

Question: I have a friend who says that Jesus is only a legendary figure and that outside the New Testament there is no historical evidence that he ever lived? Is that really true?

There have been atheistic and agnostic writers who have stated that Jesus is not a historical character; and unfortunately, many have believed them without investigation. But nothing could be further from the truth. The evidence for the historical reliability of the New Testament documents, especially the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, should be sufficient. However, corroborative evidence from others who lived in the first and second centuries A.D. clearly supports the claim that Jesus was a real person in history.

The most notable references to Jesus in history are those of the Jewish historian Josephus whose book on the history of the Jews, *The Antiquities*, was completed in about A.D. 93. After describing how a high priest named Ananias took advantage of the death of the Roman governor Festus (both of these men are mentioned in the New Testament) in order to have James killed, Josephus said: “He convened a meeting of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man named James, the brother of Jesus, who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned.”

Another time Josephus wrote: “About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. . . . And the tribe of Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.” Keep in mind that Josephus was not a Christian.

Other references to a historical Jesus can be found in the writings of Roman officials and historians. Pliny the Younger, who was the governor of Bithynia in northwestern Turkey under the Emperor Trajan, wrote a letter in about A.D. 111 to his friend Trajan and referred to the rapid spread of Christianity in the city and rural areas among every class of persons including Roman citizens. He also sent some of these Christians who claimed to be Roman citizens to Rome for trial. He spoke of their worship of Jesus as God, that Christians were not easily swayed from their beliefs, and that they maintained high ethical standards.

In A.D. 115 the Roman historian Tacitus stated that Nero persecuted the Christians as scapegoats to divert suspicion away from himself for the great fire in Rome in A.D. 64. Of these Christians he said: “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.”

When religious movements begin, it usually takes generations before people record things about them. For example, the first biography of Buddha was not written until some 600 years after he lived. Muhammad lived from A.D. 570 to 632, but his biography was not written until 767, more than a century after his death. However, the four biographies of Jesus were written between 15 to 60 years after his death, and the historical references cited above were written within the first century after Jesus lived. During this period there were people still around who could have disproved any claims about Jesus if he had not been a real person.

Secular historians focus primarily on important political and military leaders and not on religion. But the evidence for Jesus is as certain as that for people like Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great. Although a person might doubt the evidence that Jesus is the Son of God, it is hard to deny the evidence that he really lived. For further information on this subject contact me at the address below.

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