

## **JESUS' HISTORICITY AND SOURCES: The Misuse of Extrabiblical Sources for Jesus and a Suggestion**

### **Abstract**

The view that Jesus never existed is a popular one, and the debate on it has been plagued with uncritical methodologies and evaluations of the current evidence that we have for Jesus of Nazareth. In the following article, it is argued that the extrabiblical evidence for Jesus does not strictly aid in establishing that there was a person in history named Jesus, but that it does further damage the positions of Jesus Skeptics that early Christians may have believed in a purely celestial figure, as this attests to quite the opposite, a belief in a human messiah.

### **Introduction**

It is a simple fact of the matter that there are numerous sources within around 150 years of his death that attest to a figure of Jesus of Nazareth in history.<sup>1</sup> They have been frequently been invoked in the ongoing debate on whether or not Jesus was a historical person (the so-called “Christ Myth” debate) in a variety of manners, with both sides (those being *historicists* and *Jesus Skeptics*,<sup>2</sup> called “skeptics” from here on out) usually promoting one stereotypical argument on each side.

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<sup>1</sup> For overview of these, see Craig A. Evans, “Jesus in Non-Christian Sources,” in Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans (eds.), *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), pp. 443-478 and Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> These being figures who have non-traditional and unaccepted views on Jesus, most commonly being mythicists (who deny Jesus existed) and Jesus agnostics (who argue we cannot conclude one way or the other whether Jesus lived).

For those who are convinced that the evidence is conclusive, and that Jesus lived, it is claimed to be overwhelmingly the case that it is such. Some go exceptionally far in this, such as Justin Bass, who remarks in his recent volume *The Bedrock of Christianity* (2020):

Tiberius was the most powerful man in the world of his day. Jesus was one of the poorest, belonging to the peasant class as a Jewish carpenter. He even died the most shameful death, a slave's death, on a cross during Tiberius' reign. Yet we have far more reliable written sources and closer to the time of Jesus' actual life and death than this Caesar of Rome.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, this position in its extreme is, quite simply, untenable and misleading. The evidence for Tiberius, even written, far surpasses that of Jesus (as it includes even contemporary references).<sup>4</sup> However, this shows what is the general state of the more conservative side of this debate, with the mere reality of sources for Jesus apparently turning him into one of the best attested figures in history, even

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<sup>3</sup> Justin Bass, *The Bedrock of Christianity: The Unalterable Facts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2020), p. 31. This factually incorrect claim has been repeated by others, see Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), p. 222 which they glean from an inaccurate overview in Gary Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004), p. 128. These claims can be widely found on the internet.

<sup>4</sup> We have coins of Tacitus, we have his villa, and then we have contemporary sources, see *Astronomical Canon* 4; Velleius Paterculus, *Roman History* 2.94-131; Philo of Alexandria, *Embassy to Gaius* (throughout), and what is more, Augustus Caesar himself talked of Tiberius, *The Deeds of Divine Augustus* 8. It is a simple fact that it so far passes the evidence for Jesus that the mere comparison is quite detrimental to historicists. Likewise, the claim that there is less evidence for Alexander the Great than for Jesus is unfounded, as Alexander has contemporary references which have been quoted and thus preserved in fragments, as well as coins, the Babylonian Chronicles, the Decree of Philippi, and more. For Alexander, see N. G. L. Hammond, *Sources for Alexander the Great: An Analysis of Plutarch's 'Life' and Arrian's 'Anabasis Alexandrou'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

(falsely) claimed to be better attested than one of the most notable Emperors of Rome. Less extreme forms have likewise been used by scholars like Gary Habermas, Christian Chiakulas, Murray J. Harris, Sean and Josh McDowell, and more, which has only led to this view becoming widely accepted among apologists.<sup>5</sup>

On the converse, the skeptics who have rejected the historicity of Jesus have systematically rejected the evidence for Jesus from extrabiblical sources as being either entirely useless in determining anything about him or denying that such extrabiblical evidence even exists in the first place. This is generally followed by listing a number of random figures who do not speak of Jesus. This is usually found in the form of an *argument from silence*, making the case that the absence of evidence is, in fact, evidence of absence. Kryvelev's remarks are quite typical of this position:

In the first century of our era, the time when we may suppose Jesus to have lived, there was already a rich literature written in Greek and Latin on the territory of the Roman Empire, and in Hebrew and Aramaic in Judea. It included literary as well as historical and philosophical works. To this period belonged several Jewish authors, among them the philosopher Philo of Alexandria (d. A.D. 54) and the historians Justus of Tiberias (second half of the first century) and

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<sup>5</sup> Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin: College Press, 1996), pp. 187-228; Christian Chiakulas, *The Carpenter's Son: A Proletarian Reconstruction of Jesus of Nazareth* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2019), pp. 14-21; Murray J. Harris, *Three Crucial Questions About Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008), pp. 13-30; Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*, Updated and Expanded (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017), pp. 143-158. For others who use these sources in a similar fashion, see Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content*, Enlarged Edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), pp. 73-78; I. Marshall Howard, *I Believe in the Historical Jesus*, Second Edition (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004), pp. 14-16; Carsten Peter Thiede, *Jesus, Man or Myth?* (Oxford: Lion, 2005), pp. 18-29.

Josephus Flavius (37-after 100); the versatile Greek writer Plutarch (40-120) and many Roman authors, among them the historians Tacitus (54-119), Pliny the Younger (61-113), and Suetonius (b. 75), the philosopher Seneca (d. 65), and the poets Lucan (39-65), Persius (34-62) and Juvenal (45-130), the versatile writer and scholar Pliny the Elder (23-79) and a host of other literary figures. Would it be reasonable to ask what these writers have to say, if anything, about Jesus, who was a contemporary of theirs?<sup>6</sup>

This argument is among one of the only which is almost universal among mythicists and agnostics.<sup>7</sup> In short, they first argue against any of the references we have being authentic or being utterly too late/worthless, and then add to it a further silence from other authors who never spoke of Jesus.

In what follows, I will make the case that the extrabiblical evidence is likely not that useful for establishing that Jesus did, in fact, exist as there are numerous epistemological problems with all of it, but that it *does*, however, aid historicists more than those who challenge the historicity of Jesus in one very important respect: it demonstrates that early Christians were not believing in a celestial Jesus, but one who had lived as a historical person on Earth. This

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<sup>6</sup> Iosif A. Kryvelev, *Christ: Myth or Reality?* (Moscow: USSR Academy of Sciences and "Social Sciences Today" Editorial Board, 1987), pp. 108-109

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Albert Kalthoff, *The Rise of Christianity*, Translated from Ger. by Joseph McCabe (London: Watts & Co., 1907), pp. 16-27; Yan Changyou, "Yesu – chuanshuo zhong de xugou renwu," *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* 2 (1983): 122-128 [In Chinese]; A. Ranovich, *Pervoistochiki po istorii rannego khristianstva: Antichnyye kritiki khristianstva*, Second Edition (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoy literatury, 1990), pp. 172-173, 208n4, 268 [In Russian]; Frank R. Zindler, *The Jesus the Jews Never Knew* (Cranford: American Atheist Press, 2003), pp. 13-14; Richard Carrier, *Jesus From Outer Space: What the Earliest Christians Really Believed about Christ* (Durham: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020), pp. 69-110.

provides a challenge to the arguments of that require earliest Christians to have been mystics believing in this non-physical and non-historical entity who performed his deeds outside the mortal realm.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Extrabiblical Evidence**

There are a number of sources written roughly within 150 years of when Jesus died which have been called forth as evidence for Jesus: Thallus, Pliny the Younger, Josephus, Tacitus, Celsus, Suetonius Mara bar Serapion, Lucian, Phlegon, and Galen. Further on from the 150-year mark are the Talmud and *Toledot Yeshu*, which also have occasionally been called on as evidence. In totality, these amount a rather substantial number of references which on the surface would seem to be rather overwhelmingly in favor of Jesus' existence to those not aware of the issues behind them.

What is particularly important with these sources, if they are actually attesting to a man named Jesus, is that they be *independent* witnesses to the historicity of Jesus. The reason that independence is important is because if they are not independent then they are reliant in some form on Christian tradition, and if they are then it means that they do not provide a clear knowledge that such a person existed, but what Christians believed about that person, regardless of whether or not he existed. This is, as a result, why the *criterion of multiple attestation* requires sources be independent for it to be validated.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> What Carrier calls "outer space," see Carrier, *Jesus From Outer Space*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Han Gregg, *The Historical Jesus and the Final Judgment Sayings in Q* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), pp. 28-29.

To begin, we can look at what I would consider the *reconstructed* sources, these being in the *Testimonium Flavianum* (TF) and book 20 of *Antiquities* by Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.3.3 and 20.9.1 respectively). While many academics would regard these as authentic,<sup>10</sup> the present author does find it likely that these were wholesale interpolations in the work of Josephus, based on the arguments of Ken Olson, Ivan Prchlík, and N. P. L. Allen.<sup>11</sup> However, we can assume for the sake of this endeavor that they may be, in fact, authentically Josephan in some manner. The problem following from this is that the TF is needing to be reconstructed, since we do not have what Josephus originally wrote. This has led a number of scholars to concluding usually either a negative or a neutral tone TF, but the reality is that all of these reconstructions are purely hypothetical.<sup>12</sup> As the TF is then a reconstruction and therefore hypothetical in nature, what is actually left to assess the reliability and independence? The reality is that not much is remaining that is usable in my estimation. Using a hypothetical reconstruction cannot garner independence critically since we are basing all evaluations on our own personalized reconstruction,<sup>13</sup> and I would argue that the TF

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<sup>10</sup> Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012), 57-66;

<sup>11</sup> Ken Olson, "Eusebius and the 'Testimonium Flavianum'," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (1999): 305-322 and "A Eusebian Reading of the Testimonium Flavianum," in Aaron Johnson and Jeremy Scott (eds.), *Eusebius of Caesarea: Tradition and Innovations* (Cambridge: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2013), pp. 97-114; Ivan Prchlík, "Ježíš řečený Christos' u Iosepha Flavია: Jistota nejistoty," in Peter Fraňo and Michal Habaj (eds.), *Antica Slavica* (Trnava, Univerzita sv. Cyrila a Metoda v Trnave 2018), pp. 77-152 and 280-286 [in Czech]; Nicholas P. L. Allen, "Josephus on James the Just? A re-evaluation of *Antiquitates Judaicae* 20.9.1," *Journal of Early Christian History* 7 (2017): 1-27.

<sup>12</sup> For examples, see Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, "Was the Hypothetical 'Vorlage' of the 'Testimonium Flavianum' a 'Neutral' Text? Challenging the Common Wisdom on 'Antiquitates Judaicae' 18.63-64," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 45, no. 3 (2014): 326-365 and Dave Allen, "An Original Negative *Testimonium*," *Journal of Higher Criticism* 15, no. 1 (2020): 67-90.

<sup>13</sup> R. T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing 2006), p. 30 calls it a matter of "personal opinion."

in its current state is of virtually no use at all. As Sanders notes:

A reference to Jesus in Josephus (*Ant.* 18.3.3 [63-4]) has been heavily revised by Christian scribes, and the original statement cannot be recovered.<sup>14</sup>

As such, we can agree with the positions of Ehrman and others that this does not really provide us with much to use, even if authentic. It is, at best, “only marginally relevant to the question of whether Jesus existed.”<sup>15</sup> Lataster rightfully, in criticism of Ehrman, notes we should always be wary of hypothetical sources and I would argue especially so in this case.<sup>16</sup> The TF, as it stands, is on the same or worse ground as the hypothetical Q source.<sup>17</sup>

This leaves only the small reference to James the brother of Jesus in *Antiquities* 20.9.1. Though this has too been suspected of interpolation,<sup>18</sup> even if authentic the single line is too small to actually make any solid case for it being independent. The reference to Jesus comes in just a few words, reading “[...] and presented before them [the Sanhedrin] the brother of Jesus, who was so-called Christ, whose name was James and a number of others” (Grk: *kaí*

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<sup>14</sup> E. P. Sanders, “Jesus Christ,” in David Noel Freedman (ed.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 702 Cf. E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1995), p. 50

<sup>15</sup> Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* p. 66.

<sup>16</sup> Raphael Lataster, “Bart Ehrman and the Elusive Historical Jesus,” *Literature & Aesthetics* 26 (2016): 181-192.

<sup>17</sup> I likewise agree with Goodacre that there was no such source, see Mark Goodacre, *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg: A&C Black, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> See note 11. For a rebuttal to this view, see Alice Whealey, “Josephus, Eusebius of Caesarea, and the *Testimonium Flavianum*,” in Christoph Böttrich, Jenz Herzer, and Torsten Reiprich (eds.), *Josephus und das Neue Testament* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), pp. 73-116.

*paragagón eis aphtó tón adelphón Iisoú tou legoménou Christoú, Iákovos ónoma aphtó*).<sup>19</sup> It is likewise to be noted, as Olson did, that this language was, in fact, in common usage by Christian writers of the time, including in the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>20</sup> Thus, even if authentic, we have little to no reason to suspect that it was independent of Christian tradition at all.

Likewise, we have similar problems with other sources. I will not go over Galen, Lucian, Thallus, Phlegon, Mara bar Serapion, Celsus, or Suetonius. These sources have largely been concluded to be dependent on Christian tradition in some manner by the majority of academics, and there is almost no reason to challenge this position.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, the Talmudic references and the *Toledot Yeshu* are most commonly thought to derive their information from Christians and polemicize it.<sup>22</sup> None of those references, in

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<sup>19</sup> Translation mine.

<sup>20</sup> Olson, "Eusebius and the 'Testimonium Flavianum'," p. 316.

<sup>21</sup> For Galen, see Gary Ferngren, "Galen and the Christians of Rome," *History of Medicine* 2, no. 3 (2015): 255-261 and Rebecca Flemming, "Galen and the Christians: Texts and Authority in the Second Century AD," in James Carleton Paget and Judith Lieu (eds.), *Christianity in the Second Century: Themes and Developments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 171-187. For Lucian, see Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, pp. 58-64. For Thallus, see Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, pp. 20-23 and Nicholas P. L. Allen, "Thallus and Phlegon: Solar Eclipse in Jerusalem c. 33 CE?" *Akroterion* 63 (2019): 73-93. For Phlegon, see Allen, "Thallus and Phelgon," pp. 79-81, 91. For Mara bar Serapion, see Petr Pokorný, "Jesus as the Ever-Living Lawgiver in the Letter of Mara bar Sarapion," in Annette Merz and Teun Tieleman (eds.), *The Letter of Mara bar Sarapion in Context: Proceedings of the Symposium Held at Utrecht University, 10-12 December 2009* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 129-139 and Annette Merz, David Rensberger, and Teun Tieleman (eds.), *Mara Bar Sarapion: Letter to His Son* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013). For Celsus and Suetonius, see Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, pp. 29-39, 64-68.

<sup>22</sup> Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, 131-132; Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, "An Ancient List of Christian Festivals in Toledot Yeshu: Polemics as Indication for Interaction," *Harvard Theological Review* 102, no. 4 (2009): 481-496; Michael Sokoloff, "The Date and Provenance of the Aramaic *Toledot Yeshu* on the Basis of Aramaic Dialectology," in Peter Schäfer, Michael Meerson, and Yaacov Deutsch (eds.), *Toledot Yeshu ("The Life Story of Jesus") Revisited* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 13-26; Ruth Mazo Karras, "The Aerial Battle in the *Toledot Yeshu* and Sodomy in the Late Middle Ages," *Medieval*



the opinions of the vast majority of academics,<sup>23</sup> can be said to be independent of Christian tradition. However, Pliny the Younger and Tacitus both are worth exploring for a moment.

Pliny the Younger in letter 10.96 of his collection,<sup>24</sup> recalls that he was placing Christians on trial, those who professed belief in Christ and “sung antiphonally a song to Christ as though to a god,” (Lat. *Carmenque Christo quasi deo dicere secum invicem*).<sup>25</sup> Of course, the primary issue here is that he admits outright that he gleaned this information from Christians through interrogating them, and the purpose of these letters is his writing to Trajan on how to punish them properly. Therefore, Pliny is most certainly and unquestionably reliant on Christian information for his knowledge. However, it is interesting that he calls Christ “*quasi deo*” as it indicates potentially that he recognized Jesus not as a god but *like* a god.<sup>26</sup> However, what is more relevant here is the possible connection he may have with Tacitus.

Tacitus references Jesus in *Annals* 15.44, where he notes that Nero placed the blame on them for the great fire of Rome.

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*Encounters* 19 (2013): 493-533. This is, once again, however, assuming the authenticity of these passages in the Talmud. These have, however, been challenged as well, see Johann Maier, *Jesus von Nazareth in der talmudischen Überlieferung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978) [in German]. I tend to favor Maier’s view.

<sup>23</sup> A bewildering attempt to argue the *Toledot Yeshu* and Talmudic sources were independent and, in fact, older than the Christian ones, was made in Jeffrey Querner, “Jesus is Honi the Circle Drawer,” *Journal of Higher Criticism* 13, no. 2 (2018): 38-82. The article claims, unconvincingly, that Jesus was Honi the Circle Drawer.

<sup>24</sup> Assuming it is authentic, though a recent stylometric analysis may indicate that it is not, see Enrico Tuccinardi, “An application of a profile-based method for authorship verification: Investigating the authenticity of Pliny the Younger’s letter to Trajan concerning the Christians,” *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 32, no. 2 (2017): 435-447.

<sup>25</sup> Translation mine.

<sup>26</sup> Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, pp. 28-29 notes that the usage of *quasi* by Pliny is inconsistent and the evidence is inconclusive. Thus, ultimately the passage may not be of usage to historicists, Jesus agnostics, or mythicists.

In this, he uses this as a brief digression to talk about how Christianity began, noting that the founder of the *chrestian* movement was named *Christus* and was killed under Pontius Pilate. The reference is by and large considered authentic and arguments against its authenticity have failed to be persuasive.<sup>27</sup> However, with this we are left wondering where this information came from. Though the language is typically Tacitean and, in fact, does not bear much resemblance to Christian writings, a number of arguments have been made that he is basing his writing either off of information he garnered from Christians,<sup>28</sup> possibly from reading Josephus' TF,<sup>29</sup> or possibly from Pliny the Younger himself.<sup>30</sup> The arguments for independence, largely hinged on possible

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<sup>27</sup> Most recently, see Richard Carrier, "The Prospect of a Christian Interpolation in Tacitus, Annals 15.44," *Vigiliae Christianae* 68 (2014): 264–283. For response, see Willem Blom, "Why the Testimonium Taciteum Is Authentic: A Response to Carrier," *Vigiliae Christianae* 73, no. 5 (2019): 564–581; Ivan Prchlik, "Auctor Nominis Eius Christus. Tacitus' knowledge of the origins of Christianity," *Philologica* 2 (2017): 95–110, specifically 97n17. Ultimately, none of Carrier's conclusions work. The reading of *chrestian* is common in reference to Christians, see Walter Shandruk, "The Interchange of  $\iota$  and  $\eta$  in Spelling  $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau$ - in Documentary Papyri," *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 47 (2010): 205–219. In fact, we even have cases where the same inscriber used both readings at once, see Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, p. 35. Likewise, that the Neronian persecution is likely fiction is not a particular reason to disregard authenticity, see Brent D. Shaw, "The Myth of Neronian Persecution," *Journal of Religious Studies* 105 (2015): 73–100. The interpolation theory also seems to be defended by Nicholas P. L. Allen, see "Clarifying the Scope of Pre-5th Century C.E. Christian Interpolation in Josephus' *Antiquitates Judaica* (c. 94 C.E.)," Ph.D. Diss. (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom Campus North-West University, 2015), pp. 50–54, however the argumentation is, like Carrier's, exceptionally unconvincing.

<sup>28</sup> This is the dominant position in scholarship today: Archibald Robertson, *The Origins of Christianity*, Revised Edition (New York: International Publishers, 1962), pp. 92–93; R. Joseph Hoffmann, *Jesus Outside the Gospels* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1984), pp. 59–60; France, *The Evidence For Jesus*, pp. 21–23; Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, pp. 49–50; Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, pp. 49–53; Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?*, 54–56; Prchlik, "Auctor Nominis Eius Christus."

<sup>29</sup> Franz DornsiEFF, "Lukas der Schriftsteller. Mit einem Anhang: Josephus und Tacitus," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 35 (1936): 148–55 [in German].

<sup>30</sup> Richard Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus: Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014), pp. 342–343. Carrier ultimately argues the passage is an interpolation, albeit unconvincingly. Pliny and Tacitus did communicate, see letters 6.16, 6.20, 7.33 and more.

records kept by Roman officials,<sup>31</sup> have been discredited by Van Voorst.<sup>32</sup> In short, there is no reason to consider this independent of either Christians or other sources. If reliant on Josephus, then we are back to the issue that the TF is hypothetical and its independence indeterminate (at best). If reliant on Pliny, then this is not independent of Christian tradition but is, by the proxy of Pliny, using Christian information. And then, lastly, it could be directly reliant on Christian witnesses themselves.

As such, none of the extrabiblical sources that we have can, under scrutiny, be said to be independent witnesses to the life of Jesus. In this regard, it must be admitted fairly that skeptics have been correct. Probably the most astute of these has been Thomas L. Brodie, who is willing to conclude that the passages in Josephus are authentic, but is still able to argue they are not independent, which he likewise does for Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, and Lucian.<sup>33</sup> However, while the skeptics are seemingly correct on this basic issue, this does not mean these sources are not actually lacking usefulness (save for Josephus, in my view) for historicists. To the contrary, a more nuanced approach sees that there is a rather major way in which they do help in the case against skeptics and their doubts on Jesus' historicity.

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<sup>31</sup> F. F. Bruce, "Tacitus on Jewish History," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 29, no. 1 (1984): 33-44; Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 189; Lester L. Grabbe, "'Jesus Who Is Called Christ': References to Jesus outside Christian Sources," in Thomas L. Thompson and Thomas S. Verenna (eds.), *Is This Not the Carpenter?': The Question of the Historicity of the Figure of Jesus* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2011), pp. 57-70; Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man From Galilee*, Second Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), p. 39.

<sup>32</sup> Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, pp. 50-52.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas L. Brodie, *Beyond the Quest for the Historical Jesus: Memoir of a Discovery* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), pp. 162-168.

## The Silence Issue and How These Sources Help

The reality of the situation is that if Jesus was a historical person (the most probable scenario historically), we would not expect much of any information to be written about him at all from non-Christian historians and authors, for multiple reasons.

Firstly, Jesus is presented as being a member of a lower proletarian class and so were his followers. As such, there is no reason to think any of them would write during his lifetime or soon after.<sup>34</sup> Instead Jesus' life became important to write down (and only able to) in retrospective scenarios.<sup>35</sup> Secondly, proletarian individuals were simply not the concern of historians of the time, who were primarily wealthy individuals, as learning to write was a bourgeois activity.<sup>36</sup> Thirdly, Jewish people in general were not commonly written about. Even Josephus has no contemporary references outside of his own writings. The best attested Jewish figures would be Peter, James, John and a handful of others referenced by the contemporary Paul, followed by Paul himself and Josephus. Even the high priest Caiaphas fails to have much more remaining than what is provided in the Gospels and Josephus, all writing decades after his life.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Chris Keith, *The Pericope Adulterae, the Gospel of John, and the Literacy of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 2009) and *Jesus' Literacy: Scribal Culture and the Teacher from Galilee* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

<sup>35</sup> Justin J. Meggitt, "Was the historical Jesus an Anarchist? Anachronism, anarchism, and the historical Jesus," in Alexandre Christoyannopoulos and Matthew S. Adams (eds.), *Essays in Anarchism and Religion*, Volume 1 (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, 2017), pp. 124-197, specifically 127.

<sup>36</sup> Keith, *The Pericope Adulterae*, p. 72 and Chloë N. Duckworth and Andrew Wilson, *Recycling and Reuse in Roman Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 100-101.

<sup>37</sup> The ossuaries have since been shown to not correspond to the name Caiaphas and therefore cannot count as evidence for the high priest, see William Horbury, "The 'Caiaphas' Ossuaries and Joseph Caiaphas," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 126, no. 1 (1994): 32-48 and Helen K. Bond, *Caiaphas: Friend of Rome and Judge of Jesus?* (Louisville:

Fourthly, every ancient historian/writer that skeptics claim should have referenced Jesus (such as Philo of Alexandria), never mention Christians in general and as such would not be expected to talk of Christianity's founder.<sup>38</sup> As such, they are wholly irrelevant and simply validate the points made above.<sup>39</sup>

As such, the argument from silence is quite worthless when applied to Jesus and may, in fact, be argued to be implicitly classist, since if applied consistently it would have us deny the existence of all first-century Jews never referenced by ancient sources, i.e. 99.9% of ancient Palestine. As Justin J. Meggitt remarks poignantly:

To deny his [Jesus'] existence based on the absence of such evidence, even if that were the case, has problematic implications; you may as well deny the existence of pretty much everyone in the ancient world.<sup>40</sup>

As such, these sources do clarify one thing. Jesus was important in *retrospect* to ancient authors outside of Christianity, but primarily as a result of Christianity's

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Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp. 1-8. There are enough linguistic and situational issues that the evidence is inconclusive at best.

<sup>38</sup> Some examples are simply nonsensical. Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus*, p. 293 brings up sources such as Nicolaus of Damascus (who died before Jesus would have even been an adult) and Justus of Tiberias, who does not have any surviving sources (we must rely on the, occasionally shoddy, testimony of Photius, *Library* 33).

<sup>39</sup> For more on popular sources, see Justin J. Meggitt, "Sources: Use, Abuse, Neglect. The Importance of Ancient Popular Culture," in Edward Adams and David G. Horrell (ed.), *Christianity At Corinth: The Quest for the Pauline Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp. 241-254 and "Popular Mythology in the Early Empire and the Multiplicity of Jesus Traditions," in R. Joseph Hoffmann (ed.), *Sources of the Jesus Tradition: Separating History From Myth* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2010), pp. 55-80.

<sup>40</sup> Justin J. Meggitt, "'More Ingenious Than Learned'? Examining the Quest for the Non-Historical Jesus," *New Testament Studies* 65 (2019): 443-460, specifically 459.

growth, not because Jesus was an innately noteworthy person to them. But they also tell us one more thing, which mythicists, Jesus agnostics, and historicists have often overlooked in favor of trying to get on top of the historicity issue itself: they demonstrate a *lack* of mystic Christians believing in a purely celestial Jesus.

While skeptics will attempt to appeal to Trypho (errantly) as an example of an early figure who doubted that Jesus lived,<sup>41</sup> the reality of the situation is that there are no such claims made in our ancient sources if one critically evaluates the evidence.<sup>42</sup> Trypho speaks only of Jesus not being the *messiah* (i.e. Christians “invent” a messiah for themselves, not a Jesus). And likewise, none of these other ancient sources attest to such beliefs either, which one would actively expect if there were such mystic Christians in existence, especially since Carrier and others would hold (again errantly) that *Ascension of Isaiah* is evidence of this.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Kryvelev, *Christ*, p. 166; Zindler, *The Jesus the Jews Never Knew*, p. 71-72; Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus*, p. 340; and for a more cautious approach, see Raphael Lataster, *Questioning the Historicity of Jesus: How a Philosophical Analysis Elucidates the Historical Discourse* (Leiden: Rodopi, 2019), p. 236.

<sup>42</sup> For rebuttal on Trypho, see Archibald Robertson, *Jesus: Myth or History?* (London: Watts & Co., 1946), pp. 25-26, 74 and *The Origins of Christianity*, pp. 91-92; Alice Whealey, “Josephus on Jesus: Historical Criticism and the Testimonium Flavianum Controversy from Late Antiquity to Modern Times,” PhD Diss. (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley, 1998), pp. 171-172n61; and Paul Rhoades Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), pp. 166, 168-170, 198. There is simply no reason to accept the skeptic view of this passage whatsoever. Contextually it makes no sense, and internally none of the language is clearly indicative of that. If Trypho had wanted to indicate Jesus never existed, why would he use the term for “messiah” instead of Jesus’ name, which he uses several times? Such issues go unanswered by skeptics.

<sup>43</sup> This is based on their outdated assumptions that the so-called “long ending” is inauthentic, see Carrier, *On the Historicity of Jesus*, pp. 36-48. This, however, was refuted in more detailed scholarship that Carrier and others have failed to consult, see Enrico Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiae: Commentarius* (Turnhout and Belgium: Brepols), pp. 535-538; Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 363-390; Pablo M. Edo, “A Revision of the Origin and Role of the Supporting Angels in the Gospel of Peter (10:39b),” *Vigiliae Christianae* 68, no. 2 (2014): 206-225. Even without the long ending, it is still presupposed by the cosmology of the text that Jesus appears on earth as a man, see L. R. Lanzillotta, “The Cosmology of

But to the contrary, all of our sources indicate a historical figure was believed by Christians and so we actually have created, as a result, a reverse argument from silence on ancient mythicism. Likewise, no Christian sources rebut to such a concept. At best, the only exception to this could be Pliny the Younger who references Jesus as “*quasi deo*”; however, this just as easily could be a reference to Jesus being thought of as a human as just a god. As such, there is simply nothing to aid skeptics from the ancient evidence. The evidence for a mythical Jesus is, in fact, quite lacking and it requires (except on Brodie’s model) complicated and unreasonable (mis)interpretations of Paul and the *Ascension of Isaiah* in order to even properly work.<sup>44</sup> This does leave skeptics in a precarious position, which James D. G. Dunn spoke upon:

The fact of Christianity’s beginnings and the character of its earliest tradition is such that we could only deny the existence of Jesus by hypothesizing the existence of some other figure who was a sufficient cause of Christianity’s beginnings—another figure who on careful reflection would probably come out very like Jesus!<sup>45</sup>

It simply appears that, to paraphrase Trypho, skeptics have invented for themselves a Jesus, one unattested in the records of ancient history. With this, it is the onus of those

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the Ascension of Isaiah: Analysis and Re-Assessment of the Text’s Cosmological Framework,” in Jan N. Bremmer, Thomas R. Karmann, and Tobias Nicklas (eds.), *The Ascension of Isaiah* (Leuven: Peeters, 2016), pp. 235-258; Jan Dochhorn, “‘World’ (Ἄλφ) in the Ascension of Isaiah,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 94 (2018): 241-256; M. David Litwa, *How the Gospels Became History* (New Haven: Yale Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 37-39.

<sup>44</sup> For rebuttal, see Simon Gathercole, “The Historical and Human Existence of Jesus in Paul’s Letters,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 16, no. 2-3 (2018): 183-212.

<sup>45</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), p. 29.

who argue for a celestial Jesus being original to explain why there is no unambiguous evidence that such a development ever took place, and that no early sources purport such a view to have ever existed.

## **Conclusions**

Given all of this, there are two general things which can be taken away from this analysis of the extrabiblical evidence for Jesus. Firstly, that it does not actually aid historicists in concluding that Jesus did exist as a historical person, at least not in any direct fashion. None of the sources can be demonstrated with any certainty to have been independent and, as such, at best they remain in a state of limbo as to their usefulness in establishing whether or not Jesus actually lived. In their current state, they fail to pass the criterion of multiple attestation.

Secondly, there is a way in which they do still aid historicists and which, in the view of the present author, should instead be pursued. They demonstrate that early Christians by the end of the first century were not believing in a purely celestial Jesus who lived and died in the Heavens or “outer space” but instead came to earth as a person, and lived and died among people. It is simply the case that none of the evidence that skeptics have provided stands up to scrutiny. Likewise, the extrabiblical evidence does not stand up either on Jesus’ historicity.

With this re-evaluation, it is hoped that those involved in this debate will be better prepared to use these sources more critically and without simply discussing blanket historicity issues with them, but more pressing matters such as the development of early Christianity and the complete lack of any attestation of a mythic Christ.



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