The Historical Existence of Jesus

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**Foundational Scripture:**

**Intro**:

* The fundamentals and quintessence of Christianity is predicated on the reality of whether or not Jesus existed. Now, by faith, we (saints) believe that Jesus walked this earth, was born of the virgin, died on the cross, rose from the dead and is now seated at the right hand of God in Heaven. But from an evidential standpoint, that does not prove He was historically in existence. That’s not to say He didn’t in fact exist but the point of this lesson is to provide unbiased extra-biblical evidence to demonstrate that He was a real historical person. By and large, the majority of people do believe that Jesus was some type of historical figure but there are still some who question that notion. Theologian and self-defined atheist Robert Price believes that Jesus is just a myth created solely for the benefit of those looking to start a new religious group. Was Jesus a fabrication to make us feel better about our purpose in life or was He in fact real?

**Non-Christian Sources:**

1. **Suetonius (Limited Value)**
   1. Suetonius, a Roman historian and court official under the emperor Hadrian, authored the book, *Lives of Caesars*, which was published around AD 120 and describes events in the lives of the first 12 Roman emperors. In *The Deified Claudius* 25.4 he writes: *“Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.”* (Suetonius, 51).
   2. The problem, however, is that Christus is Latin name for Christ and not Chrestus. Some suggest that this indicates a spelling error by Suetonius or another figure altogether. It was well-known at this time, however, that many Gentiles were in the habit of using the name Chrestus to refer to Jesus.
2. **Pliny the Younger (Limited Value)**
   1. Pliny the Younger was Governor of Bithynia from AD 111–113. He was a prolific writer who published nine books of letters His final book, Book 10, was published after his death. Book 10 Letter 96 is a correspondence between Pliny and the Emperor Trajan. Pliny was punishing Christians who refused to renounce their faith, and he wrote to get direction from the emperor as to whether he should continue punishing in the same way or make some changes.
   2. Roman Christians who refused to recant were sent to Rome for trial. Non-Roman Christians who maintained their allegiance to Christ were executed. Letter 96 contains information Pliny gleaned from Christians who recanted their faith and began expressing allegiance to Roman gods.
   3. Pliny writes that those who deny Christ: *“…all venerated your image and the images of the gods as the others did, and reviled Christ. They also maintained that the sum total of their guilt or error was no more than the following. They had met regularly before dawn on a determined day, and sung antiphonally a hymn to Christ as if to a god. They also took an oath not for any crime, but to keep from theft, robbery, and adultery, not to break any promise, and not to withhold a deposit when reclaimed.”*
   4. Some scholars point out that it would have been highly unlikely for Pliny to record this particular instance unless he taught Jesus was not a god since ancients would not have cursed the gods. This indicates that Pliny believed Jesus was a real historical figure but not deity.
3. **Tacitus (Significant Value)**
   1. Tacitus is considered to be *“the greatest Roman Historian”* and his *Annals* is his *“finest work and generally acknowledged by modern historians as our best source of information about this period”* (Van Voorst, *JONT*).
   2. Tacitus’ *Annals* date back to the time of Augustus Caesar and all the way to Nero. In book 15 chapter 44, Tacitus records a fascinating piece of evidence that not only supports Jesus but also Christianity.
   3. In AD 64, there was a great fire in Rome which many speculated may have been the fault of Nero. In order to turn suspicion away from himself, Nero blamed the Christians for what happened.
      1. *“Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. 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, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired”* (*Annals*, 15.44).
   4. Tacitus is an extremely valuable source because he had access to plenty of historical data that could easily corroborate his claims including the *Acta Senatus* (served as Roman Senator).
   5. Another reason his information is trustworthy is because of his hatred of Christians. Not only does he call their *“superstition”* (Resurrection?) mischievous, but he also classifies their beliefs and practices as *“all things hideous and shameful.”* Thus, in his rant of “shameful Christianity,” Tacitus confirms:
      1. Jesus lived and was crucified under the reign of Tiberius (Lk. 3:1) and condemned to death by Pontius Pilate (Lk. 23:1-24)
4. **Josephus (Significant Value)**
   1. Josephus was a Jewish historian, soldier and politician who lived ca. AD 37-100. He initially fought in the Jewish war against the Romans but later defected to the Romans where he was granted freedom and Roman citizenship under Vespasian.
   2. Josephus grew up in Jerusalem and his father was a respected high priest named Matthias. This in and of itself is significant since he would have been an eyewitness to the *“increasing threat that Christianity posed to Judaism”* (Licona, *RJ*).
   3. Josephus was a very close friend to Vespasian’s son Titus who became the Roman emperor ca. AD 79 after his father died. Josephus is considered *“the single most important Jewish historian of the ancient world”* (Eddy and Boyd, *JL*).
   4. His most important works include:
      * 1. *The War of the Jews* which recounts the Jewish war against Rome which ended in the siege that destroyed Jerusalem.
        2. *The Antiquities of the Jews* which tell the history of the world from a Jewish point of view for a predominantly Greek and Roman society.
   5. Both these works give us a valuable insight into Christianity and Judaism during the mid to late 1st century. Josephus, like Tacitus being a non-Christian source, records information about Jesus a couple times in his *Antiquities.*
   6. Concerning James, the brother of Jesus (Acts 15:13; Gal. 1:19), Josephus writes: *“But this younger Ananus, who, as we have told you already, took the high priesthood, was a bold man in his temper, and very insolent; he was also of the sect of the Sadducees, who are very rigid in judging offenders, above all the rest of the Jews, as we have already observed; when, therefore, Ananus was of this disposition, he thought he had now a proper opportunity [to exercise his authority]. Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned”* (*Antiquities,* 20.9.1).
   7. Josephus here mentions two key characters of scripture: James the brother of Jesus and Jesus Himself. Note, however, that Josephus’ interest is not in James nor Jesus but in the behavior of Ananus. James is identified as the victim of his illegal doings and he names Jesus as his brother, so the audience is aware of which James this is (Jam. 1:1). This example supports the fact Jesus was a real historical figure.
   8. In the second instance, Josephus writes concerning Jesus: *“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 amongst 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*, 18.3.3).
   9. This passage is widely debated as to its authenticity since, in the eyes of many scholars, Josephus seems to now have a bias towards Christ (became a Christian?). The words highlighted in bold have been the subject of much controversy.
   10. Some suggest this passage may not be of Josephus at all but some Christian individual who clearly supports Jesus. Others say that this is Josephus’ writing which was doctored by a Christian interpolator later in history.
   11. When the text in bold is removed, the evidence for Jesus as a historical figure is without a doubt still rock solid. If the entire passage indeed be of Josephus, then he has provided perhaps one of the most extraordinary pieces of evidence for the New Testament by giving us a direct link to:
       * 1. The deity of Christ *(“if it be lawful to call him a man”* Jn. 1:1-3, 14*)*
         2. The master teacher who taught the truth (Matt. 5-7; Jn. 7:46)
         3. Jesus as one who performed miracles (Jn. 20:30-31)
         4. The large multitudes that followed Jesus (Acts 2:41; 4:4)
         5. Jesus was the Messiah (Matt. 16:16)
         6. Jesus was crucified by Pilate’s condemnation (Lk. 23:1-24)
         7. He rose from the dead according to the prophets (Lk. 24)

**Conclusion:** Jesus is clearly not a myth or some fabrication created by men out of psychotic fantasy. At the very least we know He lived and walked as a man upon this earth and that was witnessed not only by those who were on His side but by His very enemies and those who hated Him and His movement.

**Sources:**

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