

Evidence for the existence of Jesus

Christianity is not just a belief that people hold to based on stories, tradition and emotion. Without getting spiritual or mystical, we can find evidence for the existence of Jesus Christ, his death and even his resurrection. There is reliable evidence outside of the Bible which proves the existence of Jesus.

(<https://www.bethinking.org/jesus/ancient-evidence-for-jesus-from-non-christian-sources>).

The Christian's faith hinges on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Bible itself tell us that if Jesus didn't rise from the dead then the Christian faith is a useless fantasy (1 Corinthians 15:14-20). Christianity would be another empty religion if Jesus hadn't risen from the dead. But before we explore evidence for the resurrection, let's look at evidence for the existence of Jesus Christ.

The Bible (which is a reliable historical document) records Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection. But apart from the Bible there are many reliable non-biblical references to Jesus within the first and second century. Here are some of them:

Ancient Historical Manuscripts (AD 50-157)

If Jesus didn't really exist it would be difficult to explain the explosive growth of Christianity within the first 100 years of the time of Jesus' life. Many early historical figures wrote letters and treatises (a formal and systematic essay) recording details about Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Some of them would have received this information from people who personally knew Jesus.

1. Clement of Rome

Clement of Rome (35 AD – 99 AD), also known as Pope Clement I, was the Bishop of Rome and an early church father. He wrote a letter to the church at Corinth (AD 96) to deal with an internal leadership dispute. In the letter he encourages them to practice humility and look to the example of Jesus. Clement's letter also speaks of the teachings of Jesus (13:1), his death (21:6), and his resurrection from the dead (24:1).

(biblearchaeologyreport.com, earlychristianwritings.com/text/1clement-lightfoot.html)

2. Ignatius of Antioch

Ignatius of Antioch, also known as Ignatius Theophorus, was an early Christian writer and elder at Antioch. He wrote a letter to the Smyrnaeans around AD 110 in which he says, "Now, he suffered all these things for our sake, that we might be saved. And he truly suffered, even as he truly raised himself up..." (earlychristianwritings.com/text/ignatius-smyrnaeans-longer.html, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistle_of_Ignatius_to_the_Smyrnaeans)

3. Mara bar Serapion

Mara bar Serapion, was a Stoic philosopher during the first century and not a Christian. He is known for a letter that he wrote in Aramaic around 73 AD, to his son, Serapion, from prison. He wrote to encourage his son to pursue wisdom, and in it he referred to Jesus.

"What else can we say, when the wise are forcibly dragged off by tyrants, their wisdom is captured by insults, and their minds are oppressed and without defence? What advantage did the Athenians gain by murdering Socrates, for which they were repaid with famine and pestilence? Or the people of Samos by the burning of Pythagoras, because their country was completely covered in sand in just one hour? Or the Jews by killing their wise king, because their kingdom was taken away at that very time? God justly repaid the wisdom of these three men: the Athenians died of famine; the Samians were completely overwhelmed by the sea; and the Jews, desolate and driven from their own kingdom, are scattered through every nation. Socrates is not dead, because of Plato; neither is Pythagoras, because of the statue of Juno; nor is the wise king, because of the new laws he laid down."

There is no dispute about Mara Bar Serapion referring to Jesus when he wrote that the Jews killed "their own wise king". The Bible also shows us

that a number of unbelievers use the title, "King of the Jews" to refer to Jesus Christ. This includes, Pilate (Luke 23:3), Roman soldiers (Matthew 27:27-29), and even some Jews (Mark 15:12). This title was also placed on a sign above Jesus on His cross, at the crucifixion (John 19:19).

(Robert Van Voorst, Jesus outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 54., <https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2022/11/18/top-ten-historical-references-to-jesus-outside-of-the-bible/>, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mara_bar_Serapion_on_Jesus)

4. Pliny the Younger

The governor (AD 112) in the Roman province of Bithynia (modern day Turkey), Pliny the Younger, had a big problem. A number of Christians had been brought into his court, and while it is unclear what the initial charges were, he ultimately decided to execute them because they refused to deny their faith in Christ, even though they seemed harmless. Pliny wrote to his friend the emperor for advice and to see if he had handled the matter legally. This, firstly, shows that Rome recognized Christianity as a religion, although they branded it a false religion. The emperor replied saying that Pliny had done the right thing in executing them but advised him not to seek out Christians for prosecution.

In his letter, Pliny speaks about trying to get Christians to deny Christ (whom they followed). This communication between the governor and Emperor acknowledges the existence of Christ. Christ was a real, historical figure whose name the Roman government was attempting to get Christians to curse. Pliny's letter also reveals that Christians, at that time, believed in that Jesus is God and that Christians were meeting weekly to worship him as God.

(Pliny, Letters, Book 10, Letter 97. Online: <http://www.attalus.org/old/pliny10b.html#97>, <https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2022/11/18/top-ten-historical->

references-to-jesus-outside-of-the-bible/
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/maps/primary/pliny.html#:~:text=In%20the%20year%20112%2C%20Pliny,were%20brought%20into%20his%20court.>)

5. Josephus

Flavius Josephus (born AD 37/38, Jerusalem—died AD 100, Rome) was a Jewish priest, a scholar, and an historian who wrote about the Jewish revolt of 66–70 and also about Jewish history.

Josephus refers to Jesus in his work, *Antiquities of the Jews*, which is commonly referred to as the “*Testimonium Flavianum*”. Christian and non-Christian scholars alike, agree that this is an authentic reference to Jesus.

“At this time there was a wise man who was called 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 had become 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.”

(An Arabic Version of the *Testimonium Flavianum* and its Implications.

(Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1971), 9-10)

Josephus also makes a second reference to Jesus describing the death of James, “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ.”

(Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.9.1. Online:

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0146%3Abook%3D20%3Awhiston+chapter%3D9%3Awhiston+section%3D1>)

Josephus acted like a reporter would. He didn't write based on his opinion or emotion. He himself was a law-observant Jew who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. However, Josephus held an objective view in presenting facts that he knew were true: Jesus existed. He was called Christ (meaning "anointed One" referring to the Promised Messiah). He was crucified by Pilate. Many people became his followers (disciples). His disciples claimed that Jesus was alive and had appeared to them.

(<https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2022/11/18/top-ten-historical-references-to-jesus-outside-of-the-bible/>,
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Flavius-Josephus>

6. Suetonius

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (commonly known as Suetonius) was born around AD 69 and died sometime after AD 122. He was a Roman historian whose most famous work, *De vita Caesarum* (Lives of the Caesars), records a brief history of the first twelve Caesars, from Julius Caesar to the emperor Domitian. In his writings, Suetonius explained the reasons why Emperor Claudius' (AD 41-54) expelled the Jews from Rome. He wrote, "Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus [Christ], he expelled them from Rome." (Lives of the First Twelve Caesars: Life of Claudius). (this is also recorded in the Bible in Acts 18:2).

Within a hundred years of the life of Jesus, He was widely known, a popular and controversial figure which seemed to infuriate the Jews. Their fury caused them to become a public disturbance.

(<https://biblearchaeologyreport.com/2022/11/18/top-ten-historical-references-to-jesus-outside-of-the-bible/>,
https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/Claudius*.html

Jesus's historical existence is generally accepted among scholars. The evidence for the existence of Jesus Christ includes writings by historians,

artifacts and eyewitness accounts. In this lesson we have primarily focused on writings by ancient historians. If we seriously consider the evidence, we cannot question that Jesus really existed about 2,000 years ago. As archaeologist Eric Meyers, emeritus professor in Judaic studies at Duke University said,

“I don’t know any mainstream scholar who doubts the historicity of Jesus. The details have been debated for centuries, but no one who is serious doubts that he’s a historical figure.”

Questions for reflection

1. It is often stated that we have more historical proof that Jesus existed than historical proof that Julius Ceasar existed. How does this affect your view of Jesus, and/or your relationship with Him?
2. What stands out for you from this lesson?