

Jesus Christ – Did He Exist?

Question #1: "Did Jesus really exist? Is there any historical evidence of Jesus Christ?"

Answer from GotQuestions.org: 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 Bible cannot be considered a source of evidence for the existence of Jesus. The New Testament contains hundreds of references to Jesus Christ. There are those who date the writing of the Gospels to the second century A.D., more than 100 years after Jesus' death. Even if this were the case (which we strongly dispute), in terms of ancient evidences, writings less than 200 years after events took place are considered very reliable evidences. Further, the vast majority of scholars (Christian and non-Christian) will grant that the Epistles of Paul (at least some of them) were in fact written by Paul in the middle of the first century A.D., less than 40 years after Jesus' death. In terms of ancient manuscript evidence, this is extraordinarily strong proof of the existence of a man named Jesus in Israel in the early first century A.D.

It is also important to recognize that in A.D. 70, the Romans invaded and destroyed Jerusalem and most of Israel, slaughtering its inhabitants. Entire cities were literally burned to the ground. We should not be surprised, then, if much evidence of Jesus' existence was destroyed. Many of the eyewitnesses of Jesus would have been killed. These facts likely limited the amount of surviving eyewitness testimony of Jesus.

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 Jesus can be drawn from secular historical sources. Some of the more important historical evidences of Jesus include the following:

The first-century Roman Tacitus, who is considered one of the more accurate historians of the ancient world, mentioned superstitious “Christians” (from Christus, which is Latin for Christ), who suffered under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius. Suetonius, chief secretary to Emperor Hadrian, wrote that there was a man named Chrestus (or Christ) who lived during the first century (Annals 15.44).

Flavius Josephus is the most famous Jewish historian. In his Antiquities he refers to James, “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ.” There is a controversial verse (18:3) 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 in a discussion of the darkness which followed the crucifixion of Christ (Extant Writings, 18).

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

The Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 43a) 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 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.

Then we have all the Gnostic writings (The Gospel of Truth, The Apocryphon of John, The Gospel of Thomas, The Treatise on Resurrection, etc.) that all mention Jesus.

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.

Recommended Resource: The Case for the Real Jesus by Lee Strobel.

Question #2: "Who was the real historical Jesus?"

Answer from GotQuestions.org: Without a doubt one of the most frequently asked questions is "Who was Jesus?" There is no doubt that Jesus has, by far, the highest name recognition throughout the world. Fully one-third of our world's population—about 2.5 billion people—call themselves Christians. Islam, which comprises about 1.5 billion people, actually recognizes Jesus as the second greatest prophet after Mohammed. Of the remaining 3.2 billion people (roughly half the world's population), most have either heard of the name of Jesus or know about Him.

If one were to put together a summary of the life of Jesus from His birth to His death, it would be somewhat sparse. He was born of Jewish parents in Bethlehem, a small town south of Jerusalem, while the territory was under Roman occupation. His parents moved north to Nazareth, where He grew up; hence He was commonly known as "Jesus of Nazareth." His father

was a carpenter, so Jesus likely learned that trade in His early years. Around thirty years of age, He began a public ministry. He chose a dozen men of dubious reputation as His disciples and worked out of Capernaum, a large fishing village and trading center on the coast of the Sea of Galilee. From there He traveled and preached throughout the region of Galilee, often moving among neighboring Gentiles and Samaritans with intermittent journeys to Jerusalem.

Jesus' unusual teachings and methodology startled and troubled many. His revolutionary message, coupled with astonishing miracles and healings, garnered a huge following. His popularity among the populace grew rapidly, and, as a result, it was noticed by the well-entrenched leaders of the Jewish faith. Soon, these Jewish leaders became jealous and resentful of His success. Many of these leaders found His teachings offensive and felt that their established religious traditions and ceremonies were being jeopardized. They soon plotted with the Roman rulers to have Him killed. It was during this time that one of Jesus' disciples betrayed Him to the Jewish leaders for a paltry sum of money. Shortly thereafter, they had Him arrested, engineered a hastily arranged series of mock trials, and summarily executed Him by crucifixion.

But unlike any other in history, Jesus' death was not the end of His story; it was, in fact, the beginning. Christianity exists only because of what happened after Jesus died. Three days after His death, His disciples and many others began to claim that He had returned to life from the dead. His grave was found empty, the body gone, and numerous appearances were witnessed by many different groups of people, at different locations, and among dissimilar circumstances.

As a result of all this, people began to proclaim that Jesus was the Christ, or the Messiah. They claimed His resurrection validated the message of forgiveness of sin through His sacrifice. At first, they declared this good news, known as the gospel, in Jerusalem, the same city where He was put to death. This new following soon became known as the Way (see Acts 9:2; Acts 19:9; Acts 19:23; Acts 24:22) and expanded rapidly. In a short period of time, this gospel message of faith spread even beyond the region, expanding as far as Rome as well as to the very outermost of its vast empire.

It was Dr. James Allan Francis who penned the following words that aptly describe the influence of Jesus through the history of mankind:

"Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher.

"He never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put His foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself. . . .

"While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against Him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was turned over to His enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. While He was dying His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth—His coat. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

"Nineteen long centuries have come and gone, and today He is a centerpiece of the human race and leader of the column of progress.

"I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built; all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life."

The late Wilbur Smith, respected Bible scholar of the last generation, once wrote, "The latest edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica gives twenty thousand words to this person, Jesus, and does not even hint that He did not exist—more words, by the way, than are given to Aristotle, Alexander, Cicero, Julius Caesar, or Napoleon Bonaparte."

George Buttrick, recognized as one of the ten greatest preachers of the twentieth century, wrote: "Jesus gave history a new beginning. In every land he is at home. . . . His birthday is kept across the world. His death-day set a gallows against every skyline."

Even Napoleon himself admitted, "I know men and I tell you that Jesus Christ was no mere man: between him and whoever else in the world there is no possible term of comparison."

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