Jesu

This late-fifth-century anti-Christian document contains an early Jewish tradition that describes thwarting of the disciples' attempt to move the body of Jesus. This document tells of the preemptive reburial of Jesus in a newly dug grave prior to the disciples stealing the body by an individual who later gave the body to the Jewish religious leaders. The common notion that Jesus' body was stolen was one of the earliest explanations of the resurrection (Matthew 28:11-15). Second-century apologist Justin Martyr (AD 150) and Tertullian (AD 200) confirm the fact that the Jewish leaders had sent special envoys of trained individuals to further the Toledoth Jesu theory even as far as Rome and surrounding territories.²²

The Acts of Pontius Pilate

Writing about AD 150, Justin Martyr refers to Christ in his *First Apology* and sources the facts surrounding His crucifixion to a now-lost government document known as the *Acts of Pontius Pilate*:

And the expression, “They pierced my hands and my feet,” was used in reference to the nails of the cross which were fixed in His hands and feet. And after He was crucified they cast lots upon His vesture, and they that crucified Him parted it among them. And that these things did happen, you can ascertain from the Acts of Pontius Pilate.²³

Later in the same work, Justin again mentions the *Acts of Pontius Pilate* as a source to confirm the miraculous signs foretold by the prophets and performed by Christ. He writes,

...and that it was predicted that our Christ should heal all diseases and raise the dead, hear what was said. There are these words: “At His coming the lame shall leap as an hart, and the tongue of the stammerer shall be clear speaking; the blind shall see, and the lepers shall be cleansed; and the dead shall rise, and walk about.” And that He did those things, you can learn from the Acts of Pontius Pilate.²⁴

It is important to note that Pilate’s records mentioned here are not to be confused with a later document that bears a similar name. Since there are no surviving manuscripts of this earlier, imperial document and it is not widely referenced, we would naturally be reserved in our use of this source.

Other Non-Christian References to New Testament Individuals

Other New Testament individuals besides Jesus are also mentioned in early non-Christian sources. (Some of these persons are discussed in more detail in the chapters that follow.) The following chart concludes this chapter by summarizing these sources, including those for Jesus discussed above and others mentioning Him.

New Testament Persons Cited in Ancient Non-Christian Sources		
Person	Scripture Reference	Source
Herod Agrippa I and II	Acts 12; 23:35 Acts 25:13-26; 26	Philo, Josephus Coin inscriptions Nabatean Inscription Beirut Museum Inscription
Ananias (high priest)	Acts 23:2; 24:1	Josephus
Annas (high priest)	Luke 3:2; Acts 4:6; John 18:13,24	Josephus
Herod Antipas	Matthew 14:1-6 Mark 6:14-22 Luke 3:1 Acts 4:27; 13:1	Josephus Coin inscriptions that read "Herod the Tetrarch"
Herod Archelaus	Matthew 2:22	Josephus
King Aretas IV (Damascus)	2 Corinthians 11:32	Josephus Madaba Map Inscription Coins with Aretas bust
Caesar Augustus (Octavius)	Luke 2:1	Priene Inscription announcing birthday Coin Inscriptions Funerary Inscription (<i>Res Gestae Divi Augusti</i>)
Bernice	Acts 25:13-15	Josephus Suetonius Beirut Museum Inscription
Caiaphas (high priest)		Josephus Ossuary inscription
Emperor Claudius	Acts 11:28; 18:2	Josephus Suetonius Tacitus Coin inscriptions
Drusilla	Acts 24:24	Josephus Suetonius
Erastus	Romans 16:13-23; 2 Timothy 4:20	Erastus Inscription at Corinth
Marcus Antonius Felix	Acts 23:24-26; 24; 25:14	Josephus Suetonius Tacitus

Person	Scripture Reference	Source
Porcius Festus	Acts 24:27; 25; 26:24,32	Josephus
Gallio	Acts 18:12-17	Gallio Inscription at Delphi Pliny the Younger Suetonius
Gamaliel	Acts 5:34; 22:3	Josephus Jewish Mishnah Talmud
King Herod (Judea)	Matthew 2:1-22; Luke 1:5	Josephus Tacitus Coin inscriptions Herod's tomb at the Herodium Latin wine jug inscription Herodian architecture (for example, Temple Mount, Masada, Machaerus, the Herodium, and so on)
Herodias	Matthew 14:3; Mark 6:17	Josephus
James (son of Mary)	Acts 12:17; 21:18; epistle of James	James Ossuary
James (son of Zebedee)	Matthew 4:21; 10:2; Mark 5:37	Josephus
Jesus (of Nazareth)	Gospels	Josephus Tacitus Suetonius Pliny the Younger Lucian Babylonian Talmud Mara Bar-Serapion Toledoth Jesu James Ossuary Inscription Megiddo Mosaic Floor Inscription Alexamenos Graffito (picture)
John the Baptist	Matthew 3:1-13; Luke 1:7-39	Josephus Baptismal site (and steps) in Jordan at Jordan River
Joseph (adoptive father of Jesus)	Matthew 1:20	James Ossuary
Judas the Galilean	Acts 5:37	Josephus

Person	Scripture Reference	Source
Lysanias	Luke 3:1	Josephus Stone Inscription at Abila (northern Morocco)
Herod Philip I (of Iturea)	Luke 3:1	Josephus
Herod Philip II (of Galilee)	Matthew 14:3; Mark 6:17; Luke 3:19	Josephus Coin inscriptions
Pontius Pilate	Luke 23:7,22; John 18:31	Josephus Tacitus Philo Coins minted during his reign Pilate Dedication Stone Inscription
Quirinius (Publius Sulpicius)	Luke 2:2	Josephus Tacitus Res Gestae Inscription at Antioch Pisidia
Salome ("daughter of Herodias")	Matthew 14:6	Josephus
Sergius Paulus	Acts 13:7	Two stone inscriptions (Cyprus and Rome) L. Sergius Paulus Inscription (Pisidian Antioch, Turkey)
Theudas	Acts 5:36	Josephus
Tiberius Caesar	Luke 3:1	Josephus Tacitus Suetonius Marcus Velleius Paterculus Coin inscriptions Mentioned on Pilate dedication stone (Caesarea)