

## *The Historical Evidence for Jesus of Nazareth*

For centuries Christians have claimed Jesus as the central figure in human history. What if this claim were nothing more than a fable and Jesus did not even exist? Today some will argue that the writings from ancient sources are not nearly enough to prove Jesus' existence; however, they are mistaken. The preponderance of extra-Biblical evidence provides sufficient reason to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was an historical person.

### Ancient Non-Christian Sources

The earliest reports of Jesus of Nazareth are to be considered most significant; therefore, study must begin by examining sources from the first and second centuries. Although personal bias tends to obstruct one's view, this study will be limited to sources that are understood as historically reliable by scholars from a plurality of worldviews.

Flavius Josephus was born within a decade of the death of Jesus into an upper class Jewish family, and today is considered one of the best sources concerning first century Palestine.<sup>1</sup> Josephus mentions Jesus in two passages, one of which has been hotly debated in

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<sup>1</sup> Bart Ehrman. *Did Jesus Really Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), 57.

recent years.<sup>2</sup> In *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus states, “Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the Sanhedrim of the judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James.”<sup>3</sup> In declaring Jesus to be the brother of James, we can be certain that Josephus believed James was a historical person. By clarifying which “Jesus” of whom he spoke, it is clear that Josephus was indeed referring to Jesus of Nazareth, who was also known to be called Christ. The other mention of Jesus in Josephus’ writing, known as the *Testimonium Flavianum*<sup>4</sup>, reads,

“Now, there was about this time, Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for 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.”<sup>5</sup>

Debate on this excerpt has become a central point for establishing or destroying Josephus’ credibility on this topic and must be given further consideration. A minority of contemporary scholars have attempted to discredit the *Testimonium* by claiming it was entirely interpolated by an unknown Christian scribe acting as an editor.<sup>6</sup> This particular text is laden with statements that only a Christian would compose, most notably “that Jesus was more than a man, that he was the messiah, and that he arose from the dead in fulfillment of the scriptures.”<sup>7</sup> As far as we know, Josephus never became a Christian; thus, the skeptic is justified in denying Josephus’ authorship to portions of the *Testimonium*.<sup>8</sup> However, there is good reason to believe

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>3</sup> Flavius Josephus, *The Complete Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Philadelphia: Kregel Publications, 1981), 423.

<sup>4</sup> Michael R. Licona. *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 237.

<sup>5</sup> Josephus, *The Complete Works of Josephus*, 379.

<sup>6</sup> Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus*, 237-38.

<sup>7</sup> Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 60.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 60.

that the passage originated with Josephus and merely had a few minor interpolations.<sup>9</sup> Removing the contested portions does not negate any reference to a historical Jesus; rather, a non-Christian record remains which affirms that Jesus was a wise man, miracle worker, popular teacher, convict under Pilate, and had a loyal following that has carried on through his death. Further, Feldman has argued that the burden of proof falls squarely on the shoulders of whoever asserts wholesale interpolation on the grounds that Josephus authenticity has not been questioned in any of his other works, except for brief passages concerning John and James.<sup>10</sup> Although not a believer in the Jesus of the Bible, Vermes seems to accurately assess the debate over the *Testimonium*, “Declaring the whole notice a forgery would amount to throwing out the baby with the bath water.”<sup>11</sup> Direct references to Jesus of Nazareth from such a respected source in antiquity delivers a high level of credibility to the argument for the existence of Jesus.

Remembered as one of the top historians in the Roman Empire, Tacitus concluded his writing career early in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century with *The Annals*, which contains extremely relevant information pertaining to the life of Jesus.<sup>12</sup> This book was designed to recount Roman history from A. D. 14 to 68; unfortunately, much of *The Annals* has been lost throughout history. One particular lost portion is Book 16, which covers A. D. 29 to 32 – precisely the portion where we would expect to find a narrative of the trial of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> Notwithstanding this significant loss, there is one direct reference to Jesus in Tacitus’ work as he tells of the fire that destroyed Rome in A. D. 64 under the emperor Nero, “Therefore, to scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom

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<sup>9</sup> John P. Meier, *The Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 60-67.

<sup>10</sup> Feldman in Licona, 242.

<sup>11</sup> Geza Vermes, *The Changing Faces of Jesus* (New York: Penguin Group, 2000), 277.

<sup>12</sup> Licona. *Resurrection of Jesus*, 243.

<sup>13</sup> Meier, *The Marginal Jew*, 89.

the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the found of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate”.<sup>14</sup> It is quite clear that high ranking Roman officials knew of Jesus’ life and death as a real historical event, even if they were not eyewitnesses.

While some have weakly argued for Christian interpolation in the *The Annals*, the majority of skepticism surrounding Tacitus relates to his incorrect use of terms in describing Pontius Pilate and Jesus. Pilate had the title and rank of ‘prefect’, yet Tacitus uses the term ‘procurator’ to describe him. Also, Tacitus refers to Jesus as ‘Christus’. Scott Oser claims official Roman histories would have referred to him by his given name, not his Christian name. The combination of these apparent mistakes leads some skeptics to argue that Tacitus was merely reporting what Christians had told him, and therefore, does not represent independent testimony of the life of Jesus.<sup>15</sup> Without any proof of Christians as Tacitus’ sources, this argument stands on relatively weak ground. Preeminent Jesus scholar, John Dominic Crossan, who argues the gospels are to be read as fictional parables, comments on the debate surrounding Tacitus, “My point, then, is not that there is the slightest doubt about the fact of Jesus’ crucifixion under Pontius Pilate.”<sup>16</sup> Further, Ehrman’s evaluation of Tacitus is, “that high-ranking Roman officials of the early second century knew that Jesus had lived and had been executed by the governor of Judea.”<sup>17</sup> While Tacitus’ sources remain a mystery, the lack of evidence to deny his credibility is rather startling.

### Early Church Fathers

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<sup>14</sup> Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals*, transl. John Jackson, vol. 5 of *Tacitus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 283.

<sup>15</sup> Scott Oser, “Historicity of Jesus FAQ”, [http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/scott\\_oser/hojfaq.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/scott_oser/hojfaq.html) (accessed February 17, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 375.

<sup>17</sup> Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 56.

As the bishop of Rome from A. D. 88-97<sup>18</sup>, Clement of Rome is believed to have had a personal relationship with the apostle Peter<sup>19</sup>, causing him to be considered a most reliable source concerning the events surrounding the life of Jesus. Within the writing of Clement we find that “physically the Lord Jesus came”<sup>20</sup>, and that Christ’s sufferings were “before your eyes”<sup>21</sup> Clement goes on to say, “Jesus Christ . . . gave his blood for us, and his flesh for our flesh”.<sup>22</sup> Ehrman notes the significance of Clement’s assumption that Jesus was real, specifically that his existence was never disputed as historical fact in the first century – the reality of his existence was known to all.<sup>23</sup> The need to defend an event arises when that event is challenged; since Jesus existence was agreed upon by the known world in his day, Clement did not devote any time to defending his existence. With virtually no opposition to Clement as a reliable source, he provides a strong argument for the existence of Jesus from this first century documentation.

Perhaps the most significant extra-Biblical apostolic writing on the historicity of Jesus has come from the third bishop of Antioch: Ignatius. During his journey to Rome to be martyred, Ignatius wrote seven letters to churches in which he vehemently defended the full humanity of Jesus, along with other teachings of the early church.<sup>24</sup> As bishop of the church at Antioch, where Peter and Paul carried on extensive ministries, Ignatius certainly had immense exposure to the oral traditions of the early church, and had significant interaction with eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life. Ignatius spent considerable time refuting Docetism, which says that Jesus really existed, yet was not fully human, but rather a sort of “divine spirit” on earth. In response to this view, Ignatius wrote to the church at Tralles, “Jesus Christ, who was descended from David, who was

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<sup>18</sup> Goodspeed, Edgar J. *The Apostolic Fathers: An American Translation*, 48.

<sup>19</sup> Licona, *Resurrection of Jesus*, 250.

<sup>20</sup> Goodspeed, 64 (32.2).

<sup>21</sup> Goodspeed, 50 (2.1-2.2).

<sup>22</sup> Goodspeed, 74 (49.6).

<sup>23</sup> Ehrman, 104.

<sup>24</sup> Ehrman, 101-102.

the son of Mary, who was truly born, who both ate and drank, was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was truly crucified and died, in the sight of those in heaven and on earth.”<sup>25</sup> Quotes of this nature are abundant in the letters of Ignatius. Ignatian authorship is rarely contested, and his reliability is enhanced when one considers that manuscripts of his letters exist in Syriac, Latin, and Greek. Ignatius presents the most demonstrative defense of Jesus’ literal personhood of any extant first or second century sources.<sup>26</sup>

Arguments to discredit Clement and Ignatius tend circle around the fact that their sources were the apostles who wrote the New Testament, essentially nullifying them as truly “extra-Biblical” sources.<sup>27</sup> The skeptic is correct to note that both authors would have personally known the disciples. However, having a relationship with an author is very different from citing the author’s text. Had Clement or Ignatius had any issues with the Pauline or Petrine testimony, they would have had opportunity to refute their claims. While the martyrdom of both of these men does not singlehandedly prove Jesus was real, it does indicate that the eyewitness testimony to which they were exposed was very compelling. Further, to deny the credibility of all witnesses who had a vested interest in the topic on which they wrote would negate a large portion of uncontested history. Most notably, some of the best records of the Holocaust come from Jewish sources within concentration camps in Nazi Germany. Dismissing these records would be silliness, nothing more than revisionist history attempting to deny obvious events of which the revisionist was not particularly fond. Such is the case in the argument against the early apostolic fathers. Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch are credible 1<sup>st</sup> century sources because of their close relationships with eyewitnesses of Jesus. Further, Clement’s lack of attempt to prove

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<sup>25</sup> Goodspeed, 219.

<sup>27</sup> [http://thedevinevidence.com/jesus\\_history.html](http://thedevinevidence.com/jesus_history.html)

Jesus' existence coupled with Ignatius arguments that focus on the nature of Jesus' existence rather than his historicity indicates there was no meaningful debate on this topic at that time.

Arguments surrounding the life of Jesus of Nazareth have abounded for the last 2000 years, and show no signs of stopping. Christians see him as the central figure in all of human history, while some skeptics will go so far as to deny he even existed. When the evidence is closely examined, it becomes quite clear that Jesus most certainly did exist. Even after converting from Christianity to agnosticism, prominent New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman concedes, "it is difficult to understand how Jesus could have been 'invented'"<sup>28</sup> An aggressive skeptic in his own right, Crossan also adds, "I take it absolutely for granted that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate."<sup>29</sup> The evidence supporting the life of Jesus as an historical event has become so strong that even those who reject him believe he was real! Whether Christian or Jew, Atheist or Agnostic, one can be sure of this fact: Jesus of Nazareth was indeed a real person.

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<sup>28</sup> Ehrman, 171.

<sup>29</sup> Crossan, John Dominic. *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, 372.