

Did Jesus Exist?
A Study of the Wealth of Historical Evidence for Jesus Christ

“That Jesus existed is **virtually undisputed** among scholars teaching in the relevant fields of ancient history, classics, and biblical studies.” [Justin Bass, Christian religion professor]¹

“[T]he view that Jesus existed is held by **virtually every expert** on the planet.” [Bart Ehrman, atheist religion professor]²

I. Overview

Those who deny that Jesus ever existed are sometimes called “Jesus mythicists.”³ Such views are popular on the internet,⁴ but no serious scholars presently argue this unfounded theory. While these “mythicist” assertions lack credibility, we still must not – and cannot – let such claims go unanswered. A study of the historical evidence for Jesus reveals a treasure trove of independent historical sources (Christian & non-Christian) corroborating facts about Him.

For today’s review, we will examine the overwhelming expert consensus and the multiple independent sources of proof (both Christian & non-Christian) as follows:

- What is the Virtually Unanimous Consensus of Experts?
- What Do Ancient Non-Christian Sources Say About Jesus?
- Do Multiple Independent Historical Sources Confirm Jesus’ Existence?

As discussed below, both the experts and the evidence discredit the mythicists, thus reminding us why Jesus is a historical reality.

II. What is the Virtually Unanimous Consensus of Experts?

As discussed in Sections II and III below, ample evidence from historical sources (both Christian and non-Christian) confirms Jesus’ existence. Based upon in-depth examinations of this historical data, virtually all serious scholars reach the same conclusion: Jesus’ existence is a historical fact.

¹ Justin Bass, *The Bedrock of Christianity*, pp. 2-3 (2020) (bold added).

² Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* p. 4 (2012) (bold added).

³ Gary Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, pp. 157-65 (2024); see also Justin Bass, *The Bedrock of Christianity*, p. 4 (2020) (“These handful of scholars – less than 1 percent – who have doubted Jesus’ existence are known as mythicists”); Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* p. 3 (2012) (“mythicists”).

⁴ Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* p. 3 (2012) (mythicist theories spreading rapidly on internet); Reddit r/atheism “Jesus Didn’t Exist?” https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/1k4r6m4/jesus_didnt_exist/

A. Experts Agree on Jesus' Existence

Jesus-Myth History. Until recently, no one seriously questioned the existence of Jesus. In fact, the Jesus-myth theory only arose in the last 200 years.

- Recent Theory. “Additionally, we have **no record** of anyone denying the historicity of Jesus *before* a little over two hundred years ago.”⁵
- Modern Myth. “The idea that Jesus did not exist is a modern notion. It has no ancient precedents. It was **made up in the eighteenth century**. One might well call it a modern myth, the myth of the mythical Jesus.”⁶
- Dead Issue. “The theory of Jesus’ nonexistence is now **effectively dead** as a scholarly question.”⁷

The last 200 years did not generate any new evidence on Jesus’ existence. Thus, the only reliable evidence is what existed long before modern times – long before the mythicists.

Experts Agree. Virtually unanimously, experts agree on Jesus’ existence for a simple reason: all of the evidence says so.

- 99% Consensus. “Jesus’ existence is just one of many facts about Jesus and early Christianity that passes this **99-percent** threshold of agreement among scholars.”⁸
- Virtually All Experts. “[T]he view that Jesus existed is held by **virtually every expert** on the planet.”⁹
- Vast Majority. “In this chapter the ‘mythicist’ debate in general will be introduced, zeroing in on some of the reasons why this discussion is almost always considered to be a dead end for the **vast majority** of specialists and other scholars trained in the area.”¹⁰

Very few facts have the support of 99% of the experts. As discussed below, this expert consensus exists because the evidentiary record is wholly one-sided.

⁵ Justin Bass, *The Bedrock of Christianity*, p. 4 (2020) (bold added; italics in original).

⁶ Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* p. 96 (bold added).

⁷ Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence*, p. 14 (2000) (bold added).

⁸ Justin Bass, *The Bedrock of Christianity*, p. 7 (2020) (bold added).

⁹ Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* p. 4 (2012) (bold added); *see also, id.*, p. 2 (“Of the thousands of scholars of early Christianity who do teach at such schools, none of them, to my knowledge, has any doubts that Jesus existed”).

¹⁰ Gary Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, p. 155 (2024) (bold added).

B. Atheist and Skeptical Scholars Also Agree on Jesus' Existence

Both atheist professors and highly skeptical scholars readily concede Jesus' existence, based upon the extensive early evidence about Him.

- Bart Ehrman (atheist religion professor). “And for anyone to whom both evidence and the past matter, a dispassionate consideration of the case makes it quite plain: **Jesus did exist.**”¹¹
- John Dominic Crossan (historian & former Catholic priest). “I am historically convinced that Jesus existed as a still quite reconstructable historical figure.”¹²
- Rudolf Bultmann (German New Testament scholar). “Of course the doubt as to whether Jesus really existed is unfounded and not worth refutation. No sane person can doubt that Jesus stands as founder behind the historical movement whose first distinct stage is represented by the Palestinian community.”¹³

C. The Jesus Mythicists Lack Credibility

Neither conservative nor skeptical scholars give any credence to the claims by the Jesus' mythicists.

- Completely Spurious. “I therefore conclude that the mythicist arguments are completely spurious from beginning to end. They have been mainly put forward by incompetent and unqualified people.”¹⁴
- Not Taken Seriously. “It is fair to say that mythicists as a group, and as individuals, are not taken seriously by the vast majority of scholars in the fields of New Testament, early Christianity, ancient history, and theology. This is widely recognized, to their chagrin, by mythicists themselves.”¹⁵
- Evidence Disregarded. “Where I become irritated by Price's [mythicist] thesis, as with those of his predecessors, is his ignoring what everyone else in the business regards as primary data and his readiness to offer less plausible hypotheses to explain other data that inconveniences his thesis. Why no mention of

¹¹ Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* p. 6 (2012) (bold added).

¹² John Dominic Crossan, “Response to Robert M. Price,” in James Beilby & Paul Eddy, eds., *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, p. 86 (2009). As a skeptic, he acknowledges Jesus' existence, but denies that Jesus rose from the dead.

¹³ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, p. 13 (1926) quoted in Justin Bass, *The Bedrock of Christianity*, pp. 5-6 (2020). He has been described as “the very skeptical German New Testament scholar.” See Gary Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, p. 157 (2024).

¹⁴ Maurice Casey, *Jesus: Evidence and Argument or Mythicist Myths?* p. 245 (2014) quoted in Gary Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, p. 161 (2024).

¹⁵ Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* p. 20 (2012).

1 Corinthians 15:3 – generally reckoned to be an account of the faith Paul received when he was converted, that is, within two or three years of the putative events – “that Christ died . . .”¹⁶

- Weak/Bizarre Arguments. “Contemporary New Testament scholars have typically viewed [mythicist] arguments as so weak or bizarre that they relegate them to footnotes, or often ignore them completely.”¹⁷

Thus, the Jesus mythicist assertions have consistently failed not only for lack of evidence, but also because they ignore a wealth of historical evidence confirming Jesus’ existence.

III. What Do Non-Christian Sources Say About Jesus?

Why should we consider non-Christian sources about Jesus’ existence? Multiple reasons support using such historical evidence.

- Virtually all scholars consider non-Christian sources when analyzing Jesus’ existence.
- To assess all types of history, scholars favor multiple independent historical sources that corroborate the facts.
- The most powerful sources are those that admit a historical fact against their best interests – *e.g.*, hostile non-Christian sources confirming that Jesus existed.

Numerous non-Christian historical sources contain evidence of Jesus’ existence. These sources include Josephus (Jewish historian), Tacitus (Roman historian), Suetonius (Roman historian), Pliny the Younger (Roman governor), Emperor Trajan, Emperor Hadrian, Mishnah and Talmud (two Jewish sources), Lucian (Greek historian and satirist), Mara bar Serapion (Syrian writer), and Celsus (Greek philosopher).¹⁸ Some examples follow.

A. A Jewish Historian Confirms Facts About Jesus

Josephus (Jewish historian) wrote about Jesus during the first century (around AD 93-94).¹⁹ In his *Jewish Antiquities*, he recorded facts about Jesus, such as the following.

¹⁶ James Dunn, “Response to Robert M. Price,” in James Beilby & Paul Eddy, eds., *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, p. 96 (2009).

¹⁷ Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, p. 6 (2000).

¹⁸ Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, pp. 19-134 (2000); Gary Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, pp. 167-209 (2024); John Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 1, pp. 1:56-111 (1991); Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* p. 97 (2012); John Dominic Crossan in James Beilby & Paul Eddy, eds., *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, p. 86 (2009); Darrell Bock, *id.*, p. 100; Benjamin Shaw, *Trustworthy: Thirteen Arguments for the Reliability of the New Testament*, pp. 90-99 (2024).

¹⁹ John Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 1, p. 1:56 (1991); *see also* Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, p. 82 (2000); Benjamin Shaw, *Trustworthy*, pp. 93-94 (2024).

- Brother James. “the brother of Jesus called Christ, whose name was James.”²⁰
- Christ. “Jesus called Christ” [see above].
- Miracles. “For he [Jesus] was a doer of startling deeds.”²¹
- Crucifixion. “Pilate, because of an accusation by the leading men among us, condemned him [Jesus] to the cross.”²²
- Loyal Following. After being condemned “to the cross, those who had loved [Jesus] previously did not cease to do so. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians (named after him) has not died out.”²³

Even standing alone, Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities* documents Jesus’ existence as a historical fact.²⁴ But Josephus is not the only source. More proof keeps piling up.

B. Roman Writers Confirm Jesus’ Existence

Among several Roman writers confirming Jesus’ existence are Tacitus (historian) and Pliny the Younger (governor).

Tacitus. Tacitus “is generally considered the greatest Roman historian.”²⁵ Dated around AD 116, his history *Annals* confirms key facts about Jesus and His followers.

- Crucifixion. “The founder of this name, Christ, had been executed in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate [Greek text omitted].”²⁶

²⁰ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*: 20.9.1 § 200 quoted in Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, p. 83 (2000); see also John Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 1, p. 1:57 (1991).

²¹ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*: 18.3.3 § 63-64 quoted in John Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 1, p. 1:61 (1991). Josephus used the same Greek term (*paradoxa*) to describe the “miracles worked by the prophet Elisha.” John Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 2, p. 2:621 (1994); see also Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, p. 93 (2000) (translating Greek as “worker of amazing deeds”); *id.*, p. 100 (term is “an explicit characterization of Jesus’ ministry as a miracle-worker”).

²² Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*: 18.3.3 § 63-64 quoted in John Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 1, p. 1:61 (1991); see also Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, p. 93 (2000).

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ Although some passages of Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities* have been questioned as late additions, no serious dispute remains about the passages quoted above. See, e.g., Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, pp. 95-99 (2000) (identifying 7 independent reasons supporting these passages); Gary Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, p. 178 (2024) (scholars accepting these passages generally outnumber the opponents by about 5-to-1); James Charlesworth, *Jesus Within Judaism*, p. 96 (1988) (“We can now be as certain as historical research will presently allow that Josephus did refer to Jesus in *Antiquities* 18.63-64”).

²⁵ Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, p. 39 (2000).

²⁶ *Id.*, pp. 41; see also John Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 1, pp. 1:89-90 (1991).

- Loyal Followers. Tacitus writes that Jesus' crucifixion did not stop Christianity, but instead Jesus' followers multiplied: "Suppressed for a time, the deadly superstition [Christianity] erupted again not only in Judea, the origin of this evil, but also in the city [Rome]."²⁷
- Martyrdom. Christianity not only spread to Rome, but Christians were willing to die for their beliefs: "Therefore, first those who admitted to it were arrested, then on their information a very large multitude was convicted."²⁸

While a few have questioned this passage, "there are good reasons for concluding with the **vast majority of scholars** that this passage is fundamentally sound."²⁹

Pliny the Younger. As Roman "governor of Pontus-Bithynia in Asia Minor (AD 111-13), Pliny the Younger wrote letters to Emperor Trajan about how to deal with Christians.

- Worship of Jesus. Letter 96 of Book 10 refers to "Christ" three times, including the following: "They [Christians] had met regularly before dawn on a determined day, and sung antiphonally a **hymn to Christ** as if to a god."³⁰
- Loyal Followers. Around AD 112, "Pliny observes that the Christian influence was so strong in his area that the pagan temples had been nearly deserted, attendance at pagan festivals severely decreased, and few purchased sacrificial animals."³¹

Pliny's letters not only confirm Jesus' existence, but also that Christians worshiped Him as Lord and abandoned pagan worship. These letters are well-authenticated.³²

C. Non-Christian Sources Confirm Multiple Facts About Jesus

Citing just two of non-Christian historical sources above (Josephus and Tacitus), skeptical New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan identified multiple facts confirmed about Jesus Christ:

²⁷ Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, p. 42; see also Gary Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, pp. 167-68 (2024).

²⁸ Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, p. 42; see also Paul Maier, *In the Fullness of Time*, p. 219 (1997); Gary Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, pp. 167-68 (2024).

²⁹ Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, pp. 42-43 (2000) (bold added); see also John Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 1, p. 1:89-90 (1991) ("passage is obviously genuine" as "the very anti-Christian tone of the text makes Christian origin almost impossible").

³⁰ Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, p. 25 (2000) (bold added); see also Gary Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, p. 185 (2024).

³¹ Pliny, *Letters*, translated by William Melmoth, rev. W. M. L. Hutchinson, Loeb Classical Library (1948) cited in Gary Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, p. 184.

³² Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, p. 27 (2000) (Pliny's letters are "well-attested and stable, and their authenticity is not seriously disputed").

Both those authors [Josephus and Tacitus] agree on four sequential points. First, there was a *movement* started by Jesus or Christ. Second, there was an *execution* by Pilate. Third, there was a *continuation* despite that attempt to end it. Fourth, there is still an ongoing movement of “Christians.”³³

In summary, these non-Christian records firmly document the existence of Jesus and also reinforce other non-Christian records about Jesus. When combined with the many historical sources in the New Testament itself, this one-sided mountain of evidence for Jesus explains why 99% of the experts dismiss Jesus-myth theories as a “dead” issue.

IV. Do Multiple Independent Historical Sources Confirm Jesus’ Existence?

When testing historical facts, scholars consistently ask whether multiple independent sources support the fact.³⁴ For ancient history, two or more sources are compelling evidence:

Many facts from antiquity rest on just one ancient source, while two or three sources in agreement generally render the fact unimpeachable.³⁵

Even before counting the New Testament sources, the non-Christian sources above already exceed this test that “two or three sources” make “the fact unimpeachable.”

Furthermore, the experts also look at whether a hostile source admits a fact favorable to the other side.³⁶

And such positive evidence within a hostile source is the strongest kind of evidence and becomes self-authenticating.³⁷

Both Roman historian Tacitus and Roman governor Pliny the Younger represented hostile sources, calling Christianity “a deadly superstition” and “this problem.” For this additional

³³ John Dominic Crossan in James Beilby & Paul Eddy, eds., *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, p. 86 (2009).

³⁴ See e.g., Gary Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, pp. 44-52 (2024); John Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 1, pp. 168-77 (1991); Justin Bass, *The Bedrock of Christianity*, pp. 28-29 (2020); Benjamin Shaw, *Trustworthy*, pp. 65-66 (2024); Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist*, pp. 40-42 (2012); Norman Geisler & Frank Turek, *I Don’t Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist*, p. 231 (2004); Ed Komoszewski, James Sawyer & Daniel Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, pp. 39-49 (2006); Graham Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker*, pp. 248-53 (1999); James Beilby & Paul Eddy, eds., *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, pp. 40-41, 252 (2009).

³⁵ Paul Maier, *In the Fullness of Time*, p. 197 (1997).

³⁶ “The criterion of *enemy attestation* is satisfied when an antagonistic source expresses agreement concerning a person or event when it is contrary to their best interests.” Gary Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, p. 51 (2024).

³⁷ Paul Maier, *In the Fullness of Time*, p. 198 (1997) (citing evidence of Jewish evidence for the empty tomb as an admission of the truth of this fact).

reason, their statements carry great weight in rebutting the Jesus-myth theories about Jesus' existence.

A wealth of historical evidence – both Christian and non-Christian sources – proves Jesus' existence. A good summary is as follows:

Within one hundred years of his death, primary sources for the existence of Jesus include Paul's early letters; Matthew, Mark, Luke-Acts, and John; Jewish historian Josephus; Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius; and Roman governor Pliny the Younger (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.200; Tacitus, *Annals* 15-44; Suetonius, *Claudius* 25; Pliny the Younger, *Letter* 10:96) [footnote omitted] After more than two hundred years of historical and biblical criticism, the careful evaluation of such evidence for Jesus and early Christianity on the part of experts from all different backgrounds and worldviews has led to this **overwhelming 99 percent consensus**, despite a handful of mythicist hecklers.³⁸

As discussed below, Biblical experts (both conservative and skeptical) have embraced the validity of these historical sources confirming Jesus' existence.

A. **Historical Sources Recognized by the Experts**

Many experts have devoted decades to reviewing, teaching, and publishing specifically about the New Testament. A sample of their scholarship about historical sources appears below.

Gospels. Despite taking skeptical positions on various New Testament topics, Bart Ehrman (atheist religion professor) candidly acknowledges the Gospels as a historical source:

Among the Gospels we have numerous independent accounts that attest to Jesus's life, at least **seven of them** from within a hundred years of the traditional date of his death.³⁹

For these seven Gospel sources, Bart Ehrman includes not only the Gospels themselves, but also recognized sources (sometimes called Q, M, and L) underpinning the Gospels.⁴⁰

Epistles. Paul's Epistles provide some of the earliest written sources establishing Jesus' existence, as multiple scholars recognize.⁴¹ Corinthians 15:3-5 is a good example:

³⁸ Justin Bass, *The Bedrock of Christianity*, pp. 6-7 (2020) (bold added).

³⁹ Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* p. 171 (2012) (bold added).

⁴⁰ *Id.*, pp. 171-72. An example of the "Q" source would be quotations of Jesus appearing in Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark. See, e.g., Matthew 11:5 (summary of miracles); Luke 7:22 (same). For a list of "Q" verses, see Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, pp. 155-69 (2000).

⁴¹ Darrell Bock in James Beilby & Paul Eddy, eds., *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, pp. 101-02 (2009); James Dunn, *id.*, pp. 96-97; Luke Timothy Johnson, *id.*, p. 92; Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* p. 172 (2012).

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received,
that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day
according to the Scriptures,

and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Critical scholars overwhelmingly agree that this creed dates to within 2-3 years after Jesus' crucifixion, making it some of the most ancient evidence of the historical Jesus Christ.⁴²

Book of Acts. Jesus also appears in Acts which numerous scholars have hailed as a highly reliable historical source.⁴³ As James Dunn (author of the multi-volume *Jesus Remembered* set) stated:

It is sufficient to observe that Acts gives good evidence of beliefs about Jesus' mission, life and death, which almost certainly were circulating among the earliest Christians through the middle decades of the first century.⁴⁴

Thus, the existence of Jesus Christ far surpasses one of the most fundamental tests for historical authenticity: multiple attestation (*i.e.*, multiple historical sources).

B. Summary of Historical Facts about Jesus

In summing up these various ancient sources, one scholar explained that just using non-Christian sources (some of which are anti-Christian), we find the following facts about Jesus:

- (1) Jesus lived during [the] time of Tiberius Caesar.
- (2) He lived a virtuous life.
- (3) He was a wonder-worker.
- (4) He had a brother named James.
- (5) He was acclaimed to be the Messiah.
- (6) He was crucified under Pontius Pilate.
- (7) He was crucified on the eve of the Jewish Passover.
- (8) Darkness and an earthquake occurred when he died.
- (9) His disciples believed he rose from the dead.

⁴² Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 578 (2017); Gary Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, pp. 386, 454, n.56 (2024); Justin Bass, *The Bedrock of Christianity*, pp. 85-86 (2020); Benjamin Shaw, *Trustworthy*, pp. 55-56 (2024); James Dunn in James Beilby & Paul Eddy, eds., *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, p. 96 (2009).

⁴³ James Dunn in James Beilby & Paul Eddy, eds., *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, p. 97 (2009); Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* p. 172 (2012); A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, p. 189 (1963) ("For Acts, the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming").

⁴⁴ James Dunn, "Response to Robert M. Price," in James Beilby & Paul Eddy, eds., *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, p. 97 (2009).

- (10) His disciples were willing to die for their belief.
- (11) Christianity spread rapidly as far as Rome.
- (12) His disciples denied the Roman gods and worshiped Jesus as God.⁴⁵

Thus, these many historical facts not only validate the consensus experts' agreement on Jesus' existence, but also bust the Jesus mythicists' theory.

V. Conclusion

Jesus' existence is a historical fact. Not only do the expert scholars overwhelmingly agree on Jesus' existence, but the mountain of historical evidence readily confirms these expert views. No other ancient records come close to this level of historical proof. Thus, the historical record firmly refutes the Jesus mythicists' theory and fully supports Jesus' existence.

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⁴⁵ Norman Geisler & Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist*, p. 223 (2004); see also Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, pp. 384-385 (1998) quoted in Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 60 (1999).