

Study Guide #5: Did Jesus Really Exist?

Introduction

Obviously, one of the foundations of the Christian faith is a belief that a 1st-century Palestinian Jew named Jesus lived and founded the Christian Church. Before examining the New Testament documents, which provide the most complete account of Jesus' life and ministry, we will briefly look at a minimum of 6 different non-Christian writers who wrote about this particular man named Jesus.

The famous Greek philosopher and naturalist Aristotle (d. 322 B.C.) stated that a written account of a person or event should be given the benefit of the doubt. In other words, the burden of proof is on the critics to offer compelling evidence why that person did not exist, or the event did not occur. Nearly all historians follow Aristotle's dictum today. With that in mind, in this Study Guide we look at the historical record outside of the Christian New Testament.

Question #1: Didn't Josephus write a famous statement about Jesus?

Answer: Yes. Flavius Josephus was a famous Jewish historian who lived in the 1st century A.D., the same century that Christians believe Jesus lived on earth. His most famous statement about Jesus is as follows:

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 those and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day. (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book xviii, ch. 3, v. 3)



Flavius Josephus

Scholars who have studied all available manuscripts of Josephus' works see no reason to doubt the authenticity of the basic text here. In fact, manuscript evidence is unanimous as to this statement. However, since we know Josephus was not a Christian, it's possible that those words we placed in italics above were added by an unknown *Christian* writer, although it must have been at a very early date for all of the extant (available) manuscripts to contain them. An alternate view is that Josephus penned them in sarcasm. In any case, the statement confirms the existence of the Christian Jesus.

Question #2: Did Josephus write another statement about Jesus?

Answer: Yes. The other statement by Josephus about Jesus follows:

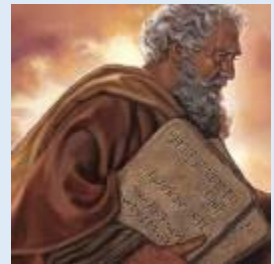
...when, therefore, Ananus was of this disposition, he thought he had now a proper opportunity [to exercise his authority]. Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the Sanhedrin of the judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called the Christ, whose name was James, and some others [or some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned. (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book xx, ch. 9, v. 1)

In this passage, Josephus clearly refers to the death of James, whom he called the “brother of Jesus, who was called the Christ...” From both statements of Josephus (see also Question #1), he confirmed several points of Christian belief about Jesus: (1) He lived in the 1st century A.D. (from his reference to Pilate); (2) Pilate condemned him to the cross at the instigation of Jewish leaders; (3) He was the leader of a group called Christians; (4) He claimed to be the Messiah (“Christ” is the English translation of the Greek word for “anointed,” which is equivalent to the English word translated from the Hebrew for “Messiah.”); and (5) He had a brother named James.

Question #3: Who was the first Gentile writer who mentioned Jesus?

Answer: A Syrian man named Mara Bar-Serapion wrote about Jesus in a letter to his son almost certainly in the late 1st century A.D. Here’s what he wrote:

What advantage did the Athenians gain from putting Socrates to death? Famine and plague came upon them as a judgment for their crime. What advantage did the men of Samos gain from burning Pythagoras? In a moment their land was covered with sand. What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise king? It was just after that that their kingdom was abolished. God justly avenged these three wise men: the Athenians died of hunger; the Samians were overwhelmed by the sea; the Jews, ruined and driven from their land, live in complete dispersion. But Socrates did not die for good; he lived on in the teaching of Plato. Pythagoras did not die for good; he lived on in the statue of Hera. Nor did the wise king die for good; He lived on in the teaching which He had been given. (Quoted by F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, p. 114)



Mara Bar-Serapion

This non-Christian writer refers to a king of the Jews, after whose execution, the latter were driven from their land and were living in dispersion. Certainly, this is a reference to Jesus and to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70.

Question #4: Did any Roman historian write anything about Jesus?

Answer: Yes. Cornelius Tacitus (A.D. 55/55-117) wrote about Jesus in the year 112, when he (Tacitus) was the governor of Asia (modern western Turkey).

Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substantiated as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, from whom they got their name, had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate when Tiberius was emperor.... (Quoted by F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, p. 117)

Tacitus was the most famous ancient Roman historian. His testimony here concerns Emperor Nero's burning of the city of Rome and how Nero blamed Christians for that fire. He confirmed Josephus' testimony that the Christian leader was called Christus [Christ] and that he was executed by Pontius Pilate.



Cornelius Tacitus

Question #5: Were there any other Roman officials who wrote about Jesus?

Answer: Yes. Pliny the Younger (d. ca. A.D. 113) wrote to Roman Emperor Trajan while he was the governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) in the year 112. Pliny had been executing so many Christians that he wondered if he should seek them out or only execute the ones who came to his attention.

They affirmed, however, that the whole of their guilt, or their error, was that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verse a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves to a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit fraud, theft, adultery, never to falsify their word, not to deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up. (Quoted by Josh McDowell, *The Best of Josh McDowell: A Ready Defense*, p. 200)

Question #6: Are there any other Gentile writers who mentioned Jesus?

Answer: Yes, there is at least one other Gentile writer who wrote about Jesus. He was Lucian of Samosata (d. ca. 180), a 2nd-century satirist who often mocked Christians. Here are 2 examples from his work entitled *The Passing of Peregrinus*:

It was then that he [Peregrinus] learned the wondrous lore of the Christians, by associating with their priests and scribes in Palestine. And—how else could it be?—in a trice he made them all look like children, for he was a prophet, cult-leader, head of the synagogue, and everything, all by himself. He interpreted and explained some of their books and even composed many, and they revered him as a god, made use of him as a lawgiver, and set him down as a protector, next after that other, to be sure, whom they still worship, the man who was crucified in Palestine [Jesus] because he introduced this new cult into the world. (www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/peregrinus.html, *The Passing of Peregrinus*, par. 11)

Furthermore, their first lawgiver [Jesus] persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another after they have transgressed once, for all by denying the Greek gods and by worshiping that crucified sophist himself and living under his laws. (www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/peregrinus.html, *The Passing of Peregrinus*, par. 13)

In these passages, Lucian can only be referring to the Christian Jesus because he declares that (1) Jesus is the founder of the Christians; (2) Christians worship Jesus; (3) Jesus was crucified in Palestine; and (4) Jesus taught that His followers were all brothers.

Question #7: Does the Talmud say anything about Jesus?

Answer: Yes. The Talmud is a collection of Jewish rabbinical laws and interpretations of laws that are second in importance only to the Hebrew Bible (Christian Old Testament). Note this statement in the Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin Folio 43a:

On the eve of Passover Yeshua was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, 'He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Any one who can say anything in his favour, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.' But since nothing was brought forward in his favour he was hanged on the eve of the Passover.

This statement is good evidence that the Christian Jesus (Yeshua is the Hebrew name for Jesus) lived because it not only agrees with the New Testament that Jesus was executed at the Passover time (Matthew 26:17 onward; Mark 14:12 onward; Luke 22:1 onward; John 13:1 onward), but that the Jewish leaders attributed His miracles to sorcery (Matthew 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15). Thus, there is some historical value to it—not because it agrees with the New Testament gospels per se, but because the 2 sources, separated by several centuries, are connected by their agreement on 2 historical facts.

Question #8: Are there any other sources that provide evidence for the existence of Jesus?

Answer: Yes. Justin Martyr was a 2nd-century Christian apologist writing to the Roman Emperor Antonius Pius around the year 150.

But the words, 'They pierced my hands and feet,' refer to the nails which were fixed in Jesus' hands and feet on the cross; and after He was crucified, His executioners cast lots for His garments, and divided them among themselves. That these things happened you may learn from the 'Acts' which were recorded under Pontius Pilate. (Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 35.7-9)

That He performed these miracles you may easily satisfy yourself from the 'Acts' of Pontius Pilate. (Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 48.3)



Justin Martyr

The great historical value of this statement is that this writer told the Roman emperor himself that he could check out what he was saying about Jesus in a written record called the "Acts" of Pontius Pilate. None of the reports from the various outposts in the Roman Empire have been discovered, for they disappeared long ago. However, for a Christian writer to ask the emperor to check out his story for himself by consulting the written record would have been suicide if such a written record didn't exist. Therefore, this is strong indirect evidence that Pilate himself must have reported the basic facts, including something about the miracles of Jesus, to the emperor in Rome.

Question #9: What conclusion should we draw from the evidence we have examined in this Study Guide?

Answer: All of the testimonies we have looked at in this Study Guide are sufficient evidence to convince any trained historian who examines them that there was a Palestinian Jew named Jesus who lived in the 1st century A.D., created Christianity, and then was crucified. Therefore, there should be no reasonable doubt that the Christian Jesus did, in fact, exist.