

JESUS: THE REAL EVIDENCE

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Prove yourself!

Imagine you're required to *prove* your existence. You have to show that lived, that you were here on earth at all! And not just now, but say a hundred years on. Or two hundred. Or five hundred.

What would you use to establish your existence? A birth certificate? A passport? A driving licence? A dog-eared membership card to the Little Snoring Mobile Library?

Paper burns. Paper tears. Paper goes brown, turns up at the edges and crumbles away. And then what?

How about the memories of family and friends? The recollections of colleagues and workmates. "Ah yes, I knew him well!" The memoirs and family histories, the great oral tradition of remembrance.

For a while, maybe. But what do *you* know of your great-great-great grandfather? Not a whole lot, I suspect.

Memorial stones? Some major impact on society? Great scientific discovery? Important leader? *How do you get to be history?*

Selective history

The truth is that history is highly selective. Much of what we know about the past--especially the distant past--is due to some happy 'accident'. For even when someone, or a group of someones, decided that a certain person or incident *was* important and needed to be preserved for the benefit of humanity, and wrote this item down on papyrus, pottery or stone, it still had to survive! When you think of the destructive power of war, fire, natural disaster as well as the perverseness of the human mind, it's a wonder that anything of importance survived at all.

So what of you? What kind of evidence does the world at large have of you, even now? And way off into the future, what then? How would you make sure that some accurate memory of merely your existence, let alone who and what you were, survives the bonfires of war and the litterbins of the ignorant?

Tacitus, the Roman historian, is known from *a single copy* of his works that was produced in the twelfth century. If that had also been lost--no Tacitus! Similarly Caesar's *Gallic Wars* and a number of other ancient writings' survival has been extremely tenuous and dependent on very limited numbers of copies.

Some chance discovery--an ancient inscription here, a fragment of parchment there-- and perhaps some circumstantial archaeological support, and that may be all you have.

Did Jesus exist?

So when it comes to Jesus, and questions about his historical existence, let alone his life and teachings, it is not surprising that there is no absolute "chapter and verse". (And besides, when it comes to the Biblical manuscripts, chapters and verses were later additions anyway!)

If Jesus was the person the New Testament says he was--the son of a Galilean carpenter who taught in Palestine some two millennia ago, then to go looking for portraits, busts and Polaroid snapshots is obviously absurd.

Add to that the fact that he never wrote a book, was not a monarch, warrior or any other kind of great political leader, and achieved no fame in the power structures of the Roman world (*the* world of his time), then it's not surprising that there is little evidence outside of the Bible record. Bear in mind that Jesus:

- * Was born in a countryside backwater
- * Had no apparent importance or power base
- * Came to notice locally for three short years
- * Led no large popular movement
- * Took part in no military action
- * Was ultimately killed as a common criminal

So to expect a vast amount of contemporary material would be absurd. Yet some evidence is essential, for the historical existence of Jesus is crucial to belief. If Christ did not actually come and live, die and be raised from the dead then the basis for belief is destroyed. In this Christianity is very different to say Buddhism--for if Buddha was legendary, this would not negate the teachings which are primarily moral and ethical prescriptions for life. But Christ was not just a good man who said good things. *He claimed divinity and the power to save and heal from sin.* He proved his ability by the miracles and by the greatest conquest of all: death itself. He demonstrated the truth about the kind of God he was by the life he lived and the death he died. Consequently without a historical Christ there is no gospel.

The evidence

The actual non-Biblical material is not large but it is undeniably conclusive. Remember that each source is either neutral, or more probably hostile, to Christianity's message.

That same *Tacitus* mentioned above (who was the Imperial Roman historian AD 55-118?), records that the Christians were made the scapegoats by Nero for the Great Fire of Rome in AD 64. He even notes that the name Christian comes from Christ, executed in the reign of Emperor Tiberius by Procurator Pontius Pilate. Tacitus also mentions that when Titus destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem (AD 70) he hoped to finish off both Judaism *and* Christianity!

Suetonius (AD 69-140?)--one of Emperor Hadrian's officials--records that Emperor Claudius had expelled the Jews from Rome because of their constant commotion over one "Chrestus". Here the expulsion (in AD 49) that involved Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:2) is clearly identified.

Pliny the Younger (AD 61-114) as governor of Bithynia (now in modern-day Turkey) wrote to Emperor Trajan on the matter of how he should deal with the Christians in his area, since they

refused to worship the Roman gods (and the Emperor in particular) and met one day a week to sing hymns to the God "Christ". Pliny was confused as to what to do as he did not find Christians to be guilty of any social crimes.

There is even a reference from a second century writer quoting *Thallus* who wrote in Rome about AD 52. Thallus sought to discredit the unnatural darkness that fell when Jesus was crucified as an eclipse of the sun. The important thing to note here is that a non-Christian Rome-based historian is well informed and writing about the circumstances of Jesus' death just some twenty years after the event!

But the most precise information is from the Jewish-born historian *Josephus* (born AD 37?), who wrote for a Roman audience after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. He clearly describes the circumstances regarding Jesus' ministry and mission, his death on the cross at the hands of Pilate and the Jewish leaders, and the belief in Jesus' resurrection. He also mentions the execution of James the brother of Jesus in AD 62. That this should come from one who was undoubtedly opposed to Christianity makes the historical details that much more significant. The later references to Jesus in the Jewish Mishnah also demonstrate conclusively that Jesus was seen as being born of a virgin and made divine claims, and that he was executed on the eve of the Passover.

It is easy and convenient to dismiss the historicity of Jesus, simply saying, "He never existed!" But that is to ignore the evidence, of which there is more than for many other historical personages of his time.

It really happened!

And despite all the claims and counterclaims, the scholarly criticism and popular debates, the evidence demonstrates that not only did Jesus exist, but also gives support for what actually *happened*. Since it would *at that time* have been relatively easy to dispose of a "Jesus-myth" based on some unreal person, and since this was not done so by Jew or Roman, and because of the above evidence from notably hostile witnesses it must be logically concluded that Jesus really did exist, that he was crucified, and that many people believed that he rose again from the dead.

The world was truly turned upside-down by his life and teachings. Though the message of truth has sometimes been misunderstood and misapplied, though so few have truly lived the good news of God that Jesus came to bring, though for the most part people prefer to ignore and dismiss the *real* evidence, the Truth remains.

No one could fake it. No one could invent it. No one could have lived and died for it--unless it was true!

For despite all the arguments and objections, the *real* evidence is that *this* same Jesus who historically lived and died and rose again is the God who saves--and it could *only* be God!

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