

# The Historical Jesus

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Many deny the validity of the Bible comparing its elaborate stories myth and legend. A critical focus is the New Testament account of Christ. There are large numbers who deny His existence claiming that there is no objective evidence proving that He preached an astonishing gospel, performed supernatural miracles, and was raised from the dead. The assertion presents Christians with several foundational questions.

Was the Jesus of Nazareth described in the Bible a historical figure? Is there credible extrabiblical evidence that proves Christ lived, preached, performed miracles, and was raised from the dead. Can we prove that Jesus of Nazareth had a profound impact on the course history? In short, can we trust the Biblical record as an accurate source of history.

The critics who deny the existence of Christ contend that the only evidence comes from writings of men who were less interested in recording factual events than in advancing a new religion. One outspoken critic explained his skepticism in the following way:

The church bases its claims mostly on the teaching of an obscure young Jew with messianic pretensions who, let's face it, didn't make much of an impression in his lifetime. There isn't a single word about him in secular history. Not a word, no

mention of him by the Romans. Not so much as a reference by Josephus (Charles Templeton, *Act of God*, p. 152).

Is Templeton correct? Are the only words regarding the life of Christ found in the Scriptures? Is there no mention of Him in Roman history? What about Jewish historians that did not agree with find Jesus' teachings? Is it true that Josephus remained silent concerning the existence of Christianity's leading figure? All serious Christians must face these questions.

Was Jesus real? Did He live when the Bible writers claim? Was Christ actually crucified and did He miraculously rise from the dead?

This booklet presents compelling evidence from both secular history and the Bible proving the existence of the Messiah according to the Scriptures. Further, to characterize the Scriptures as untrustworthy because they were written by men of bias reveals a great misunderstanding about the Bible and its many authors.

### ***Testimony from a Pagan***

Lucian of Samosata was a Greek satirist who wrote of a former Christian who later became a famous cynic and revolutionary and died in 165 A.D. In his work, *The Passing of Peregrinus*, there are two sections that clearly refer to Jesus without specifically naming Him. Before reading the following paragraphs, note that Lucian did not simply tell the story. His references to Christ as a Prophet and Lawgiver are made with contempt in the midst of satire:

It was then that he learned the marvelous wisdom of the Christians, by associating with their priests and scribes in Palestine. And—what else?—in short order he made them look like children, for he was a prophet, cult leader, head of the congregation and everything, all by himself. He interpreted and

explained some of their books, and wrote many himself. They revered him as a god, used him as a lawgiver, and set him down as a protector—to be sure, after that other whom they still worship, the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced this new cult into the world. For having convinced themselves that they are going to be immortal and live forever, the poor wretches despise death and most even willingly give themselves up. Furthermore, their first lawgiver 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 according to his laws (*Jesus in Non-Christian Sources*, p. 462).

Although Lucian seems to be aware of the Christian books that are now a part of the *New Testament*, his misinformation makes it likely that he never read them. For example, the compound term “priests and scribes” seems to have been borrowed from Judaism. This is not surprising as Christianity and Judaism were sometimes confused among pagan authors.

Lucian seems to have been a polytheist who gathered his information from sources independent of the New Testament Church. For this reason, his view as an outsider is of great value. His diatribe notes that Christians in the first and second century still worshipped the man (Christ) who was crucified in Palestine, and the reason was because He introduced a new sect in which He was revered as God. Such an unbiased view stands as independent evidence for the existence of the historical Jesus.

### ***The Roman Census***

Emperor Julian argued that Jesus was a Roman citizen when he said:

Jesus, whom you celebrate, was one of Caesar's subjects. If you dispute it, I will prove it by and by; but it may as well be done now. For you yourselves allow that he was enrolled with his father and mother in the time of Cyrenius" (Nathaniel Lardner's *Works*, Vol. 7, p. 626-627).

Luke mentions this census that was taken when Cyrenius (Quirinus) was governor of Syria in 6 A.D. (Luke 2:1-2). The documents of this census were still available nearly 100 years later when Justin Martyr wrote:

Now there is a village in the land of the Jews, thirty-five stadia from Jerusalem, in which Christ was born, as you can ascertain also from the registries of the taxing and Quirinius your first procurator in Judaea (First Apology, ch. 34).

If the Roman documents of Christ's existence did not exist, then Justin would have made a grave mistake claiming that they were still available in Rome's public record.

### ***The Witness of an Unbeliever***

Flavius Josephus is regarded as the premier first century Jewish historian. His writings have been quoted by hundreds of authors including many of the world's most respected scholars.

Josephus came from a priestly family and became a Pharisee at the age of 19. He was appointed Commander of the Jewish army under Roman occupation. After the Jewish rebellion, he was captured by the Roman general Vespasian. Although he lived after the crucifixion of Christ, he was closely associated, and very familiar, with the experiences of that generation.

In his chronicle, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus makes a statement that is contested by those who reject the existence of a historical Jesus:

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 received 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 (Book 18, ch. 3).

This statement has been the center of considerable debate and controversy. Those who reject its authenticity contend that these words were not written by Josephus, but rather were added by the Christian church in an attempt to strengthen its argument that Jesus was the Messiah. The reason for the debate comes from the fact that Josephus was not a Christian and therefore did not believe that Jesus was God's anointed. This being the case, critics claim that Josephus would not have referred to Jesus as Christ. There is, however, a credible authority which can shed considerable light on this issue.

William Whiston is a scholar who translated the works of Josephus into English. He provided the following observation concerning the authenticity of Josephus' words regarding Christ:

Since we meet with several important testimonies in Josephus, the Jewish historian, concerning John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus of Nazareth, concerning Jesus of Nazareth himself, and concerning James the Just the brother of Jesus of Nazareth; and since the principal testimony which is concerning Jesus of Nazareth

himself has of late been greatly questioned by many, and for me who has ever declared my firm belief that these testimonies were genuine, to set down fairly some of the original evidence and citations I have met with in the first fifteen centuries concerning them; and then to make proper observations upon that evidence, for the reader's more complete satisfaction (*The Works of Flavius Josephus*, p. 815).

Whiston went on to explain that, after exhaustive examination of Josephus' writings, the texts being questioned are in fact genuine. He drew this conclusion because their style was consistent with that found in Josephus' other writings. Whiston also provided a list of highly respected historians who considered them to be authentic concerning John the Baptist, James, and Jesus. Many of these historians were not believers and include such people as Tacitus in 110, Justin Martyr in 147, Origen in 230, Eusebius in 324, Ambrose in 360, Hieronymus (Jerome) in 400, Isidorus in 410, Sozomon in 440, Cassiodorus in 510, Georgius in 790, Anastasius in 740, Syncellus in 790, and Johan in 850.

Whiston further pointed out that it would be impossible to have such a volume of accurate testimony regarding numerous events and then refuse to accept the same testimony regarding Christ (p. 819). Those who contend that Josephus' reference to Jesus is spurious do so because the words appear to convey that he embraced Jesus as the Savior. However, Whiston explained that such a conclusion is a mistake:

*This was Christ, or [the] Christ*, does not mean that this Jesus was the Christ of God, or the true Messiah of the Jews; but that this Jesus was distinguished from all others of that name, of which there were not a few, as mentioned by Josephus himself, by the addition of the other name of Christ; or that this person was no other than he whom all

the world knew by the name of Jesus Christ, and his followers by the name of Christians (ibid).

Whiston went on to explain that Josephus was not conveying his belief in Jesus as Christ, but rather that Christians were named from “this Christ.” According to Whiston, if Josephus was a true believer, this passage would have required a much fuller explanation.

Additionally, it is important to understand that Josephus wrote for Jews, Greeks, and Romans. This audience would not have understood who he was referring to if he simply penned the common name Jesus. Jesus is actually an English translation of the Greek name *Iesous* which is *Yehoshua* in Hebrew and *Joshua* in English; a name given to many of the descendants of Israel. Josephus’ use of the term *Christ* was not an attempt to convince others that Jesus was the Messiah, but to differentiate Him from other people with the same name.

Whiston added that all other historians who wrote for the next several centuries understood that Josephus did not believe that Christ was the Messiah. The terms Josephus used were a historical approach similar to that of Pontius Pilate during the time of Christ’s crucifixion.

According to the scriptures, Pilate ordered a sign to be posted on Jesus’ stake that bore the literal words “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” This did not mean Pilate believed Jesus was the Messiah. He only placed it there because he was provoked by the Jewish leaders who brought charges against Jesus. These men wanted the sign to read that Jesus only claimed to be king of the Jews. However, because of his exasperation with the accusers, Pilate refused to have the words changed (John 19:19-22).

There are other manuscripts concerning the works of Josephus which make the controversial passages easier to understand. A historic Arabic document was found and translated, stating:

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 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 (كتاب العنوان , *Kitab al-Unwan*, ch. 10).

This translation of Josephus' words adds clarity to the historian's intent. He was simply documenting four points about the historical Jesus:

1. Jesus was a good man
2. Jesus' followers believed Him to be the Messiah
3. Jesus was crucified
4. Many claimed that Jesus was raised from the dead

### ***More from Josephus***

The aforementioned quote is not the only time Josephus mentioned the historical Jesus. In the last volume of *Antiquities of the Jews*, he mentions both Jesus and His brother James:

Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he [Ananus] assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called 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 20, Chapter 9).

Aside from this comment, James is otherwise a barely noticed figure in Josephus' lengthy record of historical events. The only reason Josephus mentioned James was because his death resulted in Ananus losing his position as high priest.

Since James was another common Jewish name at that time, many men named James are mentioned in Josephus' work. Thus, Josephus needed to specify which one he meant. The common custom of simply giving the father's name (i.e. James, son of Joseph) would not work here because James' father's name was also very common. Therefore, Josephus identified this James by reference to his famous brother Jesus.

However, James' famous brother Jesus, or Joshua in English, was also a very common name. In fact, Josephus mentions at least 12 other men with this name in his writings. Therefore, the historian specified which Jesus he was referring to by adding the phrase "Jesus, who was called Christ."

This fact reveals a truth few recognize. Such specific references to Jesus as a man that many believed was sent by God would discredit the entire work of Josephus' if Jesus had not been a real person.

### ***A Third Century Mosaic***

In 2004, plans were made for new construction on the Megiddo Prison in northern Israel. During this process, it was discovered that the prison had been built over a large mosaic floor that was once a prayer hall used by Christians more than 1750 years prior. The Israel Antiquities Authority was quoted as saying that, "This structure is interpreted as the oldest Christian prayer house in the world... and in fact, it tells the story of Christianity even before it became official."

The most interesting find contained in the mosaic is a dedication stating, "to God Jesus Christ." Dated to 230 A.D., this is the first archeological evidence of the belief that Jesus was divine. The IAA announced that plans are being made to move the prison to another location and prepare the historic site for preservation making it accessible to tourists.



Mosaic transcription translated as “*The god-loving Akeptous has offered the table to God Jesus Christ as a memorial.*”

### ***The Talmud***

The Talmud is a compilation of Jewish writings from before the birth of Christ to the fifth century A.D. These writings include a section in which Jesus’ crucifixion was noted. The text appears to justify Jewish leaders by claiming that He had practiced sorcery and warned that Jesus would be stoned. However, it is admitted that Jesus’ death was not carried out by Jews stating that He was hung on the eve of the annual Sabbath of Passover:

On the eve of the Passover Yeshu 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 practised 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! (Talmud - Mas. Sanhedrin, 43a).

### ***The Bible is Historical Evidence***

One of the most common misunderstandings regarding the Bible is that it is simply one book. This is not true. The New Testament alone consists of 27 books written by at least eight different authors. Of those, only three were part of the original twelve disciples. Two were initially skeptical concerning Christ's identity. One was initially a great persecutor of Christians and even consented to the execution of the first New Testament martyr. Another was a gentile and one was only a young boy when Jesus lived and taught.

These New Testament authors came from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences. One was a tax collector; another was a physician. There was a highly educated Pharisee. Two were fishermen while two others grew up as the children of a carpenter; likely practicing that trade.

It is also important to understand that the writings of the New Testament span a period of over 60 years in which the authors were often located in different countries. This being the case, it is hard to imagine a collaborative effort in creating the books of the New Testament.

### ***The Gospels are an Objective Record***

While some try to portray the gospels as the product of Christian bias, this simply is not true. Few biographies portray the flaws of their leading characters with such candor. As the renowned historian Will Durant wrote about the first four books of the New Testament:

Despite the prejudices and theological preconceptions of the evangelists, they record many incidents that mere inventors would have concealed—the competition of the apostles for high places in the Kingdom, their flight after Jesus' arrest, Peter's denial, the failure of Christ to work miracles in Galilee, the references to some auditors to his possible insanity, his early uncertainty as to his mission, his confessions of ignorance to the

future, his moments of bitterness, his despairing cry on the cross; no one reading these scenes can doubt the reality of the figure behind them. That a few simple men should in one generation have invented so powerful and appealing a personality, so lofty an ethic and so inspiring a vision of human brotherhood, would be a miracle far more incredible than any recorded in the Gospels (*The Story of Civilization*, part III, p. 557).

As Durant recognized, the gospels portray Jesus' disciples as skeptical, faithless, selfish, argumentative, fearful, and even defiant. In one example, The Scriptures record an event in which Christ rebuked Peter with the words; "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men" (Mat. 16:23).

Further, the gospels reveal the disciples disputed among themselves about who would be the greatest, and that many of them fled while Christ was being apprehended. They also describe the irony of Peter's statement that he would lay down his life for Christ and how he proceeded to deny Him three times (Mat. 26:56, 73-74; Luke 22:24). Clearly, the gospel writers were not afraid to expose their own character flaws.

The gospels also portray Christ as a man of limits. At one point He is shown in a state of such fatigue that He remains sleeping in a boat during a violent storm (Mat. 8:24-26). In another event, Jesus had to lay hands upon a man a second time in order to heal him (Mark 8:22-25). Christ was also depicted as vulnerable when He appealed to the Father to remove the horror of His impending crucifixion (Luke 22:42).

Throughout the Scriptures, Christ displays a variety of emotions such as love, joy, anger, disappointment, agitation, and reflection. Whether it was His rage at the hypocrisy of religious leaders, His lamenting the plight of Jerusalem, or His tenderness when receiving little children, Jesus was portrayed

as He truly was—real (Mat. 23; Mark 10:14-16). It is hard to imagine any biographer being more objective in his account of a person's life than the gospel writers were when recounting the life of Christ.

### ***The Testimony of Acts***

There is an important fact that is ignored by most critics of the New Testament. At least one New Testament book was authored by a professional writer who was commissioned to chronicle the history of the early New Testament Church. Therefore, the book of Acts is a credible secular and religious record of the Church during the first century. It was written by Luke who was sponsored to write this history by a man named Theophilus. Although little is known of this sponsor, most authorities believe he was a high-ranking Roman official. Luke introduced the book of Acts as well as his own gospel with a tribute to him:

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus (Luke 1:1-3).

The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen (Acts 1:1-2).

With the words “until the day in which He was taken up,” Luke is reporting that Christ had risen from the dead as a historical fact. Although many skeptics today argue the veracity of such a claim, it would have been almost impossible

to rebut during the first century. Durant again noted that understanding that Christ existed, even among those who did not believe He was the Messiah:

About the middle of this first century a pagan named Thallus, in a fragment preserved by Julius Africanus, argued that the abnormal darkness alleged to have accompanied the death of Christ was a purely natural phenomenon and coincidence; the argument took the existence of Christ for granted. The denial of that existence seems never to have occurred even to the bitterest gentile or Jewish opponents of nascent Christianity (*The Story of Civilization*, vol. III, p. 555).

The actual crucifixion of Christ was witnessed by a relative few. However, the events taking place during His death were seen by thousands. In addition, according to the Apostle Paul, there were over 500 eyewitnesses to the Messiah's resurrection:

After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep (1Corinthians 15:6).

### ***Eyewitness Testimony***

The New Testament record was chronicled by men of diverse backgrounds. Despite all their differences, they had something in common. All claimed to have known Christ personally. Therefore, they wrote as eyewitnesses. Consider the words of Peter who authored two epistles:

For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty (2Peter 1:16).

Peter asserts without ambiguity that he knew Christ and was an eyewitness to His life. The testimonies of others confirm that Peter knew well this man called Jesus. It is also important to understand that the stories concerning Peter's association with Christ are often less than flattering.

On more than one occasion, Jesus chastised Peter for his lack of faith. Once, as Peter was asserting his loyalty, Christ told him that Satan wanted to destroy Peter and Christ explained that He had prayed for him (Luke 22:31-32). These words are not very becoming considering Peter was one of the premier leaders in the New Testament. Yet, these biblical characterizations depicting his human frailties prove that both the gospel writer's, and Peter's words, are unshakably honest. He knew Jesus personally and declared that fact without apology.

The Apostle John is the second most prolific New Testament author. He too declared a personal knowledge of Christ and His message, stating:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life. the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ (1John 1:1-3).

These are just two examples of men who wrote powerfully about a historical Jesus. They were able to do so because they knew Him. They heard Him speak, were eyewitnesses to His miracles, and saw Him alive after He was crucified and His body placed in a tomb.

### ***From Fear to Devotion***

A tremendous change can be seen in the disciples after the resurrection of Christ. Prior to that time, these men were often fearful. They warned Jesus against going to certain cities fearing for His life (John 11:8). Most of the disciples fled when Christ was arrested. Based on his fear, Peter denied Jesus three times. However, after these men personally witnessed the resurrection, their commitment to Christ and His Kingdom was unshakable. They were willing to die so that the gospel would be preached.

Consider the Apostle Peter. Tradition holds that, while preaching the gospel in Rome, he was condemned to death. As historian John Foxe wrote:

Hegesippus saith that Nero sought matter against Peter to put him to death; which, when the people perceived, they entreated Peter with much ado that he would fly the city. Peter, through their importunity at length persuaded, prepared himself to avoid. But, coming to the gate, he saw the Lord Christ come to meet him, to whom he, worshipping, said, "Lord, whither dost Thou go?" To whom He answered and said, "I am come again to be crucified." By this, Peter, perceiving his suffering to be understood, returned into the city. Jerome saith that he was crucified, his head being down and his feet upward, himself so requiring, because he was [he said] unworthy to be crucified after the same form and manner as the Lord was (*Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, Ch. 1, pp. 12-13).

Those who followed Christ were subjected to physical persecution and public ridicule. Many were willing to suffer and die for Jesus. It is believed that all of the apostles were killed for their faithfulness except for John. The commitment of Christ's followers speaks volumes about the reality of Jesus' existence.

Even though being a follower of Christ might require giving up family, friends, positions of social standing and sometimes their very lives, those among the community of faith were willing to pay that price. If Jesus was simply a fabrication, why would people go to such extremes? Nobody would lay down their life to perpetuate a myth. This attests to the reality that Jesus existed, and that He was the Son of God.

### ***The Witness of a Converted Skeptic***

In another example, the Apostle Paul was the most prolific New Testament author. His epistles have been the subject of study by Christians more than any other books of the Bible. Paul was persecuted greatly for his faith and spent the end of his life in a Roman prison awaiting execution.

However, prior to his conversion, Paul was one of the greatest persecutors of Christians in the Roman world. He dragged people into prison for their belief in Christ, and even consented to their death. He personally authorized the execution of Stephen who was the first New Testament martyr (Acts 7:60-8:1). But after his conversion, Paul's commitment to Christianity was renowned (Acts 9:1-9).

### ***The Witness of History***

Is there no word about Jesus in secular history? Believing this to be the case, many reject Christ as a historical figure. However, the words of history actually corroborate the biblical record.

Consider the chronicle of Cornelius Tacitus who lived from 55 to 117 A.D. Tacitus was a Roman statesman and historian. He held several positions in the government, including that of proconsul, or governor of the provinces in Asia. Tacitus is also regarded as the "greatest historian" of ancient Rome. One of his crowning achievements is a 16-volume history of the Julian emperors from Tiberius to Nero written between 115 and 117 A.D. In this work, Tacitus mentioned persistent reports of Jesus' resurrection, stating:

...to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hand of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular (*Annals*, 15.44).

When using the words “a most mischievous superstition,” Tacitus was referring to the belief in Christ’s resurrection. This belief spread throughout the empire. When Roman officials heard of it, they considered it a superstitious fallacy. However, eyewitnesses called it a miracle.

Tacitus was not the only historian who wrote of the biblical Jesus. Suetonius Tranquillus lived between from 69 to 140 AD and was a contemporary of Tacitus. Suetonius was a Roman biographer and historian whose writings are one of the primary sources of information about the lives of the first twelve Caesars. His work was so popular that his biographical approach set a pattern for historical writing.

Suetonius wrote about a wave of riots which broke out in a large Jewish community of Rome in 49 A.D. Even though the even occurred before he was born, nobody questioned the validity of the document because it was a matter of fact. In his chronicle called *Claudius*, Suetonius explained that the Jews were banished from the city:

He banished from Rome all the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of one Chrestus (XXV).

The name of “Chrestus” is a variant spelling of Christ. It is the same term used by Tacitus. The point Suetonius was making is that riots broke out because of views regarding Christ that were in opposition to the leadership of Rome. This observation agrees with the writings of the New Testament. In the book of Acts, Luke wrote that Aquila and his wife Priscilla were forced to leave Rome because of the Emperor’s decree:

After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome (Acts 18:1-2).

Suetonius wrote about the impact of Christ on more than one occasion. In his work regarding Emperor Nero, he said that Christians were being punished for their belief that Christ was God:

He [Nero] likewise inflicted punishments on the Christians, a sort of people who held a new and impious superstition (XVI).

Suetonius continued to chronicle the great persecution inflicted on the early Christian Church. Clearly some of Rome’s leading historians acknowledged that Jesus was a historical man and an important part of history.

Christ was also written about by authors of less prominence. One such author was a man named Phlegon who was born in the second century A.D. His chief work was the *Olympiads*; a historical compendium of 16 books covering the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 229<sup>th</sup> Olympiad. Documenting unique events during the time of Christ, this historian wrote:

In the fourth year, however, of Olympiad 202 [year 32/33], an eclipse of the sun happened, greater and

more excellent than any that had happened before it; at the sixth hour, day turned into dark night, so that the stars were seen in the sky, and an earthquake in Bithynia toppled many buildings of the city of Nicaea. These things [are according to] the aforementioned man (*Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, English translation of Latin text by Felix Jacoby, p. 1165).

Well known historians understood that the biblical Jesus was a real person. They did not all live and write during Christ's time, but they accepted the impact of His ministry as being historical fact.

### ***Pliny the Younger***

Gaius Plinius Caecilius II, commonly known as Pliny the younger, was a Roman lawyer, author, and magistrate of ancient Rome (61-112 A.D.). Pliny wrote hundreds of letters that are regarded as historical sources of information for his time. While serving as governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, he was concerned about the rapid growth of Christianity as a potential threat to Rome. Pliny wrote to Emperor Trajan telling of interrogation and torture of those considered to be Christians while gathering information about the movement. In one instance, he questioned two deaconesses and wrote the emperor concerning the information he had obtained:

They [Christians] were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses of a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to 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 (*Epistulae*, X 96).

When Pliny referred to “food of an ordinary and innocent kind,” he addressed a rumor regarding the Christian Passover ceremony. The rumor was that Christians took the symbols of bread and wine literally, and met secretly to eat human flesh and drink human blood. Though this tale proved to be false, Pliny was unsure how to proceed. The Christian movement was growing and there seemed nothing he could do to stop it. Pliny wrote:

The matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms (ibid).

Christianity had spread throughout the region affecting vast numbers of people. The concern of this governor validates the biblical account that Jesus is a historical individual, and that His ministry rocked the religious community of Asia Minor.

### ***Justin Martyr***

Justin Martyr was a second century philosopher and theologian who wrote about 150 A.D. Though his parents were pagans, Justin converted to Christianity. In one of his writings, he explained that the events of Christ’s crucifixion could be validated by the written report of Pontius Pilate who was the Roman governor in Jerusalem during the time of Jesus’ ministry.

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 in the “Acts of Pontius Pilate” (First Apology XXXV).

Although the *Acts of Pontius Pilate* is no longer in existence, those historical annals were also referred to by Tertullian. Both of these historians knew that this was an official Roman document that would verify the manner in which Christ was killed.

It is interesting to note that there were two archives kept in ancient Rome. One consisted of the minutes of senatorial meetings; the other a correspondence sent to the emperor from various parts of the empire. Any communication from Pontius Pilate to Tiberius would have belonged to this second archive.

### ***Julius Africanus***

Julius Africanus was a traveler and historian of the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. In one document he spoke of the crucifixion of Christ and the miraculous events that followed. In so doing, he also mentioned two other historians that documented these events and suggested that these happenings were of a divine nature. Africanus wrote:

A most terrible darkness fell over all the world, the rocks were torn apart by an earthquake, and many places both in Judaea and the rest of the world were thrown down. In the third book of his Histories Thallus dismisses this darkness as a solar eclipse, unreasonably, as it seems to me. For the Hebrews celebrate the Passover on Luna 14, and what happened to the Saviour occurred one day before the Passover. But an eclipse of the sun takes place when the moon passes under the sun. The only time when this can happen is in the interval between the first day of the new moon and the last day of the old moon, when they are in conjunction. How then could one believe an eclipse took place when the

moon was almost in opposition to the sun? So be it. Let what had happened beguile the masses, and let this wonderful sign to the world be considered a solar eclipse through an optical [illusion]. Phlegon records that during the reign of Tiberius Caesar there was a complete solar eclipse at full moon from the sixth to the ninth hour; it is clear that this is the one. But what have eclipses to do with an earthquake, rocks breaking apart, resurrection of the dead, and a universal disturbance of this nature (*Chronography*, George Syncellus citing Julius Africanus, chapter 391, p. 465).

This description of events surrounding the crucifixion is entirely consistent with the gospel. As Matthew wrote:

Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land... Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many (Matthew 27:45-53)

There are many historical documents verifying that the historical Jesus lived. Few ancient figures can boast of the amount of material that has been written about Christ. Further, these documents prove that his followers believed the details concerning His life, death, and resurrection. The biblical Jesus is unimpeachable, and His life had a powerful impact on the course of history.

### ***No Evidence Disproving the Resurrection***

Because of their abhorrence of pagan gods and religious rites, Christianity was a faith with powerful enemies. These opponents resorted to lies and acts of violence toward

true believers. The first century Roman authorities were adversaries of Christ and Christianity. They would not publicize Him or His message. Instead, they minimized Jesus and His teachings in an attempt to control the spread of the new religion. Like the later Roman Catholic Church, they would burn documents and literature of those dissidents who held fast to the original faith.

Despite such persecution, the New Testament books survived. These documents prove that Jesus was real and the beliefs of His Church genuine. Even secular history acknowledges that Christ was crucified and that many numbers believed He was resurrected from the dead.

Christ's resurrection is a central theme of the Church. If the resurrection could be proven untrue, Christianity would collapse. However, this one thing that enemies of Christianity could have done to shut down the movement was never successful. Why?

Disproving the resurrection could have easily been accomplished in several ways if it had never happened. The enemies of Christ could have produced Jesus' body. They could have gathered testimony of a plot by Jesus' followers to stage His resurrection, or produced credible witnesses claiming Jesus' disciples or others stole they body.

However, history never recorded a legitimate attempt to invalidate the resurrection. This is because there was no credible evidence to prove Christ was not resurrected. The only witnesses that could be produced were those who saw His crucifixion, and those who later witnessed Him alive.

### ***A Respected Modern Historian Speaks***

Though many have recently tried to discredit the historical record of Christ's existence, some more modern historians agree that the Messiah known as Jesus did exist, and that the Bible is a legitimate source of historical fact. The well-regarded historian Will Durant authored one of the most respected and well researched works regarding ancient

history. In his ten-volume series of books titled *The Story of Civilization*, Durant wrote the following regarding the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John:

Criticism generally agrees in giving the Gospel of Mark priority, and in dating it between 65 and 70... Our Gospel of Mark was apparently circulated while some of the apostles, or the immediate disciples, were still alive; it seems unlikely, therefore, that it differed substantially from their recollection and interpretation of Christ. We may conclude, with the brilliant but judicious Schweitzer, that the Gospel of Mark is in essentials “genuine history” ... That a few simple men should in one generation have invented so powerful and appealing a personality, so lofty an ethic and so inspiring a vision of human brotherhood, would be a miracle far more incredible than any recorded in the Gospels. After two centuries of Higher Criticism the outlines of the life, character, and teaching of Christ, remain reasonably clear, and constitute the most fascinating feature in the history of Western man (Vol. III, pp. 556-557).

Durant’s words could not be more accurate. To fabricate the birth, ministry, and death of Christ would be an insurmountable task. Far more believable than a religious conspiracy is the truth of Jesus’ birth, ministry, death, and resurrection. The question is, will you accept the truth?

### ***History in Advance***

The voice of both the secular and New Testament records speaks dynamically regarding a historical Jesus. His life and teachings are thoroughly documented by eyewitness testimony as well as objective sources. However, there is an even more dramatic record regarding the Son of God. In addition to the 27 books of the New Testament that reflect back on His life, there are 39 books of the Old Covenant which

describe His life centuries before He was even born.

These books give extraordinary detail about the historical Jesus. They include a detailed description of His lineage, birth, teachings, miracles, betrayal, crucifixion, resurrection, and His ascension to heaven. These prophecies span the pages of the Old Covenant from the third chapter of Genesis to the third chapter of Malachi. There are virtually hundreds of prophecies regarding Christ that came true. Consider the words of Sidney Collette:

There are no less than 333 prophecies in the Old Testament which center in the person of the Messiah – every one of which, in relation to His earthly life has been fulfilled to the letter (*All About the Bible*, p. 84).

The statistical probability of every Old Covenant prophecy regarding Jesus being correct is one in several trillion. For all of them to come true without divine orchestration would be just as improbable as the earth and its creatures existing through a process of evolution. But the prophecies about Christ did come true and they were declared with pinpoint accuracy centuries earlier.

God's power to shape the course of history is dramatically declared in the Scriptures. The Prophet Isaiah made note of this, stating:

Remember the former things of old, for I *am* God, and *there is* no other; I *am* God, and *there is* none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times *things* that are not *yet* done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure (Isaiah 46:9-10).

The prophecies in the Old Covenant reveal God's great plan concerning His creation. That plan will ultimately include the return of Christ and an establishment of His

Kingdom on the earth. However, before that Kingdom comes, God had to provide a perfect sacrifice to atone for the widespread sin of the human race (Heb. 9). That sacrifice was His Son who died for all humanity.

The tables on the following pages identify a small number of the Old Covenant prophecies about Christ and their fulfillment in the New Testament documents.

<i>Prophesied</i>	<i><b>His Birth and Childhood</b></i>	<i>Fulfilled</i>
Jer. 23:5-6	He would be a descendent of David	Luke 1:32-33
Mal. 3:1	A forerunner would precede Him	Luke 1:17
Isa. 7:14	He would be born of a virgin	Mat. 1:23
Mic. 5:2	He would be born in Bethlehem	Mat. 2:5-6
Jer. 31:15	Thousands of children would be murdered after Jesus' birth in an attempt to kill Him	Mat. 2:18
Hos. 11:1	His family would flee to Egypt	Mat. 2:15
Isa. 9:1-2	He would live in the region of Galilee	Mat. 4:15

<i>Prophesied</i>	<b><i>His Life and Ministry</i></b>	<i>Fulfilled</i>
Psa. 69:9	He would cast the moneychangers out of the temple	John 2:13-17
Isa. 61:1-2	He would preach the gospel	Luke 4:18
Psa. 78:2	He would teach by parables	Mat. 13:35
Isa. 53:4	He would heal people	Mat. 8:17
Zec. 9:9-10	He would enter Jerusalem on a donkey	Mat. 21:5
Psa. 118:25-26	People would cry out to Him, "Hosanna!"	Mat. 21:9
Psa. 118:22-24	He would be rejected by most	Mat. 21:42
Zec. 11:12	He would be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver	Mat. 27:9
Psa. 41:9	He would be betrayed by one with whom He shared a meal	John 13:26

<i>Propheesied</i>	<b><i>His Crucifixion</i></b>	<i>Fulfilled</i>
Isa. 52:14	He would be brutally beaten	John 19:1
Psa. 22:16	He would be crucified	Luke 23:33
Psa. 34:20	None of His bones would be broken	John 19:36
Isa. 53:12	He would be crucified with malefactors	Luke 23:33
Psa. 22:18	Soldiers would gamble for His garments	John 19:24
Zec. 12:10	His side would be pierced	John 19:37
Psa. 22:1	He would cry out, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?”	Mat. 27:46
Psa. 22:2	Darkness would cover the earth	Mat. 27:45
Psa. 22:16	His hands and feet would be pierced	Lk. 24:39- 40
Psa. 22:6-8	He would be mocked while being crucified	Mat. 27:43
Psa. 69:21	He would be given vinegar and gall	Mat. 27:34

<i>Propheisied</i>	<i>His Burial and Resurrection</i>	<i>Fulfilled</i>
Isa. 53:9	He would be buried by a rich man	Mat. 27: 57-60
Jonah 1:17	He would be in the grave three days and three nights	Mat. 12:40
Psa. 16:10	He would be raised from the dead	Mark 16:6
Psa. 68:18	He would ascend to heaven	Acts 1:9-11
Psa. 110:1	He would sit on the right hand of the Father	Acts 7:56

### ***A Final Thought***

Jesus of Nazareth was a historical figure. He walked the countryside of Palestine and preached a powerful message of a coming kingdom. He was crucified and raised from the dead. The impact of His life is documented in both the biblical and secular record. Regardless of what critics might claim, the proof of His existence may be denied by some, but such denial is futile. Even those who denied Christ during His lifetime had to resort to perjured testimony in order to win their case (Mat. 26; Mark 14). A similar situation is happening today.

Jesus was real. He preached a powerful message of hope. He offered Himself as an atoning sacrifice for mankind. He was crucified and rose at the end of the third day just as He said He would. This brings us to another wonderful truth—He is alive today!

The Eternal Church of God offers a variety of books, booklets, articles, audio, and video to help people better understand the Bible. Some of the printed material available includes:

*The Gospel of the Kingdom of God*

*Sabbath Confessions*

*The Truth about Christmas*

*The Truth about Easter*

*The Truth about Halloween*

*Read the Book!*

*True Freedom*

*What it Means to be Born Again*

*This is Not the Only Time of Salvation*

*Why the Ten Commandments are Required Today*

*Understanding the Mark of the Beast*

*The Unclean and the Clean*

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