

How Do We Know That Jesus Lived?

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Introduction

Imagine for a moment that you did not have a Bible to learn about Jesus. How would you know that He ever lived on earth? Would it be possible to prove His existence? In modern times, there has been skepticism about the historical validity of Jesus' existence.

In this booklet, we will review mostly non-Biblical sources concerning the existence of Jesus of Nazareth and His earliest followers. We will also examine if the New Testament could be trusted as a witness of their existence. Did Jesus really live? How do we know?

Chapter 1

How Do We Know that Jesus Lived?

Millions of people lived in the Middle East during the first century AD. We do not know much if anything about most of them. They lived their lives, died, and became lost to time. Archeologists occasionally dig up some artifact with a name on it from that time, but we rarely learn anything about these people.

Of the people we learn about in ancient records and archaeological finds, many of them either did something famous or infamous or they held some position of importance in a kingdom or empire. Said another way, the people mentioned in history did something significant enough to be remembered by others who lived in that time period.

To ascertain whether or not Jesus lived on earth, we will begin by examining the historical record to see if He is mentioned and what these records say about Him. Documentation about His followers are also important, as they may contain helpful information.

Josephus

Josephus lived from about 37-100 AD. He belonged to the Jewish priestly lineage and through a series of events came to serve the Romans. He wrote some of the most valuable works on Jewish history in existence, including one called *Antiquities of the Jews* (likely composed about 93 AD). It provides us with two references to Jesus, which are listed below:

“Now about this time lived Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of men who receive truth with pleasure; and drew over to him many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. And When Pilate, at the information of the leading men among us, had him condemned to the cross, those who had loved him at first did not cease to do so. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day” (*idem*, 18.3).*

*In my quote I have removed the parts of Josephus that are con-

sidered later additions to the original text (called interpolations).

“as Festus was not dead, and Albinus was still on 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, and having accused them as breakers of the law, he delivered them over to be stoned” (*ibid*, 20.9).

What do we learn?

- Jesus was considered a wise man who did surprising deeds, and was known as a teacher of truth.
- He won over many Jews and Greeks.
- A ruler named Pilate heard accusations against Jesus by the highest Jewish authorities.
- Jesus was condemned to be crucified.
- Those who loved him formed a group known as Christians, who were named after him (implying that Jesus was called Christ by them). They still existed during the time Josephus composed his work (later first century AD).
- Jesus had a brother named James.
- Some people called Jesus the Christ.

Tacitus

The next author we will review is the Roman historian Tacitus, who lived from approximately 55-118 AD. *The Annals* is an historical work he composed that chronicled events from 14 AD through 68 AD. This included the reigns of various Emperors, including Nero.

In book 15, we learn that Nero wanted to build a city named Neronia (named after himself). One problem is that a section of the old city of Rome stood in the way of this plan. Perhaps not surprisingly, part of the old city of Rome burned down.

The Roman people demanded that the source of this crime be revealed. In their minds, someone had to pay the price for this damage. Nero tried offering sacrifices to the Roman gods and even giving gifts to the people, but these actions did not appease them. People still suspected that Nero intentionally burned the city to make room for new project. Somehow Christians were blamed for the disaster and subsequently punished. Tacitus wrote the following:

“But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiation of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report (that he started the fire), 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 of 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 by the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man’s cruelty, that they were being destroyed” (*idem*, 15.44).

What do we learn?

- Christians were a religious sect existing in Rome during the reign of Nero. This was about 64 AD or a little over 30 years from the time Jesus is believed to have died.
- They were hated by the populace for their abominations. (Side note: This is similar language that Tacitus uses of Jewish people; the concept of an abominable religion likely came from the rejection of the Roman pantheon – see *The Histories*, 5:4-5). Because they are mentioned as a separate class of people, they had distinctive beliefs from pagan Romans (so they could be identified as different).
- They were named Christians after their founder Christus. This is the Latin term for Christ.
- Christus suffered the extreme penalty (crucifixion) during the

reign of Emperor Tiberius Caesar.

- When this occurred, Pontius Pilate was the regional ruler in Judea (called procurator by Tacitus, which is a detail we will review in the next chapter).

- The movement of Christus started in Judea and eventually came to Rome.

- Tacitus mentions that “an immense multitude was convicted” of being a Christian. This means Christianity had spread considerably in Rome and the surrounding areas. The movement could not be considered insignificant nor was it new in the city of Rome. In other words, it existed for some time prior to Nero’s persecution.

- Christians suffered terribly in this persecution.

Pliny the Younger

The third ancient writer we will review is Pliny the Younger. He was a magistrate in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) during the reign of the Emperor Trajan, who ruled from 98-117 AD. He was a contemporary of Tacitus. In 112 AD, Pliny wrote a letter to Trajan asking him how to handle accusations against Christians. Letters 97-98 reveal this exchange.

“From Pliny the Younger to Trajan the Emperor: ‘It is my invariable rule, Sir, to refer to you in all matters where I feel doubtful; for who is more capable of removing my scruples or informing my ignorance? Having never been present at any trials concerning those who profess Christianity I am unacquainted not only with the nature of their crimes, or the measure of their punishment, but how far it is proper to enter into an examination concerning them. Whether, therefore, any difference is usually made with respect to ages, or no distinction is to be observed between the young and adult; whether repentance entitles them to a pardon; or if a man has been once a Christian, it avails nothing to desist from his error; whether the very profession of Christianity, unattended with any criminal act, or only the crimes themselves inherent in the profession are punishable; on all these points I am in great doubt...In the meanwhile, the method I have observed towards those who have been brought before me as Christians is this: I asked them whether they were Christians; if they admitted it, I repeated the question twice, and threatened them with punishment; if they persisted, I ordered them to be at once punished: for I was persuaded, whatever the nature of their opinions might be, a contumacious and inflexible obstinacy certainly deserved correc-

tion. There were others also brought before me possessed with the same infatuation, but, being Roman citizens, I directed them to be sent to Rome...But this crime spreading (as is usually the case) while it was actually under prosecution, several instances of the same nature occurred. An anonymous information was laid before me containing a charge against several persons, who upon examination denied they were Christians, or had ever been so. They repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered religious rites with wine and incense before your statue (which for that purpose I had ordered to be brought, together with those of the gods), and even reviled [cursing] the name of Christ: whereas there is no forcing, it is said, those who are really Christians into any of these compliances: I thought it proper, therefore, to discharge them... Some among those who were accused by a witness in person at first confessed themselves Christians, but immediately after denied it; the rest owned indeed that they had been of that number formerly, but had now (some above three, others more, and a few above twenty years ago) renounced that error. They all worshipped your statue and the images of the gods, uttering imprecations at the same time against the name of Christ...They affirmed the whole of their guilt, or their error, was, that they met on a stated (fixed) day before it was light, and addressed a form of prayer to Christ, as to a divinity, binding themselves by a solemn oath, not for the purposes of any wicked design, but never to commit any fraud, theft, or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble, to eat in common a harmless meal. From this custom, however, they desisted after the publication of my edict, by which, according to your commands, I forbade the meeting of any assemblies. After receiving this account, I judged it so much the more necessary to endeavor to extort the real truth, by putting two female slaves to the torture, who were said to officiate in their religious rites; but all I could discover was evidence of an absurd and extravagant superstition...I deemed it expedient, therefore, to adjourn all further proceedings, in order to consult you. For it appears to be a matter highly deserving your consideration, more especially as great numbers must be involved in the danger of these prosecutions, which have already extended, and are still likely to extend, to persons of all ranks and ages, and even of both sexes. In fact, this contagious superstition is not confined to the cities only, but has spread its infection among the neighbouring villages and

country. Nevertheless, it still seems possible to restrain its progress. The temples, at least, which were once almost deserted, begin now to be frequented; and the sacred rites, after a long intermission, are again revived; while there is a general demand for the victims, which till lately found very few purchasers. From all this it is easy to conjecture what numbers might be reclaimed if a general pardon were granted to those who shall repent of their error...”

Trajan’s reply to Pliny: “You have adopted the right course, my dearest Secundus, in investigating the charges against Christians who were brought before you. It is not possible to lay down any general rule for all such cases. Do not go out of your way to look for them. If indeed they should be brought before you, and the crime is proved, they must be punished; with the restriction, however, that where the party denies he is a Christian, and shall make it evident that he is not, but invoking our gods, let him (notwithstanding any former suspicion) be pardoned upon his repentance. Anonymous informations ought not to be received in any sort of prosecution. It is introducing a dangerous precedent, and is quite foreign to the spirit of our age.”

In the exchange, Trajan congratulates Pliny on his handling of the situation. He informed Pliny not to purposefully track down those who are Christians, but only prosecute those who were reported to be Christian. Anonymous accusations were not allowed, but specific accusations were investigated. Those brought forth upon such charges were asked that they honor images of the emperor and the Roman gods or be punished.

What do we learn?

- We learn that Christians lived in early second century Asia Minor (about 112 AD).
- We learn that large numbers of people were influenced by Christianity in both city and country areas. Pliny said that the pagan Temples were nearly empty before the accusations started; after they were initiated the temples were visited again. This also testifies to the length of time that Christianity was in the area.
- Accusations were made of people from all walks of society and of all ages. This also attests to Christianity’s prevalence and appeal to all groups of people.
- There was a difference between a real Christian, who refused to

worship the image of the emperor and make sacrifices, and those who only confessed the name of Jesus.

- Christians met on a specific day every week; this would have been the Sabbath (Friday sunset to Saturday sunset). I have discussed this in other works (see *Prevalence of the Sabbath in the Early Roman Empire*, Appendix B).
- Christians directed prayers to Christ.
- They received the name Christian from this Christ.
- They met before sunrise (in context this was to avoid being captured or reported as a believer).
- They committed their lives to live morally upright: “binding themselves by a solemn oath, not for the purposes of any wicked design, but never to commit any fraud, theft, or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up”
- Their assemblies were forbidden by the magistrate.
- Females officiated at Christian services. This detail testifies to the active role of women in the early church.
- Their beliefs were called an “extravagant superstition”

Pliny’s account provides more information about the early disciples of Jesus rather than Jesus Himself. However, Jesus is mentioned as the focus of their religious practice. The fact that they prayed to Christ likely reflects their view of the divinity of Christ. This would have definitely contributed to the separation of synagogue and the Christian community.

Suetonius

Suetonius was a Roman historian who lived in the early second century. His writings include one possible reference to Christians and another certain reference.

Speaking of the Emperor Claudius, he wrote that: “He banished from Rome all the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of one Chrestus” (*Life of Claudius*, 25.4).

The Latin word translated as Chrestus is Chresto. It can be used in a generic or specific sense. Chresto simply means “good.” This one line does corroborate with Acts 18:2. It is entirely possible and very likely that disputes about Jesus would have caused problems among Jewish people of that time. Does that mean Suetonius is referring to Jesus’ followers? Some scholars affirm this is

line as a reference to Jesus while others are not so sure. It is entirely possible that Suetonius meant to write “Christus” instead of “Chresto”, but there is no way to know for sure.

Suetonius also described the suffering of Christians under Nero, but in a much briefer account than Tacitus.

“He likewise inflicted punishments on the Christians*, a sort of people who held a new and impious superstition” (*Life of Nero*, 16.2). *Latin word is Christiani.

Suetonius does not add much more to the discussion of this topic than what we have already learned.

Lucian

Lucian was a satirist who lived from 115-200 AD. He wrote a work called “the Passing of Peregrinus.” Peregrinus was a former Christian who later became a cynic and revolutionary. He died in 165 AD. As we look at the quote from Lucian, we must keep in mind that he is a satirist, so he mocks Christians and other groups. However, his work is important to the topic of Jesus and His followers.

“It was then that he learned the woundrous lore of the Christians*, by associating with their priests and scribes in Palestine. And – how else could it be? In a trice he made them all look like children; for he was a prophet, cult-leader, head of the synagogue, and everything, all by himself. He interpreted and explained some of their books and even composed many, and they revered him as a god, made use of him as a lawgiver, and set him down as a protector, next after that other, to be sure, whom they still worship, the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced this new cult into the world.” (*Passing of Peregrinus*, 11).

*The Greek word used for Christian is Christianon.

“Then at length Proteus was apprehended for this and thrown into prison, which itself gave him no little reputation as an asset for his future career and the charlatanism and notoriety-seeking that he was enamoured of. Well, when he had been imprisoned, the Christians, regarding the incident as a calamity, left nothing undone in the effort to rescue him... (ibid, 12)

“Indeed, people came even from the cities in Asia, sent by the Christians at their common expense, to succor and defend and encourage the hero (Peregrinus). They show incredible speed whenever any such public action is taken; for in no time they lavish their all. So it was then in the case of Peregrinus; much money came to him from them by reason of his imprisonment, and he procured not a little revenue from it. The poor wretches have convinced themselves first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence of which they despise death and even willingly give themselves into custody, most of them. Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another after they have transgressed once for all by denying the Greek gods and by worshiping that crucified sophist himself and living under his laws” (ibid, 13).

What do we learn?

- Those who followed Christ were called Christians.
- They had religious leaders in Judea (called Palestine at that time).
- Christ was thought of as a prophet and worshipped.
- Jesus explained their books and composed many Himself (this is likely a reference to the New Testament and possibly the Old Testament)
- Christ was crucified in Judea (Palestine).
- Christians thought they would receive immortality.
- They were not afraid of death.
- They considered each other brothers.
- They refused to worship Greek gods.
- They lived by Christ’s words.
- They were known for their generosity.

Lucian’s focus is more on the followers of Jesus, but he does reiterate some details we learned from earlier writers such as Josephus and Tacitus.

To conclude this chapter, let’s put together the sum total of all these details to see what kind of picture we receive about Jesus and His followers.

“Jesus was considered a wise man who did extraordinary deeds. He was known as a teacher of truth. He was also considered a prophet and worshiped. He won over many Jews and Greeks. He

taught out of their books and even composed many Himself. During the reign of Tiberius Caesar, a regional ruler named Pilate heard accusations against Him by the highest Jewish authorities. Due to these accusations, Jesus was crucified. Those who loved him formed a group known as Christians, who were named after him. They still existed during the time Josephus composed his work (93 AD). Some people called Jesus the Christ; he had a brother named James.

The sect started in Judea and eventually became established in Rome where it found a significant following. They may have contributed to the expulsion of Jews from Rome during the reign of Claudius. During the reign of Nero they were blamed for setting fire to the city. They were tortured terribly during that time.

During the reign of the Emperor Trajan, large numbers of Christians dwelt in Asia Minor in the early second century AD. There was a difference between a real Christian, who refused to worship the image of the emperor and make sacrifices, and those who only confessed the name of Jesus. Christians met on a specific day every week (Sabbath). They met before sunrise (in context this was to avoid being captured or reported as a believer). Christians directed prayers to Christ and committed their lives to moral principles such as those found in the Ten Commandments. Females officiated at Christian services.

Christians were not afraid of death and believed in immortality. They considered each other brothers (family). They did not worship idols or pagan deities. They lived by Christ's words and were known for their generosity. They were witnessed as an active group in the days of Lucian, who wrote about 165.

These few historical accounts provide us with significant historical information about Jesus and His early followers.

Chapter 2

Archaeological Evidence

In this chapter, we will examine the archaeological evidence that relates to the life of Jesus. Archaeological evidence includes concrete findings from the time Jesus lived (early first century AD) including pottery, coins, or other physical findings. Our focus will be on four main subjects: Pontius Pilate, Crucifixion, Nazareth, and the James Ossuary.

Pontius Pilate

The Pilate Stone

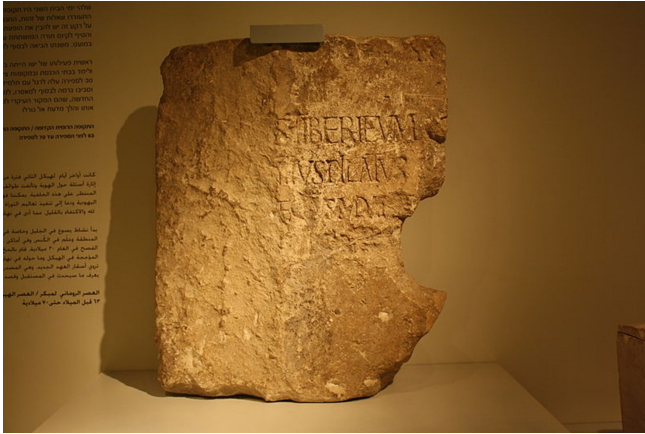
In June 1961, an inscription was discovered on an expedition at Caesarea Maritima. This was the administrative capital of Judea during the early first century AD. While excavating a theater, an inscription was found on one of the steps. The inscription was written in Latin on a block that is 82 cm high, 68 cm wide, and 20 cm in thickness.

Some of the letters are missing, but a rough transcription is listed below (letters in brackets are either most likely or certainly part of the inscription).

[...]S TIBERIEUM
...PON]TIVS PILATVS
...PRAEF]ECTVS IVDA[EA]E
[...FECIT D]E[DICAVIT]

The confirmed translation of the text is “Tiberius, Pontius Pilatus, Praefectus of Judea” (there was no J in Latin). The letter E is the only letter legible on the last line. Some historians and archeologists think it is proper that the word DEDICAVIT, meaning dedicated, would have been included in the original inscription. This word implies that Pilate dedicated the building to Tiberius.

The finding confirms the official title of Pontius Pilate, which was Prefect. This means that he was mainly a military magistrate. In the last chapter, we examined Tacitus’ account Pilate where he used the term “proconsul.” This term was an anachronism on Tacitus’ part and started to be used during the reign of Claudius (about 44 AD). Tacitus simply used the term that was common in



The Pilate Stone (Wikimedia/public domain)

his day rather than the older term Prefect.

Ancient Coins

The fact that Tiberius is mentioned and honored on the Pilate stone is consistent with his coinage. In fact, a multitude of ancient coins from the reign of Pontius Pilate have been discovered in Israel. How do they date the coins? The coins struck in Judea during the early first century AD bore the name of the Emperor, which in this case is Tiberius Caesar, and the year of his reign. Sometimes they included the name of his wife or mother instead of Tiberius. The coins have inscriptions of the years 16, 17, and 18 of Tiberius' reign. This would correspond to a time period of roughly 29-32 AD and is period that Pontius Pilate ruled the region (26-36 AD).

On one side, the coins bear some symbol common to the Jewish people such as barley or a wreath (the wreath became common during the Hasmonean dynasty). On the other side, he included some pagan Roman symbol such as an augur's wand. This was likely part of his attempt to diffuse Roman culture into the region. All the letters and numbers on the coin were inscribed using Greek, which was still a common language at that time. To avoid controversy with the Jewish people, the images of Tiberius or any other person were not put on coins (to learn at least one reason why, see Josephus' *The Jewish War* 2.169-174).

The Pilato Ring

In the late 1960s, Gideon Foerster excavated near Herod's tomb and palace. During the dig, a copper alloy metal ring was found that dated to 70 AD or before. Until recently, the ring was not able to be read because it was tarnished.

In 2018, the ring was cleaned and re-examined using modern technology. This renewed view of the ring yielded incredible results. The Greek inscription PILATO was found engraved on it along with a picture of a large wine vessel (called a krater). Pilato translated means "of Pilate." The style of the ring was common among Roman soldiers, Herodian and Roman officials, and some common people.

The metal of the ring indicates that Pontius Pilate likely did not use it. However, the name Pilate was extremely rare in ancient first century Judea. This fact combined with the location of the ring (the Herodian palace which was definitely used by Pilate's administration) indicates that the ring was likely used by someone in Pilate's administration. The ring certainly adds more confirmation of the usage of the name Pilate in this place and time.

The Crucifixion

In the historical accounts discussed in chapter one, we learned that Jesus was put to death through a form of execution called crucifixion. This cruel punishment existed for approximately 1,000 years before the time of Christ, so it was already in use by the first century. It was practiced by the Persians and even the Greeks. The Romans utilized it as well. Ancient literature provides many examples of how this method of punishment was carried out. This includes such as they fact that they mostly took place outside of a city.

Until modern times, no archaeological evidence had been found providing specific concrete examples of this execution method. This cannot be surprising since most people who were crucified were criminals or enemies of the state. This means they were buried in the graves of the infamous or poor, which were often in the ground.

In fact, to call for someone to be crucified may have been a common form of cursing. An inscription from the time of Pompeii reads: "May you be nailed to the cross!" Other ancient writings

attest to this usage.

In 1968, Vassilios Tzaferis was exploring burial chambers not far from Jerusalem. In the burial chamber were ossuaries (a small box containing the bones of a deceased person). This was a practice typically used by prominent people due to its cost. In Jerusalem they found the remains of a man whose heel had a 4.5 inch iron nail driven through it. A small piece of wood was still attached to the nail. In the 1980s, Joseph Zias and Eliezer Sekeles resumed examination of this finding and provided clarification to it.

The site dates to the first century before the destruction of Jerusalem (70 AD). This means the man was crucified at a time remarkably close to Jesus' time. Further analysis brought forth a fuller picture of how he was crucified. The arms of this particular man were tied to the cross rather than nailed to them. The right heel was nailed to the right side of the cross and the left heel to the left side.

The name of the man was also inscribed on the ossuary: "Yehohanan, the son of Hagakol." Most people who were crucified would not have been wealthy enough to afford an ossuary. On another ossuary in the same chamber, we learn that one of his family members worked on Herod's Temple. This family may have been well known in their time.

Images of Crucifixion

The revolutionary finding of an actual tomb is incredible evidence to help us understand more about the practice of crucifixion among the Romans in the first century AD. Another source of information on this punishment is found among graffiti depicting someone being crucified. We have two examples from this time.

One is called the Alexamenos graffito. It was found on a wall in Rome. It depicts the backside of a crucified person with the head of a donkey. The cross was a capital T shape. The inscription on it reads "Alexamenos worships god." Of course, the inscription was intended to mock Alexamenos. The dating ranges from between the late first century and mid-third century. It is also important that the Romans typically thought of the Jewish people and some early Christians as worshipping the head of a donkey (see Jose-

phus, *Against Appion*, 2.7-8; Tacitus, *The Histories*, 5.4-5; Tertulian, *Apology*, 16 and *Against the Nations*, 1.11, 1.14). This archaeological finding connects historical accounts of the death of Jesus and common Roman thought about Jews and Christians.

A second graffito finding was discovered in Puteoli (Pozzuli), Italy and likely dates to the second century. It shows the backside of a person being crucified. The back of the person has marks on it, which signify the flogging that he took before being punished. Both heels are nailed into the cross in a similar manner to Yehohanan (discussed above). The cross is also a capital T shape.

These examples provide us with more details involved with Jesus' crucifixion and corroborates with the New Testament account that he was flogged first (Matthew 27:26, Mark 15:15, Luke 23:22, John 19:1).

Nazareth

In the New Testament, Nazareth is mentioned about 29 times. It is described where Jesus was brought up or nourished (Luke 4:16). It must have been a humble little town because some people questioned whether anyone like Jesus could come from such a place (John 1:45-46). Major archaeological breakthroughs have occurred in this small town within the last fifteen years.

In 2009, a first-century courtyard house was discovered by archaeologist Yardenna Alexandre. The initial digs included water sources and burial sites. At that time, archaeologists estimated that about fifty houses or so were in this small village in the first century.

Ken Dark, who has worked the site since 2006, found another first century AD courtyard house near Yardenna's discovery. In 2020, he released a book with his findings entitled *The Sisters of Nazareth-Convent: A Roman-period, Byzantine, and Crusader site in central Nazareth*.

Today, the Sisters of Nazareth Convent is situated in central Nazareth. It was built on top of a Byzantine-era church that dates to about the fifth century AD. A cave church was discovered under that church, which dates to the prior century. Near this cave church was found a courtyard house of the first century which

was very similar to the one Yardenna found.

The Byzantines were known for building churches near important religious sites. What is fascinating and particularly different about this situation is that the Byzantines only built churches over two houses. This house in Nazareth is one and the other site is the house believed to have belonged to the Apostle Peter.

This courtyard house was carved out of rock and the work had to be done by someone who was skilled at stone working. Joseph, Jesus' earthly father, is described as a carpenter. However, the Greek word is *tekton* (Mark 6:3, Matthew 13:55). In ancient times, it referred to a person skilled in a number of areas including stone working. A Jewish burial site was found nearby, but it was separated from the house by some quarrying. This means that the house was abandoned or in disuse by the time the burial site was utilized. Jewish people do not inhabit areas this close to burial sites.

Limestone vessels were used, which indicate that it was once inhabited by Jewish people. Other indications, such as cooking pottery, also reflect its former occupation. No pottery from before the early Roman period or after it was found. This indicates that it was not occupied after this time and it was well preserved by those who built on top of the site. Some of the original flooring has survived as well.

The pottery and other findings does not reflect Roman cultural influence in Nazareth. The city of Sepphoris, which is about five miles away, was an administrative center in the Roman period. Communities nearer to Sepphoris embraced Roman culture, which is evident from the findings there.

According to Dark, this particular courtyard house was inhabited starting in the late BC or early first century AD time period. This is consistent with the New Testament accounts of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus dwelling in Nazareth after a time of living in Egypt (Matthew 2:19-23). The findings of Nazareth reflect the simple Jewish life that we would expect from the background of Jesus.

Dark's findings confirm the occupation of the city by Jewish inhabitants during the time of Jesus. Specifically, the house he



The James Ossuary (pictured above) was on display at the Royal Ontario Museum from November 15, 2002 to January 5, 2003.

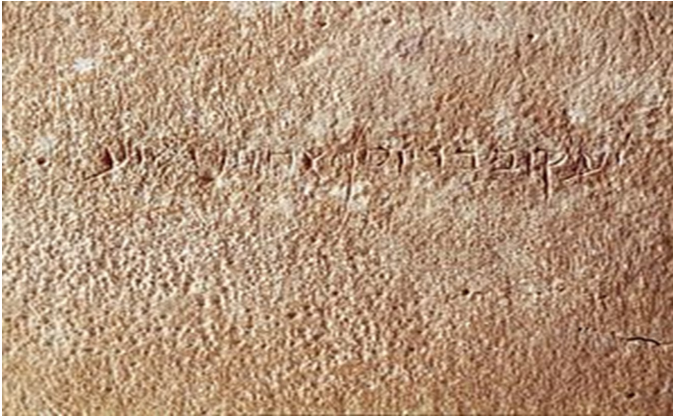
found was either the early home of Jesus or a home Jesus would have been familiar with during life.

The James Ossuary

The last archaeological finding we will examine in this chapter is the James Ossuary. In 2002, an ossuary was released to the public with the Aramaic inscription “Ya‘aqob son of Yosef brother of Yeshua” or “James, Son of Joseph, Brother of Jesus.” It was acclaimed at the time as the most important archaeological discovery in history. It was not without controversy.

Not long after the discovery was displayed to the public, the owner of the ossuary, Oded Golan, was accused of forging at least some of this inscription. After a trial of seven years, which involved over 100 witnesses and 12,000 pages of testimony, Oded was found not guilty of forgery.

Not only was he found not guilty, but the trial resulted in experts verifying the authenticity of the object! This included the inscription, which was verified by world-renowned paleographers André Lemaire and Ada Yardeni. A paleographer is someone who examines inscriptions for their authenticity. To date, no paleographer has presented evidence against its’ authenticity.



The Inscription on the James Ossuary
The transliteration of the text reads (from right to left):
Ya'akov bar-Yosef akhui diYeshua

(The James Ossuary was on display at the Royal Ontario Museum from November 15, 2002 to January 5, 2003.)

Subsequent studies, such as that by Rosenfeld, Feldman, Krumbein found that the mineral content of the ossuary (including the inscription) are authentic (see **Bibliography** for full reference on this study). The ossuary dates to the first century AD before the destruction of the Temple.

Is it the Ossuary for the brother of Jesus?

What are the chances that an inscription which reads “Jacob, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus” could belong to more than one person? First of all, we must understand that ossuaries typically did not list any other family members other than the father of the deceased. So, the finding is extremely rare. To date, only one other ossuary has been found which mentioned another family member. This indicates the brother of James was an important person. Was it Jesus?

In 2005, Camil Fuchs released a study which analyzed the statistical chances of how many people in first century (pre-70 AD) Jerusalem could have been named Jacob with a father named Joseph and brother named Jesus. He found to a 95% statistical probability that there were 1.71 males that fit such a description in first century Jerusalem. Josephus mentioned James and that he was put to death by the Jewish authorities about 62 AD.

Once we compare the location of the ossuary, its age, the rarity of mentioning the brother of the deceased, and the statistical chances of how many people named Jacob had a father named Joseph and brother named Jesus, it all but appears most likely to belong to the Biblical James.

Chapter 3

Can We Trust the New Testament?

The last question we will consider is whether or not the New Testament can be trusted as a witness for Jesus' existence. After all, it is considered the chief primary source for Jesus' life. Some people wonder: "How can an ancient religious text, which is almost 2,000 years old, be considered reliable?"

In the first chapter, we looked over the ancient historians that testify to the existence of Jesus and/or his followers. To my knowledge, none of them are questioned as to their historical value. These sources are considered reliable. I learned about them in grade school and college; we were taught from these texts. Below I have listed the dates of the oldest complete manuscripts of these works.

Josephus – 9th or 10th centuries
Tacitus – 11th century
Pliny the Younger – Late 5th century
Suetonius – 9th through 12th centuries
Lucian – 9th century

The oldest complete manuscript for four out of these five works is about 700 to 900 years after the time in which the author lived. Why is this? From the ninth century onwards, kings and monks engaged in a rigorous campaign to copy older manuscripts of the classical writers, especially as it relates to Roman history. The content from these works has been cross checked with other manuscripts of writers from the same or similar time. There are also scattered fragments of some of these works which date earlier. Archaeological findings are also used to corroborate the content. These works have each been critically examined over the centuries. This explains why their content remains to be taught and disseminated in Academia today.

If these texts can be trusted for historical content, though their manuscript history is not close to the events they report, what about the New Testament? The original New Testament describes events that occur mostly in the first century AD. What is the

agreed upon date for its oldest complete manuscript?

The oldest complete text is the Codex Sinaiticus (350 AD), which is within 320 years of the life of Jesus. There are also two others that date near it: Codex Vaticanus (fourth century AD), and Codex Alexandrinus (450 AD). Furthermore, hundreds of fragments of the New Testament books that date to the same time and earlier.

We would have even more New Testament manuscripts from earlier times, but warfare, weather, and other factors such as persecution cause old manuscripts to be lost. For instance, the Roman Emperor Diocletian initiated a persecution which lasted approximately 10 years (303-313 AD). During it, they tried to burn Christian manuscripts. The church historian, Eusebius was a contemporary eye witness to these events. He wrote the following account describing some of these events.

“All these things were fulfilled in us, when we saw with our own eyes the houses of prayer thrown down to the very foundations, and the Divine and Sacred Scriptures committed to the flames in the midst of the market-places, and the shepherds of the churches basely hidden here and there, and some of them captured ignominiously, and mocked by their enemies...It was in the nineteenth year of the reign of Diocletian, in the month Dystrus, called March by the Romans, when the feast of the Saviour's passion was near at hand, that royal edicts were published everywhere, commanding that the churches be leveled to the ground and the Scriptures be destroyed by fire, and ordering that those who held places of honor be degraded, and that the household servants, if they persisted in the profession of Christianity, be deprived of freedom” (Eusebius, *Church History*, 8.2.1, 4).

Despite this attempt to terminate Christian documents, many fragments of the New Testament survived. This includes the source documents for the codices we described earlier. They were based upon earlier documents which scribes before them had copied from even earlier ones.

In summation, the New Testament manuscripts date much closer to the events it describes than its other counterparts. This adds to its reliability as a document of ancient events, people, and places.

Conclusion

In this short work we have looked at three weighty areas of research into Jesus and His early followers: 1) ancient history; 2) archaeological evidence; and 3) the New Testament manuscripts.

Of the ancient writers we reviewed, none of them questioned whether Jesus lived or that there was a group of His followers called Christians. If Jesus were not a real historical figure who lived on earth, then the people who lived nearest that time would have an interest in discrediting His existence. This is especially true for those who opposed the movement and its founder.

The Jewish leaders clearly had an issue with Jesus, yet Josephus writes about Him twice. Roman authors such as Tacitus had a disdain for monotheistic religions, including Judaism and Christianity. Roman Emperors and/or their magistrates persecuted Christians. Yet, the annals of their persecution against Christians preserve evidence of Jesus and His followers' existence.

The archaeological record confirms key details found in the New Testament about Jesus' life including: 1) Pontius Pilate, who was a major figure at the end of Jesus' life; 2) the crucifixion, which is referenced in ancient history and the Bible as the form of execution for Jesus; 3) the town of Nazareth, which was the town of His formative years (they may have found His house!); and 4) the James Ossuary, which most likely was that of Jesus' brother James.

The manuscript history of the New Testament is more documented and traceable than most other ancient texts of the same era, especially those discussed in this work. The New Testament manuscripts survived the perils of time and direct attempts to destroy their existence in the early fourth century. The text provides us

with references to many historically accurate people outside of Jesus and His followers.

At least twenty-five people mentioned in the New Testament can be confirmed independently using other ancient writers and/or archaeology. This includes people like Herod (the great), Caesar Augustus, Tiberius Caesar, Claudius Caesar, Agrippa, Felix, Pontius Pilate, John the Baptist, Jesus, and so forth. Consider that Pontius Pilate was only mentioned among three ancient historians among many other non-Christian writers who lived in that period: Philo, Josephus, and Tacitus. However, Pilate is mentioned in six different books by five separate authors in the New Testament. Jesus was mentioned by a few ancient authors, but all writers of the New Testament testify of his existence. There are also numerous places, events, and customs recorded in its pages that can be confirmed in a like manner.

The evidence provided in this work provides us with a significant amount of corroboration with the New Testament about Jesus and His followers. This includes confirmation for about 2,000 verses (out of 8,000 total) of the New Testament (see **Appendix A** for more information). This does not include the context of these verses, which would certainly add hundreds more verses to the total.

In conclusion, history, archaeology, and the New Testament provide us with a reliable, trustworthy historical record of events that happened in the first century AD as well as the time just before and after. This includes the existence of Jesus and His followers.

Appendix A

Historical Findings and the New Testament

In this appendix, we will examine approximately 2,589 New Testament references confirmed from historical and archaeological evidence presented in chapters one and two of this book. For each entry I list the detail from the evidence and then list the number of verses that mention that piece of evidence. I approximate the total number of verses referenced to be about 2,000 because some subjects overlap and thus a verse might count more than one time. This is a sample and a more thorough study could certainly be done on this subject. Most of the time, the greater context of the verse is not included, which would certainly add more verse references.

Jesus [943 verses]: the examples are so numerous that it would take pages to list them all.

Jesus was called Christ [over 200 verses; I have only mentioned a few examples]: Matthew 1:1, 1:16, 1:18, 16:16, 20; Mark 1:1, 8:29,14:61; Luke 2:11, 26, 4:41; John 1:17, 4:42, 6:69; Acts 2:36; Romans 1:6.

Specifically, the phrase “Jesus who is called Christ” [4 verses]: Matthew 1:16, 27:17, 27:22; John 4:25.

Nazareth [29 verses]: Matthew 2:23, 4:13, 21:11, 26:71; Mark 1:9,24, 10:47, 14:67, 16:6, Luke 1:26, 2:4,39,51, 4:16,34, 18:37, 24:19; John 1:45-46, 18:5-7, 19:19; Acts 2:22, 3:6, 4:10, 6:14, 10:38, 22:8, 26:9.

Tiberius Caesar—direct references [1 verse]: Luke 3:1.

Tiberius Caesar—indirect references to him as Caesar [10 verses]: Matthew 22:17, 21; Mark 12:14, 17; Luke 20:22,25, 23:2, John 19:12, 15.

Pilate [54 verses, most of which are contained in passages]: Matthew 27:2-65; Mark 15:1-44; Luke 3:1, 13:1, 23:1-52; John 18:29-38, 19:1-38; Acts 3:13, 4:27, 13:28; I Timothy 6:13.

Jewish authorities made accusations against Jesus [well over 20 verses, some examples mentioned multiple times in a passage]: Matthew 20:18, 21:15,23, 26:3-59, 27:1-41; Mark 11:18, 14:1,10,43-55, 15:1-31; Luke 9:22, 19:47, 22:2-4, 22:52-66, 23:4-20; John 7:32-45, 18:3,35, 19:6-15,21.

Crucifixion [49 verses total, some of which are contained in passages]: Matthew 20:19, 23:34, 26:2, 27:22-44, 28:5; Mark 15:13-32; Lk. 23:21-33, 24:7, 24:26; John 19:6-41; Acts 2:23, 26, 4:10; I Cor. 1:23, 2:2, 2:8; 2 Cor. 13:4; Gal 2:20, 3:1; Heb. 6:6; Rev. 11:8.

Jesus was called wise [4 verses]: Matthew 13:54; Mark 6:2; Luke 2:40, 52.

Jesus was teacher [many verses, but 21 are listed here]: Matthew 4:23, 9:35, 11:1, 21:23, 22:16, 26:55; Mark 4:1, 6:2, 6:6, 34, 12:14, 14:49; Luke 5:17, 11:1, 13:10,22, 20:21, 21:37, 23:5; John 3:2; Acts 1:1.

Jesus and James had an earthly father named Joseph: Matthew 1:16,

Jesus had Jewish and Greek followers [about 60 verse references listed, but more are available. I also included references to Gentile followers after his death]: Matthew 4:25, 8:1,18, 9:8-10, 33-36, 11:7,12:15,21, 13:2, 34-36, 14:14-23, 15:10, 30, 20:29, 21:8-9, 21:11, 46, 22:33, 23:1; Mark 1:34, 2:2-13, 15, 3:7-9, 30-32, 6:31, 55-56, 15:41; Luke 2:32, 7:11; John 2:23, 4:39-41, 7:31, 8:30, 10:42, 11:45, 12:11, 20-25, 42; Acts 2:41, 4:4, 8:7-8, 9:42, 13:43, 14:21, 15:35, 17:12, 18:8, 19:18-19, 21:20, 28:23-31. All of the early followers were Jewish, but some were Gentiles.

Jesus was considered a prophet [14 verses]: Matthew 21:46; Mark 8:28; Luke 1:76, 7:16, 9:8,19, 24:19; John 4:19,44, 6:14, 7:40, 9:17; Acts 3:22-23, 7:37.

Jesus was considered a teacher of Truth [3 verses]: Matthew 22:16; Mark 12:14; Luke 20:21.

The Jesus movement started in Judea [43 verses mention Judaea or Judea]: The gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all

confirm this as Jesus taught throughout Judea; see also Acts 1:8.

Jesus performed miracles and did good [many examples exist, but I have listed 29 verses]: Matthew 4:23, 8:7-13,14-15, 9:35, 12:15, 14:14, 15:30; Luke 7:3, 9:42, 13:14, 14:3, 22:51, John 2:11, 23, 3:2, 4:47,54, 5:13, 6:2, 11:47; Acts 2:22, 10:38.

Jesus was worshipped [9 verses]: Matthew 8:2, 9:18, 14:33, 15:25, 20:20, 28:9, 17; Mark, 5:6; Luke 24:52.

Jesus had a brother names James; in Hebrew his name was Jacob [9 verses – we listed both indirect references to Jesus’ brothers and specific references to James]: Matthew 13:55, Mk. 6:3, John 7:5, Acts 1:14, 12:17, 15:13, I Cor. 15:7, Gal. 1:19, Book of James was written by him – see James 1:1.

Jesus’ followers were called Christians [3 verses]: Acts 11:26, 26:28; I Peter 4:16.

Jesus’ disciples prayed to Him and in His name [3 verses]: Acts 1:24; James 5:14; I Peter 3:12.

Christians lived by Christ’s Words [again, many examples, but 27 verses listed]: Matthew 28:16-20, John 13:34-35; I Cor. 11:1; Eph. 5:1-2; Col. 3:13-16; I Peter 2:21-25; I John 2:1-6, 3:15-16.

Christians considered each other brothers [approx. 245 examples in the New Testament, but we have a sample of 12 verses]: Matthew 12:50; Mark 3:35; Acts 20:32; Romans 1:13, 16:7; I Cor. 1:10-11; Hebrews 3:1; James 1:2; I Peter 1:22; 2 Peter 1:10; I John 2:7; Rev. 6:11, 22:9.

The first leaders of Christianity were in Judea [Jerusalem was the headquarters for early Christianity; we have 19 verses listed]: Acts 1:4-8, 11:1-2, 11:19-22, 11:26-27, 12:24-25, 15:2, 16:4, Gal. 2:1-2.

Christians met regularly on a fixed day [many examples in the gospels, but 5 specific examples listed here]: Acts 13:13-48, Acts 15:21, Acts 16:11-20, Acts 17:1-4, 18:1-6.

Christians were taught not to curse Christ [1 verse]: I Cor. 12:3.

Christians lived morally upright and shunned evil [at least 538 verses, all referenced]: Romans 6:1-22, 8:1-8, 12:9-21, 13:1-14; I Cor. 3:16-17, 5:1-13, 6:9-20, 10:1-13, chapter 13; Gal. 5:19-26; Eph. 4:17-32, 5:1-20; Phil. 2:12-16; Col. 3:1-17; I Thess. 4:1-12; 2 Thess. 2:11-12; I Tim. 3:1-13, 4:1-13, 5:1-16, 6:3-10; 2 Tim. 3:1-9; Titus 1:5-16; 2:1-14, 3:1-8; James 1:19-27, 2:1-26, 3:1-11, 4:1-12; I Peter 1:13-22, 2:1-3, 13-17, 3:8-18, 4:1-11; 2 Peter chapter 2, 3:11-13, I John 2:9-17, 3:1-24, 4:7-21, 5:1-5,13-21, Jude 3-22, Rev. chapters 2 and 3.

Christians were taught to shun idols [30 verses]: Acts 15:20, 15:29, 21:25; I Cor. 5:10-11, 6:9, 8:1-10; I Cor. 10:7,14,19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Gal. 5:20; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5; I Thess. 1:9; I Peter 4:3; I John 5:21; Rev. 2:14, 20, 21:8, 22:15.

Christians were persecuted and told that they would suffer for the faith [over 40 verses, but sample listed]: Matthew 10:34-38, 24:9-13; Luke 21:16; Acts 5:41, 7:54-60, 8:1, 9:16, 11:19, 13:50, 14:22; Romans 5:3, 8:17-18; Eph. 3:13; Phil. 1:29, 3:10; Col. 1:24; I Thess. 1:6, 2:2, 2:14; 2 Thess. 1:5; 2 Tim. 1:8-12, 2:3-9, 3:11; Hebrews 10:32-34, 13:3; James 5:10; I Peter 1:6-7, 2:19-21, 3:14-17, 4:15-19, 5:9-10; Rev. 2:10.

There were early believers in Rome [several verses]: Acts 28:14-18; Romans 1:1-15 (the entire letter of Romans was written to these believers).

Females had important roles in early Christianity [at least 16 verse references]: Acts 18:2,18, 24-26, 21:9; Romans 16:1-16; I Cor. 16:19; Phil. 4:2-3; Col. 4:15; 2 Tim. 4:19.

Christians believed in immortality [over 36 verses]: Matthew 25:31-46; Mark 10:30; Luke 20:34-36; John 3:15-16, 4:36, 5:36, 6:54, 6:68, 10:28, 11:24-26, 12:25; Acts 13:48, 24:15; Romans 2:7, 5:21, 6:5,22-23; I Cor. 15:20-55; Phil. 3:10-11; I Thess. 4:11-18; I Tim. 6:12,19; 2 Tim. 1:10; Titus 1:2, 3:7; I John 1:2, 2:25, 5:11-13, 5:20; Jude 1:21; Hebrews 6:2; Rev. 20:4-5.

Christians believed in giving [there are many references, but

18 specific verses and two whole chapters on this subject, which include 39 verses]: Matthew 6:1-4; Acts 2:44-45, 4:32-34; I Cor. 16:1-3; 2 Cor. chapters 8-9; Phil. 4:15; Eph. 4:28; I Tim. 6:17-19; Heb. 13:16.

Claudius removed Jews from Rome [1 verse]: Acts 18:2.

People of all ranks and ages were Christians [61 total verses, including passages about how the younger and older believers should interact with each other. More verses on this could be included, but this gives us a good sample]: People in royal households (Luke 8:3, Phil. 4:22); Priests (Acts 6:7); Chief Rulers (John 12:42); A Eunuch (Acts 8:26-38); A Weaver (Acts 16:11-15); Chief Women in a city (Acts 17:4); Fishermen (Matthew 4:18-19); Tax Collectors (Matthew 10:3); Ruler of synagogue (Acts 18:8); Erastus, a city chamberlain (Romans 16:23); People from all sorts of backgrounds famous or infamous who repented of their sins joined the early community (see I Cor. 1:26-28). The old and the young were part of this community (Acts 20:9, I Tim. 4:12, 5:1-18, Titus 2:4-6, I Peter 5:5, I John 2:13-14). Entire households joined the faith together (Acts 16:30-34, 18:8, I Cor. 1:16, 2 Tim. 4:19). They early Christian leaders taught in the Temple and in homes (Acts 5:42).

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Appendix A

The Holy Bible. King James Version and American Standard Version.

More Materials

Below are listed more short books by Kelly McDonald, Jr. available for FREE download on www.sabbathsentinel.org Look at the Free Resources page.

A Brief History of the Sabbath in Early Christianity

The majority of people who attend Church today meet on Sunday. In the New Testament, the early Church met on Sabbath, which is from Friday sunset through Saturday sunset. Did you know that most Christians 400 years after Jesus still honored the Sabbath? In this informative booklet, you will learn the seven major historical factors that affected the Sabbath in the early Church.

Sabbath and Sunday Laws in the Roman Empire

In the Roman Empire, a series of laws were passed concerning the Sabbath. Hundreds of years later, Sunday laws were also passed. These laws help us to understand the protection of Sabbath observance in broader Judaism and Christianity as well as the development of Sunday as a day of rest in the Roman Church.

Prevalence of the Sabbath in the Early Roman Empire

When the Gentiles heard the early gospel message, how did they respond as it relates to the Sabbath? Were Gentile converts persuaded to keep the Sabbath like their Jewish counterparts? Did they seek to abandon it? In this work, the author reviews two Jewish, two Christian, and fifteen Gentile primary sources as well as the New Testament to examine the prevalence of the Sabbath in the early Roman Empire.

How Did Sunday Become the First Day of the Week?

How did the first day of the week, which does not have a name in the Bible, come to be called Sunday? How did the other days of the week come to have their names? In this work, you will learn about the history of two seven-day cycles in the early Roman Empire: The Biblical week and the pagan week. This study will also reveal insight into early Church history in the development of Sunday as a day of gathering among certain groups in early Christianity.

Imagine for a moment that you did not have a Bible to learn about Jesus. How would you know that He ever lived on earth? Would it be possible to prove His existence? In modern times, there has been skepticism about the historical validity of Jesus' existence and the New Testament account.

In this book, we will address the historical, archaeological, and textual evidence to see if Jesus and His earliest followers ever existed.



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