

# **The Historical Reality of Jesus Christ: Ancient Testimony, Archaeology, Early Creeds, and the Manuscript Record**

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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that the existence of Jesus of Nazareth is historically secure even when the case is framed in deliberately restrictive terms. It proceeds first from non-Christian ancient testimony, then from archaeology and epigraphy, then from the earliest Christian creedal materials treated as historical data rather than as inspired proof-texts, and finally from the unusual textual support for the New Testament documents. The result is cumulative rather than simplistic. Tacitus, Josephus, Pliny, Suetonius, Lucian, Mara bar Serapion, and later rabbinic tradition do not give a full biography of Jesus, but they do anchor his movement in real time, place, administration, execution, and aftermath.<sup>1</sup> Archaeological finds such as the Pilate Stone and the Caiaphas ossuary reinforce the historical environment in which the Jesus movement arose.<sup>2</sup> Early creedal formulations show that claims about Jesus's death, resurrection, lordship, and divine status appear extremely early, not as late legendary accretions.<sup>3</sup> The abundance and antiquity of New Testament witnesses do not automatically prove theology, but they do place historians in a better textual position than they enjoy for most works of Greco-Roman antiquity.<sup>4</sup> The historical picture that emerges is not myth floating free of history, but a first-century Jewish figure whose execution under Roman authority generated a movement of extraordinary speed, durability, and doctrinal cohesion.

## **Introduction**

The question of Jesus's historicity is no longer a live controversy in mainstream professional scholarship. The central historical debates concern not whether Jesus existed but how to assess the sources, what

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<sup>1</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44; Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.9.1; Pliny the Younger, *Epistles* 10.96; Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.4; Lucian, *Passing of Peregrinus* 11-13; Mara bar Serapion, *Letter to His Son*; *b. Sanhedrin* 43a.

<sup>2</sup> The Pilate Stone confirms Pontius Pilate as prefect of Judea, and the Caiaphas ossuary plausibly connects the priestly name to the right period and milieu. See Museum and archaeology summaries in the sources cited below.

<sup>3</sup> On pre-Pauline and creed-like material, see James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 854-55; Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 168.

<sup>4</sup> The Institute for New Testament Textual Research maintains the official list of Greek New Testament manuscripts, and the New Testament Virtual Manuscript Room reports over 5,600 known Greek manuscripts. See INTF and NTVMR sources below.

can be said with confidence about his activity, and how the earliest convictions about him developed. Even Bart D. Ehrman, who is not writing as a confessional apologist, states the matter bluntly: whatever else one thinks about Jesus, he certainly existed.<sup>5</sup> The point is important because it clarifies the task. A responsible historical case does not require the historian to prove every theological claim; it requires the historian to explain why Jesus belongs in the map of first-century history in the first place.

This paper follows a deliberately narrow method. It does not begin by asking the reader to accept the Gospels and epistles as inspired Scripture. Instead, it asks what can be inferred from non-Christian authors, public inscriptions, archaeological discoveries, early Christian formulas treated as historical artifacts, and the manuscript tradition that preserves the texts. In that sense the argument is cumulative and cross-disciplinary. Dates, people, offices, places, habits of worship, and the speed of transmission all matter.

## 1. Non-Christian Ancient Testimony

### 1.1 Tacitus

Tacitus remains one of the most important non-Christian witnesses because he is both hostile and concise. In *Annals* 15.44, while discussing Nero's response to the fire of Rome, he explains that the Christians derived their name from "Christus," who suffered "the extreme penalty" during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of Pontius Pilate.<sup>6</sup> This single notice carries substantial historical weight. First, it places Jesus within a datable Roman administrative setting. Second, it associates his death with Pilate rather than with a free-floating religious legend. Third, it presupposes that the movement had spread from Judea to Rome quickly enough to become visible within imperial memory.

Tacitus does not confirm Christian theology. He confirms something historically more basic: by the early second century a Roman senator and historian could refer matter-of-factly to the execution of

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<sup>5</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 4-6; see also the author's 2024 retrospective discussion of the same thesis on his blog.

<sup>6</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44. The standard translation reads: "Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of ... Pontius Pilatus." The historical importance of the passage is also summarized in Dickinson College Commentaries and related classical resources. See <https://dcc.dickinson.edu/tacitusannals/15-44>. <sup>7</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.200 (20.9.1). See also Sefaria's text of the passage: "the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James."

the movement's founder under a known prefect in a known reign. That is precisely the kind of data historians look for when distinguishing legend from historical memory.

## 1.2 Josephus

Josephus is even more valuable because he writes as a first-century Jewish aristocrat with deep knowledge of Judean affairs. The most secure Josephan reference is *Antiquities* 20.9.1, where he refers to "James, the brother of Jesus who is called Christ."<sup>7</sup> Even scholars who dispute parts of the better-known *Testimonium Flavianum* usually regard this reference as authentic. It matters because Josephus is not trying to defend Christianity; he is identifying which James he means. Jesus is already a known figure in the historical background.

The *Testimonium Flavianum* in *Antiquities* 18.3.3 is textually more complex because many scholars think Christian scribes embellished it.<sup>7</sup> Yet a broad scholarly consensus still holds that Josephus originally contained a core reference to Jesus that later copyists amplified.<sup>8</sup> Once the obviously Christian phrases are peeled away, the remaining core still implies that Josephus knew of Jesus as a wise man or teacher, as someone crucified under Pilate, and as the founder of a movement that persisted after his death. The implication is again historical rather than dogmatic: Jesus belongs inside Josephus's map of late Second Temple Judea.

## 1.3 Pliny the Younger

Pliny's letter to Trajan (Ep. 10.96) is a document of administrative procedure, not Christian devotion. He reports that Christians in Bithynia met on a fixed day before dawn and sang hymns to Christ "as to a god."<sup>9</sup> That phrase is historically explosive. It shows that within living memory of the first century, provincial Roman officials were encountering communities for whom devotion to Christ was already structured, regular, and intense.

Pliny does not explain where such devotion came from; he simply reports that it exists. Yet that is precisely the historical value of the text. It shows that high devotion to Jesus was not a fourth-century invention. By the time Pliny writes, such devotion is already stable enough to be recognizable, reportable, and punishable.

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<sup>7</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.63-64.

<sup>8</sup> For a concise scholarly summary of the current state of the debate, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 59-62.

<sup>9</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Epistles* 10.96. Pliny says Christians sang a hymn to Christ "quasi deo" - "as to a god." See also the VROMA text and translation.

## 1.4 Suetonius

Suetonius is less precise than Tacitus, but still useful. In *Claudius* 25.4 he says that Claudius expelled Jews from Rome because they were constantly rioting at the instigation of “Chrestus.”<sup>10</sup> Scholars debate whether Suetonius misunderstood disputes about Christ among Roman Jews or whether he thought the instigator was physically present in Rome. Either way, the notice plausibly implies that conflicts over Christ had reached Rome by the mid-first century.

Suetonius also mentions Christian punishment under Nero in *Nero* 16.2.<sup>11</sup> These notices are thin, but their thinness is itself revealing. The Jesus movement appears in Roman literature not because Roman authors were eager to preserve Christian memory, but because Christians had become socially visible. That visibility presupposes a historical origin.

## 1.5 Lucian of Samosata

Lucian, another hostile witness, describes Christians as people who worship “that crucified sophist” and live according to his laws.<sup>12</sup> His satire is not friendly, but it is informative. It confirms three things: the founder was crucified, followers organized communal life around his teaching, and devotion to him had become distinctive enough to be mocked by outsiders.

Historically, Lucian matters because satire depends on public recognizability. He expects readers to understand whom he means. A purely mythical Christ would not have produced this sort of socially intelligible satire about an executed founder whose followers remained devoted to him.

## 1.6 Mara bar Serapion and Rabbinic Memory

The Syriac letter of Mara bar Serapion refers to the Jews’ execution of their “wise king,” after which their kingdom was taken away.<sup>13</sup> The text never names Jesus explicitly, so the identification is inferential rather than certain. Even so, many historians regard it as a plausible non-Christian allusion to Jesus. Its value lies in its memory pattern: the execution of a Jewish teacherfigure followed by the endurance of his influence.

The Babylonian Talmud, especially *Sanhedrin* 43a, is later and textually complicated, so it must be used with caution.<sup>14</sup> Still, later rabbinic memory associating Jesus or Yeshu with execution on the

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<sup>10</sup> Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.4.

<sup>11</sup> Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2.

<sup>12</sup> Lucian, *Passing of Peregrinus* 11-13. Loeb and other classical text repositories preserve the passage where Lucian says Christians worship “the man who was crucified in Palestine.”

<sup>13</sup> Mara bar Serapion, *Letter to His Son*. The identification is probable but not certain; therefore it should be used cautiously.

<sup>14</sup> *b. Sanhedrin* 43a. Because the text is later and complicated by transmission history, it is evidentially secondary, not primary.

eve of Passover suggests that Jewish tradition did not respond to Christianity by denying that Jesus existed. The dispute is over evaluation, not over existence.

## **2. Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Historical Setting**

### **2.1 The Pilate Stone**

The Pilate Stone from Caesarea Maritima is among the most important archaeological finds relevant to Jesus studies. The inscription preserves the name of Pontius Pilate and identifies him as prefect of Judea.<sup>16</sup> This matters because Pilate is not just a literary character in Christian texts; he is epigraphically anchored in the right office and region.

The implication is methodological. Historical reliability is strengthened when literary claims intersect with independent epigraphic evidence. The stone does not prove every Gospel detail, but it decisively confirms that one of the central political figures in Jesus's execution belongs to the historical record.

### **2.2 The Caiaphas Ossuary**

The ossuary commonly associated with Joseph Caiaphas is likewise significant, even though scholars discuss the degree of certainty in its identification.<sup>17</sup> If the identification is correct, it connects the name Caiaphas known from literary tradition with a material artifact from the right place and period. Even if one phrases the matter cautiously, the ossuary confirms that the priestly family name was real and historically situated.

The historical point is not that archaeology proves theology. It is that names clustered around the Jesus tradition repeatedly turn out to fit the world of early first-century Judea rather than the world of later mythic fabrication.

### **2.3 Megiddo and Early Christian Worship**

The Megiddo mosaic is especially relevant to the history of Christology. One inscription is commonly rendered, in expanded form, as a dedication "to God Jesus Christ," preserving the phrase in abbreviated Greek *nomina sacra* style.<sup>18</sup> Even allowing for scholarly discussion over exact reconstruction and dating, the mosaic is widely taken as evidence of Christian worship in a pre-Nicene setting. The Museum of the Bible exhibition and Biblical Archaeology Society coverage both stress that the mosaic comes from a Christian prayer hall

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For accessible summaries of the Pilate Stone, see the Israel Museum and Caesarea discussions, along with standard descriptions noting its discovery in 1961 at Caesarea Maritima. The inscription confirms the name and title of Pontius Pilate. See also <https://vici.org/vici/21598/>.

<sup>17</sup>

On the Caiaphas ossuary and the debates over its identification, see Helen K. Bond, *Caiaphas: Friend of Rome and Judge of Jesus?* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 3-7, and archaeology summaries from the Israel Museum and Biblical Archaeology Society.

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The abbreviated form is commonly expanded as *tō theō Iēsou Christō* - “to God Jesus Christ.” See Museum of the Bible, “The Megiddo Mosaic: Foundations of Faith,” and Biblical Archaeology Society, “The Megiddo Mosaic.” before Christianity became a legal imperial religion.<sup>1516</sup>

Historically, Megiddo matters because it is not a theological treatise. It is material culture. It shows that communities on the ground were capable of devotional language toward Jesus that is unmistakably high. That does not eliminate the need for careful doctrinal history, but it does weaken the claim that Jesus’s divinity was simply voted into existence centuries later.

## 2.4 Other Chronological Anchors

Although not directly about Jesus’s own lifetime, inscriptions such as the Gallio inscription help anchor the chronology of the earliest Christian movement.<sup>17</sup> This matters because one objection to Christian origins is that too much time supposedly elapsed for reliable memory. Yet the broader first-century framework is more tightly anchored than that objection assumes. When governors, prefects, high priests, and regional disputes can be tied to external evidence, the movement looks increasingly historical in texture.

## 3. The Earliest Creeds as Historical Data

A common mistake is to imagine that if one avoids citing the New Testament as inspired Scripture, one must also ignore the earliest Christian formulas embedded within it. That does not follow. Historians routinely analyze preliterate traditions preserved inside later texts. In Paul’s letters, the verbs “received” and “delivered” signal just such a tradition history.

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<sup>15</sup> Museum of the Bible, “The Megiddo Mosaic: Foundations of Faith,” accessed April

<sup>16</sup>, 2026, <https://www.museumofthebible.org/exhibits/megiddo>; Biblical Archaeology Society, “The Megiddo Mosaic,” accessed April 10, 2026, <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/exhibitsevents/the-megiddo-mosaic/>.

<sup>17</sup> On the Gallio inscription as an anchor for first-century chronology, see the standard Delphi inscription discussions and Murphy-O’Connor’s treatment of Corinthian chronology.

The classic example is 1 Corinthians 15:3-5. Most scholars regard the formula about Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and appearances as pre-Pauline.<sup>18</sup><sup>19</sup>The argument does not depend on piety alone. It rests on style, vocabulary, rhythmic structure, and the fact that Paul explicitly says he is handing on what he had already received. James D. G. Dunn, Larry Hurtado, and many others treat the passage as very early tradition, plausibly stemming from the Jerusalem church within a short period after Jesus's death.<sup>20</sup>

That matters historically in two ways. First, it sharply compresses the timeline between Jesus's execution and the proclamation that he had been raised and had appeared to named witnesses. Second, it shows that a coherent memorypackage about Jesus existed before the later Gospels were written in their final forms. This is not yet a proof of resurrection as an event; it is proof that resurrection proclamation was not a late doctrinal invention.

The same is true, though in a different register, of 1 Corinthians 8:6 and Philippians 2:6-11. These texts are not merely devotional flourish. They show Jesus being spoken of with categories of lordship, preexistence, and divine prerogative at a strikingly early stage.<sup>21</sup> When historians ask why the Jesus movement took the shape it did, these creed-like materials matter because they show that Jesus was not remembered merely as a dead teacher. He was remembered as one whose identity demanded reconfigured monotheistic language.

Brant Pitre's recent monograph *Jesus and Divine Christology* argues that this early high Christology is best explained not as a later theological inflation but as a development rooted in Jesus's own words, actions, scriptural allusions, and self-presentation within Second Temple Judaism.<sup>22</sup> Whether one agrees with every part of Pitre's case, the book is significant because it presses the historical question backward: if the earliest followers are already using divine categories, what in the ministry of Jesus generated that response? Pitre's contribution is not to replace historical method with dogma, but to insist that historical Jesus research must reckon with the data of early divine Christology rather than explain it away by default.

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<sup>19</sup> Cor. 15:3-5 is commonly treated as received tradition rather than Pauline composition. See Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 854-55.

<sup>20</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 168; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 855.

<sup>21</sup> On early high Christology, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 1-59; Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 95-134.

<sup>22</sup> Brant Pitre, *Jesus and Divine Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024), esp. the discussion summarized by Eerdmans and Google Books: Pitre argues that the origins of early high Christology can be traced to the historical Jesus's words and actions.

## 4. Greek Fragments, Early Witnesses, and What They Mean

The case for Jesus's historicity is about more than the existence of manuscripts. Yet manuscripts matter because they determine how close historians can get to the earliest recoverable form of the traditions.

Papyrus 52, preserved at the John Rylands Library, contains portions of John 18:31-33 and 37-38 in Greek and is generally dated to the second century, though exact dating remains debated.<sup>23</sup> Its importance is often overstated in apologetic literature and understated in skeptical literature. Properly understood, P52 does not prove the date of John's Gospel with mathematical precision, nor does it by itself prove theological claims. What it does show is that a Greek codex containing Johannine material was circulating in Egypt remarkably early.

A representative fragment of the text it preserves is the exchange between Pilate and Jesus:

Σὺ εἶ βασιλεὺς; ... εἰς τοῦτο γεγέννημαι ... ἵνα μαρτυρήσω τῇ ἀληθείᾳ.

Even in fragmentary form, this matters historically. It means the text had already moved geographically and materially into copy culture early enough to leave papyrological traces close to the period of composition.

The Megiddo mosaic likewise preserves Greek devotional language. In common expanded reading, the inscription includes the phrase:

τῷ θεῷ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ

The significance here is not just lexical. It is social and devotional. Greek-speaking Christians in a concrete worship setting publicly inscribed devotion to Jesus in a way that intersects with later doctrinal claims but clearly predates the great councils.<sup>24</sup>

## 5. The New Testament as the Best-Attested Corpus from Antiquity

It is important to state the manuscript argument with precision. A large number of manuscripts does not prove that the narrated events occurred. It proves something narrower but still crucial: historians possess an exceptionally rich basis for textual criticism. The Institute for New Testament Textual Research maintains the official international list of Greek New Testament manuscripts and notes

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<sup>23</sup> The John Rylands fragment P52 is listed by CSNTM as a second-century papyrus; the John Rylands Library itself notes that dating is debated and may be nearer 200 CE than older claims suggested. See CSNTM, "Manuscript P52," accessed April 10, 2026, [https://manuscripts.csntm.org/manuscript/Group/GA\\_P52?sequence=0](https://manuscripts.csntm.org/manuscript/Group/GA_P52?sequence=0).

<sup>24</sup> Museum of the Bible, "The Megiddo Mosaic: Foundations of Faith"; COJS, "Akeptous Inscription, 3-4th century CE," accessed April 10, 2026, [https://cojs.org/akeptous\\_inscription\\_3-4th\\_century\\_ce/](https://cojs.org/akeptous_inscription_3-4th_century_ce/).

that depending on counting method the number of available Greek witnesses exceeds 5,500.<sup>25</sup> The New Testament Virtual Manuscript Room similarly reports that over 5,600 Greek New Testament manuscripts are known and that the overwhelming majority have image access.<sup>26</sup>

By raw quantity of surviving witnesses, the New Testament is therefore better attested than any other individual work or corpus of Greco-Roman antiquity commonly used by historians. Bruce Metzger and Bart Ehrman emphasize that textual criticism works precisely because of this abundance, not in spite of it.<sup>27</sup> The large number of variants often scares non-specialists, but the abundance of witnesses is the reason critics can identify, classify, and weigh those variants in the first place.

The implication for historical Jesus research is substantial. If a historian decides to use Tacitus, Josephus, Suetonius, or Pliny from far thinner manuscript bases than the New Testament tradition, then it would be methodologically inconsistent to dismiss the New Testament writings as hopelessly unstable. That does not mean historians must grant every claim in those writings. It means that, at the level of textual access, the documents are unusually well supported.

A second implication follows. Because the New Testament text is so well attested, creed-like material embedded in it becomes historically valuable. One can analyze formulaic tradition, titles, place names, and social references with more confidence than one could if the textual base were late and sparse. The manuscript tradition does not bypass normal critical method; it enables it.

## 6. What the Evidence Implies

Taken one by one, no single item solves every question. Tacitus does not describe miracles. Josephus does not give a passion narrative. Pliny does not explain where Christian worship came from. P52 does not by itself prove the date of every Gospel. Megiddo does not collapse the difference between third-century devotion and first-century self-understanding. But historical arguments are rarely won by one source in isolation.

What the cumulative case shows is this:

1. Jesus belongs to the world of first-century Judea, not to a later mythic imagination.

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<sup>25</sup> INTF, “How Many Greek New Testament Manuscripts Are There Really? The Latest Numbers,” accessed April 10, 2026, <https://ntvmr.uni-muenster.de/intfblog/-/blogs/how-manygreek-new-testament-manuscripts-are-there-really-the-latest-numbers>.

<sup>26</sup> NTVMR/INTF platform summary, as indexed on the Bodleian and NTVMR resources, notes over 5,600 known Greek New Testament manuscripts with roughly 90 percent imaged. See <https://blogs.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/theconveyor/bodleian-manuscripts-on-the-newtestament-virtual-manuscript-room/>.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament*, 3-16.

2. His execution under Roman authority is embedded in both Christian and non-Christian memory.
3. His movement spread rapidly enough to become visible to Roman administrators and satirists within decades.
4. Claims about his exalted or divine status appear very early, both in creedlike formulas and in material culture.
5. The documents preserving these traditions are transmitted in unusually strong textual form compared with other ancient works.

The historical meaning of these points is considerable. Even if one brackets confessional conclusions, Jesus is best understood as a real Jewish teacher and public figure whose death under Pontius Pilate ignited a movement that almost immediately made large claims about his status and significance. A purely legendary or mythic explanation does not fit the data as well as a historical one.

## **Conclusion**

From a strictly historical point of view, Jesus of Nazareth is not a shadowy symbol assembled from late devotional imagination. He is a first-century figure anchored by hostile Roman testimony, Jewish historiography, administrative correspondence, social satire, epigraphic confirmation, archaeological context, early creed, and an unusually strong textual tradition. The evidence does not erase every historical problem, but it does establish a solid baseline. Jesus existed; he was executed in Judea under Roman authority; his followers rapidly formed communities that worshiped him, preserved formal confessions about him, and spread across the empire. That conclusion is not the product of circular appeal to Christian Scripture alone. It is the result of converging historical lines of evidence.

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