

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE  
LIFE OF JESUS

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## **FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS (Born AD 37):**

“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 among 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.” *Antiquities*. xviii.33. (Early second century).

## **CORENELIUS TACITUS (Born Around AD 52):**

Tacitus was a Roman Historian.

“But not all the relief that could come from man, not all the bounties that the prince could bestow, nor all the atonements which could be presented to the gods, availed to relieve Nero from the infamy of being believed to have ordered the conflagration, the fire of Rome. Hence to suppress the rumour, he falsely charged with the guilt, and punished with the most exquisite tortured, the persons commonly called Christians, who were hated for their enormities. Christus, the name of the founder, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius: but the pernicious superstition, repressed for a time broke out again, not only through Judea, where the mischief originated, but through the city of Rome also.” *Annals* xv. 44.

## **LUCIAN OF SAMOSATA:**

He was a satirist of the second century, who spoke scornfully of Christ and the Christians. He connected them with the synagogues of Palestine and alluded to Christ as “. . . the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced this new cult into the world . . . Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they were all brothers one of 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.”

### **SUETONIUS (AD 120):**

He was a Roman historian and a court official under Hardrian, analyst of the Imperial House. According to him; “As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Christ, he expelled them from Rome.”

He also writes: “Punishment by Nero was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new mischievous superstition.”

### **PLINIUS SECUNDUS (PLINY THE YOUNGER):**

He was the Governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor (AD 112). Pliny was writing to the emperor Trajan seeking counsel as to how to treat the Christians. He wrote:

“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 do to any wicked deeds, never to commit any fraud, theft, adultery, never to falsify their word, not to deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up.”

### **TERTULLIAN:**

He was a Jurist-theologian of Carthage. In a defense of Christianity (AD 197) before the Roman authorities in Africa, mentions the exchange between Tiberius and Pontius Pilate: “Tiberius accordingly, in those days the Christian name made its entry into the world, having himself received intelligence from the truth of Christ's divinity, brought the matter before the senate, with his own decision in favor of Christ. The senate, because it had not given the approval itself, rejected his proposal. Caesar held to his opinion, threatening wrath against all the accusers of the Christians.”

### **THALLUS:**

He was a Samaritan-born historian, and one of the first Gentile writers who mentions Christ. He wrote about Christ around 52 AD. Portions of his writings have been cited by other writers. One such writer is Julius Africanus,

a Christian writer about 221 AD.

Quoting Thallus on the crucifixion of Christ, Africanus states, “On the whole world, there pressed a most fearful darkness, and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down.” Thallus calls this darkness, “as appears to me without reason, an eclipse of the sun.”

### **LETTER OF MARA BAR-SERAPION:**

This was a letter written some time later than AD73, by a Syrian named Mara Bar-Serapion to his son Serapion. Mara Bar-Serapion was in prison at the time, but he wrote to encourage his son in the pursuit of wisdom, and pointed out that those who persecuted wise men were overtaken by misfortune. He mentions the death of Socrates, Pythagoras and Christ:

1. “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 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, lived in complete dispersion. But Socrates did not die permanently; he lived through the teaching of Plato. Pythagoras did not die for ever; he lived in the stature of Hera. Nor did the wise King die for ever; He lived through the teaching which He had given.”

### **JUSTIN MARTYR:**

Around AD 150, Justin Martyr, addressing his *Defense of Christianity* to the Emperor Antoninus Pius, referred him to Pilate's report. Justin assumed that this report must be preserved in the Imperial Archives which kept a record of all government activities. He pointed out that the words, “They pierced my hands and my feet were a description of the nails that were fixed in His hands and His feet on the cross; and after he was crucified Him they cast lots for His garments, and divided them among themselves; and that these things were so, you may learn from the 'Acts' which were recorded under Pontius Pilate.” Later he says. “That He performed these miracles you may easily be

satisfied from the 'Acts' of Pontius Pilate.”

### **THE JEWISH TALMUDS:**

Talmuds are commentaries on the Law written by Jewish scholars between AD100 to 500. Several of these Talmuds have survived, including what is known as the Babylonian Talmud. Many of them contain direct, indirect, and veiled reference to Jesus, His miracles, and even to his mother's virgin-pregnancy.

### **EVIDENCE FROM THE BABYLONIAN TALMUD:**

There are only a few clear references to Jesus in the Babylonian Talmud, a collection of Jewish rabbinical writings compiled between approximately A.D. 70-500. Given this time frame, it is naturally supposed that earlier references to Jesus are more likely to be historically reliable than later ones. In the case of the Talmud, the earliest period of compilation occurred between A.D. 70-200. The most significant reference to Jesus from this period states:

“On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald . . . cried, 'He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy.'”

Let's look at this passage. You may have noticed that it refers to someone named “Yeshu.” So why would we think this is Jesus? Actually, “Yeshu” (or “Yeshua”) is how Jesus' name is pronounced in Hebrew. But what does the passage mean by saying that Jesus “was hanged”? Doesn't the New Testament say he was crucified? Yes it does. But the term “hanged” can function as a synonym for “crucified.” For instance, Galatians 3:13 declares that Christ was “hanged”, and Luke 23:39 applies this term to the criminals who were crucified with Jesus. So the Talmud declares that Jesus was crucified on the eve of Passover. But what of the cry of the herald that Jesus was to be stoned? This may indicate what the Jewish leaders were planning to do, but Roman involvement changed their plans!

The passage also tells us why Jesus was crucified. It claims He practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy! Since this accusation comes from a rather hostile source, we should not be too surprised if Jesus is described somewhat differently than in the New Testament. But if we make allowances

for this, what might such charges imply about Jesus?

The charge of sorcery is similar to the Pharisees' accusation that Jesus cast out demons "by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons." But notice this charge actually tends to confirm the New Testament claim that Jesus performed miraculous feats. Apparently Jesus' miracles were too well attested to deny. The only alternative was to ascribe them to sorcery! Likewise, the charge of enticing Israel to apostasy parallels Luke's account of the Jewish leaders who accused Jesus of misleading the nation with his teaching. This charge tends to corroborate the New Testament record of Jesus' powerful teaching ministry. Thus, if read carefully, this passage from the Talmud confirms much of our knowledge about Jesus from the New Testament.

There is much evidence from secular history for the authenticity of Jesus' life. There are over 39 extra Biblical sources that attest to over 100 facts concerning Christ and his life. Here I have listed only a few. Feel free to copy any or all to aide you in your studies or defense of the Bible.