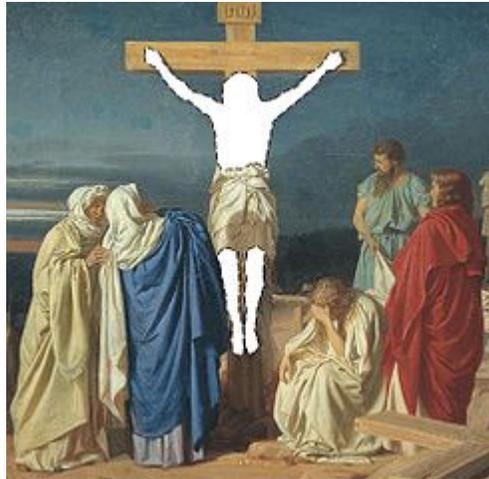


Did Jesus really exist?

Got Questions Ministries



Typically, when this question is asked, the person asking qualifies the question with “outside of the Bible.” We do not grant this idea that the New Testament cannot be considered a source of evidence for the existence of Jesus. Scholars (Christian and non-Christian) are in general agreement that the 27 documents contained within the New Testament – including four books that describe the public life and ministry of Jesus – were written between AD 45 and 95. That is, within the lifetime of eyewitnesses to Jesus of Nazareth (4 BC-AD 33). In terms of historical evidences, ancient texts composed by eyewitnesses to or contemporaries of the events described are not common, and are naturally considered the most reliable sources. And so the documents that make up the New Testament are extraordinarily strong proof for the existence of Jesus.

It is also important to recognize that in AD 70, the Romans invaded and destroyed Jerusalem and much of Israel, slaughtering its inhabitants. Entire cities were literally burned to the ground. We should not be surprised, then, that the amount of surviving contemporary testimony about Jesus is limited – though still more extensive than for most any other historical figure of His time.

Considering that Jesus' ministry was largely confined to a relatively unimportant area in a small corner of the Roman Empire, a surprising amount of information about Him can be drawn from secular historical sources. Some of the more important non-Christian historical evidences of Jesus include the following:

The first-century Roman Tacitus (AD 56-117), who is considered one of the more accurate historians of the ancient world, in Book 15 of his *Annals* mentions, with approval, Emperor Nero's persecution of the superstitious "Chrestians." He notes that "Christus [Latin for Christ], 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," in Judaea.

Suetonius (AD 69/75-140), historian and chief secretary to Emperor Hadrian, mentioned, in his *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, that "the Jews" were expelled from Rome under Emperor Claudius (died AD 54) for "making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus" (15.44). Most scholars recognize this as a variant spelling of Christ. The same event is referred to in the Acts of the Apostles 18:2.

Flavius Josephus (AD 37-100) was a Jewish military leader during the first Jewish-Roman War (AD 66-73) and an historian. In his *Antiquities* he refers to James, "the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ." There is a controversial verse (18:3) which most scholars doubt the authenticity of, in whole or in part, that says, "Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats....He was [the] Christ...he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him." One version reads, "At this time there was a wise man named Jesus. His conduct was good and [he] was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who became his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive; accordingly he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders."

Julius Africanus quotes the historian Thallus, a Greek historian who probably wrote in the mid- to late first century but whose works are now lost, referring to the darkness which followed the crucifixion of Christ (*Extant Writings*, 18).

Pliny the Younger (AD 61-112), in *Letters* 10:96, recorded early Christian worship practices including the fact that Christians worshipped Jesus as God and were very ethical, and he includes a reference to the love feast and Lord's Supper.

The Babylonian Talmud is a record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, customs, and history. It was transmitted orally for centuries prior to

its compilation by Jewish scholars in Babylon about the 5th century AD. In the *Sanhedrin* (43a) it confirms Jesus' crucifixion on the eve of Passover and the accusations against Christ of practicing sorcery and encouraging Jewish apostasy.

Lucian of Samosata was a second-century Greek writer who admits that Jesus was worshiped by Christians, introduced new teachings, and was crucified for them. He said that Jesus' teachings included the brotherhood of believers, the importance of conversion, and the importance of denying other gods. Christians lived according to Jesus' laws, believed themselves to be immortal, and were characterized by contempt for death, voluntary self-devotion, and renunciation of material goods.

Mara Bar-Serapion, a first-century Stoic philosopher from Syria, confirms that Jesus was thought to be a wise and virtuous man, was considered by many to be the king of Israel, was put to death by the Jews, and lived on in the teachings of His followers.

In fact, we can almost reconstruct the gospel just from early non-Christian sources: Jesus was called the Christ (Josephus), did "magic," led Israel into new teachings, and was hanged on Passover for them (*Babylonian Talmud*) in Judea (Tacitus), but claimed to be God and would return (Eliezar), which his followers believed, worshipping Him as God (Pliny the Younger).

There is overwhelming evidence for the existence of Jesus Christ, both in secular and biblical history. Perhaps the greatest evidence that Jesus did exist is the fact that literally thousands of Christians in the first century A.D., including the twelve apostles, were willing to give their lives as martyrs for Jesus Christ. People will die for what they believe to be true, but no one will die for what they know to be a lie.