

“Where Are the References to Jesus From His Lifetime?”

Dr. Michael Gleghorn

I’m not a Christian but I have a great appreciation for a lot of the messages attributed to Jesus in the writings about him.

The idea that Jesus was, in fact, a real person seems to rely 100% on hearsay. I have read a lot of the strong arguments against a historical Christ and they all note the major flaw in the evidence you have put forth in your article: Not one of the men you named lived when Jesus supposedly did. All of their references to him are made by people born decades after the crucifixion supposedly happened. This holds true for every single reference I have ever seen. If there are any mentions of Jesus as a real person that were written or recorded during the time he supposedly lived, I would greatly appreciate you sending them to me. I say that not as a challenge to you but as someone who truly wants to know all there is to know about the subject. I am fascinated by this and I would hate to have made a decision without all of the available information.

I’m not disregarding any post mortem references to Jesus in history as being unimportant to the argument for his existence but I feel they would be excellent companions to support any actual contemporary evidence. I’m looking for any mention of him in the records of any historian living in his time. Such record keepers as Philo Judaeus or Pliny the Elder, who both lived in the area at the time that Jesus supposedly lived and died never mention him or any of the stories attributed to him in the New Testament. They are not the only reliable sources for such contemporary references but they certainly would have heard of Jesus Christ. Also, the Romans kept records but I have not heard of any mention of Jesus made

by the Romans during his lifetime. This seems odd considering the fame and following Jesus is given in the stories of the Bible.

Thanks for your letter. I'm glad to see that you're researching this important issue and really taking it seriously.

I'll offer a few comments in response to your letter, but I will also list a few resources that will allow you to go much deeper than I can do over email. Also, although I have some knowledge in this area (and am interested in gaining more), I really don't have the same level of expertise as the resources that I will mention at the end of this letter.

First, by way of responding specifically to your main question, as far as I'm aware we have no written testimony regarding the life of Jesus that dates to his own lifetime.

On the other hand, I personally believe that it would be a rather unwarranted leap to draw the conclusion that, because of this, Jesus of Nazareth was not an actual historical person, or even to draw the conclusion that the information that we do have about him is therefore untrustworthy or unreliable. What many people don't realize is that the New Testament writings themselves, including the Gospels, constitute our earliest and best sources of historical information about the life and ministry of Jesus. And this fact is recognized not only by conservative scholars, but by the broad spectrum of religious and theological scholarship.

Moreover, even those scholars who doubt that the Gospels are historically reliable in all that they affirm would still acknowledge that they contain much reliable history about the life, ministry, and death of Jesus. With only a few exceptions, the vast majority of scholars qualified to comment on this issue would not hesitate for a moment to declare that Jesus of Nazareth was a real figure of history, nor would they hesitate to say that the Gospels give us much (or at least some) historically reliable information about him. To see this, one need only remember that even very radical New Testament scholars, like John Dominic Crossan, do not doubt

that Jesus was a real figure of history, nor do they doubt that the Gospels preserve at least some historically reliable information about him.

Additionally, some of the traditions about Jesus appear to be very early - far too early to have been contaminated by later, legendary developments. For example, the German commentator on Mark, Rudolph Pesch, has argued that the passion story in Mark's Gospel probably dates to within seven years of Jesus' death. This is because the High Priest is never mentioned by name in this section of the Gospel. It's as if I was to say something about what the "President" said today. You would know I was talking about George Bush (the current President). After the election, if I wanted to refer to something that George Bush said, I would have to specify that (for then a different President will be in power). Since Mark never mentions the High Priest by name, he is very likely referring to the High Priest that held power at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. But this was Caiphias, who ruled from A.D. 18 - 37. If Jesus was crucified in A.D. 30, then Mark's passion narrative must date to within seven years of Jesus' death. This makes the legendary hypothesis extremely untenable - for legends simply do not arise that quickly.

Finally, please allow me to recommend some good books and articles. The questions raised in regard to Jesus must be dealt with in much more detail than I can do over email:

1. *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel
2. *The Historical Jesus* by Gary Habermas
3. *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* by Craig Blomberg
4. *Reasonable Faith* (2008 edition) by William Lane Craig
5. *Reinventing Jesus* by Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace
6. William Lane Craig's website, www.reasonablefaith.org. Dr. Craig has a number of scholarly articles on the historical Jesus available here:

www.reasonablefaith.org/site/PageServer?pagename=scholarly_articles_historical_Jesus. Also, here is a link to a debate on the historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection between Dr. Craig and Dr. Bart Ehrman:

www.holycross.edu/departments/crec/website/resurrection-debate-transcript.pdf.

Dr. Ehrman is an ex-evangelical New Testament scholar and is a leading authority in his field. Hence, this debate will really give you two top scholars debating the historicity of Jesus' resurrection.

7. Articles about Jesus from the trustworthy Bible.org website:
www.bible.org/topic.php?topic_id=6

Wishing you all the best in your continued research!

Michael Gleghorn

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