

# Did Jesus Exist? Searching for Evidence Beyond the Bible

Lawrence Mykytiuk's feature article from the January/February 2015 issue of BAR with voluminous endnotes

Lawrence Mykytiuk December 16, 2025

*Read Lawrence Mykytiuk's article "[Did Jesus Exist? Searching for Evidence Beyond the Bible](#)" as it originally appeared in [Biblical Archaeology Review](#), January/February 2015. The article was first republished in Bible History Daily in late 2015.—Ed.*

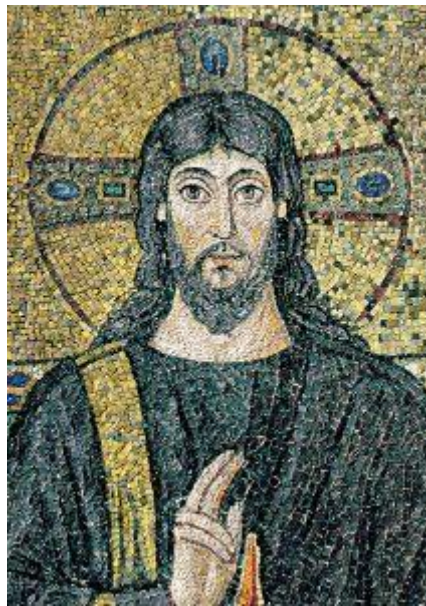
After two decades toiling in the quiet groves of academe, I published an article in **BAR** titled "[Archaeology Confirms 50 Real People in the Bible](#)."<sup>a</sup> The enormous interest this article generated was a complete surprise to me. Nearly 40 websites in six languages, reflecting a wide spectrum of secular and religious orientations, [linked to BAR's supplementary web page](#).<sup>b</sup> Some even posted translations.

I thought about following up with a similar article on people in the New Testament, but I soon realized that this would be so dominated by the question of Jesus' existence that I needed to consider this question separately. This is that article:<sup>1</sup>

Did Jesus of Nazareth, who was called Christ, exist as a real human being, "the man Christ Jesus" according to 1 Timothy 2:5?

The sources normally discussed fall into three main categories: (1) classical (that is, Greco-Roman), (2) Jewish and (3) Christian. But when people ask whether it is possible to prove that Jesus of Nazareth actually existed, as John P. Meier pointed out decades ago, "The implication is that the Biblical evidence for Jesus is biased because it is encased in a theological text written by committed believers."<sup>2</sup> What they really want to know is: Is there extra-Biblical evidence ... for Jesus' existence?"<sup>c</sup>

Therefore, this article will cover classical and Jewish writings almost exclusively.<sup>3</sup>



THE MAN CHRIST JESUS. Did Jesus of Nazareth exist as a real human being? Outside of the New Testament, what is the evidence for his existence? In this article, author Lawrence Mykytiuk examines the extra-Biblical textual and archaeological evidence associated with the man who would become the central figure in Christianity. Here Jesus is depicted in a vibrant sixth-century C.E. mosaic from the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy. Photo: Sant'Apollinare Nuovo Ravenna, Italy/Bridgeman Images.

Tacitus—or more formally, Caius/Gaius (or Publius) Cornelius Tacitus (55/56–c. 118 C.E.)—was a Roman senator, orator and ethnographer, and arguably the best of Roman historians. His name is based on the Latin word *tacitus*, “silent,” from which we get the English word *tacit*. Interestingly, his compact prose uses silence and implications in a masterful way. One argument for the authenticity of the quotation below is that it is written in true Tacitean Latin.<sup>4</sup> But first a short introduction.

Tacitus's last major work, titled *Annals*, written c. 116–117 C.E., includes a biography of Nero. In 64 C.E., during a fire in Rome, Nero was suspected of secretly ordering the burning of a part of town where he wanted to carry out a building project, [so he tried to shift the blame to Christians](#). This was the occasion for Tacitus to mention Christians, whom he despised. This is what he wrote—the following excerpt is translated from Latin by Robert Van Voorst:



Roman historian Tacitus. *Photo: Bibliotheque nationale, Paris, France / Giraudon / Bridgeman Images.*

[N]either human effort nor the emperor's generosity nor the placating of the gods ended the scandalous belief that the fire had been ordered [by Nero]. Therefore, to put down the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits and punished in the most unusual ways those hated for their shameful acts ... whom the crowd called "Chrestians." The founder of this name, Christ [*Christus* in Latin], had been executed in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate ... Suppressed for a time, the deadly superstition erupted again not only in Judea, the origin of this evil, but also in the city [Rome], where all things horrible and shameful from everywhere come together and become popular.<sup>5</sup>

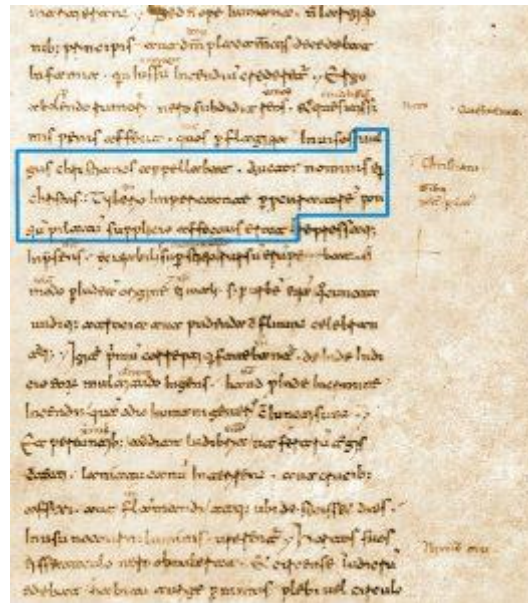


TACIT CONFIRMATION. Roman historian Tacitus's last major work, *Annals*, mentions a "Christus" who was executed by Pontius Pilate and from whom the Christians derived their name. Tacitus's brief reference corroborates historical details of Jesus' death from the New Testament. The pictured volume of Tacitus's works is from the turn of the 17th century. The volume's title page features Plantin Press's printing mark depicting angels, a compass and the motto *Labore et Constantia* ("By Labor and Constancy"). Photo: *Tacitus, Opera Quae Exstant*, trans. by Justus Lipsius (Antwerp, Belgium: Ex officina Plantiniana, apud Joannem Moretum, 1600). Courtesy of the Philadelphia Rare Books & Manuscripts Co. (PRB&M).

Tacitus's terse statement about "Christus" clearly corroborates the New Testament on certain historical details of Jesus' death. Tacitus presents four pieces of accurate knowledge about Jesus: (1) *Christus*, used by Tacitus to refer to Jesus, was one distinctive way by which some referred to him, even though Tacitus mistakenly took it for a personal name rather than an epithet or title; (2) this *Christus* was associated with the beginning of the movement of Christians, whose name originated from his; (3) he was executed by the Roman governor of Judea; and (4) the time of his death was during Pontius Pilate's governorship of Judea, during the reign of Tiberius. (Many New Testament scholars date Jesus' death to c. 29 C.E.; Pilate governed Judea in 26–36 C.E., while Tiberius was emperor 14–37 C.E.<sup>6</sup>)

Tacitus, like classical authors in general, does not reveal the source(s) he used. But this should not detract from our confidence in Tacitus's assertions. Scholars generally disagree about what his sources were. Tacitus was certainly among Rome's best historians—arguably the best of all—at the top of his game as a historian and never given to careless writing.

Earlier in his career, when Tacitus was Proconsul of Asia,<sup>7</sup> he likely supervised trials, questioned people accused of being Christians and judged and punished those whom he found guilty, as his friend Pliny the Younger had done when he too was a provincial governor. Thus Tacitus stood a very good chance of becoming aware of information that he characteristically would have wanted to verify before accepting it as true.<sup>8</sup>



CHRESTIANS OF CHRIST. Book XV of Tacitus's *Annals* is preserved in the 11th–12th-century *Codex Mediceus II*, a collection of medieval manuscripts now housed in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence, Italy, along with other manuscripts and books that belonged to the Medici family. Highlighted above is the Latin text reading “... whom the crowd called ‘Chrestians.’ The founder of this name, Christ, had been executed in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate ...” Photo: *Codex Mediceus 68 II, fol. 38r, the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence, Italy.*

The other strong evidence that speaks directly about Jesus as a real person comes from [Josephus](#), a Jewish priest who grew up as an aristocrat in first-century Palestine and ended up living in Rome, supported by the patronage of three successive emperors. In the early days of the first Jewish Revolt against Rome (66–70 C.E.), Josephus was a commander in Galilee but soon surrendered and became a prisoner of war. He then [prophesied that his conqueror, the Roman commander Vespasian, would become emperor](#), and when this actually happened, Vespasian freed him.

“From then on Josephus lived in Rome under the protection of the Flavians and there composed his historical and apologetic writings” (Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz).<sup>9</sup> He even took the name Flavius, after the family name of



his patron, the emperor Vespasian, and set it before his birth name, becoming, in true Roman style, Flavius Josephus.

Most Jews viewed him as a despicable traitor. It was by command of Vespasian's son Titus that a Roman army in 70 C.E. destroyed Jerusalem and burned the Temple, stealing its contents as spoils of war, which are partly portrayed in the imagery of their gloating triumph on the [Arch of Titus](#) in Rome.<sup>10</sup> After Titus succeeded his father as emperor, Josephus accepted the son's imperial patronage, as he did of [Titus's brother and successor, Domitian](#).

Yet in his own mind, Josephus remained a Jew both in his outlook and in his writings that extol Judaism. At the same time, by aligning himself with Roman emperors who were at that time the worst enemies of the Jewish people, he chose to ignore Jewish popular opinion.

Josephus stood in a unique position as a Jew who was secure in Roman imperial patronage and protection, eager to express pride in his Jewish heritage and yet personally independent of the Jewish community at large. Thus, in introducing Romans to Judaism, he felt free to write historical views for Roman consumption that were strongly at variance with rabbinic views.

In his two great works, *The Jewish War* and *Jewish Antiquities*, both written in Greek for educated people, Josephus tried to appeal to aristocrats in the Roman world, presenting Judaism as a religion to be admired for its moral and philosophical depth. *The Jewish War* doesn't mention Jesus except in some versions in likely later additions by others, but *Jewish Antiquities* does mention Jesus—twice.

The shorter of these two references to Jesus (in Book 20)<sup>11</sup> is incidental to identifying Jesus' brother James,<sup>12</sup> the leader of the church in Jerusalem. In the temporary absence of a Roman governor between Festus's death and governor Albinus's arrival in 62 C.E., the high priest Ananus instigated James's execution. Josephus described it:

Being therefore this kind of person [i.e., a heartless Sadducee], Ananus, thinking that he had a favorable opportunity because Festus had died and Albinus was still on his way, called a meeting [literally, "sanhedrin"] of judges and brought into it the brother of Jesus-who-is-called-Messiah ... James by name, and some others. He made the accusation that they had transgressed the law, and he handed them over to be stoned.<sup>13</sup>



Jewish historian Josephus is pictured in the ninth-century medieval manuscript *Burgerbibliothek Bern Codex* under the Greek caption “Josippos Historiographer.” Photo: Burgerbibliothek Bern Cod. 50, f.2r.

James is otherwise a barely noticed, minor figure in Josephus’s lengthy tome. The sole reason for referring to James at all was that his death resulted in Ananus losing his position as high priest. James (Jacob) was a common Jewish name at this time. Many men named James are mentioned in Josephus’s works, so Josephus needed to specify which one he meant. The common custom of simply giving the father’s name (James, son of Joseph) would not work here, because James’s father’s name was also very common. Therefore Josephus identified this James by reference to his famous brother Jesus. But James’s brother Jesus (Yehoshua) also had a very common name. Josephus mentions at least 12 other men named Jesus.<sup>14</sup> Therefore Josephus specified *which* Jesus he was referring to by adding the phrase “who is called Messiah,” or, since he was writing in Greek, *Christos*.<sup>15</sup> This phrase was necessary to identify clearly first Jesus and, via Jesus, James, the subject of the discussion. This extraneous reference to Jesus would have made no sense if Jesus had not been a real person.

Few scholars have ever doubted the authenticity of this short account. On the contrary, the huge majority accepts it as genuine.<sup>16</sup> The phrase intended to specify *which* Jesus, translated “who is called Christ,” signifies either that he was mentioned earlier in the book or that readers knew him well enough to grasp the reference to him in identifying James. The latter is unlikely. First-century Romans generally had little or no idea who *Christus* was. It is much more likely that he was mentioned earlier in *Jewish Antiquities*. Also, the fact

that the term “Messiah”/“Christ” is not defined here suggests that an earlier passage in *Jewish Antiquities* has already mentioned something of its significance.<sup>17</sup> This phrase is also appropriate for a Jewish historian like Josephus because the reference to Jesus is a noncommittal, neutral statement about what some people called Jesus and not a confession of faith that actually asserts that he was Christ.

This phrase—“who is called Christ”—is very unlikely to have been added by a Christian for two reasons. First, in the New Testament and in the early Church Fathers of the first two centuries C.E., Christians consistently refer to James as “the brother of the Lord” or “of the Savior” and similar terms, not “the brother of Jesus,” presumably because the name Jesus was very common and did not necessarily refer to their Lord. Second, Josephus’s description in *Jewish Antiquities* of how and when James was executed disagrees with Christian tradition, likewise implying a non-Christian author.<sup>18</sup>

This short identification of James by the title that some people used in order to specify his brother gains credibility as an affirmation of Jesus’ existence because the passage is not about Jesus. Rather, his name appears in a functional phrase that is called for by the sense of the passage. *It can only be useful for the identification of James if it is a reference to a real person, namely, “Jesus who is called Christ.”*

This clear reference to Jesus is sometimes overlooked in debates about Josephus’s other, longer reference to Jesus (to be treated next). Quite a few people are aware of the questions and doubts regarding the longer mention of Jesus, but often this other clear, simple reference and its strength as evidence for Jesus’ existence does not receive due attention.

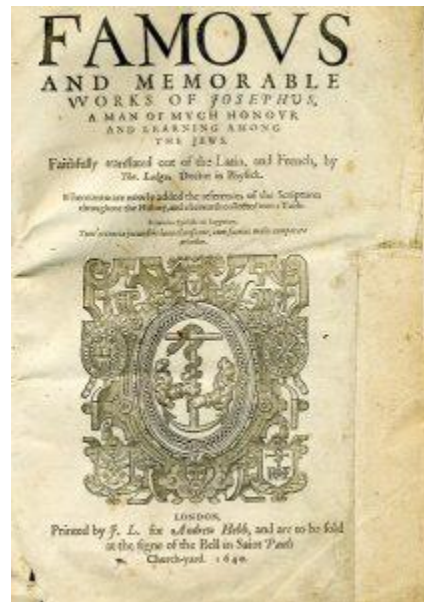
The longer passage in Josephus’s *Jewish Antiquities* (Book 18)<sup>19</sup> that refers to Jesus is known as the *Testimonium Flavianum*.

If it has any value in relation to the question of Jesus’ existence, it counts as *additional* evidence for Jesus’ existence. The *Testimonium Flavianum* reads as follows; the parts that are especially suspicious because they sound Christian are in *italics*:<sup>20</sup>

Around this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, *if indeed one ought to call him a man*.<sup>21</sup> For he was one who did surprising deeds, and a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. *He was the Messiah*. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, had



condemned him to be crucified, those who in the first place came to love him did not give up their affection for him, *for on the third day, he appeared to them restored to life. The prophets of God had prophesied this and countless other marvelous things about him.* And the tribe of Christians, so called after him, have still to this day not died out.<sup>22</sup>



JAMES, BROTHER OF JESUS. In *Jewish Antiquities*, parts of which are included in this mid-17th-century book of translations, Josephus refers to a James, who is described as “the brother of Jesus-who-is-called-Messiah.” Josephus’s mention of Jesus to specify which James was being executed by the high priest Ananus in 62 C.E. affirms the existence of the historical Jesus. *Photo: Josephus, Famous and Memorable Works of Josephus, trans. by Thomas Lodge (London: J. L. for Andrew Hebb, 1640).*

All surviving manuscripts of the *Testimonium Flavianum* that are in Greek, like the original, contain the same version of this passage, with no significant differences.

The main question is: Did Flavius Josephus write this entire report about Jesus and his followers, or did a forger or forgers alter it or possibly insert the whole report?<sup>23</sup> There are three ways to answer this question:<sup>24</sup>

**Alternative 1:** The whole passage is authentic, written by Josephus.

**Alternative 2:** The whole passage is a forgery, inserted into Jewish Antiquities.

**Alternative 3:** It is only partly authentic, containing some material from Josephus, but also some later additions by another hand(s).

Regarding Alternative 1, today almost no scholar accepts the authenticity of the entire standard Greek *Testimonium Flavianum*. In contrast to the obviously Christian statement “He was the Messiah” in the *Testimonium*, Josephus elsewhere “writes as a passionate advocate of Judaism,” says Josephus expert Steve Mason. “Everywhere Josephus praises the excellent constitution of the Jews, codified by Moses, and declares its peerless, comprehensive qualities ... Josephus rejoices over converts to Judaism. In all this, there is not the slightest hint of any belief in Jesus”<sup>25</sup> as seems to be reflected in the *Testimonium*.

The bold affirmation of Jesus as Messiah reads as a resounding Christian confession that echoes St. Peter himself!<sup>26</sup> It cannot be Josephus. Alternative 1 is clearly out.

Regarding Alternative 2—the whole *Testimonium Flavianum* is a forgery—this is very unlikely. What is said, and the expressions in Greek that are used to say it, despite a few words that don’t seem characteristic of Josephus, generally fit much better with Josephus’s writings than with Christian writings.<sup>27</sup> It is hypothetically possible that a forger could have learned to imitate Josephus’s style or that a reviser adjusted the passage to that style, but such a deep level of attention, based on an extensive, detailed reading of Josephus’s works and such a meticulous adoption of his vocabulary and style, goes far beyond what a forger or a reviser would need to do.

Even more important, the short passage (treated above) that mentions Jesus in order to identify James appears in a later section of the book (Book 20) and implies that Jesus was mentioned previously.

The best-informed among the Romans understood *Christus* to be nothing more than a man’s personal name, on the level of Publius and Marcus. First-century Romans generally had no idea that calling someone “Christus” was an exalted reference, implying belief that he was the chosen one, God’s anointed. The *Testimonium*, in Book 18, appropriately found in the section that deals with Pilate’s time as governor of Judea,<sup>28</sup> is apparently one of Josephus’s characteristic digressions, this time occasioned by mention of Pilate. It provides background for Josephus’s only other written mention of Jesus (in Book 20), and it connects the name Jesus with his Christian followers. The short reference to Jesus in the later book depends on the longer one in the earlier (Book 18). If the longer one is not genuine, this passage lacks its essential background. Alternative 2 should be rejected.



THE TESTIMONY OF JOSEPHUS. This 15th-century manuscript, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, contains the portion of Josephus's *Testimonium Flavianum* that refers to Jesus (highlighted in blue). The first sentence of the manuscript, highlighted in green, reads, from the Greek, "Around this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man." The majority of scholars believe this passage of the *Testimonium* is based on the original writings of Josephus but contains later additions, likely made by Christian scribes. *Photo: Codex Parisinus gr. 2075, 45v. Courtesy Bibliothèque Nationale de France.*

Alternative 3—that the *Testimonium Flavianum* is based on an original report by Josephus<sup>29</sup> that has been modified by others, probably Christian scribes, seems most likely. After extracting what appear to be Christian additions, the remaining text appears to be pure Josephus. As a Romanized Jew, Josephus would not have presented these beliefs as his own. Interestingly, in three openly Christian, non-Greek versions of the *Testimonium Flavianum* analyzed by Steve Mason, variations indicate changes were made by others besides Josephus.<sup>30</sup> The Latin version says Jesus "was *believed to be* the Messiah." The Syriac version is best translated, "He was thought to be the Messiah." And the Arabic version with open coyness suggests, "He was perhaps the Messiah concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders." Alternative 3 has the support of the overwhelming majority of scholars.

We can learn quite a bit about Jesus from Tacitus and Josephus, two famous historians who were not Christian. Almost all the following statements about Jesus, which are asserted in the New Testament, are corroborated or confirmed by the relevant passages in Tacitus and Josephus. These independent historical sources—one a non-Christian Roman and the other Jewish—confirm what we are told in the Gospels:<sup>31</sup>

1. **He existed as a man.** The historian Josephus grew up in a priestly family in first-century Palestine and wrote only decades after Jesus' death. Jesus' known associates, such as Jesus' brother James, were his contemporaries. The historical and cultural context was second nature to Josephus. "If any Jewish writer were ever in a position to know about the non-existence of Jesus, it would have been Josephus. His implicit affirmation of the existence of Jesus has been, and still is, the most significant obstacle for those who argue that the extra-Biblical evidence is not probative on this point," Robert Van Voorst observes.<sup>32</sup> And Tacitus was careful enough not to report real executions of nonexistent people.
2. **His personal name was Jesus**, as Josephus informs us.
3. **He was called *Christos* in Greek**, which is a translation of the Hebrew word *Messiah*, both of which mean "anointed" or "(the) anointed one," as Josephus states and Tacitus implies, unaware, by reporting, as Romans thought, that his name was *Christus*.
4. **He had a brother named James (Jacob)**, as Josephus reports.
5. **He won over both Jews and "Greeks"** (i.e., Gentiles of Hellenistic culture), according to Josephus, although it is anachronistic to say that they were "many" at the end of his life. Large growth in the number of Jesus' actual followers came only after his death.
6. **Jewish leaders of the day expressed unfavorable opinions about him**, at least according to some versions of the *Testimonium Flavianum*.
7. **Pilate rendered the decision that he should be executed**, as both Tacitus and Josephus state.
8. **His execution was specifically by crucifixion**, according to Josephus.
9. **He was executed during Pontius Pilate's governorship over Judea** (26–36 C.E.), as Josephus implies and Tacitus states, adding that it was during Tiberius's reign.

Some of Jesus' followers did not abandon their personal loyalty to him even after his crucifixion but submitted to his teaching. They believed that Jesus later appeared to them alive in accordance with prophecies, most likely those found in the Hebrew Bible. A well-attested link between Jesus and Christians is that Christ, as a term used to identify Jesus, became the basis of the term used to identify his followers: Christians. The Christian movement began in Judea, according to Tacitus. Josephus observes that it continued during the first century. Tacitus deplores the fact that during the second century it had spread as far as Rome.

As far as we know, no ancient person ever seriously argued that Jesus did not exist.<sup>33</sup> Referring to the first several centuries C.E., even a scholar as cautious and thorough as Robert Van Voorst freely observes, "... [N]o pagans and Jews who opposed Christianity denied Jesus' historicity or even questioned it."<sup>34</sup>

Nond denial of Jesus' existence is particularly notable in rabbinic writings of those first several centuries C.E.: "... [I]f anyone in the ancient world had a reason to dislike the Christian faith, it was the rabbis. To argue successfully that Jesus never existed but was a creation of early Christians would have been the most effective polemic against Christianity ... [Yet] all Jewish sources treated Jesus as a fully historical person ... [T]he rabbis ... used the real events of Jesus' life against him" (Van Voorst).<sup>35</sup>

Thus his birth, ministry and death occasioned claims that his birth was illegitimate and that he performed miracles by evil magic, encouraged apostasy and was justly executed for his own sins. But they do not deny his existence.<sup>36</sup>

## Notes

a. Lawrence Mykytiuk, "[Archaeology Confirms 50 Real People in the Bible](#)," [BAR](#), March/April 2014.

b. See [biblicalarchaeology.org/50](http://biblicalarchaeology.org/50)

c. John P. Meier, "[The Testimonium](#)," [Bible Review](#), June 1991.

d. See André Lemaire, "[Burial Box of James the Brother of Jesus](#)," [BAR](#), November/December 2002; Hershel Shanks, "[Brother of Jesus' Inscription Is Authentic!](#)" [BAR](#), July/August 2012.

1. I gratefully dedicate this article to my brother, Thomas S. Mykytiuk, to the memory of his wife, Nancy E. Mykytiuk, and to their growing tribe of descendants. I wish to thank Dr. Stuart D. Robertson of Purdue University, a Josephus scholar who studied under the great Louis H. Feldman, for kindly offering his comments on an early draft of this article. As the sole author, I alone am responsible for all of this article's errors and shortcomings.

The previous **BAR** article is supplemented by two more persons, officials of Nebuchadnezzar II, mentioned in the "[Queries and Comments](#)" section, [BAR](#), July/August 2014, bringing the actual total to 52. That previous article is based



on my own research, because few other researchers had worked toward the twin goals I sought: first, developing the necessary methodology, and second, applying that methodology comprehensively to archaeological materials that relate to the Hebrew Bible. In contrast, this article treats an area that has already been thoroughly researched, so I have gleaned material from the best results previously obtained (may the reader pardon the many quotations).

Another contrast is that the challenge in the research that led to the previous article was to determine whether the inscriptions (down to 400 B.C.E.) actually referred to the Biblical figure. In the present article, most of the documents very clearly refer to the Jesus of the New Testament. Only in relatively few instances, such as some rabbinic texts, is the reference very unclear. The challenge in this article has been to evaluate the relative strength of the documents about Jesus as evidence, while keeping in mind whether they are independent of the New Testament.

2. Of course, the New Testament is actually a small library of texts, as is the Hebrew Bible.

3. Because Meier only covered writings of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, his article stays within the first century. This article covers writings that originated in the first several centuries C.E. These non-Christian sources deserve to be welcomed and examined by anyone interested in the historical aspect of Scripture. At the same time, Christian sources found in the New Testament and outside of it have great value as historical evidence and are not to be discounted or dismissed.

The Gospels, for example, are loosely parallel to writings by members of a Prime Minister's or President's cabinet, in that they are valuable for the firsthand information they provide from inner circles (F. F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament*, Knowing Christianity [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1974], pp. 14–15). While allowance must be made for human limitations (at least lack of omniscience) and bias (such as loyalty to a particular person or deity), no good historian would completely discard them.

An example that is more to the point is Bart D. Ehrman's strong affirmation of Jesus' existence in his *Did Jesus Exist?* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), pp. 142–174. It is based on New Testament data and is noteworthy for its down-to-earth perception. Ehrman bases his conclusion that Jesus existed on two facts: first, that the apostle Paul was personally acquainted with Jesus' brother James and with the apostle Peter; and second, that, contrary to Jewish

messianic expectation of the day, Jesus was crucified (*Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 173).

In the last analysis, all evidence from all sources must be considered. Both Biblical and non-Biblical sources “are in principle of equal value in the study of Jesus” (Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998], p. 23). An excellent, up-to-date resource on both Christian and non-Christian sources is Craig A. Evans, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

[4.](#) “As Norma Miller delightfully remarks, ‘The well-intentioned pagan glossers of ancient texts do not normally express themselves in Tacitean Latin,’ and the same could be said of Christian interpolators” (Norma P. Miller, *Tacitus: Annals XV* [London: Macmillan, 1971], p. xxviii, quoted in Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000], p. 43).

[5.](#) *Annals XV.44*, as translated in Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside*, pp. 42–43. Instead of the better-documented reading, “Chrestians,” the word “Christians” appears in a more traditional translation by Alfred J. Church and William J. Brodribb, *Annals of Tacitus* (London: Macmillan, 1882), pp. 304–305.

[6.](#) Along with these corroborations, Tacitus’s statement also contains difficulties that might cause concern. Three that I consider the most important are treated in this note. Although debates will continue, proper use of historical background offers reasonable, tenable solutions that we may hold with confidence while remaining open to new evidence and new interpretations if they are better. Every approach has difficulties to explain. I prefer those that come with this article’s approach, because I consider them smaller and more easily resolved than the problems of other approaches.

First, it is common for scholars to observe that Pontius Pilate’s official title when he governed Judaea (26/27–36 C.E.) was not *procurator*, as in the quotation from Tacitus above, but *praefectus* (in Latin, literally, “placed in charge”; in English, *prefect*), as stated on the “Pilate stone” discovered in 1961. This stone was lying in the ruins of the theater in the ancient city of Caesarea Maritima, on Israel’s northern seacoast. The stone had been trimmed down to be re-used twice, so the first part of the title is broken off, but the title is not in doubt. With square brackets marking missing letters that scholars have filled in, two of its four lines read “[Po]ntius Pilate . . . [Pref]ect of Juda[ea]”:

line 2 [...PO]NTIUS PILATUS  
line 3 [...PRAEF]ECTUS IUDA[EA]E

The inscription could potentially be dated to any time in Pilate's career, but a date between 31 and 36 C.E. seems most likely. See Clayton Miles Lehmann and Kenneth G. Holum, *The Greek and Latin Inscriptions of Caesarea Maritima*, Joint Expedition to Caesarea Excavation Reports V (Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2000), pp. 67–70, no. 43, p. 249 Pl. XXVI.

The family name *Pontius* was common in some parts of Italy during that era, but the name *Pilatus* was “extremely rare” (A. N. Sherwin-White, “Pilate, Pontius,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 3 [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986], p. 867). Because of the rarity of the name *Pilatus* and because only one *Pontius Pilatus* was ever the Roman governor of Judea, this identification should be regarded as completely certain.

It is possible that “procurator” in the quotation above is a simple error, but the historical background reveals that it is not so much an error as it is an anachronism—something placed out of its proper time, whether intentionally or by accident. As emperor until 14 C.E., Augustus gave governors of western and southern Judea the title *praefectus*. But later, Claudius (r. 41–54 C.E.) began conferring the title *procurator pro legato*, “procurator acting as legate” on new provincial governors. A *procurator*, literally, “caretaker,” was a steward who managed financial affairs on behalf of the owner. Roman governmental procurators managed taxes and estates on behalf of the emperor and had administrative duties. The English verb *to procure* is derived from the same root.

From then on, the title *procurator* replaced *praefectus* in many Roman provinces, including Judea. “So the early governors of western and southern Judea, after it became a Roman province in A.D. 6, were officially entitled *praefecti*. Later writers, however, usually referred to them anachronistically as *procurators* or the Greek equivalent ...” (A. N. Sherwin-White, “Procurator,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, p. 979.)

Writing in 116 or 117 C.E., Tacitus, who was above all a careful writer, might have intentionally chosen to use the then-current title *procurator* in keeping with the anachronistic way of speaking that was common in his day. Even today, we accept titles used anachronistically. One might read comparable statements about “U.S. Secretaries of Defense from Henry Stimson during World War II to Chuck Hagel,” even though Stimson's actual title was

Secretary of War, and the current title is Secretary of Defense. Readers who are unfamiliar with Stimson's title would nevertheless understand which position he held in the government.

Whether *procurator* was used intentionally or not, in effect this anachronistic term helped readers quickly understand Pilate's official position and avoided confusing people who were not familiar with the older title.

The second difficulty is that Tacitus's word for "Christians" is spelled two different ways in existing Latin manuscripts of *Annals*: both *Christianoi* and *Chrestiano*i. The name *Chrestus*, meaning "good, kind, useful, beneficent," was commonly given to slaves who served Roman masters. In spoken conversation, people in Rome could easily have mistakenly heard the Latinized foreign word *Christus* as the familiar name *Chrestus*. *Chrestiano*i, "good, kind, useful ones," is found in the oldest surviving manuscript of this passage in Tacitus.

[T]he original hand of the oldest surviving manuscript, the Second Medicean (eleventh century), which is almost certainly the source of all other surviving manuscripts, reads *Chrestiano*i, "Chrestians." A marginal gloss "corrects" it to *Christianoi*. *Chrestiano*i is to be preferred as the earliest and most difficult reading and is adopted by the three current critical editions and the recent scholarship utilizing them. It also makes better sense in context. Tacitus is correcting, in a way typical of his style of economy, the misunderstanding of the "crowd" (*vulgus*) by stating that the founder of this name (*auctor nominis eius*) is *Christus*, not the name implicitly given by the crowd, *Chrestus*. Tacitus could have written *auctor superstitionis*, "the founder of this superstition," or something similar, but he calls attention by his somewhat unusual phrase to the *nomen* [name] of the movement in order to link it directly—and correctly—to the name of Christ (Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside*, pp. 43–44. See also John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*, Anchor Bible Reference Library [New York: Doubleday, 1991], p. 100, note 7.).

It is very common for ancient classical writings to be represented by manuscripts that were copied many centuries later. For example, the earliest manuscript of the *Odyssey* is from the 900s C.E., yet it is traditionally ascribed to the blind Greek poet Homer, who is dated variously from about the 800s to the 500s B.C.E., roughly 1,400 to 1,700 years earlier. Similarly, it is not unusual for the earliest surviving manuscripts of various works of the Greek philosopher Plato to date from over 1,000 years after he wrote.

For a technical, critical discussion of *Christus* and *Chrestus* in English, see Robert Renahan, "Christus or Chrestus in Tacitus?" *Past and Present* 23 (1968), pp. 368–370.

The third difficulty is more apparent than real: Why did it take about 85 years for a classical author such as Tacitus to write about Jesus, whose crucifixion occurred c. 29 C.E.? (The A.D. system, devised by the Christian Scythian monk Dionysius Exiguus ["Dennis the Small"] in the 525 C.E. and used in our present-day calendar, was not perfectly set on the exact year of Jesus' birth, though it was close. As a result, Jesus was born within the years we now refer to as 6 to 4 B.C.E. That would put the beginning of his ministry, around age 30 (Luke 3:23), at c. 25 C.E. In the widely held view that Jesus' ministry lasted 3.5 years before his death, a reasonable date for the crucifixion is c. 29 C.E.)

The following two observations made by F. F. Bruce are relevant to works by Tacitus and by several other classical writers who mention Jesus:

1. Surprisingly few classical writings, comparatively speaking, survive from the period of about the first 50 years of the Christian church (c. 29 to 80 C.E.). (Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins*, p. 17.)
2. Roman civilization paid almost no attention to obscure religious leaders in faraway places, such as Jesus in Judea—just as today's Western nations pay almost no attention to religious leaders in remote parts of the world, unless the national interest is involved. Rome became concerned only when Christians grew numerous. (Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins*, pp. 17–18. For thorough discussion, see Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside*, pp. 68–71.)

A time factor that affects Tacitus in particular is:

3. In the *Annals*, the reference to Jesus appears only in connection with the cruel treatment of Christians in Rome by Nero, as part of a biography of Nero (d. 68 C.E.). By happenstance, Tacitus did not get around to composing Nero's biography until the last group of narratives he wrote before he died. A writer for most of his life, Tacitus began with works on oratory, ethnography of German tribes and other subjects. His book *Histories*, written c. 100–110, which covers the reigns of later Roman emperors after Nero, was actually written before his book *Annals*, which covers the earlier reigns of Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero. Thus Tacitus wrote his biography of Nero at the end of his career.



7. *Asia* was the name of a Roman province in what is now western Turkey (Asia Minor).

8. Perhaps he compared it to Roman records, whether in general governmental archives or in records concerning various religions. I have read one analysis by an author who arbitrarily assumes that Tacitus got his information only from Christians—no other source. Then, on the sole basis of the author's own assumption, the analysis completely dismisses Tacitus's clear historical statement about "*Christus*." This evaluation is based on opinion, not evidence. It also undervalues Tacitus's very careful writing and his discernment as a historian. He likely had access to some archives through his status, either as Proconsul of Asia, as a senator—or, as is often overlooked, from his connections as a high-ranking priest of Roman religion. In 88 C.E., he became "a member of the *Quindecimviri Sacris Faciundis* ["The Board of Fifteen for Performing Sacrifices"], the priestly organization charged, among other things, with ... supervising the practice of officially tolerated foreign cults in the city ... [and facing] the growing necessity to distinguish illicit Christianity from licit Judaism" (Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside*, p. 52), or, given Jewish resistance to oppressive measures taken by Rome, at least to keep a close watch on developments within Judaism. Indeed, "a Roman archive ... is particularly suggested by the note of the temporary suppression of the superstition, which indicates an official perspective" (Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, p. 83). Membership in this priestly regulatory group very likely gave Tacitus access to at least some of the accurate knowledge he possessed about *Christus*. With characteristic brevity, he reported the facts as he understood them, quickly dismissing the despised, executed *Christus* from the *Annals* (see Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, p. 90).

Tacitus himself tells us ... that in 88 [C.E.] both in his capacity as priest of the college of *quindecimviri sacris faciundis* and as a praetor he had been present at and had paid close attention to the *ludi saeculares* ["secular games"] celebrated by Domitian in that year... [*Annals*, XI.11, 3–4]. It rather sounds as if he took his religious office seriously ...

Tacitus presents himself as a man concerned to preserve traditional Roman religious practice, convinced that when religious matters are allowed to slide or are completely disregarded, the gods will vent their anger on the Roman people to correct their error. What on his view angers the gods is not so much failure to observe the niceties of ritual practice, as disdain for the moral order that the gods uphold" (Matthew W. Dickie, "Magic in the Roman Historians," in Richard Lindsay Gordon and Francisco Marco Simón, eds., *Magical Practice in the Latin West: Papers from the International Conference Held at the*

*University of Zaragoza, 30 Sept. – 1st Oct. 2005, Religions in the Greco-Roman World*, vol. 168 [Leiden: Brill, 2010], pp. 82, 83).

Tacitus was in his twenties in 79 C.E., when an eruption of Mt. Vesuvius annihilated the city of Pompeii. One can reasonably suppose how he might have interpreted this disaster in relation to the Roman gods.

9. Quoted from Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, p. 64.

10. Titus's troops captured and treated as war booty the sacred menorah that had stood in the holy place inside the Temple. See articles on the menorah as depicted on the Arch of Titus, in Yeshiva University's Arch of Titus Digital Restoration Project, etc., at [yeshiva.academia.edu/StevenFine/Menorah-Arch-of-Titus-Digital-Restoration-Project](http://yeshiva.academia.edu/StevenFine/Menorah-Arch-of-Titus-Digital-Restoration-Project).

11. *Jewish Antiquities*, XX.200 (or, in Whiston's translation of *Jewish Antiquities*, XX.9.1).

12. James's name was actually Jacob. Odd as it may seem, the English name *James* is ultimately derived from the Hebrew name *Jacob*.

13. *Jewish Antiquities*, XX.9.1 in Whiston's translation (§200 in scholarly editions), as translated by Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, p. 57. Meier's original passage includes the phrases in square brackets [ ]. The omitted words indicated by the ellipsis (...) are in Greek, to let scholars know what words are translated into English.

14. Winter asserts that Josephus mentions about twelve others named Jesus. Feldman puts that number at 21. See Paul Winter, "Excursus II: Josephus on Jesus and James: *Ant.* xviii 3, 3 (63–64) and xx 9,1 (200–203)," in Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, 3 vols., rev. and ed. by Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, Matthew Black and Martin Goodman (Edinburgh: Clark, 1973–1987), vol. 1, p. 431; Louis H. Feldman, "Introduction," in Louis H. Feldman and Gohei Hata, eds., *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1987), p. 56.

15. See Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, pp. 57–58. *Messiah*, the Hebrew term for "anointed (one)," came through Greek translation (*Christos*) into English as *Christ*.

16. See Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, p. 59, note 12; pp. 72–73, note 12.

[17.](#) Richard T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus*, The Jesus Library (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986), p. 26.

[18.](#) Josephus says James was executed by stoning before the Jewish War began, but Christian tradition says he was executed during the Jewish War by being thrown from a height of the Temple, then, after an attempt to stone him was prevented, finally being clubbed to death. See Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, p. 58.

[19.](#) XVIII.63–64 (in Whiston’s translation: XVIII.3.3).

[20.](#) It was modern scholar John P. Meier who put these passages in italics.

[21.](#) Christians believe that Jesus was fully human, but also fully Divine, having two natures in one person. To refer to him as “a wise man,” as the earlier part of the sentence does, would seem incomplete to a Christian. This clause seems intended to lead toward the two boldly Christian statements that come later.

[22.](#) This straightforward translation from Greek, in which I have *italicized* three phrases, is by Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 65–66.

In his *Bible Review* article (Meier, “[The Testimonium](#),” [Bible Review](#), June 1991, p. 23), John P. Meier subtracts these three apparently Christian portions from the *Testimonium*. What remains is a very plausible suggestion, possibly the authentic, smoothly flowing report written by Flavius Josephus—or very close to it. Here is the remainder:

Around this time there lived Jesus, a wise man. For he was one who did surprising deeds, and a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who in the first place came to love him did not give up their affection for him. And the tribe of Christians, so called after him, have still to this day not died out (Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 65–66, after deleting the apparent Christian additions as Meier would).

[23.](#) Regarding differing religious convictions of readers that have generated disagreements about this passage at least since medieval times, see Alice Whealey, *Josephus on Jesus: The Testimonium Flavianum Controversy from Late Antiquity to Modern Times*, Studies in Biblical Literature, vol. 36 (New

York: Peter Lang, 2003). Whealey's observations in her conclusion, pp. 203–207, may be summarized as follows:

In the High Middle Ages (c. 1050–1350), Jewish scholars claimed it was a Christian forgery that was inserted into Josephus's text, and Christians simply claimed it was entirely authentic. The problem was that with few exceptions, both sides argued from *a priori* assumptions with no critical examination of evidence. In the late 1500s and the 1600s, some Protestant scholars made the public charge of forgery. By the mid-1700s, based on textual evidence, scholarly opinion had rejected the authenticity of the *Testimonium Flavianum* and the controversy largely ended for over two centuries.

Twentieth-century scholars, however, revived the controversy on the basis of “new” variations of the text and whole works from ancient times that had been overlooked. Instead of the generally Protestant character of the earlier controversy, the controversy that began in the twentieth century is “more academic and less sectarian ... marked by the presence of Jewish scholars for the first time as prominent participants on both sides of the question, and in general the attitudes of Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, and secular scholars towards the text have drawn closer together” (p. 206).

[24.](#) Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, p. 65–69. Meier, “[The Testimonium](#),” [Bible Review, June 1991](#), gives the third answer.

[25.](#) Steve Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), p. 229.

[26.](#) Matthew 16:16; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20.

[27.](#) According to Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 66–67, unless otherwise noted, these phrases that are characteristic of Josephus include: 1) Calling Jesus “a wise man” and calling his miracles “surprising deeds”; 2) Use of one of Josephus's favorite phrases, “accept the truth gladly,” that in the “gladly” part includes the Greek word for “pleasure” which for Christian writers of this era, as a rule, had a bad connotation; 3) The reference to attracting “many of the Greeks” (meaning Hellenistic Gentiles), which fits better with Rome in Josephus's time than with the references to Gentiles in the Gospels, which are few (such as John 12:20–22). On the style being that of Josephus, see also Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside*, pp. 89–91; 4) “The execution of Jesus by Pilate on the denunciation of the Jewish authorities shows acquaintance with legal conditions in Judaea and contradicts the tendency of the Christian reports of the trial of Jesus, which incriminate the Jews but play down Pilate's

responsibility” (Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, p. 67); 5) Calling Christians a “tribe” tends to show a Jewish perspective.

[28.](#) On whether the *Testimonium Flavianum* interrupts the structure of its literary context, see Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 67–68, under “The interpolation hypothesis.” They describe E. Norden’s analysis (in German) of the context in *Jewish Antiquities*. Also see France, *Evidence for Jesus*, pp. 27–28, which mentions that Josephus’s typical sequencing includes digressions. Josephus’s key vocabulary regarding revolts is absent from the section on Jesus, perhaps removed by a Christian copyist who refused to perpetuate Josephus’s portrayal of Jesus as a real or potential rebel political leader.

[29.](#) Various scholars have suggested that Josephus’s original text took a hostile view of Jesus, but others, that it took a neutral to slightly positive view of him. See Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 68–71 (hostile views) and pp. 71–74 (neutral to slightly positive views).

[30.](#) Josephus scholar Steve Mason observes, “Long after Eusebius, in fact, the text of the *testimonium* remained fluid. Jerome (342–420), the great scholar who translated the Bible and some of Eusebius into Latin, gives a version that agrees closely with standard text, except that the crucial phrase says of Jesus, ‘He was *believed to be* the Messiah’” (Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament*, p. 230, italics his. A decades-long, simmering debate continues about whether Jerome’s translation accurately represents what Josephus wrote.).

Besides Jerome’s Latin version, other examples of variation in manuscripts that are mentioned by Mason include an Arabic rendering and a version in Syriac. The Syriac language developed from Aramaic and is the (or an) official language of some branches of Orthodox Christianity.

A passage in a tenth-century Arabic Christian manuscript written by a man named Agapius appears to be a version of the *Testimonium Flavianum*. Shlomo Pines gives the following translation from the Arabic:

Similarly Josephus [Yūsīfūs] the Hebrew. For he says that in the treatises that he has written on the governance [?] of the Jews: ‘At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. His conduct was good, and [he] was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They



reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive; accordingly, he was perhaps the Messiah concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.

This is what is said by Josephus and his companions of our Lord the Messiah, may he be glorified (Shlomo Pines, *An Arabic Version of the Testimonium Flavianum and Its Implications* [Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1971], pp. 8–10).

Feldman thinks that Agapius mixed in source material from writers besides Josephus and provided “a paraphrase, rather than a translation” (Louis H. Feldman, *Josephus and Modern Scholarship, 1937–1980* [New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1984], p. 701). John P. Meier tends not to attribute much significance to Agapius’s description of the *Testimonium Flavianum*; see Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, pp. 78–79, note 37.

Of the three apparently Christian portions that are italicized in the translation of the Greek text above, the first is missing, and the other two are phrased as neutral statements (“they reported” he was alive, “he was perhaps” the Messiah), rather than as affirmations of Christian faith, such as, “He was” the Messiah, “He appeared” alive again.

Mason also refers to Pines’s translation of a version in Syriac found in the writings of Michael, the Patriarch of Antioch:

The writer Josephus also says in his work on the institutions of the Jews: In these times there was a wise man named Jesus, if it is fitting for us to call him a man. For he was a worker of glorious deeds and a teacher of truth. Many from among the Jews and the nations became his disciples. He was thought to be the Messiah. But not according to the testimony of the principal [men] of [our] nation. Because of this, Pilate condemned him to the cross, and he died. For those who had loved him did not cease to love him. He appeared to them alive after three days. For the prophets of God had spoken with regard to him of such marvelous [as these]. And the people of the Christians, named after him, has not disappeared till [this] day” (Pines, *Arabic Version*, pp. 26–27).

Pines adds a note about the Syriac text of the sentence “He was thought to be the Messiah”: “This sentence may also be translated *Perhaps he was the Messiah*.”

These Latin, Arabic and Syriac versions most likely represent genuine, alternative textual traditions. “The Christian dignitaries who innocently report

these versions as if they came from Josephus had no motive, it seems, to weaken their testimony to Jesus” (Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament*, p. 231). Actually, Christians tended to make references to Jesus more glorious. Nor is there any indication that anti-Christian scribes reduced the references to Jesus from glorious to mundane, which would likely have been accompanied by disparagement. “It seems probable, therefore, that the versions of Josephus’s statement given by Jerome, Agapius and Michael reflect alternative textual traditions of Josephus which did not contain” the bold Christian confessions that appear in the standard Greek version (Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament*, p. 231). They contain variations that exhibit a degree of the fluidity that Mason emphasizes (Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament*, pp. 230–231). But these versions are not so different that they are unrecognizable as different versions of the *Testimonium Flavianum*. They use several similar phrases and refer to the same events, presenting phrases and events in a closely similar order, with few exceptions. Thus, along with enough agreement among the standard Greek text and the non-Greek versions to reveal a noteworthy degree of stability, their differences clearly exhibit the work of other hands after Josephus. (It is by this stability that we may recognize many lengthy additions and disagreements with the manuscript texts of the *Testimonium Flavianum* that are found in a passage sometimes called the *Testimonium Slavianum* that was apparently inserted into the Old Russian translation, called the Slavonic version, of Josephus’s other major work, *The Jewish War*.)

In the process of finding the similarities of phrases and references in extant manuscripts, one can come to recognize that the standard Greek form of the *Testimonium Flavianum* is simply one textual tradition among several. On balance, the Greek version is not necessarily supreme over all other textual traditions (Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament*, pp. 234–236). Despite a degree of stability in the text, the fluidity that is evident in various textual traditions is plain evidence that what Josephus wrote was later altered. When viewed from the standpoint of the Latin, Arabic and Syriac versions, the Greek text looks deliberately altered to make Josephus seem to claim that Jesus was the Messiah, possibly by omitting words that indicated that people *called* him *Christos* or thought, said, reported or believed that he was. Also, although of course the evidence is the crucial factor, alternative 3 also happens to have the support of the overwhelming majority of scholars, far more than any other view.

[31](#). Almost all of the following points are listed and elaborated in Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside*, pp. 99–102.

[32.](#) Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside*, p. 99.

[33.](#) “The non-Christian testimonies to Jesus ... show that contemporaries in the first and second century saw no reason to doubt Jesus’ existence” (Theissen and Merz, *Historical Jesus*, p. 63).

[34.](#) Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside*, p. 15. His footnote attached to this sentence states, with reference to Justin Martyr:

The only *possible* attempt at this argument known to me is in Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, written in the middle of the second century. At the end of chapter 8, Trypho, Justin’s Jewish interlocutor, states, “But [the] Christ—if indeed he has been born and exists anywhere—is unknown, and does not even know himself, and has no power until Elijah comes to anoint him and make him known to all. Accepting a groundless report, you have invented a Christ for yourselves, and for his sake you are unknowingly perishing.” This may be a faint statement of a nonexistence hypothesis, but it is not developed or even mentioned again in the rest of the *Dialogue*, in which Trypho assumes the existence of Jesus (Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside*, p. 15, note 35).

Even in this statement, in which Trypho tries to imply that an existing report of Jesus as the Christ is erroneous, his reason is not necessarily that Jesus did not exist. Rather, he might well have wanted to plant the doubt that—although Jesus existed, as Trypho consistently assumes throughout the rest of the dialogue—the “report” that Jesus *was the Christ* was “groundless,” and that later on, someone else might arise who would prove to be the true Christ. Trypho was attempting to raise hypothetical doubt without here stating any actual grounds for doubt. These suggestions, more likely taunts, from Trypho, which he immediately abandons, cannot be regarded as an argument, let alone a serious argument. They are simply an unsupported doubt, apparently regarding Jesus’ being the Messiah.

[35.](#) Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside*, pp. 133–134.

[36.](#) The chief difficulty in working with rabbinic writings that might be about Jesus is that

it is not always clear if Jesus (variously called Yeshua or Yeshu, with or without the further designation ha-Nošri [meaning “the Nazarene”]) is in fact the person to whom reference is being made, especially when certain epithets are employed (e.g. Balaam, Ben Pandira, Ben Stada, etc. ... Another serious

problem in making use of these traditions is that it is likely that none of it is independent of Christian sources (Craig A. Evans, "Jesus in Non-Christian Sources," in Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans, eds., *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research*, 2nd impression, New Testament Tools and Studies, vol. 6 (Boston: Brill, 1998, 1994), pp. 443–444).

Thus Van Voorst finds that "most passages alleged to speak about him in code do not in fact do so, or are so late as to have no value" (Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside*, p. 129).

From among the numerous rabbinic traditions, many of which seem puzzling in their potential references to Jesus, a fairly clear example is as follows:

And it is tradition: On the eve of the Passover they hanged Yeshu ha-Noşri. And the herald went forth before him for forty days, "Yeshu ha-Noşri is to be stoned, because he has practiced magic and enticed and led Israel astray. Anyone who knows anything in his favor, let him come and speak concerning him." And they found nothing in his favor. And they hanged him on the eve of the Passover. Ulla says, "Would it be supposed that Yeshu ha-Noşri was one for whom anything in his favor might be said? Was he not a deceiver? And the Merciful has said, 'Thou shalt not spare, neither shalt thou conceal him' [Deuteronomy 13:8]. But it was different with Yeshu ha-Noşri, for he was near to the kingdom" (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 43a; compare *Sanhedrin* 67a).

The following paragraph summarizes Craig A. Evans's comments on the above quotation from the Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 43a:

According to John 18:28 and 19:14, Jesus' execution occurred during Passover. The phrase "near to the kingdom" might refer to the Christian tradition that Jesus was a descendant of King David (Matthew 1:1; Mark 10:47, 48), or it could refer to Jesus' proclamation that the kingdom of God was at hand (Mark 1:15). Deuteronomy 13:1–11 prescribes death by stoning for leading other Israelites astray to serve other gods, giving a sign or wonder, and Deuteronomy 21:21–22 requires that "when a man has committed a sin worthy of death, and he is put to death, you shall hang him on a tree" (compare the Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 6:4, "All who have been stoned must be hanged"). When Judea came under Roman rule, which instituted crucifixion as a legal punishment, apart from the question of whether it was just or unjust, Jews roughly equated it with hanging on a tree. (Evans, "Jesus in Non-Christian Sources," p. 448)

The passage above simultaneously implies the rabbis' view that Jesus really existed and encapsulates the rabbis' uniformly negative view of his miracles as magic and his teachings as deceit (Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside*, p. 120).

[37.](#) *Passing of Peregrinus*, §11, as translated in Evans, "Jesus in Non-Christian Sources," p. 462.

[38.](#) This paragraph is a separate quotation from *Passing of Peregrinus*, §11, again as translated in Evans, "Jesus in Non-Christian Sources," p. 462.

[39.](#) On Celsus: in c. 176 C.E., Celsus, a Platonist philosopher in Alexandria, wrote *The True Word* (this title is also translated as *The True Doctrine*, or *The True Discourse*, or *The True Account*, etc.) to lodge his severe criticisms of Judaism and Christianity. Although that work has not survived, it is quoted and paraphrased in Origen's reply in defense of Christianity, *Against Celsus* (c. 248 C.E.). Prominent among his many accusations to which Origen replies is as follows:

Next he makes the charge of the savior that it was by magic that he was able to do the miracles which he appeared to have done, and foreseeing that others also, having learned the same lessons and being haughty to act with the power of God, are about to do the same thing, such persons Jesus would drive away from his own society.

For he says, "He was brought up in secret and hired himself out as a workman in Egypt, and having tried his hand at certain magical powers he returned from there, and on account of those powers gave himself the title of God" (Origen, *Against Celsus*, 1.6, 38, as translated in Evans, "Jesus in Non-Christian Sources," p. 460).

It is unknown whether Celsus became aware of information about Jesus, including reports of his miracles, from the Gospel tradition(s) or independently of them. Thus it cannot be said that Celsus adds any new historical material about Jesus, though it is clear that in accusing Jesus of using magic for personal gain, Celsus assumed his existence.

Charges that Jesus was a magician are common in ancient writings, and Christian replies have been published even very recently. Evans refers readers to "an assessment of the polemic that charges Jesus with sorcery": Graham N. Stanton, "Jesus of Nazareth: A Magician and a False Prophet Who Deceived God's People?" in Joel B. Green and Max Turner, eds., *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New*

*Testament Christology*, I. Howard Marshall Festschrift (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 166–182 (Evans, “Jesus in Non-Christian Sources,” p. 460, note 45).

[40.](#) On Pliny the Younger: A friend of Tacitus, and like him the governor of a Roman province (in 110 C.E.), Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (c. 61–113 C.E.), known as Pliny, seems to have been excessively dependent on the Emperor Trajan for directions on how to govern. In his lengthy correspondence with Trajan, titled *Epistles*, X.96, along with his inquiries about how to treat people accused of being Christians, Pliny wrote:

They [the Christians] assured me that the sum total of their error consisted in the fact that that they regularly assembled on a certain day before daybreak. They recited a hymn antiphonally to Christus as to a god and bound themselves with an oath not to commit any crime, but to abstain from theft, robbery, adultery, breach of faith, and embezzlement of property entrusted to them. After this, it was their custom to separate, and then to come together again to partake of a meal, but an ordinary and innocent one (Evans, “Jesus in Non-Christian Sources,” p. 459)

The things that Pliny wrote about Christians can be found in or deduced from the New Testament. He reveals nothing new about Jesus himself, nor can his letters be considered evidence for Jesus’ existence, only for Christian belief in his existence. One may note what seems to have been early second century Christian belief in Jesus as deity, as well as the sizable population of Christians worshiping him in Pliny’s province, Bithynia, in Asia Minor, despite Roman prohibition and punishments.

[41.](#) On Suetonius: In c. 120 C.E., the Roman writer, lawyer and historian Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (c. 70–140 C.E.), a friend of Pliny, wrote the following in his history, *On the Lives of the Caesars*, speaking of an event in 49 C.E.: “He [Claudius] expelled the Jews from Rome, because they were always making disturbances because of the instigator Chrestus” (Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside*, p. 30).

In the first place, the term “the Jews” could refer to Christians, whom Romans viewed as members of a Jewish sect. So the “disturbances” could be understood as riots among Jews, among Christians viewed as Jews, or, most likely, between those whom we would call Jews and Christians.

The use of the name “Chrestus” creates more ambiguity in this passage than the term “Chrestians” did in the passage in Tacitus treated above. Tacitus



implicitly corrected the crowd. Here, with Suetonius speaking of events in 49 C.E., we have two options to choose from. The first option is that it's a spelling of a mispronunciation of Christus, which Romans thought was Jesus' name. If so, then Suetonius misunderstood Christus, whom he called "Chrestus," to be an instigator. Suetonius's key appositive phrase, "*impulsore Chresto*," is much more accurately translated "the instigator Chrestus" (Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside*, p. 31) than the usual "at the instigation of Chrestus" (Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside*, p. 29). Another logical result would be that the uproarious disputes in 49 C.E. were actually disturbances sparked by disagreement about who Jesus was and/or what he said and did. Considering the two sides, namely, the rabbinic view that he was a magician and deceitful teacher, versus early Christians whose worship was directed to him "as to a god" (as described from the Roman perspective of Pliny the Younger), one can see how synagogues could become deeply divided.

The second option is that it refers to an otherwise unknown "instigator" of disturbances who bore the common name of slaves and freedmen, Chrestus. Actually, among hundreds of Jewish names in the catacombs of Rome, there is not one instance of Chrestus being the name of a Jew (Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside*, p. 33). For this and other reasons, it seems more likely that Suetonius, who often uncritically repeated errors in his sources, was referring to Christus, that is, Jesus, but misunderstood him to be an agitator who lived in Rome in 49 C.E. (Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside*, pp. 29–39).

[42.](#) On Mara bar Serapion: In the last quarter of the first century C.E., a prisoner of war following the Roman conquest of Samosata (see under Lucian), Mara bar Serapion wrote a letter to his son, Serapion. In Stoic fashion, he wanted his son to seek wisdom in order to handle life's misfortunes with virtue and composure.

For what advantage did the Athenians gain by the murder of Socrates, the recompense of which they received in famine and pestilence? Or the people of Samos by the burning of Pythagoras, because in one hour their country was entirely covered in sand? Or the Jews by the death of their wise king, because from that same time their kingdom was taken away? 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 (Evans, "Jesus in Non-Christian Sources," pp. 455–456)

All we know of the author comes from this letter. Mara does not seem to have been a Christian, because he does not refer to a resurrection of Jesus and because his terminology, such as “wise king,” is not the usual Christian way of referring to Jesus. It is entirely possible that Mara received some knowledge of Jesus from Christians but did not name him for fear of displeasing his own Roman captors. His nameless reference makes the identification of “the wise king” as Jesus, though reasonable, still somewhat uncertain.

[43.](#) Doubtful sources contain “second- and third-hand traditions that reflect for the most part vague acquaintance with the Gospel story and controversies with Christians. These sources offer nothing independent” (Evans, “Jesus in Non-Christian Sources,” p. 443). Doubtful sources include the following:

Many rabbinic sources, including the *Sepher Toledot Yeshu*, “The Book of the Generations of Jesus” (meaning his ancestry or history; compare Matthew 1:1). It might be generally datable to as early as the eighth century C.E. but “may well contain a few oral traditions that go back to the third century.” It is “nothing more than a late collection of traditions, from Christian as well as from Jewish sources ... full of fictions assembled for the primary purpose of anti-Christian polemic and propaganda,” and has no historical value regarding the question of Jesus’ existence (Evans, “Jesus in Non-Christian Sources,” p. 450).

The Slavonic (or Old Russian) Version of Josephus’s *Jewish War* “contains numerous passages ... [which] tell of Jesus’ amazing deeds, of the jealousy of the Jewish leaders, of bribing Pilate,” etc. (Evans, “Jesus in Non-Christian Sources,” p. 451). These additions have no demonstrated historical value. The Yosippon (or Josippon) is a medieval source which appears in many versions, often with many additions. Its core is a Hebrew version of portions of Josephus’s writings that offers nothing from before the fourth century C.E. The Dead Sea Scrolls contain no contemporary references to Jesus or his followers. Islamic traditions either depend on the New Testament or are not clearly traceable to the early centuries C.E.

[44.](#) Regarding archaeological discoveries, along with many other scholars, I do not find that the group of ossuaries (bone boxes) discovered in the East Talpiot district of Jerusalem can be used as a basis for any conclusions about Jesus of Nazareth or his family. See the variety of views presented in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Tomb of Jesus and His Family? Exploring Ancient Jewish Tombs Near Jerusalem’s Walls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), especially the essay by Rachel Hachlili, “What’s in a Name?” pp. 125–149. She concludes, “In light of all the above the East Talpiot tomb is a Jewish

family tomb with no connection to the historical Jesus family; it is not the family tomb of Jesus and most of the presented facts for the identification are speculation and guesswork” (p. 143).

[45.](#) See Nili S. Fox, *In the Service of the King: Officialdom in Ancient Israel and Judah*, Monographs of the Hebrew Union College (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 2000), pp. 23–32; Christopher A. Rollston, “Non-Provenanced Epigraphs I: Pillaged Antiquities, Northwest Semitic Forgeries, and Protocols for Laboratory Tests,” *Maarav* 10 (2003), pp. 135–193, and his “Non-Provenanced Epigraphs II: The Status of Non-Provenanced Epigraphs within the Broader Corpus of Northwest Semitic,” *Maarav* 11 (2004), pp. 57–79.

[46.](#) See Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and the Ossuaries* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, Markham Press Fund, 2003), pp. 112–115. Regarding identification of the people named in the James ossuary inscription, even if it is authentic, the question as to whether it refers to Jesus of Nazareth has not been clearly settled. It is worth observing that its last phrase, “the brother of Jesus,” whose authenticity is disputed, is not the characteristic *Christian* way of referring to Jesus, which would be “the brother of the Lord,” but this observation hardly settles the question.

[47.](#) On G. A. Wells and Michael Martin, see Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1996), pp. 27–46. On others who deny Jesus’ existence, see Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, especially pp. 61–64, 177–264.

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