

Evidence for the Historical Jesus

References to Jesus by Ancient, Post-Apostolic Secular Writers and Rabbis

- Thallus (A.D. 52) and Phlegon (A.D. 140) mention Jesus' crucifixion and the resulting darkness
 - Don't have the original documents, but other authors referenced these writer's discussion of the darkness
 - Julius Africanus – c. A.D. 221
 - Origen – early 200s references Phlegon
 - Philopon – c. 500s references Phlegon

“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. This darkness Thallus in the third book of his *History*, calls, as appears to me without reason, an eclipse of the sun. For the Hebrews celebrate the Passover on the 14th day according to the moon, and the passion of our Saviour falls on the day before the Passover; but an eclipse of the sun takes place only when the moon comes under the sun. And it cannot happen at any other time but in the interval between the first day of the new moon and the last of the old, that is, at their junction: how then should an eclipse be supposed to happen when the moon is almost diametrically opposite the sun?

A History of the World, Julius Africanus , A.D. 220

- Flavius Josephus (b. A.D. 37)
 - Wrote *Antiquities of the Jews* A.D. 93
 - Passage 1 Testimonium Flavianum
 - “At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus ...They reported that he had appeared to them after his crucifixion and that he was alive; accordingly, he was perhaps the Messiah concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.”
 - "Passage 2 “John the Baptist”
 - “Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and was a very just punishment for what he did against John called the baptist [the dipper]. For Herod had him killed...”
 - Passage 3 “James and Jesus”
 - “He (High Priest Ananus who in AD 62) had brought before them the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ, who was called James, and some other men, whom he accused of having broken the law, and handed them over to be stoned.”

Pliny the Younger

- Pliny the Younger (Plinius Secundus) was the nephew and adopted son of the elder Pliny, the natural historian who died in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.
- Ten volumes of Pliny's correspondence have survived to the present. In the tenth volume there is a letter from Pliny to the emperor Trajan concerning the Christians of his province. It was written circa AD. 112 while Pliny was serving as governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor.

Pliny the Younger writing to Emperor Trajan

“It is a rule, Sir, which I invariably observe, to refer myself to you in all my doubts; for who is more capable of guiding my uncertainty or informing my ignorance? Having never been present at any trials of the Christians, I am unacquainted with the method and limits to be observed either in examining or punishing them, whether any difference is to be made on account of age, or no distinction allowed between the youngest and the adult; whether repentance admits to a pardon, or if a man has been once a Christian it avails him nothing to recant; whether the mere profession of Christianity, albeit without the commission of crimes, or only the charges associated therewith are punishable-on all these points I am in considerable perplexity.”

“In the meantime, the method I have observed towards those who have been denounced to me as Christians is this: I interrogated them whether they were in fact Christians; if they confessed it, I repeated the question twice, adding the threat of capital punishment; if they still persevered, I ordered them to be executed. For whatever the nature of their beliefs might be, I could at least feel no doubt that determined contumacy and inflexible obstinacy deserved chastisement. There were others also possessed with the same infatuation, but being citizens of Rome, *I directed them to be taken to Rome for trial.*”

These accusations spread (as is usually the case) from the mere fact of the matter being investigated, and several forms of the mischief came to light. A placard was put up, without any signature, accusing a large number of persons by name. Those who denied they were, or had ever been, Christians, and who repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered formal worship with libation and frankincense, before your statue, which I had ordered to be brought into Court for that purpose, together with those of the gods, and who finally cursed Christ-none of which acts, it is said, those who are really Christians can be forced into performing-these I thought it proper to discharge.

Others who were named by the anonymous informer at first confessed themselves Christians, and then denied it; true, they said, *they had been of that persuasion but they had quitted it*, some three years, others many years, and a few as much as twenty-five years previously. They all worshipped your statue and the images of the gods, and cursed Christ.”

“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 verses a hymn to *Christ, as to a god*, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, *not to perform any wicked deed, never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to make it good*; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food- but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.

“Even this practice, however, they had abandoned after the publication of my edict, by which, according to your orders, I had forbidden political associations. I therefore judged it so much the more necessary to extract the real truth, with the assistance of torture, from two female slaves, who were styled deaconesses: but I could discover nothing more than depraved and excessive superstition.”

“I therefore adjourned the proceedings, and betook myself at once to your counsel. For the matter seemed to me well worth referring to you - especially *considering the numbers endangered. Persons of all ranks and ages, and of both sexes are, and will be, involved in the prosecution. For this contagious superstition is not confined to the cities only, but has spread through the villages and rural districts.* It seems possible, however, to check and cure it. It is certain at least that the temples, which had been almost deserted, begin now to be frequented; and the sacred festivals, after a long intermission, are again revived; while there is a general demand for sacrificial meat, which *for some time past had met with but few purchasers.* From hence it is easy to imagine what multitudes may be reclaimed from this error, if a door be left open to repentance?”

Reply to Pliny the Younger (Plinius Secundus) from Emperor Trajan

“My dear Secundus: You have acted with perfect correctness in deciding the cases of those who have been charged before you with being Christians. Indeed, no general decision can be made by which a set form of dealing with them could be established. They must not be ferreted out; if they are charged and convicted, they must be punished, provided that anyone who denies that he is a Christian and gives practical proof of that by invoking our gods is to be pardoned on the strength of this repudiation, no matter what grounds for suspicion may have existed against him in the past. Anonymous documents which are laid before you should receive no attention in any case; they form a very bad precedent and are quite unworthy of the age in which we live.”

We learn...

1. Christians who were citizens of Rome were sent to Rome for trial
 - Paul said the same thing

2. Some recanted of being Christians
 - Jesus stated this would happen...
 - Mt 13:18 “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: ...²⁰ The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹ But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. *When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away...*”

And we learn...

3. They held Christ to be God.
4. They possessed exemplary moral character
5. Some women in the church held the office of deaconess
6. Large numbers were being added to the church
7. The spread of the Gospel had negative financial repercussions to those selling in the various pagan temples and religions

Finally, we learn...

8. By A.D. 112 (within 80 years of Christ's crucifixion), men and women were so convinced of the actual historical life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus that *they voiced those convictions in the face of certain execution.*

Cornelius Tacitus

- Born c. A.D. 52-55
- Became a senator under Emperor Vespasian (Josephus' mentor)
- A.D. 112-113 became governor of Asia
- Respected orator, historian and close friend of Pliny the Younger (who was governor of adjacent Bithynia)

Cornelius Tacitus writing in his Annals c. A.D. 116 writing of the fire that swept Rome in A.D. 64

“So far, the precautions taken were suggested by human prudence: now means were sought for appeasing deity, and application was made to the Sibylline books; at the injunction of which public prayers were offered to Vulcan, Ceres, Proserpine, while Juno was propitiated by the matrons, first in the Capitol, then at the nearest point of the sea shore, where water was drawn for sprinkling the temple and image of the goddess. Ritual banquets and all night vigils were celebrated by women in the married state.

Cornelius Tacitus writing in his Annals c. A.D. 116 writing of the fire that swept Rome in A.D. 64

“But neither human help, nor imperial munificence, nor all the modes of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order. Therefore, to scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians.

Cornelius Tacitus writing in his Annals c. A.D. 116...

“Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, *vast numbers were convicted*, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night.

Cornelius Tacitus writing in his Annals c. A.D. 116...

“Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man.

- Only 30 years after Christ's crucifixion we have reports of Christians being killed for their conviction that Jesus lived, died and rose again on their behalf.

Hadrian

- Emperor of Rome, A.D. 117-138
- Serenius Granianus, proconsul of Asia, wrote to the emperor asking for his advice in dealing with charges against the Christians
- Christians were leading others away from the pagan religions, and away from the idols that were being supplied by local tradesman
- The tradesmen were taking the Christians to court over the lost business

Serenius Granianus writing to Hadrian, Emperor of Rome c. A.D. 117-138 (letter preserved by Eusebius)

“I do not wish, therefore, that the matter should be passed by without examination, so that these men may neither be harassed, nor opportunity of malicious proceedings be offered to informers. If, therefore, the provincials can clearly evince their charges against the Christians, so as to answer before the tribunal, let them pursue this course only, but not by mere petitions, and mere outcries against the Christians. For it is far more proper, if any one would bring an accusation, that you should examine it.”

- More evidence of the existence of committed Christians
- The same things Pliny the Younger had recorded

Suetonius

- Roman historian writing in his *The Life of Claudius*, c. A.D. 115

"Punishment by Nero was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition."

"As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome."

Suetonius

- Who is Chrestus?
 - This is plausibly a reference to the expulsion of Jewish Christians from Rome during the reign of Claudius (A.D. 41-54)
 - Luke, the author of Acts makes mention of this same expulsion, which occurred in A.D. 49 according to the fifth century church father Orosius, in Acts 18:2. "There he [Paul] met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome." Aquila and Priscilla seem to have been converted prior to meeting Paul.

Lucian of Samosata

- Wrote hostile satire directed towards the Christians and their “lawgiver”
- Dated to A.D. 170

Lucian, The Death of Peregrine, 11-13, Ancient Source

“The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day - the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account. . . . You see, these misguided creatures start with the general conviction that they are immortal for all time, which explains the contempt of death and voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them; and then it was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws. All this they take quite on faith, with the result that they despise all worldly goods alike, regarding them merely as common property.

- Lucian also mentions the Christians several times in his *Alexander the False Prophet*, sections 25 and 29.

Mara Bar-Serapion

- ~ A.D. 70 wrote from prison to his son
“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 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, live in complete dispersion. But Socrates did not die for good; he lived on in the teaching of Plato. Pythagoras did not die for good, he lived on in the statue of Hera. Nor did the wise King die for good, he lived on in the teaching which he had given.”

Mara Bar-Serapion

- Some historical errors and from an apologetic value, he could have heard these things from Christians.
- Definitely not a Christian (“our gods...”)
 - But, as with the other writers discussed so far, his writing shows an awareness of Christians, Jesus and his death at a very early date.

- We have original documentation from each of these people claiming that Jesus and Christianity were historical facts.
- Thallus (A.D. 52 – 100)
- Phlegon (A.D. 140)
- Josephus (A.D. 93)
- Justin Martyr (A.D. 150)
- Tertullian (A.D. 200)
- Suetonius (A.D. 115)
- Lucian of Samosata (A.D. 170)
- Pliny the Younger (A.D. 112)
 - Emperor Trajan
- Cornelius Tacitus (A.D. 116)
- Serenius Granianus (A.D. 117 – 138)
 - Emperor Hadrain
- Mara Bar-Serapion (>A.D. 70)
- Eusebius (c. A.D. 325)

- Starting around the time of Ezra (c. 500 B.C.) the rabbis began commenting on scripture (and commenting on those comments)
- Oral tradition. Memorized and passed on generation to generation. These teachings grew with subsequent generations
- By Jesus' time the number of detailed rules had become unbelievably vast and Jesus commented about this

“Tradition of the Elders”

- The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the *tradition of the elders*.

⁴When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other *traditions*, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.

Mark 7:4 (NIV)

¹Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ²“Why do your disciples break the *tradition of the elders*? They don't wash their hands before they eat!”

Matthew 15:1-2 (NIV)

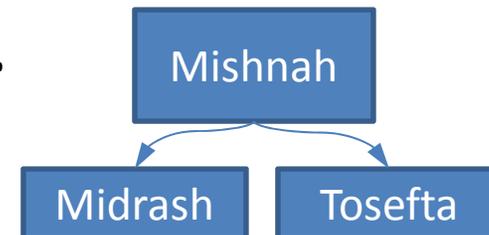
- ³Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your *tradition*? ⁴For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ ⁵But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,’ ⁶he is not to ‘honor his father’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your *tradition*. ⁷You hypocrites!

Matthew 15:3-7a (NIV)

- After the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, the Pharisees from the school of Hillel feared that Israel might lose her traditions and so worked to begin transcribing the oral tradition into a written record
- Finished in A.D. 200 as a compilation called the *Mishnah*
 - Means “teaching” or “repetition”

Other Commentaries (A.D. 70-200)

- An additional commentary starting around A.D. 70, was a running commentary on scripture and was called the *Midrash*
- A third commentary, called the *Tosefta*, gave parallel or additional interpretations of the sayings found in the *Mishnah*.



- These commentaries (and others such as *Gemara* ...a commentary on the Mishnah) expanded until combined
 - First compilation: A.D. 325-425 *Palestinian (or Jerusalem) Talmud*
 - Second compilation: A.D. 500 *Babylonian Talmud*
- The *Babylonian Talmud* was much larger than the *Palestinian/Jerusalem Talmud*

References to Jesus in Talmud

- Shouldn't expect many...
- First, only a few copies of the original Talmud exist
 - Early Christians persecuted the Jews and confiscated and burned their documents
- Second, in light of the persecution, Jewish communities self-imposed censorship on references to Jesus so they would no longer be subject to attack

- 1631 the Jewish Assembly of Elders in Poland declared:

“We enjoin you under the threat of the great ban to publish in no new edition of the Mishnah or the Gemara anything that refers to Jesus of Nazareth.... If you will not diligently heed this letter, but run counter thereto and continue to publish our books in the same manner as heretofore, you might bring over us and yourselves still greater sufferings than in previous times.”

- At first deleted words were replaced by small circles or blank spaces, but in time those too were forbidden by the censors

- Third, Rabbi's of the "Second Temple Period" (536 B.C. – A.D. 70) were not prone to include historical events unless it was highly relevant to scripture or commentary on scripture

"That *Talmud* authorities on the whole refer rarely to the events of the period of the Second Temple, and do so only when the events are relevant to some halakhic [Hebrew law] discussion, or else they mention them quite casually in the course of some haggada [discussion of the Passover and the exodus from Egypt]. What, for example, should we have known of the great Maccabaeen struggle against the kings of Syria if the apocryphal books, I and II Maccabees, and the Greek writings of Josephus had not survived, and we had been compelled to derive all our information about this great event in the history of Israel from the *Talmud* alone? We should not have known even the very name of Judas Maccabaeus!"

- Fourth, as mentioned before, the Pharisees of the time were mostly concerned about the invasion and conquest of their land by Rome
 - To some lesser extent concerned about the Sadducees, Gnostics and Essenes
- The result is, we would expect to have only veiled references (if any at all) to Jesus in the Rabbinical writings.

- “On the eve of Passover they hanged Yeshu”

It has been taught: On the eve of Passover they hanged Yeshu. And an announcer went out, in front of him, for forty days (saying): “He is going to be stoned, because he practiced sorcery and enticed and led Israel astray. Anyone who knows anything in his favor, let him come and plead in his behalf.” But, not having found anything in his favor, they hanged him on the eve of Passover.

Babylonian Talmud: Sandhedrin 43a

- Munich manuscript reads “Yeshu the Nazarene”.
- Yeshu translates through Greek to English as “Jesus”
- “Hanged” also refers to crucifixion
- Why was he “hanged” rather than the prescribed stoning?
 - Attests to a Roman execution. Jews would stone.
 - That this was done on the eve of the Passover is strong evidence that this “Yeshu” was Jesus of Nazareth

- Passage interesting for what it doesn't deny
 - Jews involved in his death. Doesn't even mention the Romans
 - This Yeshu performed miracles. Attributed to sorcery
 - This Yeshu gathered a following as he “enticed and led Israel astray”
- “40 days” comment could refer to John 8:58-59 and 10:31-33,39 that Jewish leaders were seeking to arrest Jesus for some time prior to his crucifixion

¹³ Then Moses said to God, “Indeed, *when* I come to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they say to me, ‘What *is* His name?’ what shall I say to them?”

¹⁴ And God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And He said, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

Exodus 3:13-14 (NKJV)

⁵⁷ Then the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?”

⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.”

⁵⁹ Then they took up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.

John 8:57-59 (NKJV)

- Yeshu Had Five Disciples

“Our rabbis taught: Yeshu had five disciples – Mattai, Nakkai, Netzer, Buni and Todah.”

Babylonian Talmud: Sandhedrin 43a

- That he only had 5 disciples could be explained by the other teachers in the Talmud (Yohanan ben Zakkai, Akiba) are also described as having 5 disciples or students

- “Healing in the name of Yeshua ben Pantera”
It happened with Rabbi Elazar ben Damah, whom a serpent bit, that Jacob, a man of Kefar Soma, came to heal him in the name of Yeshua ben Pantera; but Rabbi Ishmael did not let him. He said, “You are not permitted, Ben Damah.” He answered, “I will bring you proof that he may heal me.” But he had no opportunity to bring proof, for he died. (Whereupon) Rabbi Ishmael said, “Happy art thou, Ben Damah, for you have gone in peace and you have not broken down the fence of the Sages, to him punishment will ultimately come, as it is in Scripture: ‘Whoso breaketh through a fence, a serpent shall bite him.’”

Tosefta: Hullin 2.22

(also found in Jerusalem Talmud Shabbath 14d, Abodah Zarah 40d, 41a and Babylonian Talmud Abodah Zarah 27b

- "Fence" is used to refer to decrees of the sages meant to protect Jews from situations where they may unwittingly break a commandment
- "ben Pantera"?
 - Scholars have debated this for years
 - Some believe it is a corruption of Greek *parthenos* meaning "virgin"
 - Jews heard from earliest Christians that Jesus was called "Son of the Virgin" (ben parthenos)
 - Perhaps mockingly, they called him ben pantera (Son of a Leopard [panther])?

- Scholars place this story near A.D. 95 with Rabbi Elazar (Eliezer) recalling events that occurred with Jacob of Kefar Soma (Sekanya) around A.D. 60
- Several ancient Christian apologists (including Origen [A.D. 248], Andrew of Crete, John of Damascus, Epiphanius) speculate that the name Panther comes from Jesus' grandfather, Jacob ['being called Panther'], the father of Joseph
- Yeshua ben Pantera, therefore, would be “Jesus, the ancestor of Pantera [his grandfather]”
- We probably won't know for sure, but regardless, we learn
 - Controversy by the rabbi's in allowing healing in Yeshua's (Jesus') name
 - Healing was part of the work of this disciple of Yeshua
 - Episode is dated to no later than A.D. 135

“Jacob (James) a Disciple of Jesus”

- The *Tosefta* (Chullin 2:24) tells how Rabbi Eliezer was once arrested and charged with minuth [*heresy*]. When the chief judge (*procurator*) interrogated him, the rabbi answered that he "trusted the judge." Although Rabbi Eliezer was referring to God, the judge interpreted him to be referring to the judge himself, and freed the Rabbi. The remainder of the account concerns why Rabbi Eliezer was arrested in the first place. Rabbi Akiva suggests that perhaps one of the minim [*outsiders of the Jewish community and false teachers, apostates*] had spoken a word of minuth to him and that it had pleased him. Rabbi Eliezer recalls that this was indeed the case, he had met Jacob [James] of the town of Sechania in the streets of Sepphoris who spoke to him a word of minuth in the name of Yeshu ben Pandera [Jesus], which had pleased him.

- “Such-an-one”

They asked Rabbi Eliezer, “What of such-an-one as regards the world to come?” He said to them, “You have only asked me about such-an-one... What of a bastard as touching inheritance? ...”

Tosefta: Yebamoth 3.3

- Rabbi Shimeon ben ‘Azzai said: I found a genealogical roll in Jerusalem wherein was recorded, “Such-an-one is a bastard of an adulteress.”

Babylonian Talmud: Yebamoth 4. 49a

- Hebrew scholars such as Joseph Klausner (who is not a Christian) state that since the early Tannaitic period (A.D. 70 and later), “such-an-one” refers to Jesus of Nazareth.
- “Bastard” and “adulteress” refer to the Pharisee's position that Jesus’ birth was illegitimate.
They [Pharisees] said to Him [Jesus], “We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God.”
John 8:41b NASB
- Passage seems pointless without a name and such-an-one was a suitable cover for the name of Jesus when the church began to confiscate writings critical of Jesus.

Summary

- Did the early Jewish rabbis think Jesus was a myth or a legend?
No.
 - They refer to him by name: Yeshu'a of Nazareth
 - Although many references had likely been purged from much of the Talmud due to Christian persecution
 - This Yeshu'a practiced sorcery
 - He beguiled and led Israel astray
 - He mocked the words of the Wise
 - He expounded scripture in the same manner as the Pharisees
 - He had 5 disciples
 - That he did not come to take “aught” away from the Law or add to it
 - That he was hanged (crucified) as a false teacher on the eve of the Passover which happened to be on a Sabbath
 - His disciples healed the sick in his name