

THE HISTORICAL JESUS

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 **FAITH MAKES SENSE**

DID JESUS EXIST?

It has become increasingly popular to question not only the divinity of Jesus, but His historicity as well. There are some who attempt to undermine the Christian faith as a whole by claiming Jesus never existed at all. This claim, popular though it may be, does not hold up under the weight of the historical evidence. The historical evidence for the person of Jesus is so strong that atheist New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman wrote in his book, "Did Jesus Exist" that *"the evidence is overwhelming that Jesus really did live as a Jewish teacher in Palestine and was crucified at the direction of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate."*

EXTRA-BIBLICAL SOURCES FOR JESUS

TACITUS

Roman historian and senator writing around 116 AD. He has every reason to be dismissive of Christianity and no motive to serve its cause, which makes his testimony particularly valuable. In Annals 15.44, Tacitus records that "Christus" suffered the extreme penalty under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius. He goes on to note that the movement, though suppressed momentarily, broke out again and spread from Judea to Rome itself. This is the single strongest extra-biblical witness to the historical Jesus.

JOSEPHUS

First century Jewish historian writing for a Roman audience. The Testimonium Flavianum in Antiquities 18.3 contains what most scholars believe are later Christian additions, but the core reference to Jesus as a teacher executed under Pilate is widely accepted as original. The stronger passage is Antiquities 20.9, universally accepted as unaltered, which references "James the brother of Jesus who was called Christ." A Jewish historian hostile to Christianity left two references to Jesus in his work.

PLINY THE YOUNGER

Roman governor writing to Emperor Trajan around 112 AD seeking advice on handling Christians in his province. In Letters 10.96, Pliny describes Christians gathering before dawn to sing hymns "to Christ as to a god" and binding themselves by oath to ethical conduct. He is not endorsing the movement, he is reporting a problem. By the early second century, organized Christian worship of Jesus as divine was visible enough to require imperial attention.

CELSUS

Second century pagan philosopher who wrote the first known comprehensive intellectual attack on Christianity around 175 AD. His work survives through Origen's rebuttal *Contra Celsum*. Christians preserved their critic's strongest arguments. Celsus never argues Jesus did not exist. He argues Jesus was born illegitimately, learned magic in Egypt, and deceived his followers. His criticisms presuppose a historical figure whose life was known well enough to dispute.

These four are not the only voices outside the New Testament who attest to Jesus. Lucian of Samosata, a Greek satirist, Suetonius, a Roman court historian, and Mara bar Serapion, a Syrian Stoic philosopher, each reference Jesus or his movement from their own non-Christian cultural contexts.

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WHO IS JESUS?

Jesus does not allow us to remain neutral about who He is. Before we can even evaluate what He claimed, we have to ask whether the claims were actually made at all. Some skeptics argue that the portrait of Jesus in the gospels is a legend, a story that grew and was embellished over generations until the real Jesus was buried beneath the theology of His followers. This is the Legend option, and it has to be answered first, because if it is true, the conversation ends there. The evidence on the reverse of this handout is what removes Legend from the table. There are clear non-Christian extra-biblical references to Jesus placing Him in history exactly the gospels describe. Jesus is not a legend.

With legend off the table, we are left with a real first-century figure who made extraordinary claims about himself, and those claims force a verdict. C.S. Lewis, in his book, "Mere Christianity" popularized an argument known as the Trilemma. He wrote that a man who said what Jesus said cannot simply be dismissed as a good moral teacher. He presented three options: Liar, Lunatic, or Lord. These three categories are the only ones available. Jesus was either a deliberate deceiver, genuinely deluded, or exactly who he claimed to be.

THE TRILEMMA OF JESUS

LIAR	LUNATIC	LORD
<p>If Jesus knew His claims were false, He was deliberately deceiving the people who followed him. But liars deceive for a reason: power, money, influence, survival, etc. Jesus gained none of these. His claims cost him everything, culminating in a brutal public Roman crucifixion. Men do not die for claims they know are false when recanting would save their lives. The liar option collapses under the weight of what it would require us to believe about a man facing death.</p>	<p>If Jesus sincerely believed claims that were not true, he was deluded. But the profile does not fit. His teaching is incredibly coherent and morally consistent. His composure under pressure, His clarity in debate, and His care for people around him do not resemble someone who is delusional. A man who believes He is God and is wrong looks nothing like the Jesus of the gospels. The lunatic option requires us to ignore everything we actually know about how He lived and taught.</p>	<p>If the claims Jesus made about Himself are authentic and He was neither lying nor deluded, there is only one option left. Jesus is exactly who He said He was. This is not a conclusion forced on us by the other two options failing. It is the conclusion the evidence points toward on its own. If Jesus wasn't lying when He claimed to be God, and He wasn't deluded when He claimed to be able to forgive sins, then Jesus is God and He does have the power to forgive human sin.</p>

Jesus does not allow us to remain neutral. Legend is defeated by history. Liar is defeated by the cross. Lunatic is defeated by everything He said and did. The only option remaining is shockingly simple and yet also eternally powerful. Jesus is exactly who He said He was. He is God and He does forgive sin.

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