

Extra-Biblical “Proof” of Jesus

Today we will be exploring the alleged extra-biblical proofs for the existence of Jesus.

Proof: Josephus mentions John the Baptist and Herod.¹

Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness.

Now when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late. Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure to him. (Antiquities of the Jews 18:5:2)²

Refutation: Simply because John the Baptizer and Herod are mentioned there is no direct correlation proving the existence of Jesus. There are a few issues that bring up a question as to the accuracy of the Christian scriptures regarding Jesus and John the Baptist.

Josephus does seem enamored with John the Baptist and his baptismal services. However we must note that Josephus does not represent John as baptizing people as a baptism of redemption. “Josephus strongly denies that John claimed any such power: the washing was a physical manifestation of a spiritual commitment to performing good works.” Josephus also offers no indication that John was in any way preparing for the coming of Jesus.³

It appears that Josephus was enamored with John because John reminded Josephus of a man whom he admired and copied in lifestyle.

...but when I was informed that one, whose name was Banus, lived in the desert, and used no other clothing than grew upon trees, and had no other food than what grew of its own accord, and bathed himself in cold water frequently, both by night and by day, in order to preserve his chastity, I imitated him in those things, and continued with him three years. (The Life of Flavius Josephus 2)⁴

Josephus indicates that John had in fact come after Jesus and was therefore not a forerunner to Jesus as indicated in the Christian scripture. In fact Josephus gives John's death as occurring in 36 CE which is at least six years after his indicated death in the Christian scripture.³

Proof: Josephus mentions Jesus.¹

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day. (Antiquities of the Jews 18:3:3)²

Refutation: There are multiple issues that have been raised regarding this passage from Josephus' writing. All or part of this particular section has been declared interpolation or forgery by leading scholars. Scholars have concluded that the similarity between Josephus' writing and the Book of Luke come from a common source. There is a now-lost Christian proselytizing text upon which both Luke and Josephus based their own writings.⁵

Simply put, Josephus copied a text intended on proselytizing the Jews and Gentiles without actually inferring that he himself believed Jesus existed or was in fact a great leader. If you notice at the end of this section Josephus appears to be writing this to show what the Christians believe and not necessarily what is in fact true.

Christian researchers have in fact attested to the insertion of certain portions of this section of Josephus' writing.

Edwin Yamauchi has stated that the following portions of this paragraph are indeed insertions and not originally in Josephus' writings.⁶

1. ...if it be lawful to call him a man...
2. He was [the] Christ.
3. ...for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him.

Without the insertions the most-authentic passage would read:

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day. (Antiquities of the Jews 18:3:3)²

As you can see there is a very large difference between the writing with the later insertions and the more authentic version written by Josephus. Josephus simply wrote about one of many teachers who arose in the time of Jesus. He simply stated that this is what the people called Christians believe without inferring that he himself believes in Jesus or that such a man really did exist.

Proof: Josephus mentions Jesus' brother James.¹

Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the sanhedrim of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned... (Antiquities of the Jews 20:9:1)²

Refutation: Simply stating that a person existed who was a brother of Jesus again does not prove that Jesus was anyone other than a teacher – one of many during that era.

The Hegesippus – a Christian text written in 66 or 67 CE – also gives an account of the death of “James, the Lord’s brother” which is very different from what Josephus accounted.

The aforesaid scribes and Pharisees accordingly set James on the summit of the temple, and cried aloud to him, and said: “O just one, whom we are all bound to obey, forasmuch as the people is in error, and follows Jesus the crucified, do thou tell us what is the door of Jesus, the crucified.” And he answered with a loud voice: “Why ask ye me concerning Jesus the Son of man? He Himself sits in heaven, at the right hand of the Great Power, and shall come on the clouds of heaven.”

And, when many were fully convinced by these words, and offered praise for the testimony of James, and said, “Hosanna to the son of David,” then again the said Pharisees and scribes said to one another, “We have not done well in procuring this testimony to Jesus. But let us go up and throw him down, that they may be afraid, and not believe him.” And they cried aloud, and said: “Oh! oh! the just man himself is in error.” Thus they fulfilled the Scripture written in Isaiah: “Let us away with the just man, because he is troublesome to us: therefore shall they eat the fruit of their doings.” So they went up and threw down the just man, and said to one another: “Let us stone James the Just.” And they began to stone him: for he was not killed by the fall; but he turned, and kneeled down, and said: “I beseech Thee, Lord God our Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”

And, while they were thus stoning him to death, one of the priests, the sons of Rechab, the son of Rechabim, to whom testimony is borne by Jeremiah the prophet, began to cry aloud, saying: “Cease, what do ye? The just man is praying for us.” But one among them, one of the fullers, took the staff with which he was accustomed to wring out the garments he died, and hurled it at the head of the just man.

And so he suffered martyrdom; and they buried him on the spot, and the pillar erected to his memory still remains, close by the temple. This man was a true witness to both Jews and Greeks that Jesus is the Christ.

And shortly after Vespasian besieged Judaea, taking them captive. (Hegesippus 5:4-8)⁷

As you can see from what Josephus wrote, James was supposedly stoned – along with others – after a trial before the Sanhedrin. In the Christian account from the Hegesippus we see that there was no trial and the stoning – only of James – was an afterthought because he did not die from the fall. The differences in the timing of James' death (62 CE for Josephus and 66-67 CE for the Hegesippus) as well as the different accounts of the deaths indicates that this section of Josephus was an insertion by later Christian scribes.

Proof: Josephus mentions Ananias the High Priest.¹

AND now Caesar, upon hearing the death of Festus, sent Albinus into Judea, as procurator. But the king deprived Joseph of the high priesthood, and bestowed the succession to that dignity on the son of Ananus, who was also himself called Ananus. Now the report goes that this eldest Ananus proved a most fortunate man; for he had five sons who had all performed the office of a high priest to God, and who had himself enjoyed that dignity a long time formerly, which had never happened to any other of our high priests. But this younger Ananus, who, as we have told you already, took the high priesthood, was a bold man in his temper, and very insolent; he was also of the sect of the Sadducees, who are very rigid in judging offenders, above all the rest of the Jews, as we have already observed; when, therefore, Ananus was of this disposition, he thought he had now a proper opportunity [to exercise his authority]. (Antiquities of the Jews 20:9:1)²

Refutation: Simply stating that a person existed who was a high priest does not prove that Jesus was anyone other than a teacher or that he existed at all.

There is a big issue with timing concerning Ananus ben Ananus and the death of James the brother of Jesus. Ananus dies in 69 CE after being the High Priest for only three months. Again, Josephus said that James died in 62 CE and the Hegesippus implies that James died in 66 or 67 CE. So, how can Ananus be the one to have ordered the death of James if he was not even High Priest when James was stoned? This goes back to also showing that the text regarding James is an insertion and not authentic to Josephus' text.

Proof: Tacitus mentions the Christians and Christ after whom they are named.¹

Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. (The Annals 15:54)⁸

Refutation: Tacitus does indeed speak about a people known as “Christians” and the idea that they are named after “Christ” who was treated with a harsh penalty during the reign of Pontius Pilate but this cannot be used to prove Jesus existed.

Tacitus was a loyal Roman citizen who wrote very unseemly things about Christians. Simply because he connects the term Christian with Christ does not mean that he believed that a person known as Christ existed. He is simply making a statement about a group of people whom he detests. Tacitus is simply relaying what he has heard from Christians and is not indicating that he has any source for there being a Christ who existed around the first century CE. In addition, even if Tacitus was using official Roman documents there is also no indication that those documents were anything other than what the Christians said about themselves.

Proof: Pliny the Younger mentions the Christians and Christ after whom they are named.¹

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food--but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition. (Letter to Trajan)⁹

Refutation: Pliny does speak about his judgments regarding a people who call themselves “Christians” and who follow “Christ” but this does not in any way prove that Jesus existed.

Pliny speaks harshly against the Christians and even refers to their beliefs as superstition. Pliny only had second-hand knowledge of what Christians believed and practiced. His writings offer no first-hand knowledge of Christ or the first Christians and cannot be used to prove that Jesus existed.

Proof: Lucian mentions the Christians and Christ after whom they are named.¹

It was then that he learned the wondrous lore of the Christians, by associating with their priests and scribes in Palestine. And—how else could it be?—in a trice he made them all look like children, for he was prophet, cult-leader, head of the synagogue, and everything, all by himself. He interpreted and explained some of their books and even composed many, and they revered him as a god, made use of him as a lawgiver, and set him down as a protector, next after that other, to be sure, whom they still worship, the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced this new cult into the world. (The Passing of Peregrinus 11)¹⁰

Refutation: Lucian mentions Christ and Christians in a satirical play. This is meant as an affront to those who call themselves Christians.

Christians are spoken about as a group of people who believe in a man who was crucified by the Romans in Judea. They were called a cult and mocked in this play by Lucian. Mentioning someone in a play is by no means actual proof to the person's existence. There were people who followed the Egyptian god Ra who are also portrayed in the arts but this is not a proof as to the existence of Ra. Just like Pliny and Tacitus, Lucian has no first-hand knowledge or proof text of a person known as Christ. He has only second-hand information that is presented in a way as to bring about shame to a group of people who are hated by the Roman Empire.

Proof: The Talmud mentions Yeshu who was hanged on the eve of Passover.¹

[In contradiction to this] it was taught: On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, 'He is going forth to be stoned because he has practised sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Any one who can say anything in his favour, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.' But since nothing was brought forward in his favour he was hanged on the eve of the Passover! — 'Ulla retorted: Do you suppose that he was one for whom a defence could be made? Was he not a Mesith [enticer], concerning whom Scripture says, Neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him? With Yeshu however it was different, for he was connected with the government [or royalty, i.e., influential]. (Sanhedrin 43a)¹¹

Refutation: There are many items that can be brought up against this text from the Talmud Bavli that show that this passage is not even talking about Jesus.

The Yeshu mentioned in the Talmud was a student of Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Perachiah who lived in the first century BCE. Thus, the Yeshu in this passage of the Talmud cannot be Jesus who lived in the first century CE.¹² Yeshu from the Talmud was hanged on the eve of Passover. However, Jesus was crucified on the day of Passover.

Now on the first [day of the Feast] of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying to Him, "Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?" ... When morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people plotted against Jesus to put Him to death. ... And when they had mocked Him, they took the robe off Him, put His [own] clothes on Him, and led Him away to be crucified. (Matthew 26:17, 27:1, 31)¹³

Yeshu was executed by the Jewish court and not by the Romans. Thus again proving that the Yeshu from the Talmud Bavli is not Jesus. Yeshu was charged with apostasy and sorcery yet Jesus was charged with blasphemy.¹⁴ Yeshu is shown to have connections to the political elite – usually in the case of apostasy such as this the trial and sentence is carried out immediately. However, we see from the Christian scripture that Jesus did not have any connections to the political elite and was in fact a danger to them.

All of these so-called proof texts for an historical Jesus have been disproven. All those who follow Jesus will just need to take it on faith that he did actually exist.

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- ²Whiston, William. *The Works of Flavius Josephus*. 1737. [<http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/josephus/index.htm>]
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- ⁴Whiston, William. *The Works of Flavius Josephus*. 1737. [<http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/josephus/autobiog.htm>]
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- ⁶Slick, Matthew. “Regarding the Quotes from the Historian Josephus about Jesus.” *carm.org*. Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry, n.d. [<http://carm.org/regarding-quotes-historian-josephus-about-jesus>]
- ⁷Kirby, Peter. “Hegesippus.” *earlychristianwritings.com*. Early Christian Writings, 2001. [<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/hegesippus.html>]
- ⁸Church, Alfred & Brodribb, William. “The Annals by Tacitus.” *mit.edu*. The Internet Classic Archive, n.d. [<http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/annals.11.xv.html>]
- ⁹“Pliny the Younger on the Christ.” *mesacc.edu*. Mesa Community College, n.d. [<http://www.mesacc.edu/~thoqh49081/handouts/pliny.html>]
- ¹⁰Pearse, Roger. “Lucian of Samosata: The Passing of Peregrinus.” *tetullian.org*. The Tertullian Project, 2001. [<http://www.tetullian.org/rpearse/lucian/peregrinus.htm>]
- ¹¹Epstein, I. *Soncino Babylonian Talmud*. London: Soncino Press, 1949. [<http://halakhah.com/pdf/nezikin/Sanhedrin.pdf>]
- ¹²Student, Gil. “The Jesus Narrative in the Talmud.” *faithweb.com*. The Real Truth About the Talmud, 2000. [<http://talmud.faihtweb.com/articles/jesusnarr.html>]
- ¹³Thomas Nelson, Inc. *New King James Version*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Bibles, 1982. [<http://www.blueletterbible.org>]