

Jesus Christ In Ancient Literature

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1. Introduction

The primary source for understanding Jesus Christ, his life, his teaching and his authority must be the New Testament, especially the Gospels. This is supported by predictions of the life and actions of Jesus in the Old Testament. However, there are also minor references to Jesus outside the Bible.

Jesus was not a very major figure from the perspective of the Roman mind. He came from a remote and rural district, he led no armies and his miracles were of a kind which raised no excitement among the Roman upper classes (who wrote the histories). In spite of this he does appear in a few books of history.

The existence of references to Jesus outside the Bible tells very little that could not have been found in the Bible, and in more detail. However, it does help to answer some of the questions of critics who wish to date writing of the Gospels very late and insist that most of the picture of Jesus in them was made up long after the events themselves. One set of critics who are particularly concerned with the evidence of Jesus outside the Bible are the conspiracy theorists who insist that Jesus never existed but was made up from astrology and pagan gods. These people tend to claim that the figure of Jesus was effectively invented in the fourth century AD; the existence of records of Jesus before that time is an embarrassment to them.

1.1 The Kinds of Literature

The period following the resurrection was one in which different cultures coexisted within the Roman Empire. At the centre of the Empire were the Roman rulers who ruled through local élites. The Romans spoke Latin but upper class Romans were usually fluent in Greek, which was the *lingua franca* of the Eastern Mediterranean area. One group of writers that cover events were writing for this group of people. The ones who mention Jesus are mainly writing history for an upper class Roman audience.

The second group of writers who include references to Jesus in their work are Jewish writers. These were not writing for Roman readers, but for a Jewish audience. The Jewish community, however, had been dispossessed of its homeland in various wars and was strongly concerned with events in Judea during the time of the Second Temple; of course Jesus was crucified in Judea towards the end of this time.

A third source of potential early writings about Jesus is Christian literature. It would be more than strange if the Christians had no interest in the life of Jesus. Some Christians were companions of Jesus and others were part of the earliest community formed in his name. One would therefore expect Christians to be the people best informed about Jesus. The New Testament is the earliest and most reliable information about Jesus, and Jesus is also mentioned (albeit less reliably) by the Apostolic Fathers, writers who had met the Apostles.

1.2 What can be Expected

The problem with looking for accounts of Jesus Christ outside the Bible is that to contemporary Romans, Jesus was a minor figure in a remote province at a time when that province was of little interest. Jesus built no buildings, commanded no armies, and fought no battles. His influence on human thought and culture did not become immediately obvious; it was some time before his followers became a global movement. Jesus never travelled away from the Levant, and the Gospels indicate that he only once went into Phoenicia (he may have travelled through the Decapolis on more occasions).

Roman historians are also noted for their tendency to stick to their subject and not to digress. As a consequence one would not expect a very large number of references to Jesus. Nevertheless, they tended to be thorough within their fields, so we would not expect them to be inaccurate.

One can see this tendency in references to the fire of Rome which took place in 64AD, in the reign of Nero. There is no doubt that this fire took place; archaeologists excavating the Domus Aureus (the palace that Nero built in central Rome on land cleared by the fire) found that it was built on a layer of ash which testifies to both the extent and the date of the fire. However, references to the fire are very scanty. Out of eight Roman historians who might be expected to refer to the fire, and another 30 Church Fathers, only four actually make any kind of reference to it; if one includes all the writers in Remsburg's list (see below) then the number who refer to the fire of Rome doesn't increase. The existence of Jesus is mentioned more often than the Fire of Rome.

Another character who appears in Roman history is Hannibal the Carthaginian general. No-one claims that Hannibal did not exist but the number of contemporary sources for his existence is very low. The only contemporary witness to the existence of Hannibal is Cato. Later the historian Livy wrote about the campaigns and battles of Hannibal, but the writings of Livy are considerably after the event. If one were to decide that the existence of Hannibal was a conspiracy by Cato and his followers to persuade the Senate to attack Carthage, it would be much harder to prove that this is not the case than it is to prove that Jesus existed.

1.3 Facts that Won't Disappear

The existence of Jesus left traces in the world which can't be explained by any idea of a myth created around a fictional character. The fact of Jesus' existence caused a community of followers to come into existence and to survive. The early Church had a large number of critics and opponents. From the first months of its existence it faced extreme opposition from the Jewish religious establishment and after 64AD the Roman authorities undertook horrendous persecutions of Christians. Two facts emerge from our knowledge of the earliest Christian community. One is that the people closest to the evidence were the people least likely to be intimidated by persecution; very few people will choose to be tortured to death in order to affirm something that they know to be a fiction. The other one is that in all the attempts to overthrow the Christian community no-one ever suggested that Jesus had not existed, or had not died.

The other fact that won't go away is the fact of the empty tomb. The early Christian community began in Jerusalem. The core belief of these Christians was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Such a community would never have been able to grow if there had not been an empty tomb in Jerusalem which had once contained the body of Jesus. Not only that but the authorities continued to refer to the empty tomb. Matthew 28:13-15 indicates the story that was put about by the Jewish authorities and we know that the same account was being used in the second century and forms part of the argument in Justin's "Dialogue against Trypho".

The tomb of Jesus was an obvious fact, or there would have been no point in trying to explain it in terms of a stolen body. If Jesus had a tomb he must have existed.

2. Roman Historians

These are writers whose works were published in the general Roman world. They tended to be secular, and to be writing histories of the Roman world rather than concentrating on specific religious matters. Jesus is a matter of peripheral interest to them at the very most, but the references nevertheless confirm that Jesus existed and that he was executed in the reign of Tiberius.

The conspiracy theorists tend to use three strategies to undermine the references:-

- They assert that the passage in question doesn't talk about Jesus Christ at all but about some completely different figure.
- They assert that the subject matter in the text wasn't from the knowledge of the writer in question but was picked up as hearsay from a Christian and written down completely uncritically by the writer.
- They assert that the text of the book in question originally had no reference to Jesus, but that the reference was inserted later on by mediaeval Christian scribes.

These claims are, of course, self-contradictory. Why should a Christian insert a passage about a pagan god into an ancient writing? Nevertheless it is often the case that one critic claims that a particular passage is about a pagan demigod while another critic (or sometimes the same one) will claim that this passage was clearly inserted by a later (Christian) scribe, or that the writer picked up the story from Christians and accepted it without comment or question.

In reality most of the references are fairly easily shown to be genuine, to refer to the real Jesus Christ and to be part of the original text of the book concerned.

2.1 Flavius Josephus

Josephus was born in 37AD in Jerusalem where he came from a distinguished priestly family. He visited Rome in 64AD (leaving just before Nero's fire). At the start of the Jewish war in 66AD he was appointed commander of the rebel forces in Galilee by the Jerusalem Sanhedrin, but in 67AD he was captured by the Romans at the end of the siege of Jotapata. He gained the patronage of Vespasian by his statement that Vespasian was the Messiah and that both he and his son Titus would rule the world - both of them later became Emperor, Vespasian only a year later. In 69AD Vespasian freed Josephus who added Vespasian's family name (Flavius) to his own, following Roman custom for a freedman.

Josephus wrote four known works:-

- **The Jewish War** (*Bellum Judaicae*) - BJ - Written c75AD. This describes the causes and course of the war between the Romans and the Jews which ran from 66AD to 73AD.
- **Life** - Written c90AD. The autobiography of Josephus.
- **Antiquities of the Jews** (*Antiquitates Judaicae*) - AJ - Written in the reign of Domitian (c94AD). Contains an account of the history of the Jewish peoples from the Patriarchal period.
- **Against Apion** (*Contra Apionem*) - Date unknown but after AJ. Apion was a Greek who had accused the Jews of Alexandria before the emperor Caligula.

Josephus is possibly the most controversial of the authors who refer to Jesus. The works of Josephus, as they stand, contain three references people recorded in the New Testament. The first of these references is the controversial one and refers directly to Jesus - in the notes below it is treated last. The second reference is to John the Baptist and the last to James, who it describes as the brother of Jesus, hence providing a second reference to him.

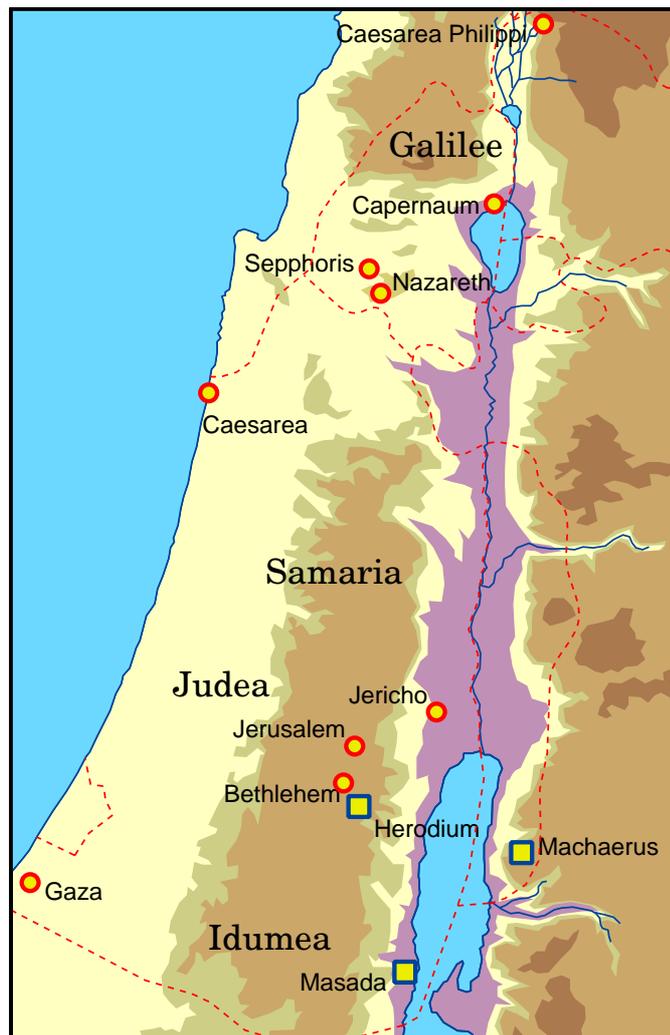
All three of these references appear in Antiquities (AJ). The probable reason for the absence of references to Jesus in War is that BJ was written only shortly after the fire of Rome. This means that Nero's persecution of Christians was only recent and that references to people who were accused of having started the fire were possibly politically foolish. Not only that but Josephus' support for Vespasian, in which Vespasian was described as "Christ" might seem to be undermined by a reference to anyone else described as "Christ". As a consequence, Josephus left his references to Jesus to a later work, Antiquities.

Reference to John the Baptist (AJ 18.5.2)

The important reference here is:-

Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man... Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion... Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. (AJ 18.5.2)

This account is generally consistent with the account in the Gospels. It shows how John was arrested by Herod and held for some time, but that after a while he was killed. Josephus attributes the arrest of John to the fact that John was popular with the people, so that Herod feared that he would be able to stage an uprising. The Gospels suggest that Herod imprisoned John because he criticised the marriage of Herod Antipas to Herodias on religious grounds. These two views are not, however, incompatible. In the atmosphere of Galilee in the first century AD religious considerations were politically of great importance. A criticism of Herod on religious grounds might be expected to turn a good number of his subjects against him. Herod may have decided to act against John when this degree of political antagonism became clear. As a result, while the underlying reason for Herod's imprisonment of



John was afraid that he might build up a rebellious following, the actual trigger to the arrest might have been John's direct criticism of Herod.

The other difference is that Josephus has John the Baptist imprisoned and executed at Macherus, a fortress on the eastern side of the Dead Sea (see map on previous page). The Gospels do not say where John was imprisoned but his execution was ordered at a gathering of Herod's main supporters (Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29); it is unlikely that these would travel all the way to a remote area like Macherus for their banquet. However, there is no reason to suppose that the execution took place in the same hour that Herod ordered it. He may have sent a message immediately to Machaerus ordering John's beheading and requiring the head to be brought back. This would be perfectly consistent with first century behaviour.

It is clear that the section on John the Baptist has not been tampered with in any significant way by Christian scribes. For a Christian John the Baptist is only of interest as a forerunner of Christ Jesus. If a Christian scribe had altered the section then a reference to Jesus would have been the first thing added. What we have is an authentic reference to John the Baptist.

Reference to James the Brother of Jesus (AJ 20.9.1)

This is a much shorter reference which, nevertheless, does include a direct mention of Jesus.

But the emperor, when he learned of the death of Festus, sent Albinus to be procurator of Judea . . . But the younger Ananus who, as we have already said, had obtained the high priesthood, was of an exceedingly bold and reckless disposition. . . . Ananus, therefore, being of this character, and supposing that he had a favourable opportunity on account of the fact that Festus was dead and Albinus was still on the way, called together the Sanhedrin and brought before them the brother of Jesus, the one called (the) Christ, James by name, together with some others and accused them of violating the law, and condemned them to be stoned. But those in the city who seemed most moderate and skilled in the law were very angry at this, and sent secretly to the king, requesting him to order Ananus to cease such proceedings . . . And the king, Agrippa, in consequence, deprived him of the high priesthood, which he had held three months, and appointed Jesus, the son of Damnaeus. (AJ 20.9.1)

This is only a minor reference but it occurs in all manuscripts without variation and is a secure part of the text. It indicates that James the brother of Jesus existed, and that he had a sufficiently important role in the Christian community for it to be worthwhile for the Jerusalem authorities to put him to death. This matches the picture of James in Acts (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:18) - James is the head of the Christian congregation in Jerusalem.

Some conspiracy theorists have suggested that this mention of Jesus has been inserted later by Christian copyists. However, this is unlikely. In the first place the passage refers to James as "the brother of Jesus, the one called Christ" (*ton adelphon Iesou tou legomenou Christou*). It is almost impossible to imagine a Christian scribe of any period referring to Jesus in this way. It is simply too non-committal to be a Christian interpolation into the text.

This passage of Josephus is quoted by Origen in his work "Contra Celsum" (Against Celsus) (Con Cel 1:47 & 2:13) and in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew

(On Matthew 10:17). He cites the text of Josephus exactly in two references and more loosely in the other. As Origen wrote his works shortly before 250AD (he died in 253 or 254) this shows that the text existed in Josephus before this date. The writing of Origen also shows how a Christian of the second or third century would have viewed the saying.

Quotations of this text from Origen.

For in the eighteenth book of his Jewish Antiquities, Josephus bears witness to John as having been a Baptist . . . and the same writer, although not believing in Jesus as the Christ, in seeking after the cause of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple . . . says nevertheless (being, although against his will, not far from the truth) that these disasters happened to the Jews as a punishment for the death of James the Just, who was a brother of the Jesus who was called Christ, since they killed him despite his being supremely just. (Origen Contra Celsum 1.47)

Titus destroyed Jerusalem, on account, as Josephus wrote, of James the Just, the brother of Jesus who was called Christ, but in reality, as the truth makes clear, on account of Jesus Christ the Son of God. (Origen Contra Celsum 2.13)

And to so great a reputation among the people for righteousness did this James rise, that Flavius Josephus, who wrote the Antiquities of the Jews in twenty books, when wishing to exhibit the cause why the people suffered such great misfortunes that even the Temple was razed to the ground, said that these things happened to them in accordance with the wrath of God in consequence of the things which they had dared to do against James the brother of Jesus who is called Christ. And the amazing thing is that although he did not accept Jesus as Christ, he yet gave testimony that the righteousness of James was so great, and he says that the people thought that they had suffered these things because of James. (Origen - Commentary on Matthew 10.17)

The quotations from Origen show that James would have been known as “James The Just” among the early Christians; the phrase “Just” was considered by those early Christians to be an essential part of his name. Origen refers to him in this way in all three passages and it is inconceivable that a Christian interpolation would write in the name James without any comment on his reputation for moral excellence. Not only that but, as Origen points out, Josephus sees the calamities of the war as coming on the Jewish nation in part because of the killing of James. A Christian would have included a reference to the crucifixion of Jesus in this context. A Christian would have been more likely to say that the inhabitants of Jerusalem were punished for crucifying Jesus than for killing James.

The Testamonium Flavianum (TF AJ 18.3.3)

This is the most controversial reference to Jesus in ancient literature. It appears in Antiquities of the Jews, but there are odd points about it. The passage, as it stands, reads:-

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 Greeks. 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. (AJ 18.3.3)

If this is authentic it would be a clear reference to Jesus. However, the full authenticity of the passage is heavily disputed by many scholars.

This text exists, unchanged, in every known manuscript of Josephus. It is cited in full and correctly by Eusebius in his work “History of the Church”, written shortly before the Council of Nicea in 325AD (most date it 324AD), and in his “Demonstration of the Gospel” which was written a little earlier. Eusebius’ readers would have been likely to check his sources, so one can take it that the passage (known hereafter as the TF) was a feature of Josephus’ writing by this time.

However, there are issues. It is difficult to see how someone would write this passage unless they believed that Jesus was sent by God, and was the Messiah. A Jew would be unlikely to refer to Jesus in these terms and Josephus had declared Vespasian to be the Messiah during the Jewish War. On these and other grounds many scholars doubt the full authenticity of this particular passage although the overwhelming majority write that there was something like the TF in the original writing of Josephus.

There are four common hypotheses about the origin of this passage.

- 1) The passage is authentic. Josephus wrote it in its current form and it has been in his work from the start.
- 2) The passage was devised by later Christians who inserted it into the manuscripts of Josephus when these were copied.
- 3) The passage was written by Josephus in a different form which was less than complimentary about Jesus and was amended by Christian scribes to its current form later on.
- 4) Josephus is quoting a document from a heterodox but essentially Christian group.

The Case for believing that the TF is Authentic

- There are 42 Greek manuscripts of Antiquities and another 171 Latin manuscripts. Every single one of these has the full text of the TF exactly as it is in the standard version of Josephus.
- The TF is quoted in full by Eusebius in his church history, written c324AD (and completed before the Council of Nicea in 325). The citation is exact; there are no differences between this and the full text of the TF.
- The vocabulary and style of the passage are consistent with that of Josephus; there are particularly characteristic twists within it which indicate that much of the text, at the very least, originated with Josephus.
- The passage concerning James (AJ 20.9.1) refers to “The Jesus who is called Christ”. This supposes that he has already been introduced in the text of the book, or there would be no point in referring to him in this way. The only known reference to Jesus in Antiquities other than the James passage is the TF.
- No other passage in Josephus has been challenged as unauthentic. The burden of proof is thus in favour of the inclusion of the passage; an extremely good case would need to be made to suggest that this is the only interpolation in Josephus. It is especially notable

that neither the passage on John the Baptist nor on James the brother of Jesus has been altered. One would have expected these passages to have minor alterations before a major interpolation like the TF was introduced. The fact that they have not indicates that the TF is authentic, at least in part.

The Case for believing that the TF was a later Christian Insertion

This rests on several points:-

- It seems unlikely that a Jew would refer to Jesus in the terms found in the TF. In particular, the TF refers to Jesus as the Christ. This would be unlikely for any non-Christian with a Jewish background; to admit that Jesus was the Messiah would be to convert to Christianity. Josephus had already declared that Vespasian was the Messiah; it is unlikely that he would be allowed to change his mind in a public way without consequences. There is a similar problem with the phrase “if it is lawful to call him a man.”
- The earliest Christian writer to cite the TF is Eusebius. It is argued that the earlier writers did not cite the TF because it was not part of the text of Josephus that they knew. The problem with this objection is that it is an argument from silence. The various writers who do not quote Josephus may simply not have known about the existence of references to Jesus in the writings of Josephus.

The one writer who does quote from Josephus is Origen. He quotes from the James passage because this is a part of the argument he is making at the time but he doesn't make any arguments which would be influenced by the TF. This may be why he might not choose to use the TF.

- It is sometimes argued that the style of the TF is untypical of that of Josephus in general, but this is difficult to maintain. There are several points within the text that are characteristic of Josephus and none that are absolutely outside his style. A similar claim that the passage breaks the continuity of the narrative is clearly false, as the TF is in a part of Josephus which deals with miscellaneous items; there is no discernible flow to interrupt.
- While the Greek and Latin manuscripts of Josephus are unanimous in containing the TF, there are a few quotations where it appears with a slightly different text. In particular the Slavonic Josephus has a variant text and a comment on the passage by Agaprios (10th century Arabic writer) have some differences. Jerome, who wrote in Latin c400AD has the phrase “He was believed to be the Christ” instead of “He was the Christ”. Ambrose of Milan (c390AD) omits the phrase “He was the Christ” entirely, although he includes the “if it is lawful to call him a man” clause.

In general these arguments are not very strong; the only one with any weight is the possibility that the original text of the TF did not contain the phrase “He was the Christ” as this seems out of character with what is known of Josephus. However, even here there is internal evidence that supports the inclusion of some kind of phrase which suggests that Jesus was known as the Christ.

More Analysis

The solution adopted by the majority of scholars is to suggest that most of the TF was in the original text of Josephus, but that there have been amendments to it. One can consider the clauses one by one to see which are likely to have been changed. This is what is done in the next few paragraphs.

- *Now there was about this time Jesus,* The apparent digression is characteristic of Josephus (see AJ 17:19; AJ 18:39,65,80; AJ 19:278). The name “Jesus” is not characteristic of contemporary Christian writings outside the Gospels. Frequencies are:-

Writer	Designation of Jesus			
	Jesus Christ	Christ Jesus	Christ	Jesus
Ignatius	112	12	4	3
Polycarp	10	0	0	0

This implies that the phrase is not taken from a Christian source.

- *a wise man,* The phrase “A wise man” is not applied to Jesus by any contemporary Christian writer. Josephus uses the phrase to refer to Solomon (AJ 8:53) and Daniel (AJ 10:237), both in the context of working miracles.
- *if it be lawful to call him a man;* This phrase is problematic, being foreign to both Josephus and contemporary Christianity. It cannot therefore be used as an argument in either direction.
- *for he was a doer of wonderful works,* The word “doer” is not found elsewhere in Josephus, but it is formed by merging two standard Greek words in a way that is characteristic of Josephus.
- *a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure.* This phrase would be pejorative to a Christian, for whom the word “pleasure” would imply dilettantism or hedonism; it is not found in any Christian work before Eusebius quotes Josephus. However the phrase appears eight times in this part of Josephus (AJ 17-19).
- *He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Greeks.* It is clear in the Gospels that Jesus had little contact with Gentiles (see Mt 10:5,6). However, as there were many Gentile Christians by the time that Antiquities was written, this would have been an easy mistake for Josephus to make.
- *He was the Christ.* This is the most debated clause of the TF. It seems unlikely that Josephus would refer to Jesus as the Christ because a Jew who believed that Jesus was the Christ would be a Christian and Josephus was not a Christian. Not only that, but Josephus had declared Vespasian to be the Christ, and to write publicly that he had changed his mind would be politically dangerous. On the other hand, a later clause in the TF declares that the tribe of Christians is named from Jesus, which supposes that some connection has been made between the person Jesus and the name Christ.

The usual solution to this problem is to suppose that the text has been slightly amended here. The original text is held to be something like “He was called the Christ” or “He was believed to be the Christ”. The second of these is the text in the citation by Jerome, although no other witness gives any indication of a variant here (Agapios leaves the phrase out in its entirety in his Arabic translation, as does Ambrose of Milan in his Latin citation).

- *And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross,* The phrase “principal men” is never found in Christian literature, but is common in Josephus. The phrase “among us” is common in Josephus in passages which refer to events close to his own time, particularly in Antiquities from book 18 onwards (eg. AJ 1.3; 10.2.2; 12.6.2; 14.10.1; 15.3.2; 15.10.5 - 15.17.18; 18.7,99,121,376). The phrase “at the suggestion of” is also rather bland for a Christian writer. One would have expected some stunning denunciation.
- *those that loved him at the first did not forsake [him];* The pronoun is missing in the Greek; this is apparently characteristic of Josephus.
- *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.* This is an obviously Christian wording, but even here some of the phrases are very characteristic of Josephus. For example, the phrase “divine prophets” appears in AJ 10:35 with reference to Isaiah. Most scholars suggest an original that was amended. The original would read something like: “For it seemed to his followers that he appeared to them as the divine prophets foretold”.
- *And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.* The word “Tribe” (*phyle*) is uniquely characteristic of Josephus, appearing in War: BJ 3.354; 7.327; 2.366; 2.379. No Christian writer would apply it to the Christian community.

Putting together this analysis produces a passage which is only a little different from the TF as in current manuscripts. The amended passage reads:-

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 Greeks. He was [said to be] 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 [it seemed to his followers that] 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.

The only writers who do not agree that the original text was something like this are those who are determined to try to prove that Jesus didn't exist at all. These are the conspiracy theorists who need to rewrite large tracts of ancient literature to exclude any mention of Jesus as a real person.

Summary

Josephus' book “Antiquities” contains three references which have a bearing on the New Testament. The reference to John the Baptist is the least controversial, but it corresponds to what is known of John in the New Testament. It is clearly not a Christian reference and has clearly not been tampered with by any Christian scribe. The reference to James the brother of Jesus is also clearly independent of Christian interpretation and has not been altered in any meaningful way. The long reference to Jesus is the Testamonium Flavianum which was certainly present in the original text of Antiquities, but which may very well have been altered by Christian scribes. However, the original text must have referred to Jesus and was probably not much different from the standard text.

2.2 Pliny the Younger

Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus was brought up and adopted by his uncle, Gaius Plinius Secundus the elder. He had a conventional career which took him to the Senate, the judicial council of Trajan and from c110AD to his death in c112AD to be governor (*Legatus Augusti*) of Pontus and Bithynia.

Pliny wrote and published nine volumes of letters to various friends from 99AD to 109AD. These letters were clearly composed specially for publication and have a definite literary flavour; Pliny distinguished these from his ordinary business letters. The tenth volume of letters is of correspondence with the Emperor Trajan. These letters are considerably less elaborate than the literary letters and it is conjectured that they were business letters not intended for publication but published posthumously by associates. The first 14 letters in this volume date from the years 98-110 AD and appear to be from Rome. The remaining letters in the volume belong to the period of Pliny's term of office as Governor in Bithynia and Pontus. One of these letters concerns Christians in the province. It seems to have been written towards the end of Pliny's term of office, about 112AD. The full text is as follows:-

Sir,

It is my constant method to apply myself to you for the resolution of all my doubts; for who can better govern my dilatory way of proceeding or instruct my ignorance? I have never been present at the examination of the Christians [by others], on which account I am unacquainted with what uses to be inquired into, and what, and how far they used to be punished; nor are my doubts small, whether there be not a distinction to be made between the ages [of the accused]? and whether tender youth ought to have the same punishment with strong men? Whether there be not room for pardon upon repentance? or whether it may not be an advantage to one that had been a Christian, that he has forsaken Christianity? Whether the bare name, without any crimes besides, or the crimes adhering to that name, be to be punished? In the meantime, I have taken this course about those who have been brought before me as Christians. I asked them whether they were Christians or not? If they confessed that they were Christians, I asked them again, and a third time, intermixing threatenings with the questions. If they persevered in their confession, I ordered them to be executed; for I did not doubt but, let their confession be of any sort whatsoever, this positiveness and inflexible obstinacy deserved to be punished. There have been some of this mad sect whom I took notice of in particular as Roman citizens, that they might be sent to that city. After some time, as is usual in such examinations, the crime spread itself and many more cases came before me. A libel was sent to me, though without an author, containing many names [of persons accused]. These denied that they were Christians now, or ever had been. They called upon the gods, and supplicated to your image, which I caused to be brought to me for that purpose, with frankincense and wine; they also cursed Christ; none of which things, it is said, can any of those that are ready Christians be compelled to do; so I thought fit to let them go. Others of them that were named in the libel, said they were Christians, but presently denied it again; that indeed they had been Christians, but had ceased to be so, some three years, some many more; and one there was that said he had not been so these twenty years. All these worshipped your image, and the images of our gods; these also cursed Christ. However, they assured me that the main of their fault, or of their mistake was this:-That they were wont, on a stated day, to meet together before it was light, and to sing a hymn to Christ, as to a god, alternately; and to oblige themselves by a sacrament [or oath], not to do anything that was ill: but that they would

commit no theft, or pilfering, or adultery; that they would not break their promises, or deny what was deposited with them, when it was required back again; after which it was their custom to depart, and to meet again at a common but innocent meal, which they had left off upon that edict which I published at your command, and wherein I had forbidden any such conventicles. These examinations made me think it necessary to inquire by torments what the truth was; which I did of two servant maids, who were called Deaconesses: but still I discovered no more than that they were addicted to a bad and to an extravagant superstition. Hereupon I have put off any further examinations, and have recourse to you, for the affair seems to be well worth consultation, especially on account of the number of those that are in danger; for there are many of every age, of every rank, and of both sexes, who are now and hereafter likely to be called to account, and to be in danger; for this superstition is spread like a contagion, not only into cities and towns, but into country villages also, which yet there is reason to hope may be stopped and corrected. To be sure, the temples, which were almost forsaken, begin already to be frequented; and the holy solemnities, which were long intermitted, begin to be revived. The sacrifices begin to sell well everywhere, of which very few purchasers had of late appeared; whereby it is easy to suppose how great a multitude of men may be amended, if place for repentance be admitted.

Trajan's Epistle To Pliny in Reply

My Pliny,

You have taken the method which you ought in examining the causes of those that had been accused as Christians, for indeed no certain and general form of judging can be ordained in this case. These people are not to be sought for; but if they be accused and convicted, they are to be punished; but with this caution, that he who denies himself to be a Christian, and makes it plain that he is not so by supplicating to our gods, although he had been so formerly, may be allowed pardon, upon his repentance. As for libels sent without an author, they ought to have no place in any accusation whatsoever, for that would be a thing of very ill example, and not agreeable to my reign.

Source: The Works of Josephus, translated by William Whiston

This pair of letters does not concern events in Judea or Galilee in the time of Jesus, but it does confirm a number of pictures of Christianity which are consistent with the Gospel. These are:-

- 1 By the time of the governorship of Pliny (around 112AD, or at most 82 years after the crucifixion) there was a considerable number of Christians in Bithynia. It was not only common in the cities, but had even spread to the villages and the rural areas.
- 2 As a consequence of the ascendancy of Christianity in the area the Temples had been deserted and the trade in sacrificial animals and the meat from sacrificial animals was suffering a serious decline. Pliny's persecution managed to restore the Temples to use and increased the trade in sacrifices to the point where it was again viable.
- 3 Some women held offices as Deaconesses in the early church (as in Romans 16:1).
- 4 When Pliny went out to Bithynia he had received no instructions on how to handle Christians, but he knew that Christianity was against Roman Law.

- 5 Pliny was prepared to imprison Christians and have them put to death. Locals were put to death within the province but Roman Citizens were sent to Rome for trial. This matches the experience of Paul the Apostle in 59AD.

Critical Response

A small number of Critics (the ones so extreme as to be called conspiracy theorists) claim that this cannot be considered to be a reference to the historical Jesus. They assert:-

- 1) Pliny wrote in 112AD, over 80 years after the resurrection. His writing doesn't come from any direct personal knowledge of Jesus but from his experience of Christians in the province that he governed.

It is true that Pliny never met Jesus. However, what we have is confirmation of a thriving Christian community within 90 years of the resurrection. Many of the members of this community considered that their beliefs were more important than their lives. This suggests a resurrection faith.

- 2) It is asserted that the "*Christos*" that Pliny's *Christiani* were following was not Jesus but Serapis. This is an extraordinary claim, but one typical of the more extreme conspiracy theorists. and one which shows that the conspiracy theorists know that the testimony of Pliny is an important witness to the existence of Jesus and the early Church.

One of the details of Pliny's letter which shows that the Christians of Bithynia did not worship Serapis is the statement that they sang hymns to Christ "as though to a god". This implies that they did not believe that Christ was a god; they worshipped him as they might have worshipped a god. The distinction is clear. Serapis, on the other hand, was believed to be a god by all the members of the Serapis cult. There would have been no "as though to a god" phrased in the letter had the community been worshipping Serapis.

There is no doubt from historical continuity in the area that this was a Christian community and not a community dedicated to Serapis. In any case the Roman Empire did not persecute the followers of Serapis, but gave protection to the cult. Christianity was in a special position due to its condemnation in the reign of Nero.

Summary

The letter of Pliny to Trajan, together with the reply from the Emperor, show that there was a considerable Christian community in Bithynia well within a century of the time of Jesus. The Christians were organised along New Testament lines and most of them were prepared to die rather than to deny their faith. For the community to have been so large it must have been in existence for a considerable time, which shows a tradition back to a rather earlier period.

The letters also show that persecution of Christians was routine. Pliny had not received specific instructions on how to handle them, but he had enough background knowledge to know that Christians had to be persecuted and to arrange for them to be put to death. This shows that persecution was not the light matter that many critics claim.

2.3 Tacitus (P? Cornelius Tacitus)

The life of Tacitus is only poorly known. Even his first name (*praenomen*) is uncertain; it could have been either Publius or Gaius. Tacitus was born in 56 or 57AD in a provincial town, probably in either Gallia Narbonensis (Southern France) or Cisalpine Gaul (Northern Italy). Tacitus entered the Senate before the reign of Domitian and managed to retain his seat during Domitian's reign. He was Consul under Nerva (97AD) and Governor of Asia in 112/113AD. He was a close friend of Pliny the younger who wrote letters to him. In 77AD he married the daughter of Agricola, who was a general involved in the conquest of Britain.

Tacitus wrote five works of history:-

- *De Vita Lulii Agricolae* - a historical biography of his father-in-law
- *De origine et situ Germanorum* - a description of the Germanic tribes
- *Dialogus et Oratoribus* - a discussion of the decline of oratory in the time of Tacitus
- *Historiae* - A history from 69AD to the death of Domitian - only a small part still exists
- *Annales - ab excessu Divi Augusti* - A chronological history of the Julio-Claudian period. Only 16 books out of possibly 24 still exist.

Tacitus was a senator and claims that his main source of information is the *Acta Senatus* - the records of the Roman Senate. However, he uses other sources and names at least some of these. He comments on the fact when he suspects that his sources may not be accurate.

Tacitus' account of Jesus

Included among the remaining parts of Annals is a volume on Nero's life and reign. This refers to the fire which destroyed much of Rome in the summer of 64AD and also to Christians. The text of the section is:-

Such indeed were the precautions of human wisdom. The next thing was to seek means of propitiating the gods, and recourse was had to the Sibylline books, by the direction of which prayers were offered to Vulcanus, Ceres, and Proserpina. Juno, too, was entreated by the matrons, first, in the Capitol, then on the nearest part of the coast, whence water was procured to sprinkle the fane and image of the goddess. And there were sacred banquets and nightly vigils celebrated by married women. But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations 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, 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 Judaea, 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. 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, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed. (Annals 15:44,45)

This passage not only deals with the persecution of Christians but also describes Jesus and in particular his death under Pontius Pilate. The detail is good and the account is clearly independent of Christian sources.

Objections to the witness of Tacitus.

The usual objections appear. Various attempts were made to claim that all of Tacitus Annals was a late forgery; this, however, foundered on the extremely good correspondence of information in Tacitus with archaeology and with other Roman sources. Essentially the history is as reliable as it is possible to imagine; it would be impossible for a late forgery to be as accurate as this.

It is often claimed that Tacitus is not quoted by a list of Christian writers of the third and fourth centuries. However, this is false. Sulpicius Severus (writing about 400AD) contains an extended quotation of exactly this passage from Tacitus.

A second objection is that in the oldest manuscript of Tacitus the word used for Christ is "*Chrestos*" rather than "*Christos*". This was corrected by a later hand, but it is possible that the original word was "*Chrestos*". This would not be an insuperable problem. The word "*Chrestos*" was relatively common, with the meaning "Worthy fellow" or "Goody". It is likely that many people in the early Christian era referred to Christians by this name, partly because it was a word that they knew while "Christ" was not, and partly to make fun of Christians. It is therefore quite likely that Tacitus would use the word "*Chrestos*" to refer to "Christ".

The passage is, of course, absolute in its description of who the "*Chrestos*" mentioned in it is; he is the founder of the name "Christian". It is difficult to think of a clearer way of identifying the person mentioned as Jesus Christ.

The other problem within the text is that Tacitus refers to Pilate as "Procurator" whereas his real rank was "Prefect". The mistake would be an easy one to make. After 41AD the Roman governors of Judea were procurators, and it would be normal for Tacitus to deal with governors of minor provinces who were procurators. He might thus use the current rank associated with such provinces rather than the historically accurate designation.

The third objection is the idea that the passage was simply quoted uncritically from a Christian source. However, the fact that the probable original designation of Jesus is "*Chrestos*" is sufficient in itself to show that the source of information was not a Christian; no Christian would make the mistake of referring to Jesus as "*Chrestos*". The passage describes Christians as being guilty of a "mischievous superstition" and as being "a class hated for their abominations". It is certain that no Christian decided these designations.

Summary

The witness of Tacitus is very clear, is obviously independent of Christian influence and describes the Jesus of Christianity. No serious scholar doubts that Tacitus provided a witness to Jesus. The existence of Jesus is confirmed, as are some of the more salient details of his life. The persecution of Christians is shown to be severe, which leads one to the conclusion that they had a strong belief that their faith could overcome death.

2.4 Suetonius

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus was a Roman writer from the equestrian order. He was a friend of Pliny the younger, who tells us that he practiced briefly as a lawyer, but avoided politics. He became chief secretary to Hadrian, and as such had access to Roman records. He wrote many books, the most famous of which is his “Twelve Caesars”. This covers the lives of the Caesars from Julius Caesar to Nero and the Flavians Vespasian, Titus and Domitian. Suetonius checked his facts and quotes conflicting evidence where it appears in his sources; however, he has a tendency to be interested in the scurrilous and as a result the history tends towards the gossipy.

Twelve Caesars contains two possible references to Christians, one in the reign of Claudius and the other in the reign of Nero.

Claudius 35

Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.

The expulsion of the Jews from Rome is mentioned in some later histories and in Acts

And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, (Acts 18:2)

The reference thus confirms one statement in Acts, the statement that Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome. Later histories allow one to date the expulsion to the early part of 49AD.

However, the question of whether the “*Chrestus*” mentioned in the passage is Jesus Christ or someone else is more difficult to answer. The Latin text is quite clear that the person mentioned is “*Chrestus*” and not “*Christos*” (“*Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit*”). The mistake would be an easy one for Suetonius to make; “*Chrestus*” is a Latin word and might be substituted for the more correct “*Christos*”, which is not. It is also likely that the word was used by Romans as a slang expression for Christ as it has a usefully satirical meaning (“Goody” - the Romans, like many modern secularists, tended to despise Christians because they avoided many of the vices of the time).

However, there were pretenders who claimed to be the Messiah; Josephus lists some of them. It is possible that it was one of these pretenders who roused the Jewish community and caused riots (especially if he had a message of overthrowing the Roman empire). There is one reason for suggesting that the “*Chrestos*” mentioned here is not Jesus, which is that Acts does not mention any hint that the expulsion from Rome might have been caused by riots involving Christians. Aquilla and Priscilla have come from Rome and Paul finds lodging with them because they, like him, were tentmakers. If there had been problems in Rome concerning Jesus Christ then Aquilla and Priscilla would have heard of Jesus and would either have been Christians already (in which case Paul would have stayed with them because of their faith, not because of their trade) or they would have been wary of Christians (who had caused their expulsion from Rome). The fact that neither of these appears to be the case suggests that the “*Chrestus*” who had caused disturbances in Rome was not Jesus.

The alternative suggestion is that the problems in Rome were caused by Christians but that Luke decided not to mention this in Acts in order not to upset the Roman authorities who were holding Paul prisoner at the time. A document which associated Paul with a group which had caused so much trouble that the Jews had been expelled from Rome might be somewhat inflammatory from the view of Paul's coming defence of himself.

The more likely of the two is probably that the person who caused the disturbances in Rome was some Messianic pretender and not Jesus of Nazareth.

Nero 16

*During his reign many abuses were severely punished and put down, and no fewer new laws were made [than by Claudius]: a limit was set to expenditures; the public banquets were confined to a distribution of food; the sale of any kind of cooked viands in the taverns was forbidden, with the exception of pulse and vegetables, whereas before every sort of dainty was exposed for sale. **Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition.** He put an end to the diversions of the chariot drivers, who from immunity of long standing claimed the right of ranging at large and amusing themselves by cheating and robbing the people. The pantomimic actors and their partisans were banished from the city.*

This passage is a reference to Nero's persecution of Christians. It is on a rather smaller scale than the reference in Tacitus, but nevertheless it confirms Tacitus' statement that the Christians were persecuted in Rome by Nero. The text of the passage is completely different from the text in Tacitus. Clearly the two are independent.

The passage is also clearly not a Christian interpolation. No Christian would make such a minor reference to the persecution of Nero. Not only is the passage very short and contains no details of the persecution, but it places it in a very minor position, between regulations of food sellers and mime artists. A Christian would consider Nero's persecution to be very important and would give a full paragraph. Not only that but the description of Christians as "given to a new and mischievous superstition" would not come from the pen of a Christian scribe.

Summary

The witness of Suetonius does not provide a direct confirmation of any detail about Jesus Christ but does confirm that his followers existed in Rome in the reign of Nero and that they suffered persecution. This confirms the account of Tacitus.

The account of the expulsion of Jews from Rome in 49AD, following riots, may not be a reference to Jesus, but to someone else. However, it does confirm the reference in Acts 18

2.5 Lucian of Samosata

Lucian of Samosata was born in 125AD and probably lived until after 180AD. He was a satirist who wrote more than 70 works which parody famous writers and philosophers of his time and expose the emptiness of various social norms. One of these works, the death of Peregrinus, makes reference to Christianity. Lucian himself appears to lean towards Epicureanism, and is certainly no friend of Christianity. As Peregrinus died in 165AD, Lucian's work must have been written later than this.

The work which refers to Christianity and Christians is the Satire “The death of Peregrinus”. Peregrinus was a Cynic who read his own funeral oration and then killed himself at the Olympic Games; he was considered to be an important role model and a statue was erected to him in his home town; this was supposed to have oracular powers. Lucian distorts his life in order to undermine his philosophy and distorts those who Peregrinus meets, partly to reduce the reputation of Peregrinus further, but partly to undermine the communities and ideas that Peregrinus encounters.

Lucian depicts Peregrinus as an adulterer, a homosexual and a pederast, as well as a patricide. The account of Peregrinus’ contact with Christians is as follows:-

11. *It was then that he learned the wondrous 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 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.***
12. *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. Then, as this was impossible, every other form of attention was shown him, not in any casual way but with assiduity, and from the very break of day aged widows and orphan children could be seen waiting near the prison, while their officials even slept inside with him after bribing the guards. Then elaborate meals were brought in, and sacred books of theirs were read aloud, and excellent Peregrinus – for he still went by that name – was called by them ‘the new Socrates.’*
13. *Indeed, people came even from the cities in Asia, sent by the Christians at their common expense, to succour and defend and encourage the hero. 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 worshipping that **crucified sophist** himself and living under his laws. Therefore they despise all things indiscriminately and consider them common property, receiving such doctrines traditionally without any definite evidence. So if any charlatan and trickster, able to profit by occasions, comes among them, he quickly acquires sudden wealth by imposing upon simple folk.*

Lucian clearly has three purposes in his writing:-

- To undermine Peregrinus: The Christians were considered to be not only outside the conventions of the ancient world, but were considered to be despicable and foolish in

their beliefs. By associating Peregrinus with such people Peregrinus is shown to be praised by fools and to be morally corrupt in that he deceives such simple people for gain.

- To undermine Christian claims to a high moral code: If the Christians accept Peregrinus even though he has a clearly immoral life then the Christian claims to live to a higher moral standard than those in the world around them is undermined.
- To present Christians as gullible: The supposed fact that the Christians are not only taken in by Peregrinus, but actually make him an important leader, shows that they are gullible to be taken in by such a poor moral example.

However, one needs to bear in mind that Lucian is a satirist who will attempt to belittle and ridicule any philosophy other than his own. He is not able to carry out a logical analysis of Christianity. Rather he is setting the example followed by modern Atheists who ridicule Christianity by looking at some of the weirder statements by American right-wing creationist groups and presenting this as the Christian norm.

Lucian does confirm some points about Christianity. He describes it as founded by “The man crucified in Palestine”, who he also describes as “The crucified sophist”. He shows that Christian belief included the idea that death had been overcome and that hence they were careless of their lives. This shows a deeply held resurrection faith.

Objections

The obvious objection that can be made of the writing of Lucian is that the references to Jesus were made late on in the second century, by which time the basic beliefs of Christianity were well established. Nevertheless, the picture of Jesus as the lawgiver of the Christians is interesting in that it helps to understand other writings which refer to Jesus in similar terms.

The satire is clearly not a Christian invention. It is aimed at holding Christians and Christianity up to ridicule, something that would not be done by any Christian writer. The same objection also shows that the satire is not a late invention. A late insertion would be made by a Christian writer, and this passage is clearly not Christian in its source.

Summary

Lucian produces a view of Christianity in the last quarter of the second century, about 150 years after the resurrection. This is beyond any real picture of a contemporary source, but nevertheless shows how Christians had a strong faith in a resurrected Jesus.

2.6 Mara Bar-Serapion

Mara bar-Serapion (aka M. bar-Sarapion) came from Samosata and was imprisoned there by the Romans. While in prison he wrote a letter to his son which contains a reference to Jesus. The letter was copied into a sixth century manuscript where it was discovered by western scholars. Little more is known about the background of bar-Serapion.

The letter was written after bar-Serapion had been taken captive in Samosata and taken to Seleucia. There are three known episodes which might have started this captivity. In 72AD the Romans annexed Samosata and took captives from it. The Parthians invaded in the middle of the second century and took captives again and in the third century (256AD) the

Sassanids did the same thing. It is not completely certain to which of these captivities Bar-Serapion refers in his letter, although that of the Romans is the most likely. As a consequence by far the majority of scholars believe that the letter dates from shortly after 72AD. However a vocal minority place the letter in the middle of the second or even the third century with one of the other invasions.

The letter includes the following passage:-

What advantage did the Athenians gain from putting Socrates to death? Famine and plague came upon them as a judgment for their crime. What advantage did the men of Samos gain from burning Pythagoras? In a moment their land was covered with sand. What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King? It was just after that their Kingdom was abolished. God justly avenged these three wise men: the Athenians died of hunger; the Samians were overwhelmed by the sea; the Jews, ruined and driven from their land, live in complete dispersion. But Socrates did not die for good; he lived on in the teaching of Plato. Pythagoras did not die for good; he lived on in the statue of Hera. Nor did the wise King die for good; He lived on in the teaching which He had given.

This describes a “Wise king” who has the following characteristics:-

- He was referred to as a king.
- He was wise.
- He was executed.
- He was executed by the action of Jews.
- He was executed by the Jews before their dispersion.
- He lived on in the teaching that he gave.

It is difficult to see who this could refer to other than Jesus of Nazareth. The obvious “wise king” of Israel was Solomon, but he was never executed. Various other kings might be regarded as wise, such as David, Hezekiah or Josiah, but none of these was put to death either. The description of Jesus as “King of the Jews” was applied during his lifetime - it was written on a notice attached to his cross; a foreigner who had heard of Jesus but not in any great detail might easily apply the term to him.

Objections

The usual objections are applied to this passage.

- **Could the person be some other figure than Jesus?** At first sight this seems a possibility as Jesus is not mentioned by name. However, no other person in history comes close to matching the points about the “wise king” noted above.
- **Could the passage have come from Christians?** The passage is obviously non-Christian. No Christian would refer to Jesus only as a wise king. Nor would a Christian say that Jesus lived on only in his teaching.
- **Is the passage a later interpolation?** Again this is highly unlikely. The letter is known in a single manuscript, but it is an early one. There is no reason why a scribe should seek to alter the text. Not only that but the reasons that eliminate the possibility of a Christian origin also eliminate the possibility of a deliberate later insertion.

The main issue with the bar-Serapion letter is its date. Most scholars believe that it was written in the first century AD, in or shortly after 72AD, but a second century or even a third century date is possible. The reason for deciding that the letter comes from the first century is that bar-Serapion was in captivity and there are hints that this is Roman captivity, which leaves only the first century date. A later date would require that a different nation was responsible for the captivity. It is very likely that the letter is from the first century, but most conspiracy theorists would insist on a later date. They would then go on to assert that as the letter is a second or third century composition the writer would only have hearsay knowledge of Jesus from the second or third century church, which they would consider to be providing a story of an invented messiah. This, of course, is not believable; the terms in which Jesus is described could not have come from a Christian source.

Summary

The letter of Mara Bar-Serapion is almost certainly a reference to Jesus from shortly after 72AD. It contains a reference to Jesus which certainly has no contact with Christian teaching, which means that they must have come via a different route. Bar-Serapion clearly understands that Jesus is a real person. He uses Jesus in a sequence which is about real people and events grounded in history. Socrates and Pythagoras were real people and the events that followed all three deaths are real events.

2.7 Celsus

Celsus was a Greek philosopher who lived in the second century AD and wrote during the reign of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Most of Celsus' work would have been written between 175 and 180 AD, which places it right at the end of the period of interest. However, it provides a kind of floor to the witness of non-biblical writers as it gives a fairly comprehensive view of Christian belief about Jesus in the second century.

Celsus is well informed about the Jewish religion and intimately acquainted with Egyptian life and customs, which suggests that he spent a considerable time in Alexandria. He apparently follows middle-Platonism as his general philosophical background and many of the attacks on Christianity that are still found among atheists in the modern day originate with Celsus.

Celsus' only work of which anything at all remains is his treatise "The True Word" (*logos Alethes*) which was preserved by Origen. Origen wrote a rebuttal to it which consisted mainly of citing the work and then commenting on each paragraph; this preserved much of the original text. The work is in four parts:-

- 1) An attack on Christianity from the point of view of Judaism
- 2) An attack on Christianity from the point of view of Greek Philosophy
- 3) A point by point refutation of Christian teaching in detail
- 4) An appeal to Christians to adopt paganism.

The writing is long and it would be pointless to cite all the references to Jesus here. However, it includes the following points:-

- The virgin birth (which Celsus ridicules).
- That Jesus was brought up in a rural village by a carpenter. Celsus believes that this is beneath the dignity of a Son of God.
- That Jesus worked miracles of healing and feeding. Celsus states a belief that these are not what one might expect of a Son of God, being unspectacular. He attributes them to knowledge of magic learned in Egypt.
- That Jesus had disciples. These Celsus belittles as “ten or eleven people of notorious character” but is able to describe some of their occupations - tax gatherer and fishermen.
- That Jesus carried out no conquests and performed no spectacular feats such as the defeat of his enemies.
- That Jesus was betrayed by one of his disciples.
- That Jesus was crucified, although Celsus states a belief that Jesus was not properly executed but only appeared to have crucifixion wounds.
- That he was an ordinary man. Celsus therefore believes that Jesus was a real person and not merely a mythical fiction.

Celsus is quite clear that Jesus was a historical figure and presents him as a real person who was not sufficiently impressive to challenge the figures of Roman and Greek mythology. Celsus is quite determined to attack Christianity, but does not even consider the argument that Jesus didn't exist. Writing about 150 years after the crucifixion he presents a picture of Jesus which is consistent with the Gospels and which declares Jesus to be a real person.

Objections

The standard response of the conspiracy theorists to the writings of Celsus is to point out that they are late (although no later than some of the people in Remsburg's list - see below). Celsus is certainly a late source, but he is also comprehensive and in touch with various brands of Christian as well as with Jews. If there were any suggestions that Jesus had not existed, or had acted in a manner inconsistent with the accounts in the Gospels, Celsus would have spotted these and would have included them in his criticism of Christianity. It is quite clear that Celsus and his sources believed that Jesus was a real person who had carried out at least some of the actions described in the Gospels.

Summary

Celsus shows a good grasp of the background to Christianity and confirms virtually every point of the Gospel understanding of Jesus. This is not unexpected as Celsus is writing towards the end of the second century when Christianity was widespread, but the writing gives a kind of summary of what had passed into common knowledge of Christianity by the end of the second century. This is, of course, long before the time of Constantine.

2.8 Thallus

Thallus was a historian who wrote about developments in the ancient world. He wrote between 52 and 100 AD, probably towards the beginning of this period. His work is now lost, but is cited by Julius Africanus, and later by Eusebius. Africanus, writing in around 220AD, says this, including the reference to Thallus:-

On the whole world there pressed a fearful darkness, and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down. Thallus calls this darkness an eclipse of the sun in the third book of histories, without reason it seems to me. (Africanus, in Syncellus)

Thallus is attempting to explain the darkness that occurred around the time of Jesus' crucifixion. His explanation is defective, as Africanus points out, but nonetheless confirms that the darkness occurred.

Africanus was a Christian writer, but he is taking issue with Thallus, who was a pagan. He summarises what Thallus says in order to disagree with it; the way that he disagrees shows that there is something special about the record of Thallus. Had Thallus merely been talking about an ordinary eclipse of the sun then Africanus would have had no reason to take issue with him. Thallus is not documenting an eclipse, but attempting to explain a period of darkness. It must therefore be concluded that Thallus really did discuss the darkness at the death of Jesus.

Objections

The conspiracy theorists object to the use of Thallus as a source for three main reasons:-

- They note that the writings of Thallus no longer exist, but are only known in fragmentary form through citations by other writers and that the only source for the particular mention under discussion is in a book by a Christian which is itself only known through citations. However, the work of Julius Africanus is known through citations by many other writers; the text of this portion is secure. One then needs to ask why he might introduce a source so as to disagree with it. It is thus very likely that Thallus did write the comment in question.
- The second objection is the problem of finding a correct date for the writing of Thallus. The earliest date is given by Eusebius as 52AD, calculated from another citation; this is the last year covered by Thallus' history. The end date is more difficult to calculate. Thallus is cited by Theophilus of Antioch in 180AD (but no reference to the darkness). This gives an absolute upper limit to the date of writing. The probability is that Thallus wrote fairly soon after the last event in his history, which would place his writing soon after 52, but how soon it is impossible to estimate with any real confidence. It is, however, unlikely that Thallus was writing after 70AD, let alone 100AD as otherwise one would have expected his history to have included events such as the Jewish War. Of course, Thallus may have done this, but his account could have been omitted by Africanus. Nevertheless an early date seems more likely.
- The final objection is the possibility that Thallus is not writing about the darkness at Jesus' crucifixion, but about some other darkness. Africanus is clearly in no doubt about this; he writes about precisely this darkness, accompanied by an earthquake, and then states that Thallus refers to it. However, we are dependent on Africanus' analysis; we can't check it for ourselves.

Summary

If the reference in Thallus is genuine and early then it is a very significant witness to one of the details in the Gospel accounts. However, it is quite possible that Thallus is rather later than the 52AD that is usually quoted, possibly as late as the end of the first century. It is most likely, however, that the reference is a genuine reflection of the phenomena which occurred at the time of Jesus’ death.

2.9 Phlegon

Phlegon wrote on astronomy in about 140AD. He also refers to the darkness which accompanied the death of Jesus and to the earthquake. There are references to his work in the writings of Julius Africanus (Chronography) and Origen (Contra Celsum)

The Citation in Julius Africanus is: *Phlegon records that, in the time of Tiberius Caesar, at full moon, there was a full eclipse of the sun from the sixth hour to the ninth—manifestly that one of which we speak. But what has an eclipse in common with an earthquake, the rending rocks, and the resurrection of the dead, and so great a perturbation throughout the universe? Surely no such event as this is recorded for a long period.* (XVIII.1)

Origen refers to Phlegon in these words:-

With regard to the eclipse... Phlegon too, I think, has written in the 13th or 14th book of his chronicles. (Con Cel 2:33)

Phlegon... not only ascribed to Jesus a knowledge of future events... but also testified that the outcomes corresponded to his predictions. (Con Cel 2:14)

Contra celsum 2:69 records Phlegon as a witness to both the darkness and the earthquake at Jesus’ crucifixion.

The problem, of course, is that Phlegon’s works are lost and that Phlegon may possibly be referring to some other darkness and earthquake. However, the most likely explanation is that Phlegon is referring to a real darkness and a real earthquake which happened at the time of the crucifixion; anything else would require Origen not only to be telling a lie, but one which could easily be uncovered by someone at the time who read the words of Phlegon in a library. It is thus exceedingly likely that this is a reference to the time of Jesus.

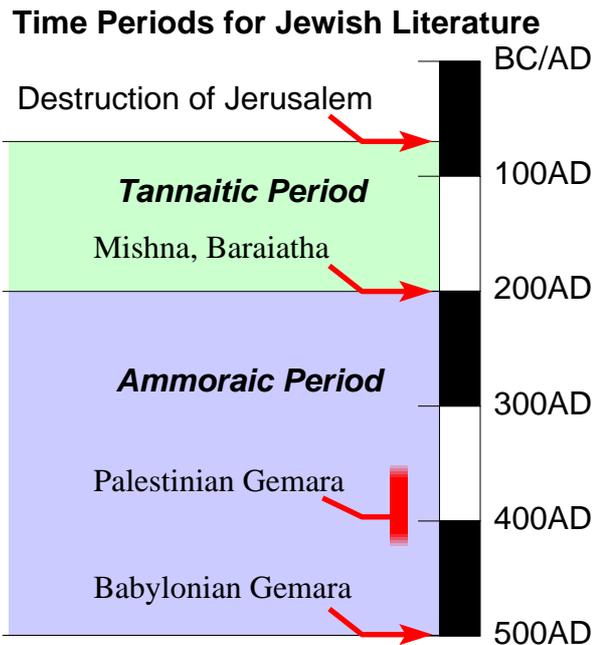
2.10 Summary

There are nine Roman writers who make some mention of Jesus or of Christianity. These include the following details:-

Fact	Writers
The virgin birth	Celsus
Jesus had a brother called James.	Josephus
He was a teacher.	Josephus
He performed acts thought as supernatural.	Josephus, Celsus
He was executed.	Josephus, Tacitus, Lucian, bar-Sarapion, Celsus, Thallus
The date of the Crucifixion	Josephus, Tacitus
He was thought to have been raised.	Josephus
His group of followers expanded rapidly.	Pliny, Tacitus
Followers of Jesus were persecuted.	Pliny, Tacitus, Suetonius

3. Jewish Sources

From the time of Ezra (c450BC) onwards there has been a considerable body of Jewish tradition and teaching which comments on scripture and explains the practical details of applying the Law of Moses in the context of the time. After the destruction of the temple in 70AD the school of Hillel began to commit the traditions to writing. The core of the tradition was put together in around 200AD by Rabbi Judah - this forms the Mishnah. Other traditions that were written at about the same time are called baraiitha (plural Baraiitha); some were collected into collections called Tosefta. The period from 70AD to 200AD is called the Tannaitic period after the Hebrew Tanna'im - the repeaters, which refers to the people who repeated the traditions as they were collected. The period from 200AD to the completion of the Talmud is called the Ammoraic period. The later portion of the Talmud is called the Gemara - the Palestinian Gemara was completed between 350 and 425 AD and the fuller Babylonian Gemara was completed around 500AD.



The aim of the transmitters of the traditions was to provide an accurate account losing nothing and changing nothing, as this text from the Mishnah shows:-

Eliezer ben Hyrcanus is a plastered cistern which does not lose a drop
(Mishnah Aboth 2:11)

This means that one can have a high degree of confidence that traditions recorded at the end of the period are reasonably accurate pictures of events and teachings from the first century AD. This is true for both the Mishnah and the Baraiitha (which can be defined as Tannaitic material not found in the Mishnah). Not only that, but there was considerable friction between Jewish and Christian communities during the Tannaitic period and one can thus guarantee that the Jewish records are independent of Christian ones.

3.1 Sanhedrin 43a - On the Eve of the Passover

This is a baraiitha which mentions Jesus. The first section can be seen to have considerable accuracy, although this is less so for the later sections.

On the eve of the Passover, Yeshu (Jesus) was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, 'He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Any one who can say anything in his favour, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.' But since nothing was brought forward in his favour he was hanged on the eve of the Passover.

Ulla commented: "Do you think that he belongs among those for whom redeeming evidence is sought? Rather, he was a seducer [of whom] the All-merciful has said: 'Show them no pity... and do not shield them.' (Deut 13.8b) In Yeshu's case, however, an exception was made because he was close to those who held [political/religious] authority."

This records what Jewish people were saying about Jesus at the end of the second century, but based on traditions passed on reliably from the time of the second temple. The basic tradition is that Jesus was killed on the day before the Passover; this matches the picture in the Gospels. The baraita mentions “hanging”. This, of course, refers to any method of execution where the victim is suspended off the ground. It would include crucifixion. The part of the baraita which refers to the herald is presumably an attempt to justify the execution. It would have been unusual for such a practice to take place (as the comment by Ulla shows) and in any case, had a delay of a month been allowed then Jesus would have been crucified after the Passover to ensure that his dead body could be removed from the cross without any great haste.

However, the baraita confirms the following details of Jesus’ crucifixion:-

- The date of the execution (the eve of the Passover)
- That Jesus was a miracle worker (it claims that he practiced sorcery)
- He was a teacher (he enticed Israel to apostasy)
- He was hung (crucified) rather than stoned, as would have been preferred by Jewish Law.

Ulla, who makes the comment about Jesus being connected to people in high places, lived at the end of the third century. The addition of a comment by Ulla shows that this is an early tradition recorded with the majority of Baraiatha at the end of the second century and not simply a late insertion.

3.2 Sanhedrin 43a - The disciples of Jesus

This is the second element of the same baraita. It contains another tradition about Jesus:-

There is a tradition (in a Baraita): Yeshu had five students: Mattai, Nakkai, Netzer, Buni, and Todah.

When Mattai was brought to trial, he said to the judges, “Should Mattai be executed? But scripture says, ‘When [mathai] shall I come and behold the face of God?’”

(Ps 42.2b) They replied, “Yes, Mattai should be executed, for scripture says, ‘When will he die, and his name perish?’” (Ps 41.5b)

When Nakkai was brought, he said to them, “Should Nakkai be executed? But scripture says, ‘Do not slay the innocent[naki] and righteous.’” (Ex 23.7b RSV) They replied, “Yes, Nakkai should be executed, for scripture says, ‘in hiding places he murders the innocent.’” (Ps 10.8b)

When Netzer was brought, he said to them, “Should Netzer be executed? But scripture says, ‘a branch[netzer] shall grow out of his roots.’” (Is 11.1b) They replied, “Yes, Netzer should be executed, for scripture says, ‘you are cast out, away from your sepulchre, like a loathed branch.’” (Is 14.19a)

When Buni was brought, he said to them, “Should Buni be executed? But scripture says, ‘Israel is my firstborn son[beni].’” (Ex 4.22b) They replied, “Yes, Buni should be executed, for scripture says, ‘behold, I will slay your firstborn son[benkha].’” (Ex 4.23b)

When Todah was brought, he said to them, “Should Todah be executed? But scripture says, ‘A psalm for Thanksgiving [todah].’” (Ps 100.heading) They replied, “Yes, Todah should be executed, for scripture says, ‘He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honours me.’” (Ps 50.23a)

The baraita records that Jesus had disciples, but there is little information about them. The word-plays on the names of the disciples are typical of Jewish tradition of the early Amoraic period, and the names are presumably devised to allow these word-plays to take place. It is tempting to think that Mattai might be Matthew but given the unreliability of the rest of the names there is probably no connection between the two.

3.3 Tosefta Hullin 2:22,23 - The death of Rabbi Elazar ben Damah

It happened with Rabbi Elazar ben Damah, whom a serpent bit, that Jacob, a man of Kefar Soma, came to heal him in the name of Jeshua ben Pantera; but Rabbi Ishmael did not let him. He said, 'You are not permitted, Ben Damah.' He answered, 'I will bring you proof that he may heal me.' But he had no opportunity to bring proof, for he died.

This baraita has more to do with the early Christian community than it does with Jesus himself. It refers to Rabbi Elazar who was bitten by a snake and called for a Christian to heal him but then became involved with a theological discussion as to whether this was permissible. The discussion went on for such a long time that the Rabbi died before a conclusion was reached.

The baraita confirms that the disciples of Jesus were known for their healings. This would only be the case in the early part of the Christian period; there would be virtually no effective Christian healers after the end of the first century.

The name "ben Pantera" or "ben Panthera" is an occasional reference to Jesus in the Talmud (the difference between the two names is a single dot [point] in Hebrew). It is generally considered to come from the Greek word "*Parthenos*" which means "Virgin". The reference to Jesus as the son of a virgin connects to the accounts of the virgin birth in the New Testament. Later documents attempt to explain this phrase by the suggestion that Pantheras was the name of a man, possibly a Roman.

3.4 Tosefta Hullin 2:24 - The Hire of a Harlot

Akiba, you have reminded me. Once, I was walking on the upper street of Sephoris and found one of the disciples of Yeshu the Nazarene, by the name of Jacob, a man of Kefar Sechanaya. He said to me, "It is written in your Torah: 'Thou shalt not hire a harlot, etc. 'How about making with it a privy for the high priest?' But I did not answer him at all. He told me. Thus did Yeshu the Nazarene teach me: 'For the hire of a harlot has she gathered them, and unto the hire of a harlot shall they return, 'from the place of filth they come, and unto the place of filth they shall go.' And the utterance pleased me."

This incident follows the acquittal of Rabbi Eleazar which is said to have happened in 95AD. It is thus a witness to the existence of a Christian community at the end of the first century or the beginning of the second, but has little value other than this.

3.5 Babylonian Talmud, Yebamoth 3:3

Rabbi Shimeon ben Azzmi said: "I found a genealogical roll in Jerusalem in which was recorded, 'Such -a-one is an illegitimate child of an adulteress'".

This is a late tradition; the Babylonian Talmud wasn't recorded until about 500AD. However, the traditions of Judaism were kept completely separate from those of Christianity, so it is very unlikely that any Christians had an input to this tradition.

The phrase “Such-a-one” is a coded reference to Jesus - by the sixth century Jews were in danger of persecution if they were found to be disrespectful to Jesus by the Church, which was by this time intimately involved with the Roman state. Even though the Babylonian Talmud was compiled outside the Roman empire it was still politic to conceal the subject of writings which were against Jesus to protect readers inside the Roman sphere. The phrase “Such-a-one” is also an indicator that the tradition is not from a Christian source. In addition the tradition is extremely disrespectful to Jesus; no Christian would have indicated this.

The tradition is a reaction to the teaching of the virgin birth. Its value, however, depends on how far back is the origin of the tradition. If the tradition goes back as far as the more conservative Jewish scholars suggest then it is an early witness to the teaching of the virgin birth. If, however, it is a late reaction to this teaching then it has no particular value.

3.6 Summary of Evidence from Rabbinic Literature

The earliest Jewish sources (the Baraiatha and the Tosefta) were written down at the end of the second century but contain information which was passed on with considerable accuracy from the first century AD (and occasionally earlier). They represent the views of the Jewish religious establishment in the middle of the first century. The picture that they provide of Jesus is the view of the Pharisees, and can be expected to have an anti-Christian spin.

The description of Jesus in the baraiatha include the fact that he was put to death after a Jewish legal process, that he was hanged (and not stoned), that this happened on the Passover Eve, that he was considered to be a miracle-worker, that he was a teacher, and that he had disciples. The accounts also confirm that there was considerable opposition to his teaching and to the new Jesus movement in official Jewish circles.

4. Christian Sources

One set of sources which is almost always ignored when the references to Jesus in ancient literature are discussed is the set of Christian writings. These were written close to the time of Jesus' ministry by people who either knew him or were companions of those who knew him. The usual objections are made to these documents, that they were late, or that they are

Book	Date	Book	Date
Galatians	48 Spring	Colossians	62 Spring
James	48 Summer	Philemon	62 Spring
1 Thessalonians	50 Summer	Acts	62 Spring
2 Thessalonians	51 Summer	1 Timothy	62 Autumn
1 Corinthians	55 Spring	Titus	62 Autumn
Romans	56 Spring	2 Timothy	63 Autumn
2 Corinthians	56 Summer	Hebrews	64 Spring
Luke	57-59-62?	John's letters	64?
Philippians	61 Autumn	1 Peter	64 Autumn
Ephesians	62 Spring	2 Peter, Jude	64 Autumn

purely theological and contain no real information but in fact the evidence is different. The evidence indicates that the New Testament documents give a very accurate picture of the events they describe, and of Jesus.

4.1 The Epistles

The earliest books to be written in the New Testament were letters. The probable earliest was the letter of Paul to the Galatians, although the Epistle of James is another candidate and the two Letters to the Thessalonians are also early.

The earliest of Paul's letters to be written was Galatians. The first verse of this reads:-

Paul, an apostle - not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead. (Galatians 1:1)

Galatians was written no later than the spring of 48AD, less than 20 years after the resurrection. This verse is a definite reference to Jesus, and to the resurrection. There are 403 references to Jesus in the letters of Paul (excluding Hebrews) and another 70 in the remaining letters. This is rather at variance with the picture that one receives from atheist literature which asserts that Paul doesn't refer to Jesus very much.

It is true to say that none of the Epistles contain much in the way of detail about the life and ministry of Jesus. This is what one would expect, given that + the life of Jesus was already known by the recipients of the letters. If stories about Jesus were being invented over the period of the epistles (48-64AD) then one would have expected new stories to have been included in the letters. The fact that they were not shows that there was already a general knowledge of the life of Jesus throughout the Christian community.

The letters do, however, refer to the fact that Jesus was a real historical figure:-

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the

third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. (1 Corinthians 15:3-6)

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honour and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. (2 Peter 1:16-18)

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life (1 John 1:1)

In these passages the Apostles emphasise that there were eyewitnesses to Jesus. Paul lists eyewitnesses to the resurrection; he includes the comment that some of these were still alive at the time of writing (the spring of 55AD) and were available to be asked in person by the people who read the letter. Peter points out that he himself was an eyewitness of Jesus, and in particular of one episode in his ministry. John emphasises that he had seen Jesus and that he had touched him. This is not a picture of someone who is inventing stories, or is simply reporting stories gleaned from a "creative community" who had generated them.

In 1 Corinthians 7 [*To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband* (1 Corinthians 7:10) among other places] Paul is able to remind the Corinthians of teaching which was already available in the name of Jesus. This implies that there was a record of the teaching of Jesus in at least the area concerned which was available in the early church.

The evidence of the Letters is that Jesus was already a well-known figure (at least within the Christian community) by the time the earliest of them were written, around 50AD.

4.2 The Gospels and Acts

The most detailed record of Jesus appears in the Gospels. It is relatively simple to work out the dates of Luke and John; both of these were written before 70AD, and Luke must have been written before 62AD. The Gospels were written well within living memory of the time of Jesus, and show unmistakable signs of contact with the area in which Jesus' ministry took place. Details of topography, customs, buildings and people are correct for the period and place; undesigned coincidences show an accurate recollection and linguistic fossils show a further contact with the ministry of Jesus. The Gospels clearly depict a real person.

4.3 The Apostolic Fathers

The Apostolic Fathers are people who had known the Apostles. Typically the contact would occur when the Apostolic Father concerned was a very young man and the Apostle was elderly. The Apostolic Fathers wrote a number of documents which still exist. These were written before 130AD. The Apostolic Fathers include:-

- **Clement of Rome** - who in 96AD wrote a letter to the congregation in Corinth. This letter mentions the travels of the Apostle Paul and also refers to Jesus Christ.
- **Ignatius of Antioch** - who was taken to Rome for execution in the reign of Hadrian; he died in about 115-117AD. On his way to Rome he wrote letters to various other Christians: seven of these survive. These letters all refer to Jesus and quote from the New Testament.
- **Polycarp of Smyrna** - who wrote a letter in response to the one he received from Ignatius. This also mentions Jesus.
- **The Epistle of Barnabas** - This was written between 70AD and 132 AD and usually placed in 130AD. It refers to Jesus and quotes extensively from the New Testament.

4.4 The Empty Tomb

The one fact that is constant throughout the early descriptions of Jesus is the resurrection. The earliest accounts of the New Testament refer to it and the way that Christians were prepared to suffer persecution rather than deny their faith showed that they had a final belief that the grave had been overcome. The empty tomb is a fact which runs through the history of the early Church and is mentioned by outside sources as well.

The first outside references to the empty tomb are found in the Gospel of Matthew:-

And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

(Matthew 28:12-15)

One can only take the full detail of this passage to be true if one believes that the Gospel of Matthew is reliable in detail; the evidence for this is outside the scope of this paper. However, it would have been pointless for Matthew to have written the passage unless the Jewish authorities were repeating the story that Jesus' body had been taken away by the disciples at the time when the Gospel was first circulated.

This story was still being repeated in the middle of the second century, as can be seen from Celsus and from Justin's dialogue with Trypho the Jew, which contains a fictionalised dialogue between Trypho, who represents the Jewish viewpoint of the time and Justin. The words of Trypho are typical of what one would have heard from Jews in religious debate.

This comment from Trypho appears in Dialogue Chapter 108:-

you have sent chosen and ordained men throughout all the world to proclaim that a godless and lawless heresy had sprung from one Jesus, a Galilaean deceiver, whom we crucified, but his disciples stole him by night from the tomb, where he was laid when unfastened from the cross, and now deceive men by asserting that he has risen from the dead and ascended to heaven.

(Justin, Dialogue 108)

This comment was written at some point between 150 and 160 AD. Trypho is almost certainly a fictional character, although the name might be loosely based on a well-known

Rabbi of the time. However, there would be no point in Justin putting arguments into the mouth of Trypho unless these were reasonably representative of the kind of remark that might come from the Jewish community of Justin's time.

We therefore have a reference to Jewish teaching that there was a tomb of Jesus and that it was empty. This is not an argument that would have been made if Jesus had been a completely fictitious person.

There is also a reference to the empty tomb and an alleged theft by the disciples in the fifth century *Toledoth Jesu*. This is too late to be considered in detail here but the existence of the comment shows that it remained alive within the Jewish community.

The point about the empty tomb is that there is no need to explain away an empty tomb for a completely fictitious character. It is only if Jesus existed and there were unusual events at his death that there would be an empty tomb, and the fact that comments about the empty tomb continue through the second century and beyond is excellent evidence both for the existence of Jesus and his resurrection.

4.5 Persecution

One of the features of the lives of early Christians was persecution. This began with persecution by the religious establishment in Jerusalem almost as soon as Jesus was raised but spread to Jewish communities throughout the ancient world and was taken up by the Romans under Nero (after which it continued to the reign of Constantine).

The persecutions came in waves, intensifying when the local economy went badly or when an officious governor arrived, but they were nevertheless real and a constant threat. Early Christian writers after 65AD regularly refer to Roman persecutions. The fact that the Christian community continued to grow in the face of these persecutions shows that they did not simply believe Jesus to have been a fictional or mythical character. Had this been the case there would have been no reason not to switch to some other, less dangerous, observance.

4.6 Summary - The Evidence of Christian Witnesses

The various Christian witnesses to the existence of Jesus are by no means insignificant. There were clearly very many of these - the ancient witnesses refer to multitudes of them being put to death. The evidence is that the Christian community grew very rapidly after the time of Jesus, often in the face of considerable persecution. It is difficult to imagine how this might happen unless Jesus is a real historical being.

From the earliest Christian writings Jesus is described as a real person who was really born, really died and was really raised from the dead. This is true of the writers of the New Testament, the earliest of whom are writing within two decades of the resurrection and by later authors who wrote their letters in the late first and early second centuries.

Above all this there is the witness of the empty tomb, testified to by both Jewish and Christian witnesses. This fact alone would show the existence of a real and resurrected Christ.

5. Remsburg's List

This is a list of writers, mainly from the first and second centuries AD. The list is popular among the conspiracy theorists and forms the basis of half a dozen books from the "Jesus didn't exist" school and over 200 websites.

Remsburg himself was a professional atheist who lived by writing and selling atheist books and tracts and who gave lectures in the cause of atheism throughout the USA. In 1909 he published a book called "The Christ" in which he put together a catalogue of objections to Christianity. In the first chapter of his book he wrote:-

Jesus of Nazareth, the Jesus of humanity, the pathetic story of whose humble life and tragic death has awakened the sympathies of millions, is a possible character and may have existed; but the Jesus of Bethlehem, the Christ of Christianity, is an impossible character and does not exist.

Remsburg was also one of the first atheists to attack the Bible with the claim that it is immoral and encourages people to irrational acts of hatred and violence!

5.1 The Remsburg Argument

The argument is generally produced in the following form:-

Conspiracy theorists claim that the life of Jesus included many events which should have come to the notice of the entire ancient world and hence been recorded by almost all ancient writers. He then produced a list of ancient writers who he asserts would certainly have included a reference to Jesus, but who in fact do not mention him. The list below is taken from one of the many atheist websites which contain versions of the Remsburg list; the real likelihood of a comment on Jesus is assessed.

The Atheist websites which contain the Remsburg lists indicate points about the life of Jesus which they assert are so spectacular that they would certainly be included. In fact they are often less spectacular than the conspiracy theorists suggest, particularly in the eyes of Roman authors. The items are often described in a flippant manner; the headings are not those of the conspiracy theorists to avoid emotive language.

Born of a virgin mother This is not an obvious matter; one wouldn't have been able to tell that it was the case simply by looking at Jesus. Nevertheless it does appear in secular and Jewish literature which describes Jesus.

The Star of Bethlehem The conspiracy theorists tend to exaggerate the noticeability of the star of Bethlehem; it is often described as the brightest and most spectacular star of all time. In fact we have no idea what this star (if it was a star in modern terms) was like. It may have been a supernova, or a comet, or a conjunction of planets or even an angel - all of these might have been described as a star in ancient times. Various astronomical phenomena did appear over the period, but we have no idea what the Magi thought about them or why they chose to follow. It may be that one of these astronomical phenomena actually is the star of Bethlehem but that we have not identified it as such.

The slaying of the innocent babies Bethlehem was only a small village at the time of Jesus; the number of babies concerned would probably be less than a dozen. When this is compared to the other cruelties of Herod the Great the massacre of the innocents is insignificant and as a result unlikely to appear in ancient literature.

Raising the dead, healing the blind and lame Various ancient writers, both Roman and Jewish assert that Jesus performed acts thought to be supernatural. They generally describe them as “sorceries”. Celsus asserts that the miracles that Jesus did were not very important because they were only healings. Including this as one of the things that should have drawn Jesus to the attention of Roman historians shows the lack of scholarship of the writer of the list.

Having the sky turn to blackness when Jesus died This is mentioned by two ancient writers, although we only have their comments in citation from others. Again, to claim that this should have been reported but wasn't betrays a lack of knowledge on the part of the critic.

Earthquakes in the region Earthquakes are not uncommon in the area and we know from archaeology that many of them occurred in the first century AD. They are sufficiently frequent for them not to be of note and hardly any of them (including some quite severe ones which appear in the archaeological record) is recorded by ancient writers. The earthquakes that happened at the time of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus may have been quite small and minor by comparison with some of the major ones in the area which remain unrecorded in literature.

The saints raised at the time of Jesus' death The passage that mentions this is difficult to understand. It is not clear what exactly happened. Only Matthew mentions it, however, which means that it was sufficiently unnoticed to be left out of three other Gospels. If Mark, Luke and John didn't think it was worth recording, then it is unlikely that other writers of their time would think so either. The conspiracy theorists sometimes try to belittle the text of the Gospel by using the word “zombie” to describe those resurrected - even Rensburg didn't use this word.

The Resurrection Again, this is mentioned by classical writers. Only people who were followers of Jesus recorded it in terms of the resurrection, but other writers recorded that Christians believed that Jesus had been raised.

The list of writers produced by Rensburg is often garbled in the various websites where it appears as the people who post the list onto their websites often don't have much knowledge of ancient literature and make schoolboy errors. One site, for example, lists Aulus Gellius Philo-Judaeus in one line of his table. Aulus Gellius was a poet who wrote an account of his thoughts while spending sleepless nights in Athens, the other was a major platonist philosopher living in Alexandria.

The list is accompanied with a citation from Rensburg (often paraphrased):-

Enough of the writings of the authors named in the foregoing list remains to form a library. Yet in this mass of Jewish and Pagan literature, aside from two forged passages in the works of a Jewish author, and two disputed passages in the works of Roman writers, there is to be found no mention of Jesus Christ.

Notice that the passages which are considered forged or disputed are only considered to be forged or disputed by the conspiracy theorists.

In addition, the conspiracy theorists tend to assert that ancient writers don't refer to early Christians, the disciples of Jesus or the Apostles. This is almost unbelievable, but nevertheless it is found on many websites. Here is the text from one such site:-

Nor, we may add, do any of these authors make note of the disciples or apostles; increasing the embarrassment from the silence of history concerning the foundation of Christianity. In other words, the only information of the life of Jesus comes from Christian believers.

Anyone who has read the first parts of this paper will realise just how far from correct this claim is. Clearly it has been posted by someone who hasn't done even basic research in the area.

5.2 The List in Detail

The Remsburg list contains 42 different writers or alleged writers. The majority of these wouldn't have written about Jesus as they wrote on other subjects such as astronomy, coastal navigation or Spanish agriculture. Five of Remsburg's list either didn't exist at all, or wrote nothing and one is a duplicate of another writer under a different name. Only six could have mentioned Jesus, and of these six five did.

The table below goes through Remsburg's list, attempts to identify the people in it and assesses the possibility that that person could have written about Jesus. The details of the people mainly come from the Oxford Classical Dictionary, with further information from the Penguin Classical Dictionary. Where no information was available in either of these a web search was carried out.

Writer	Date	Comment
Apollonius	??????	Several Apolloniuses exist. Most are from the time before Christ. The only one later than Jesus (Apollonius of Tyana) didn't write anything.
Appian	95-165AD	A Roman historian who wrote a military history of Rome. This is one of the best sources for the civil wars involving Caesar, Pompey, Antony, Octavian etc. It would not be concerned with a rural teacher like Jesus
Appion of Alexandria		The same person as Appian!
Arrian	86-c160AD	Mainly a historian and wrote the major work on the life of Alexander the Great. He also wrote an account of the philosophy of Epictetus (see below).
Aulus Gellius	125-180+AD	Wrote a commonplace book ("Attic Nights") containing his thoughts while in Greece in a severe winter. This contains thoughts on grammar, geometry, philosophy and other subjects which he had encountered during conversations in Greece.
Columella	4 - 70AD	Lived in Spain and wrote about the agriculture and arboriculture of his region.
Columella Phlegon	?????	This seems to be a conflation of Columella and Phlegon - appears in "Jesus didn't exist" literature, but no other record. Phlegon possibly mentions the darkness that occurred at Jesus' crucifixion.

Writer	Date	Comment
Damis	mid 1 st cent - mid 2 nd cent	Disciple of Apollonius of Tyana. Wrote nothing. Is only known in writings of Philostratus (who wrote in the mid 3rd century).
Dio Chrysostom	c40 - c120 AD	Orator who gave speeches on philosophy and the histories of famous men to draw out exhortation for Rome's ruling classes.
Dion Pruseus	????	No record - Teknon says he wrote on rhetoric, but no evidence elsewhere. Appears lots in the "Jesus didn't exist" literature but nowhere else.
Epictetus	55 - 135 AD	Philosopher who wrote nothing. What we know of him is from Arrian (see above).
Favorinus	80 - 160 AD	Sceptical philosopher. Wrote a treatise on philosophy, but only fragments remain.
Florus Lucius	Reigns Trajan & Hadrian	Wrote a history of Rome from earliest times to the early part of the reign of Augustus (25BC).
Hermogones	161 - 180 AD	Possibly Hermogenes of Tarsus. Wrote on legal issues and rhetoric.
Justus of Tiberius	Late 1 st Century AD	Wrote history of the Jewish war which varied from that of Josephus and a chronology of the kings of Israel from Moses to Agrippa II. Neither work has survived. As the chronology is of reigning kings only Jesus would not have been included.
Juvenal	Late 1 st - early 2 nd century	Satirist who wrote about the issues of urban Roman life.
Lucanus = Lucan	39 - 65 AD	Poet who wrote mainly about Spain, but also a history of the war between Pompey & Caesar which is the only surviving work apart from a few fragments of poetry.
Lucian	125 - 180 AD	Lucian of Samosata mentions Jesus and gives a satirical picture of Christianity.
Lysias	c400BC	Far too early to mention Jesus
Martial	40 - 104 AD	Wrote poems and epigrams on the brutality of life in Rome.
Paterculus	19BC - 31AD	Wrote a history of Rome from the Trojan war to the death of Livia (29AD) which he published in 30AD, the earliest possible year for the crucifixion.
Pausanias	2nd century AD	Geographer who wrote a geography of Greece. His work describes the countryside, cities, architecture and society of Greece, including a significant amount of history. It leaves out some portions of Greece (eg. Crete), so would not cover events in Judea or Rome.
Persius	34 - 62 AD	Aulus Persius Flaccus: Satirist and poet. Wrote satires on Roman civilisation taking the line that it was decadent and declining.

Writer	Date	Comment
Petronius	27 - 66 AD	Courtier in the court of Nero. Probably Arbiter of Fashion for Nero. Only known work is his Satyricon, which exposes the foibles of Roman society in his day. The most famous part of this is the banquet of Trimalchio (<i>Cena Trimalchion</i>).
Phaedrus	15BC - 50AD	Wrote a collection of fables under the pseudonym Aesop. (Aesop himself was a much earlier Greek writer).
Philo-Judaeus	20BC - 50AD	Wrote on Middle-Platonism. His only works which refers to current affairs are "Embassy to Gaius" (<i>De Legatione ad Caium</i>) which deals with Caligula's effect on Jewish subjects and <i>Peri Judeum</i> (about the Jews), an apology for Judaism.
Phlegon	early 2 nd cent	Wrote a chronicle of the Olympiads, an account of marvels in the Classical World (ie long before his own time) and a catalogue of long-lived persons (people who lived more than 100 years using taken from the Roman censor's office). His works only exist as cited by others and are said to have included an account of the darkness at the time of Jesus' crucifixion.
Pliny the Elder	23 - 79 AD	Senator and writer from the reign of Nero to Vespasian. He completed several histories by other writers but avoided anything topical to placate Nero. His main work was "Natural Histories" which record a miscellany of facts. He would avoid mention of Christians so as to keep out of politics.
Pliny the Younger	61 - 112 AD	Adopted son of Pliny the Elder. Wrote a collection of letters, one of which contains a mention of Jesus.
Plutarch	46 - 120 AD	Wrote a collection of biographies of ancient Romans as moral examples for his own time. Major works include lives of Caesar, Pyrrhus and Alexander. Parallel lives includes short biographies of many other ancient Greeks and Romans. Could have mentioned Jesus if he had thought him significant for Romans
Pompon Mela	d 45 AD	Pomponius Mela wrote a geography describing coasts available to Roman mariners. It was based to some degree on Eratosthenes. The fact that the name "Pompon Mela" is referred to, retaining the error made by Remsburg, shows that no independent research is being done by the Jesus deniers.
Ptolemy	90 - 168 AD	Astronomer and Mathematician. Wrote on scientific themes and not on history. No reason to mention Jesus.
Quintilian	35 - 100 AD	Rhetorician from Spain. Wrote on Rhetoric.
Quintius Curtius	First Century	Wrote a biography of Alexander the Great, his only known work.

Writer	Date	Comment
Seneca	4 BC - 65 AD	Stoic Philosopher. Wrote a number of letters, poems, works on philosophy, plays and a work on meteorology. Jesus doesn't fit into these categories.
Silius Italicus	28 - 103 AD	Poet. Only surviving work is an epic poem on the Punic war (against Hanibal).
Statius	45 - 96 AD	Poet who mainly wrote on mythical and archaic subjects, although one volume is on courtiers in the court of Domitian.
Suetonius	69 - 122 AD	Writer of ""Twelve Caesars"". This includes a possible reference to Jesus and a definite reference to Christians in the reign of Nero.
Tacitus	56 - 117 AD	Writer of various histories. One of these, "Annals", includes a brief reference to Jesus.
Theon of Smyrna	70 - 135 AD	Mathematician and Astronomer who wrote on such matters as the calculation of prime numbers.
Valerius Flaccus	BC!	Various men of this name flourished in the second century BC. None is known at or after the time of Jesus.
Valerius Maximus	Reign of Tiberius?	Wrote a collection of anecdotal histories of early Roman and Greek figures to prove that Roman civilisation had fallen from its earlier prominence.

Summary of Remsburg's Writers

To summarise Remsburg's list:-

Remsburg mentions 42 supposed writers.

Of these three didn't exist, two wrote nothing, 4 confined their writings to times before Jesus and one is the same person as someone else in the list.

There is thus a total of ten lines of Remsburg's list which can be deleted. This is rather more than the number of people in the list who might have mentioned Jesus. The level of scholarship shown by Remsburg and his disciples is rather disappointing. One would have hoped that they could at least have found writers who existed, lived at the right time, and wrote about the right period.

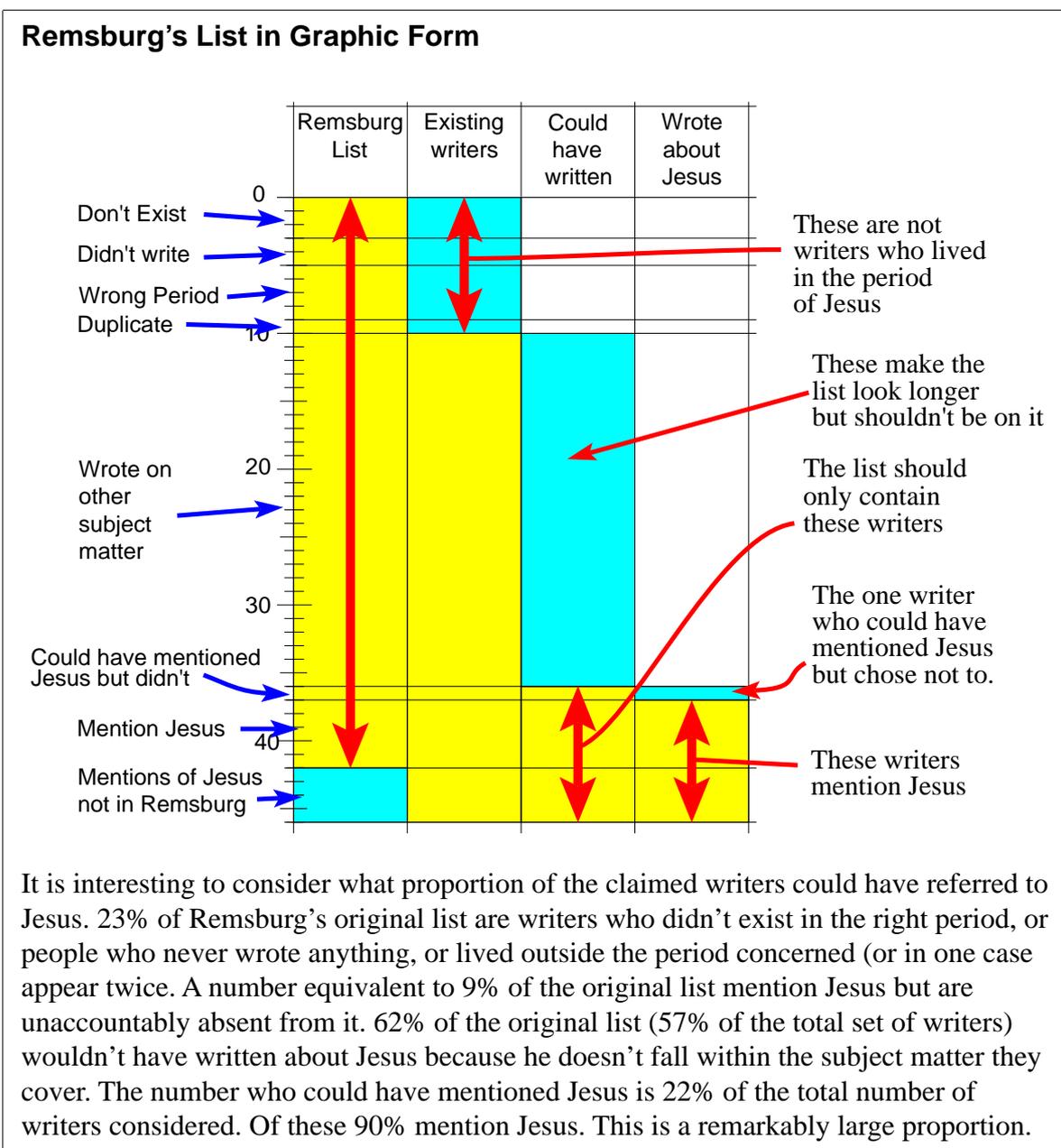
This leaves 32 writers.

Of these, 26 wrote on subjects which had nothing to do with what was happening in Judea and would not therefore have written about Jesus, even if they had known about him.

This leaves six writers, of whom five did comment on Jesus. The ones who refer to Jesus or to Christians tell us where and when Jesus he lived, that he was put to death and when, that he was considered to have carried out marvellous works and that his followers considered him to have been raised from the dead. These are the most important facts about Jesus.

The remaining writer is Philo Judaeus (Philo of Alexandria). Philo died 20 years after the resurrection and moved in Jewish circles, which would have given him the opportunity to have learned about Jesus. His death corresponds to the date of the writing of 1 Thessalonians, one of the first New Testament books to be written. By the time Philo died he might have known of Christians in Alexandria. However, Philo shared many of the mores of the Greeks among whom he lived. He would have had a disdain for rustics, who lived away from the city life, and would therefore have considered Jesus to have been a nobody as he came from a tiny and obscure village and was, at best, a tradesman (carpenter). Not only that, but Jesus (and especially his resurrection) was considered by the civilised Greeks to be foolish (1 Corinthians 1:18,22-23). As a great philosopher Philo would have been susceptible to the idea that Christianity was mere foolishness and might not have wished to damage his reputation by writing about it.

On the other hand, Philo might simply not yet have heard about Jesus - it is not clear when the news of Christianity arrived in Alexandria, although we know from the writings of Clement of Alexandria at the end of the second century that Christianity did not make much headway in Alexandria in the first century.



Rensburg doesn't mention all the available writers. His list misses:- Celsus, Josephus, Mara bar-Sarapion, Thallus and Phlegon. He ignores any Jewish sources or Apostolic Fathers. Having complained that there is no mention of the disciples of Jesus the conspiracy theorists completely ignore their writings and the writings of those who knew them. Had he included the additional writers he would have doubled the number who referred to Jesus. The fact that he never included them, but does include writers who never existed or who died before Jesus' ministry, or who wrote exclusively about other subjects says something about the level of scholarship he employed. One fails to be impressed by the depth of his knowledge.

This can be extended to the people who quote Rensburg's list. The fact that a large proportion of the "Mythical Jesus" movement is prepared to take Rensburg's list at face value indicates a lack of understanding and scholarship within that movement.

6. Conclusion

It seems to be taken for granted by many extreme atheists that Jesus did not exist. This idea was relatively common towards the end of the 19th century but had mainly been abandoned by the middle of the 20th century because of the overwhelming weight of evidence. The amount of evidence has not grown less but atheism has grown more rampant and more in need of evidence. As a result the arguments of the 19th century atheists have been unearthed and pressed into service.

In reality the evidence for Jesus is as strong as one could imagine. Only a small number of Roman writers could have been expected to have written about him, and of these almost all chose to do so. In addition Jesus appears in the earliest written strands of Jewish literature, and in the Early Church Fathers. The most important of the Church Fathers are the Apostolic Fathers (Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, the *Didache* and the Epistle of Barnabas); these were written by people who possibly knew Apostles and who certainly lived at a time when many who had known the Apostles were still alive.

The best evidence, of course, is in the New Testament. Some of the more extreme atheists have claimed that there is no mention of Jesus in the Epistles; this is a ludicrous claim. There are over 400 references to Jesus in the Epistles. The first words of the New Testament to be written by the Apostle Paul (Galatians 1:1) contain a reference to Jesus. The Apostles are also definite in explaining that they were eyewitnesses of Jesus. The Gospels, of course, contain the most detailed information. Quotations from the Gospels appear in the Apostolic Fathers, which shows an early date for the Gospels, and linguistic fossils, undesigned coincidences and linguistic fossils all connect the Gospels with the time of Jesus.

The extra-Biblical references to Jesus are endorsed by two indisputable facts. The first of these is that no-one in any position of authority ever questioned the existence of Jesus. It would have been a powerful, even a devastating, attack on Christianity to state that Jesus had never existed, provided that this statement was true. No-one ever used this idea in an attempt to undermine Christianity. This shows that the idea that Jesus had never existed but had instead been a mythical being would have been laughable.

The Jewish authorities in Jerusalem would have been in a position to be absolutely certain whether Jesus existed or not; according to the Gospels they were present at Jesus' trials. The Gospels do not present the Jerusalem authorities in a good light, and if the events that are described in the Gospels had never happened one would have expected the Jewish authorities to have made this known. They never did so. Instead, Jewish writings presume that Jesus existed, but describe him as a sorcerer and a teacher of falsehood.

The other solid fact is that of the empty tomb. This is deducible from the references made to the tomb of Jesus outside the New Testament. It is clear from Justin Martyr that Jewish people were asserting that the disciples of Jesus had stolen the body of Jesus from his tomb in the mid second century and the Gospel of Matthew shows that the same story was being used as an explanation in the first century. It would be pointless to state that the body of Jesus had been stolen if Jesus had never existed. The fact that the empty tomb is a universally acknowledged fact is a guarantee that Jesus existed, that he was killed and that he was not bound by the grave.

The persecution of Christians in Judea began almost immediately after the resurrection; in Rome the persecution became a major threat following the fire of Rome in 64AD. This meant that almost from the first Christians in any part of the Roman Empire could find themselves under persecution from the local Jewish community or from the followers of the pagan cults (as in Ephesus - see Acts 19:23-41; 1 Corinthians 15:32). From the start anyone who became a Christian might suffer the loss of their home and possessions and might find themselves in prison or beaten up. From the reign of Nero onwards they risked their lives.

The fact that Christians were prepared to face persecution like this shows that they were confident that Jesus was a real person who had really overcome death. One does not put oneself in the kind of jeopardy that was their lot for a convenient fiction. If Jesus had been simply another version of a pagan god, or had been an entirely mythical being the people who were being persecuted on his behalf would have expressed themselves in terms of the perfectly legal Dionysius or Isis instead.

Not only does the evidence outside the Bible indicate the existence of Jesus, it also gives a very basic picture of his life. This corresponds as well as could be expected with the picture in the New Testament.

The evidence again supports the New Testament record.