The Historical Jesus

**Introduction:** Some radical secularists actually claim that the Jesus described in the New Testament does not actually exist as a historical person. For example, Bertrand Russell, in his essay “Why I am Not a Christian”: “Historically, it is quite doubtful whether Christ ever existed at all, and if He did we do not know anything about Him.” In this lesson, we will examine the historical case for Christ’s existence.

**The Biblical Record of Jesus Christ**

* Birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 2:1-7)
* A Nazarene (Matthew 2:23; Luke 2:39-40; John 1:43-50)
* Life, teaching, miracles (The Gospel Accounts)
* Death by Crucifixion (Matthew 27:32-56; Mark 15:21-41; Luke 23:26-49; John 19:17-30)
* Resurrection from the Dead (Matthew 28:1-8; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-10; 1 Corinthians 15:1-5)
* Ascension into Heaven (Mark 16:19-20; Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:9-11)
* Assertion of Christ’s Lordship and Messiahship (Acts 2:22-36, among many others)

**Note:** The following extra-biblical witnesses are taken from Josh McDowell’s book, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (pages 119-136). Full quotes and documentation can be found there…

**Pagan Witnesses to the Historical Jesus** *(Note: Antagonistic toward Christian faith)*

* **Cornelius Tacitus** (Roman Historian 55-120, *Annals, Histories*). Relates that Nero blamed the burning of Rome upon the Christians. Notes that “Christus”, was the founder, and was put to death by “Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberias.”
* **Lucian of Samosata** (Greek satirist, latter half of second century). Spoke scornfully of Christ and Christians, but never argued Him to be mythical. “The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day – the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account…”
* **Seutonius** (Roman Historian during reign of Hadrian, *Life of Claudius*). Refers to the Jews being expelled from Rome (cf. Acts 18:2) in 49 A.D. “As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome.” Also notes in another work that Nero punished Christians in Rome for the fire in A.D. 64. By doing so, he puts Christians in Rome, suffering and dying for their conviction that Jesus was the crucified and resurrected Lord, only a few decades after the event.
* **Thallus** (A.D. 52, his writing exists only in fragments, quoted by others). Julius Africanus, a Christian (A.D. 221), quotes him, stating that Thallus refers to the darkness the afternoon of Christ’s crucifixion, attributing it to a solar eclipse, despite the fact it took place during the time of a full moon. (cf. Matthew 27:45) This indicates that the event was well known, and coincided with Christ’s death. Thus, necessitating a naturalistic explanation from non-Christians.
* **Phlegon** (*Chronicles*, exists only in quotes from others). Also affirmed that the darkening happened during a full moon. “During the time of Tiberius Caesar an eclipse of the sun occurred during the full moon.” Quoted by Julius Africanus, Origen in the third century, and Philopon, a sixth century writer.
* **Mara Bar-Serapion** (A.D. 70, Syrian, wrote a letter from prison to his son). He compares Jesus to the philosophers Socrates and Pythagorus. “What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King? It was just after that that their kingdom was abolished. God justly avenged these three wise men… Nor did the wise King die for good; He lived on in the teaching which He had given.”

**Jewish Witnesses to the Historical Jesus** *(Note: Antagonistic toward the Christian faith)*

* **The Babylonian Talmud** (edited 200 A.D., seeks to justify the crucifixion of Jesus). Identified the date of the crucifixion, alludes to His practice of sorcery, refers to Him as a Nazarene, uses the name Yeshua. A late 3rd century commentary on the Talmud, by Ammora, notes the importance of executing Him, stating that he was “near to the kingship” a possible reference to His geneology. A later passage refers to Him as a rabbi with followers. There are also derisive references to the claim he was born of a virgin. The Pharisees (cf. John 8:41) expressed the same derision.
* **The Testimonium of Josephus** (Jewish Antiquities, 37-100 A.D.) Note: italicized section may be a Christian addition:

“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 among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that love 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.

* **Josephus** (Antiquites XX, 9.1) He refers to the High Priest Ananus, who delivered James, the brother of “Jesus, the so-called Christ” to be stoned.

**Christian (extra-biblical) Witnesses to the Historical Jesus**

* **Clement of Rome** (Elder in Rome, end of first century, *Corinthians*, written to help settle a dispute in the church at Corinth). Affirmed that Jesus was sent from God, and that His message was authenticated by His resurrection from the dead.
* **Ignatius** (Elder in Antioch, wrote 7 letters, a disciple of Peter, Paul and John) Identified Jesus as the Son of David, born of virgin Mary, baptized by John, crucified at the order of Pontius Pilate, resurrected and the firstfruits from the dead. *(Trallians, 9; Smyrneans, 1; Magnesians, 11).*
* **Quadratus** (Elder in Athens, disciple of the apostles). Defended the faith to Roman Emperor Hadrian. Eusebius (125 A.D.) preserved the only lines of his defense that remain: “The deeds of our Savior were always before you, for they were true miracles; those that were healed, those that were raised from the dead, who were seen, not only when healed and when raised, but were always present. They remained living a long time, not only whilst our Lord was on earth, but likewise when he had left the earth. So that some of them have also lived to our own times.”
* **Justin Martyr** (100-167 A.D., one of the greatest of the early Christian apologists). Corroborated the existence of ancient Bethlehem, the census that brought Mary & Joseph there, the Magi going to Herod, the use of nails in Christ’s crucifixion, His ascension, the men known as Apostles, and His resurrection from the dead. *(Note: Some claim that the idea of a Christ resurrected from the dead was a fiction created at a later time. These early Christian writers corroborate the claims of the New Testament writers).*

**Conclusion:** Careful historians (even those who deny the Bible claims of His miracles, resurrection and ascension) attest to the historical Jesus. The evidence is conclusive that Jesus really did live among us. *“And the word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth”* (John 1:14).