

Historical Evidence for Christ (Rev. Dr. John Bartol)

“Caesar hoped to reform men by changing institutions and laws; Christ wished to remake institutions, and lesson laws, by changing men.” Will Durant, Historian.

Who was Jesus Christ? Few, if any, now question that a person bearing this name once lived upon this earth. His universal influence permeates society both in calendars and legal documents, using “B. C.” and “A. D.” to indicate time before or after his birth. “Christ became a human being and lived here on earth among us and was full of grace and truth” (John 1:14a TLB).

Many people have asked, is Christ mentioned in any historical writings besides the Bible? Yes, without question! Secular historians such as Pliny (61 – 114 A. D.), Tacitus (55 – 118 A. D.), Suetonius (69 – 140 A. D.), all refer to the historical person known as Jesus of Nazareth. We have far more information about Jesus than for most, if not all, major figures of antiquity.

Josephus Flavius, the noted Jewish historian wrote in his Antiquities (18.3.3), about a man named Jesus: “A wise man... a doer of marvelous deeds. This man was the Messiah... After his crucifixion, he appeared to them on the third day alive again; as the holy prophets had predicted. And even now the race of Christians, so named after him, has not yet died out.”

If we compare the historical evidence for Jesus to the evidence for other figures who lived in ancient times, there’s just no comparison. For example, the earliest biographies of Alexander the great were written more than 400 years after his death. The earliest copy of Caesar’s Gallic wars is dated 1000 years after the original. If space permitted, many other examples could be given.

In contrast, although we may not have the original documents of the New Testament, we do have several thousand copies and there is overwhelming textual evidence that the earliest primary sources about Christ were written a mere 25 – 40 years after his resurrection, while many of the eyewitnesses were still alive. “This is far too brief a span for myths and legends to take hold.”- C.S. Lewis

The more evidence is uncovered, the more scholars agree that the New Testament is an authentic account of what the writers saw and heard. Either I believe the historical evidence of Jesus to be authentic, or I become a complete skeptic about all of ancient history.

Seneca, the Roman philosopher wrote, “All my life I have been seeking to climb out of the pit of my besetting sins. And I can’t do it, and I never will unless a hand is let down to me to draw me up.” That hand, O Seneca, has been led down!

Look at it, and you will see nail prints. Take hold of it, and you will find it has the strength of omnipotence.

“All history is incomprehensible without Christ.” Joseph E. Renan