

# Jesus Outside the Bible

*What Roman historians, a Jewish historian, governors, and even hostile sources record about Jesus*

Imagine you could erase every page of the New Testament — every Gospel, every letter of Paul, the whole library that Christians treasure — and then ask a simple question: would we still know that Jesus of Nazareth ever lived? It is a fair question, and a serious one. Skeptics sometimes suggest that the only people who mention Jesus are the people who already believed in him, as though the entire record were one long circle of the faithful talking to themselves.

This week we test that suggestion by listening to a very different set of voices. Not preachers. Not apostles. Not friends. We turn to a Roman senator who despised Christians as a "mischievous superstition," a Jewish historian in the pay of the emperor, a provincial governor trying to figure out how many believers he should execute, and a satirist who thought the whole movement was a joke. These are outsiders. Several of them are hostile. None of them had any reason to help the church — and that is exactly what makes their testimony worth hearing.

## THE PRINCIPLE

Evidence is strongest when it comes from a witness who gains nothing — or loses something — by giving it. An enemy's admission carries a weight a friend's praise cannot.

## THE STANDARD

We will let each source say only what it actually says. Where the evidence is disputed or thin, we will say so. Overstating the case never serves the truth.

We begin with the most prized category of all: professional historians of the ancient world, men whose business was getting the record right. Three stand out — two Romans and one Jew — and none of them was a Christian.

**Tacitus** *Annals, AD 115*

*"Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus ..."*

Rome's greatest historian, writing of Nero's persecution, names the founder, the executioner, and the era — Pilate under Tiberius — and calls the faith a "mischievous superstition," language no Christian would invent.

Cornelius Tacitus (c. AD 55–120) has been called the greatest historian of ancient Rome, admired even by his critics for his integrity. He had no fondness for Christians; in the same passage he describes them as "hated for their abominations" and reports their torture without a flicker of sympathy for their beliefs. Yet in the course of explaining whom Nero scapegoated for the great fire of Rome, Tacitus simply records the facts: the movement was named after Christus, who was executed under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius (AD 14–37), and whose teaching — checked for a moment by his death — "again broke out," first in Judaea and then in Rome itself.

That last phrase is striking. Tacitus is no friend of the resurrection, but he is reporting, almost in passing, that a movement which should have died with its leader did the opposite. The faith of the early church was that the crucified Christ had risen — and here a hostile Roman, with no intention of preaching, bears unwitting testimony to the very thing the church was claiming.

**Suetonius** *Lives of the Caesars, c. AD 120*

*"Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from the city."*

Writing of the emperor Claudius, Suetonius records the AD 49 expulsion of Jews from Rome — the same event Acts 18:2 mentions of Aquila and Priscilla. "Chrestus" is a known variant spelling of "Christ."

Suetonius, chief secretary to the emperor Hadrian, had access to the imperial records. His reference is brief and a little garbled — he seems to think "Chrestus" was personally present stirring up trouble in Rome, when in fact the disturbances were disputes over Christ's teaching within the Jewish community. But the value lies precisely in the offhand nature of it. Here is an independent Roman source, working from official archives, confirming that arguments about Christ were disrupting Rome's Jewish population by AD 49 — barely two decades after the crucifixion. And the detail lines up neatly with Luke's note in Acts 18:2 that Aquila and Priscilla had recently left Italy "because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome."

**Josephus** *Antiquities, AD 90s (Arabic recension)*

*"At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. His conduct was good and he was known to be virtuous ... Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die ... they reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive; accordingly he was perhaps the Messiah ..."*

The first-century Jewish court historian. This more cautious Arabic version — recovered by Professor Schlomo Pines in 1972 — is widely held to preserve what Josephus actually wrote before later Christian copyists embellished it.

Flavius Josephus (AD 37/38–c. 97) was a Jewish priest and Pharisee who, after the war with Rome, became court historian to the emperor Vespasian. His *Antiquities* mentions Jesus twice — once briefly, as "the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ" (James), and once at length. The longer passage is famous and disputed, because the version preserved by Christian scribes contains lines no observant Jew would write ("He was the Christ"). For that reason scholars have long suspected Christian hands tidied it up.

The breakthrough came in 1972, when Professor Schlomo Pines of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem published an Arabic manuscript preserving a more restrained version — one far less likely to have passed through the church's editing. In it the loaded claims are softened to careful reporting: Jesus was "perhaps the Messiah," and the disciples "reported" that he had appeared alive. This is exactly the cautious, secondhand tone we would expect from a Jewish historian who did not himself believe. Stripped to what even skeptics grant, Josephus tells us Jesus was a wise and virtuous teacher with a following among Jews and Gentiles, that Pilate condemned him to

crucifixion, and that his disciples reported him risen on the third day and went on proclaiming his message.

**A note on honesty.** The Josephus passage is genuinely debated, and we will not pretend otherwise. What scholars across the spectrum do affirm is that Josephus referred to Jesus and corroborated the basic shape of the gospel account — his ministry, his death under Pilate, and the disciples' report of his resurrection. We claim no more than the evidence allows.

## GOVERNORS & OFFICIALS

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Historians write about the past. Administrators deal with the present — and one Roman governor left us a letter that is, in a way, even more revealing, because it shows us not what Jesus did but what his followers were doing about him within eighty years of the cross.

**Pliny the Younger** *Letter to the Emperor Trajan, AD 112*

*"They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god ..."*

A governor describing Christian worship for the emperor — not to praise it, but to ask how to prosecute it. His own words record that believers were worshiping Jesus as God within a single lifetime of the crucifixion.

Pliny the Younger governed the province of Bithynia in Asia Minor, and he was puzzled. The Christian movement had grown so strong that the pagan temples stood nearly empty and the sacrificial animals had few buyers. Pliny was interrogating, torturing, and executing believers — he describes the process plainly — but he was unsure how far to go, so he wrote to the emperor Trajan for guidance. In the course of explaining what these people actually did, he gives us a precious snapshot of early Christian worship: they gathered before dawn, sang a hymn "to Christ, as to a god," and bound themselves by oath not to lie, steal, or commit adultery.

Sit with the weight of that phrase from a hostile pen. Within roughly eighty years of the crucifixion, ordinary people across an entire Roman province were rising before daylight to sing to Jesus as God — and they were willing to be tortured and killed rather than stop. This is not a Christian boasting about devotion. It is a magistrate documenting a crime as he prepares to punish it.

## JEWISH & HOSTILE SOURCES

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If anyone had reason to deny Jesus, downplay him, or write him out of history, it was those who opposed the movement directly. Yet even the sources written to dismiss Christianity end up confirming its central facts. An enemy who concedes the basics is a powerful witness.

**The Talmud** *Sanhedrin 43a (Tannaitic period, AD 70–200)*

*"On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged ... because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy."*

The earliest Jewish tradition confirms the fact of Jesus' execution and its timing — the eve of Passover — while reframing his miracles as "sorcery." A hostile verdict that still grants the events.

This passage comes from the earliest, most reliable layer of the Talmud. It is plainly unfriendly: it calls Jesus' works "sorcery" and his teaching "apostasy." But notice what it concedes in the very act of condemning him. It confirms that Jesus was executed, that it happened on the eve of Passover — exactly as the Gospels record — and, by accusing him of sorcery, it concedes that he was known for doing things his opponents could not explain away as ordinary. They did not deny the wonders; they reassigned the source. The word "hanged," incidentally, is no contradiction of crucifixion; the New Testament itself uses the same language (Galatians 3:13).

**Mara Bar-Serapion** *Syrian letter, late 1st–3rd century*

*"What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King? ... Nor did the wise King die for good; he lived on in the teaching which he had given."*

A non-Christian Syrian, writing from prison, ranks Jesus with Socrates and Pythagoras as a wronged wise man — and notes that, unlike them, "he lived on" in his teaching.

**Lucian of Samosata** *Greek satirist, 2nd century*

*"The Christians ... worship a man to this day — the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account."*

A pagan mocking Christian gullibility nonetheless records the core facts: Jesus introduced new teachings, was crucified for them, and is worshiped by his followers, who hold all things in common and do not fear death.

**Phlegon** *Chronicles, early 2nd century (via Julius Africanus)*

*"Phlegon records that, in the time of Tiberius Caesar, at full moon, there was a full eclipse of the sun from the sixth to the ninth hour."*

A pagan chronicler reports a strange daytime darkness and earthquakes during Tiberius' reign — the very period and phenomena the Gospels associate with the crucifixion.

Look at the spread of these witnesses. Mara Bar-Serapion, a Syrian writing to encourage his son, files Jesus alongside Socrates and Pythagoras as a "wise King" unjustly killed — and observes that his teaching outlived him. Lucian, a Greek satirist whose whole aim was to ridicule Christians as easy marks, can do so only by telling us what they believed: that Jesus introduced new rites, was crucified for them, and is worshiped to this day by people so confident of immortality that they hold death in contempt. And Phlegon, a pagan chronicler, records a strange midday darkness and earthquakes in the reign of Tiberius — independently noting the kind of phenomenon the Gospels tie to the hour Jesus died.

Not one of these men was trying to build a case for Christianity. Several were trying to tear it down. And still the basic facts surface, again and again, from every direction.

Now set the New Testament aside entirely, and see what we can reconstruct from these non-Christian sources alone. The portrait is not blank. It is remarkably full.

- 1 Jesus was a real person who lived in first-century Judaea (Tacitus, Josephus, the Talmud).
- 2 He was a wise and virtuous teacher with a reputation for extraordinary deeds — works his enemies attributed to "sorcery" (Josephus, the Talmud).
- 3 He gathered disciples from among both Jews and Gentiles (Josephus, Lucian).
- 4 He was crucified under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius (Tacitus, Josephus, Lucian, Phlegon).
- 5 The execution took place at Passover (the Talmud), and was marked by reports of darkness and earthquakes (Phlegon).
- 6 His followers reported that he rose and appeared to them alive on the third day (Josephus, Tacitus' "again broke out").
- 7 Within a single lifetime, those followers were worshipping him as God, singing to him before dawn and dying rather than recant (Pliny, Lucian).

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independent non-Christian sources naming Jesus within roughly a century of the cross

That is an extraordinary result. For most figures of the ancient world we would be delighted to have a single passing reference. For Jesus of Nazareth — a provincial teacher executed as a criminal, who left no writings, raised no army, and held no office — we have a chorus of unfriendly witnesses preserving the outline of his life, his death, and the explosive conviction of his followers that he was alive again. The faith does not need these sources to stand; its foundation is the testimony of those who knew him. But it is a great encouragement to know that

when the world's own records speak, they do not contradict the Gospel. They confirm its skeleton — and then fall silent exactly where only an eyewitness could go on.

## THE WITNESS FROM WITHIN

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The outsiders give us the bones. The eyewitnesses give us the life. And the apostles were keenly aware of the difference. They were not passing along a legend that had grown in the retelling; they were reporting what they had seen with their own eyes. Peter, near the end of his life, draws exactly that line — between clever stories and sworn testimony.

### GREEK NEW TESTAMENT · 2 PETER 1:16

16 Οὐ γὰρ σεσοφισμένοις μύθοις ἐξακολουθήσαντες ἐγνωρίσαμεν ὑμῖν τὴν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δύναμιν καὶ παρουσίαν, ἀλλ' ἐπόπται γενηθέντες τῆς ἐκείνου μεγαλειότητος.

### ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION · 2 PETER 1:16

16 For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.

## ΕΠΟΠΤΑΙ

*epoptai* · "eyewitnesses"

Peter chooses a weighty word. An *epoptēs* was not someone who heard a rumor secondhand but one admitted to see firsthand — the term was even used of those initiated to behold sacred mysteries with their own eyes. Over against "cleverly devised myths" (*sesophismenois mythois*), Peter stakes the whole Christian claim on direct, personal sight: *we were there*.

This is the heartbeat of the historical case. The Roman senator, the Jewish historian, the governor, and the satirist tell us that Jesus lived, taught, and was crucified, and that his followers worshiped him as risen. But only the men and women who walked with him can tell us *why* — that they had seen his majesty, watched him die, and met him alive again. The outsiders frame the picture; the eyewitnesses fill it in. And the Spirit invites us, across twenty centuries, to trust the ones who were in the room.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Why is the testimony of a hostile or indifferent witness — like Tacitus or Pliny — often considered stronger evidence than the testimony of a friend? Can you think of an everyday example where an opponent's admission carries special weight?

2. The Talmud calls Jesus' miracles "sorcery" rather than denying they happened. What does it tell us that even his enemies argued about the *source* of his works instead of disputing the works themselves?

3. Pliny records Christians singing to Jesus "as to a god" within about eighty years of the crucifixion — and dying rather than stop. What does the speed and cost of that devotion suggest about what these believers thought had actually happened?

4. We were careful to say the faith does not *depend* on these outside sources, yet is genuinely strengthened by them. Why does that distinction matter? How would you explain it to a friend who asked whether your faith rests on Roman historians?

5. In 2 Peter 1:16 the apostle contrasts "cleverly devised myths" with being an "eyewitness." Where do the outside sources stop, and where does only an eyewitness like Peter go on? What can the eyewitnesses tell us that Tacitus never could?

## CLOSING PRAYER

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*Father, we thank You that the truth of Your Son does not hide in a corner. You set His life in the open, in the days of real emperors and governors, so that even those who hated Him left their witness behind. Thank You that Your Gospel has nothing to fear from honest history. Guard us from a faith built on cleverly devised myths, and root us instead in the testimony of those who saw His majesty, watched Him suffer, and met Him risen. When we are tempted to doubt, steady us with the same confidence that sent the early believers singing before dawn and unafraid of death. We ask it in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, crucified under Pontius Pilate, risen on the third day, and worshiped now as God. Amen.*

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