

Top Ten Historical References to Jesus Outside of the Bible

After publishing my blog of [Top Ten Discoveries Related to Jesus](#), I faced some criticism from people who noted that none of the discoveries proved Jesus existed. Leaving aside the facts that “proof” is subjective and is not the purpose of archaeology, these individuals misunderstood my intent. As I noted in my blog, those discoveries affirmed and illuminated details about Jesus’ life as recorded in the gospels; they were not meant to prove his existence.

However, their feedback has inspired me to write this follow-up article addressing the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth. Did he exist? There is ample evidence to suggest that he did indeed live early in the first century.

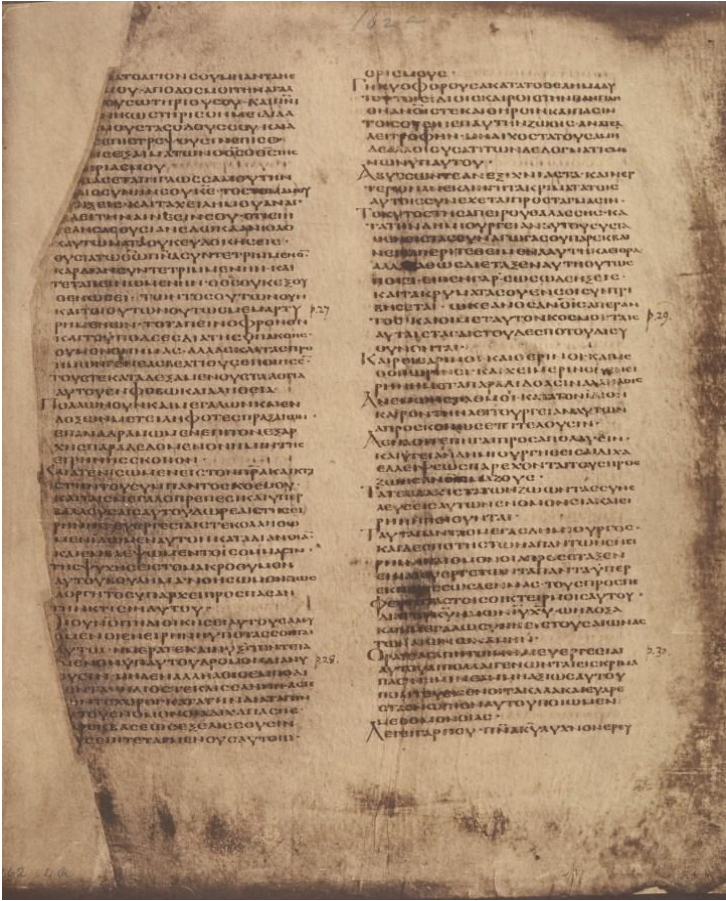
While I believe the gospels in the New Testament are the earliest and most reliable records of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, for the purpose of this blog, I’m going to focus on non-biblical references to him. In order to make this list, I’ve used the following criteria:

- The sources must be from the first or second century, not later. So, for example, while some quote rabbinic references to Jesus from the Talmud (ca. AD 400-700) or the *Toledot Yeshu* (ca. AD 1000), I have left them off this list. The reality is that they are really of little or no value in determining the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth.¹
- Secondly, the sources must reference Jesus, not just to Christians.

Here then are the top ten historical references to Jesus in literary works outside of the Bible.

10. Early Christian Writers (ca. 50-157)

It is difficult to explain the explosive growth of Christianity within the first 100 years or so of Christ’s life if he himself did not actually exist. One of the often-overlooked group of extra-biblical texts which testify to the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth are those from early Christian writers, some of whom reported what they heard directly from those who met Jesus personally. Their letters and treatises record details about Jesus’ life, his death, and the fact that they believed he rose from the dead.



A photographic facsimiles of the First Epistle of Clement from Codex Alexandrinus in the British Museum. Photo: Roger Fenton / Wikimedia Commons / CC0 1.0

Clement was a first-century leader of the church at Rome who wrote a letter to the church at Corinth (ca. AD 70-96). In it he speaks of the teachings of Jesus (13:1), his death (21:6), and his resurrection from the dead (24:1).²

Ignatius of Antioch wrote a letter to the Smyrnaeans (ca. AD 110) in which he claims that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch (Ch. 1) and that “he suffered all these things for us; and He suffered them really, and not in appearance only, even as also He truly rose again” (Ch. 2).³

Similarly, Polycarp in his letter to the Philippians (ca. AD 110-140) affirmed that Jesus lived and died (1:2).⁴ Polycarp was said to have been taught directly by the original Apostles.⁵

Justin Martyr, in his First Apology (ca. AD 155-157) argues that Jesus was a teacher, that he was crucified, that he died and rose again (Ch. XXI).⁶

Papias (ca. AD 95-110)⁷ wrote that he learned of Jesus teachings directly from those who had heard him in-person.⁸

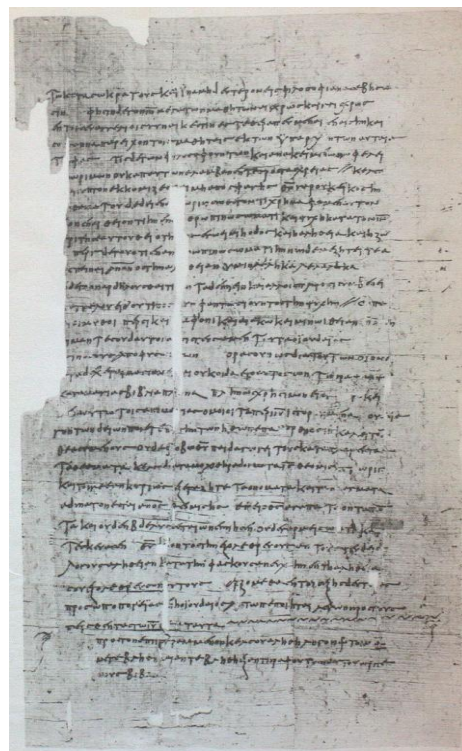
Quadratus was an early Christian apologist who wrote a letter to the emperor Hadrian (ca. AD 117-138) in defense of Christianity. In it he stated, “But the works of our Saviour were always present, for they were genuine:— those that were healed, and those that were raised from the dead, who were seen not only when they were healed and when they were raised, but were also always present; and not merely while the Saviour was on earth, but also after his death, they were alive for quite a while, so that some of them lived even to our day.”⁹

Even earlier than all of these is a manuscript known as the Didache (ca. 50-70 AD), a sort of early discipleship manual explaining how Christians should act. It recites some of the teachings of Jesus and lays out instructions for celebrating communion, remembering Jesus’ death and resurrection.¹⁰

Early Christian writers, some of whom learned directly from the original Apostles, testified to Jesus's life as a teacher, miracles he performed, his death under Pontius Pilate by crucifixion, and their belief that Jesus rose again from the dead. While critics of Christianity may not accept the testimony of early Christians, there is no denying that, within one hundred years of Jesus' life, his followers were writing about him and telling others about his life, death and resurrection.

Still, to answer the critics, the remaining references will all be from non-Christian writers, who had no motivation to promote Jesus or Christianity. As we shall see, they affirm the same details these Christian writers recorded.

9. Phlegon (ca. AD 140)



An early manuscript of Origen's Contra Celsum (Against Celsus), currently housed in the Egyptian Museum. Photo: Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain

Some references to Jesus come from works that are no longer in existence, but which have been quoted by other authors in antiquity. This is not a problem for the historian, as many works have been preserved in the quotations of other ancient writers. Phlegon of Tralles wrote a book of history around the middle of the second century. While it is no longer extant, Origen cites several passages in which Phlegon refers to Jesus:

“Now Phlegon, in the thirteenth or fourteenth book, I think, of his Chronicles, not only ascribed to Jesus a knowledge of future events...but also testified that the result corresponded to His predictions.”¹¹

“And with regard to the eclipse in the time of Tiberius Caesar, in whose reign Jesus appears to have been crucified, and the great earthquakes which then took place, Phlegon too, I think, has written in the thirteenth or fourteenth book of his Chronicles”¹²

“We have in the preceding pages, made our defence, according to our ability, adducing the testimony of Phlegon, who relates that these events took place at the time when our Saviour suffered. And he goes on to say, that “Jesus, while alive, was of no assistance to himself, but that he arose after death, and exhibited the marks of his punishment, and showed how his hands had been pierced by nails.”¹³

According to the ancient historian Phlegon, Jesus was thought to have accurately predicted the future, was crucified during the days of Tiberius Caesar, and was believed to have risen again, showing his hands that had been pierced by nails.

8. Thallus (ca. AD 55)



A woodcut of Julius Africanus from 1493. Image: Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain

Thallus was perhaps the earliest non-Christian writer to refer to Jesus. While Thallus' work has been lost, a fragment was quoted by Julius Africanus around AD 220, which itself was quoted by the Byzantine historian Georgius Syncellus in his *Chronicle* (ca. AD 800). Julius Africanus was discussing the darkness that accompanied the crucifixion of Jesus (Mt 27:45). He writes:

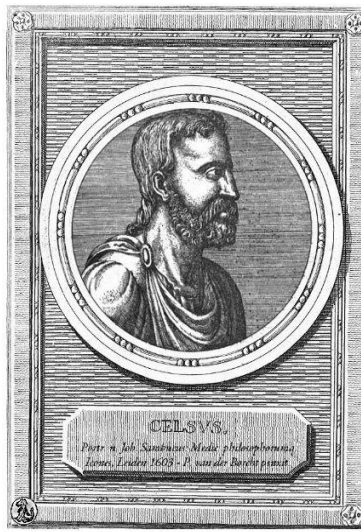
“On the whole world there pressed a most fearful darkness; and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down. This darkness Thallus in the third book of his History, calls, as appears to me without reason, an eclipse of the sun.”¹⁴

At first glance, Jesus isn't mentioned in this quotation. However, it is likely that Thallus referred to Jesus in his original work. Robert Van Voorst explains: “Thallos could have mentioned the eclipse with no

reference to Jesus. But it is more likely that Julius, who had access to the context of this quotation in Thallos and who (to judge from other fragments) was generally a careful user of his sources, was correct in reading it as a hostile reference to Jesus' death. The context in Julius shows that he is refuting Thallos' argument that the darkness is not religiously significant."¹⁵

Note that Julius explicitly states that Thallus is mistaken in his understanding of the reason for the darkness; he is not merely noting an eclipse. While not explicit, this reference is important because it likely pre-dates the writing of most of the Gospels themselves. Since Thallus appears to be countering the argument of Christians that darkness accompanied the death of Christ, he obviously knew about Jesus, and likely not from the gospels themselves, but from sources outside of the Bible.

7. Celsus (ca. 175 AD)



Celsus was a second-century Greek philosopher who wrote a treatise attacking Christianity called, *The True Doctrine*. His work remains primarily through quotations in Origen's rebuttal, *Against Celsus*, written some 75 years later. Given the length of time between Celsus' original text and Origen's response, it would seem *The True Doctrine* had a

lasting impact.¹⁶ Origen summarizes Celsus's arguments against Christianity, noting that the critic had used a literary device of imagining a Jew talking with Jesus:

*"...in imitation of a rhetorician training a pupil, he [Celsus] introduces a Jew, who enters into a personal discussion with Jesus, and speaks in a very childish manner, altogether unworthy of the grey hairs of a philosopher, let me endeavour, to the best of my ability, to examine his statements, and show that he does not maintain, throughout the discussion, the consistency due to the character of a Jew. For he represents him disputing with Jesus, and confuting Him, as he thinks, on many points; and in the first place, he accuses Him of having "invented his birth from a virgin," and upbraids Him with being "born in a certain Jewish village, of a poor woman of the country, who gained her subsistence by spinning, and who was turned out of doors by her husband, a carpenter by trade, because she was convicted of adultery; that after being driven away by her husband, and wandering about for a time, she disgracefully gave birth to Jesus, an illegitimate child, who having hired himself out as a servant in Egypt on account of his poverty, and having there acquired some miraculous powers, on which the Egyptians greatly pride themselves, returned to his own country, highly elated on account of them, and by means of these proclaimed himself a God."*¹⁷

One must always be careful when judging the veracity of something someone said when quoted by another. However, even though Celsus's claims are quoted within a critical response, it would make sense that Origen has faithfully recorded Celsus's words, as he would need to be accurate for his critique to be taken seriously. From Celsus' critique of Jesus, we see that it was said he was born of a poor virgin, that he was known to have performed miracles, and that he claimed to be divine. Even his claim that Jesus mother was driven away by Joseph because of adultery, while not factual, certainly captures Joseph's initial thoughts upon hearing of Mary's pregnancy (Matt. 1:19).

6. Lucian of Samosata (ca. AD 166)



Lucian of Samosata, the satirist. Engraving by William Faithorne (1616/1691). Image: Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain

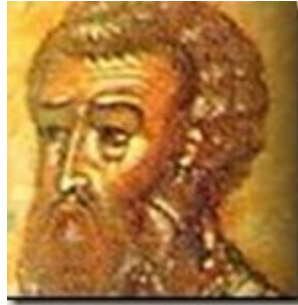
Lucian of Samosata was a famous Greek satirist who also referred to Jesus in his work, *The Death of Peregrine*, which was written sometime after AD 165. In it he mocks Christians, writing:

“The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day, –the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account.... You see, these misguided creatures start with the general conviction that they are immortal for all time, which explains the contempt of death and voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them; and then it was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws.”¹⁸

In this statement from the middle of the second century, we see Lucian acknowledge the following historical facts: 1) Jesus was the founder of a religion who was crucified; 2) His followers were converted and considered themselves spiritual brothers and sisters. 3) Jesus’s followers worshiped him as God.

5. Mara Bar Serapion (ca. AD 73)

Mara Bar Sarapion's city was destroyed by the Romans who were occupying the land, and he himself was taken captive. From prison, he wrote a letter in Syriac to his son, also called Serapion, encouraging him to pursue wisdom. In it, Mara Bar Serapion refers to Jesus:



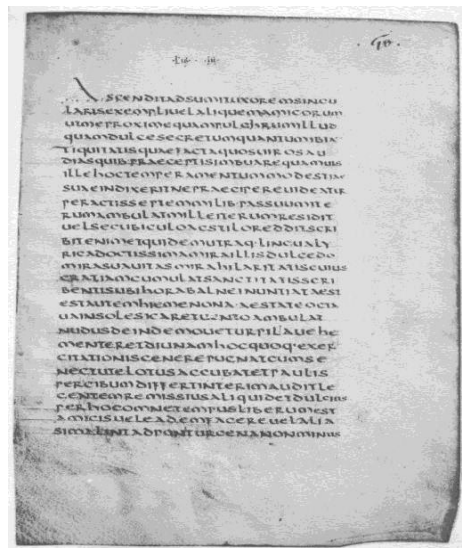
What else can we say, when the wise are forcibly dragged off by tyrants, their wisdom is captured by insults, and their minds are oppressed and without defense? What advantage did the Athenians gain by murdering Socrates, for which they were repaid with famine and pestilence? Or the people of Samos by the burning of Pythagoras, because their country was completely covered in sand in just one hour? Or the Jews by killing their wise king, because their kingdom was taken away at that very time? God justly repaid the wisdom of these three men: the Athenians died of famine; the Samians were completely overwhelmed by the sea; and the Jews, desolate and driven from their own kingdom, are scattered through every nation. Socrates is not dead, because of Plato; neither is Pythagoras, because of the statue of Juno; nor is the wise king, because of the new laws he laid down.¹⁹

While Jesus is not explicitly named, it is almost certain that Mara Bar Serapion is referring to Jesus as the “wise king” whom the Jews killed. Remember that the title “King of the Jews” was one used by Pilate (Lk 23:3), Roman soldiers (Mt 27:27-29), and even some Jews themselves (Mk 15:12). Moreover, the written charge that was placed above Jesus when he was crucified, which was seen by all, read “Jesus of Nazareth,

the King of the Jews” (Jn 19:19). It would appear that this was a commonly known title by which Jesus was known in the first century.

J. Warner Wallace summarizes the significance of this reference: “From this account, we can add to our understanding of Jesus: He was a wise and influential man who died for His beliefs. The Jewish leadership was somehow responsible for Jesus’ death. Jesus’ followers adopted His beliefs and lived their lives accordingly.”²⁰

4. Pliny the Younger (ca. AD 112)



A sixth century page from Pliny’s Letters. Image: Project Gutenberg

Pliny the Younger was a Roman Governor of Bithynia, who wrote to Emperor Trajan asking for advice on how to deal with the Christians he was prosecuting. In Book 10, Letter 96, he describes his procedure to Trajan:

Others, whose names were given me by an informer, first said that they were Christians and afterwards denied it, declaring that they had been but were so no longer, some of them having recanted many years before, and more than one so long as twenty years back. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the deities, and cursed the name of Christ. But they declared

*that the sum of their guilt or their error only amounted to this, that on a stated day they had been accustomed to meet before daybreak and to recite a hymn among themselves to Christ, as though he were a god, and that so far from binding themselves by oath to commit any crime, their oath was to abstain from theft, robbery, adultery, and from breach of faith, and not to deny trust money placed in their keeping when called upon to deliver it.*²¹

Pliny's letter reveals that Christ was a real, historical figure whose name the Roman magistrates were attempting to get Christians to curse. It also demonstrates that Christians at that time believed in the divinity of Jesus and were meeting weekly to worship him. It is interesting to note that Trajan responds to Pliny's letter stating that Christians were "not to be hunted out," but that those who claimed to be followers of Jesus were to be punished, while those who recanted their faith were to be pardoned.²²

3. Suetonius (ca. AD 120)



A page from Suetonius, De vita Caesarum (Lives of the Caesars) in the the Berlin State Library. Image: Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain

Suetonius was a Roman historian whose most famous work, *De vita Caesarum* (*Lives of the Caesars*), recounts a brief history of the first twelve Caesars, from Julius Caesar to the emperor Domitian. In his chapter on the life of Claudius (AD 41-54), he explained the reason for the emperor’s decision to expel the Jews from Rome, an event also recorded in the Bible (Acts 18:2):

*“Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus [Christ], he expelled them from Rome.”*²³

There is a near-unanimous consensus among scholars of all religious persuasions that “Chrestus”, likely a phonetic misspelling of the Latin “Christus”, is Jesus Christ; indeed, the name Chrestus/Chrestos and the term Chrestians were known to, and used by, numerous church fathers.²⁴

Suetonius’s reference demonstrates that, within a hundred years of the life of Jesus, he was known to have existed and that he was a popular and controversial figure who caused disturbances among the Jews during the reign of Claudius, affirming the biblical record.

2. Josephus (ca. AD 93)



An illustrated page of a Latin translation of Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews* from the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence. Image: Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain

Josephus, a Jewish-Roman historian, referred to Jesus twice in his work, *Antiquities of the Jews*. In one reference, he describes the death of James, “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ.”²⁵ The other reference, the more famous of the two, is commonly referred to as the *Testimonium Flavianum* (TF). Many scholars, both Christian and non-Christian alike, believe this passage in its Greek form was altered by a Christian scribe at some point in antiquity who added interpolations to enhance the image of Jesus.²⁶ They argue, for example, that Josephus, a Jew, would not have said, “He was the Christ.” According to this theory, while the passage was altered, it still contains an authentic reference to Jesus at its core, and scholars for years have proposed reconstructions of how it originally read.

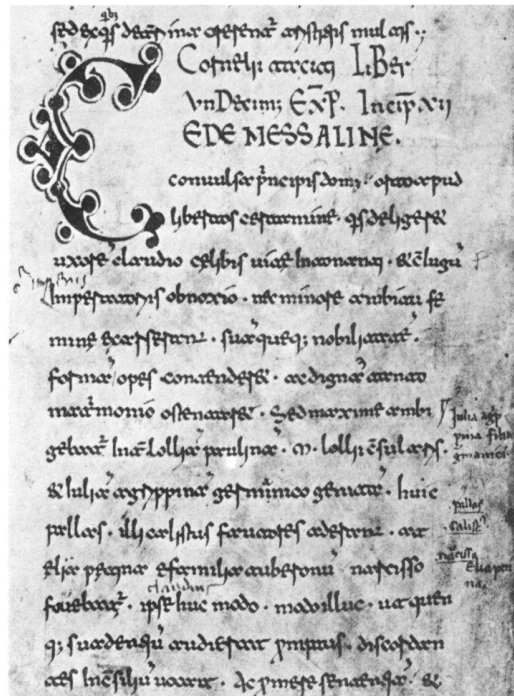
The latest research, however, presents a compelling case that no interpolations were added by some supposed Christian scribe in the past. Rather, one or two words were mistakenly dropped from the text. In his book, *Josephus and Jesus: New Evidence for the One Called Christ*, T.C. Schmidt meticulously analyzes Josephus’ writings and demonstrates that each phrase of the TF is used multiple times by Josephus elsewhere.²⁷ Moreover, he argues that “The TF found in extant manuscripts of the *Antiquities* is essentially authentic...it has merely lost two or three words that can still be found preserved in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Arabic, and Armenian textual witnesses....the Syriac phrase *mestabrā itaw* which in the TF can be translated as ‘thought to be’... [this] means that the original TF did not say that Jesus ‘was the Christ’ but only that he was ‘thought to be’ the Christ. The Latin version of the TF similarly says that Jesus was ‘believed to be’ (*credebatur esse*) the Christ.”²⁸

Schmidt provides his own translation of the TF, which takes into consideration the meaning of the phrases as Josephus used them elsewhere, as well as the Syriac and Latin translations. It reads:

And in this time, there was a certain Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man, for he was a doer of incredible deeds, a teacher of men who receive truisms with pleasure. And he brought over many from among the Jews and many from among the Greeks. He was [thought to be] the Christ. And, when Pilate had condemned him to the cross at the accusation of the first men among us, those who at first were devoted to him did not cease to be so, for on the third day it seemed to them that he was alive again given that the divine prophets had spoken such things and thousands of other wonderful things about him. And up till now, the tribe of Christians, who were named from him, has not disappeared.²⁹

From these references, it is clear Josephus accepted the existence of Jesus, who was “called Christ”, and whose conduct was good. He acknowledges that Jesus was crucified by Pilate, and that many people became disciples, reporting that he was alive and had appeared to them. Moreover, Josephus may have even known some of the “first men among us” who were involved in the trial of Jesus, and who likely provided him with first-hand information about Jesus.³⁰

1. Tacitus (ca. AD 116)



An 11th century copy of The Annals, by Tacitus. Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain

Tacitus was a Roman Historian, who left two major works, the *Histories* (covering the Roman Empire from AD 69-96) and the *Annals* (covering the period from 14-68).³¹ In his *Annals*, Tacitus writes about suspicions that Nero was responsible for the Great Fire of Rome and how Nero tried to deflect the blame:

*“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 Judæa, 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.”*³²

This passage is of great importance to biblical scholars for several reasons. First, there is no question as to its authenticity. Secondly, Tacitus is seen as an independent source; there does not seem to be any literary or oral dependence between his description and the gospel accounts.³⁵ Thirdly, it affirms numerous details about Jesus, called Christus, including his historicity, his death under Pontius Pilate, and the persecution of his disciples. Furthermore, by describing the “mischievous superstition,” Tacitus may be referring to the belief of the early disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Conclusion

Each of these sources, on their own, provides limited information regarding the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth. Taken together, though, they provide a remarkably detailed summary of Jesus’s life. Certainly, they attest to the fact that Jesus of Nazareth existed. Furthermore, even if we did not have the New Testament books, and simply relied on non-biblical sources, we would know the following about Jesus:

- He was reported to have been born of a poor virgin and that his father was a carpenter
- He was a teacher, and his disciples passed on his teachings to others
- He prophesied and performed miracles
- He was known for his wisdom and his virtuous life
- He claimed to be God
- He was crucified by Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius Caesar in Judea
- That an earthquake and darkness accompanied his death
- His followers reported that he had risen from the dead, appeared to them, and showed them the wounds in his hands

- His followers worshiped him as God
- Belief in Jesus caused disturbances with the Jews, which led to Claudius' decree for the Jews to leave Rome

In fact, Jesus was so well-known within a century that word of him likely reached no less than seven Roman emperors: Claudius, who evicted Christians from Rome, Nero, who persecuted Christians; Vespasian, Titus and Domitian, under whose patronage Josephus wrote; and Trajan, who replied to Pliny.

While there may be popular blogs and books promoting the “Christ-myth” today, suggesting that Jesus never lived, at a scholarly level, the existence of Jesus of Nazareth has been firmly established, even if one uses only non-biblical, historical texts. In reality, Jesus of Nazareth is one of the best-attested historical figures from the first century.

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