

[Source of this information](#)

The historical documents referring to [Christ's life](#) and work may be divided into three classes: [pagan](#) sources, Jewish sources, and [Christian](#) sources. We shall study the three in succession.

Pagan sources

The non-Christian sources for the historical [truth](#) of the Gospels are both few and polluted by [hatred](#) and prejudice. A number of reasons have been advanced for this condition of the [pagan](#) sources:

- The field of the Gospel history was remote [Galilee](#) ;
- the [Jews](#) were noted as a [superstitious](#) race, if we believe Horace (*Credat Judoews Apella*, I, Sat., v, 100);
- the [God](#) of the [Jews](#) was unknown and unintelligible to most [pagans](#) of that period;
- the [Jews](#) in whose midst [Christianity](#) had taken its origin were dispersed among, and [hated](#) by, all the [pagan](#) nations;
- the [Christian religion](#) itself was often confounded with one of the many [sects](#) that had sprung up in [Judaism](#), and which could not excite the interest of the [pagan](#) spectator.

It is at least certain that neither [Jews](#) nor [Gentiles](#) suspected in the least the paramount importance of the religion, the rise of which they witnessed among them. These considerations will account for the rarity and the asperity with which [Christian](#)

events are mentioned by

[pagan](#)

authors. But though

[Gentile](#)

writers do not give us any information about Christ and the early stages of

[Christianity](#)

which we do not possess in the Gospels, and though their statements are made with unconcealed

[hatred](#)

and contempt, still they unwittingly prove the historical value of the facts related by the

[Evangelists](#)

.

We need not delay over a writing entitled the "Acts of Pilate", which must have existed in the second century ([Justin](#) , "Apol"., I, 35), and must have been used in the [pagan schools](#) to warn boys against the

[belief](#)

of

[Christians](#)

(

[Eusebius](#)

,

[Church History](#)

[I.9](#)

;

[Church History](#)

[IX.5](#)

); nor need we inquire into the question whether there existed any authentic census tables of Quirinius.

Tacitus

We possess at least the testimony of Tacitus (A.D. 54-119) for the statements that the [Founder of the Christian religion](#)

, a deadly

[superstition](#)

in the eyes of the Romans, had been

[put to death](#)

by the

[procurator](#)

[Pontius Pilate](#)

under the reign of

[Tiberius](#)

; that His religion, though suppressed for a time, broke forth again not only throughout [Judea](#) where it had originated, but even in [Rome](#), the conflux of all the streams of [wickedness](#) and shamelessness; furthermore, that [Nero](#) had diverted from himself the suspicion of the burning of [Rome](#) by charging the [Christians](#) with the crime; that these latter were not guilty of arson, though they deserved their fate on account of their universal misanthropy. Tacitus, moreover, describes some of the horrible torments to which [Nero](#) subjected the [Christians](#) (Ann., XV, xlv). The Roman writer confounds the [Christians](#) with the [Jews](#), considering them as a especially abject Jewish [sect](#); how little he investigated the historical [truth](#) of even the Jewish records may be inferred from the credulity with which he accepted the absurd legends and [calumnies](#) about the origin of the Hebrew people (Hist., V, iii, iv).

Suetonius

Another Roman writer who shows his acquaintance with Christ and the [Christians](#) is Suetonius (A.D. 75-160). It has been noted that Suetonius considered Christ (Chrestus) as a Roman insurgent who stirred up seditions under the reign of Claudius (A.D. 41-54): "Judaeos, impulsore Chresto, assidue tumultuantes (Claudius) Roma expulit" (Clau., xxv). In his life of [Nero](#) he regards that emperor as a public benefactor on account of his severe treatment of the [Christians](#): "Multa sub eo et animadversa severe, et coercita, nec minus instituta . . . afflicti Christiani, genus hominum superstitious novae et maleficae" (Nero, xvi). The Roman writer does not understand that the Jewish troubles arose from the Jewish antagonism to the [Messianic](#)

character of
[Jesus Christ](#)
and to the
[rights](#)
of the
[Christian Church](#)

Pliny the Younger

Of greater importance is the letter of Pliny the Younger to the [Emperor Trajan](#) (about A.D. 61-115), in which the Governor of Bithynia consults his imperial majesty as to how to deal with the [Christians](#)

living within his
[jurisdiction](#)

. On the one hand, their lives were confessedly innocent; no crime could be
[proved](#)
against them excepting their
[Christian](#)
[belief](#)

, which appeared to the Roman as an extravagant and perverse
[superstition](#)

. On the other hand, the
[Christians](#)

could not be shaken in their allegiance to Christ, Whom they celebrated as their
[God](#)

in their early morning meetings (Ep., X, 97, 98).

[Christianity](#)

here appears no longer as a religion of criminals, as it does in the texts of Tacitus and Suetonius; Pliny acknowledges the high moral principles of the

[Christians](#)

, admires their constancy in the Faith (*pervicacia et inflexibilis obstinatio*

), which he appears to trace back to their worship of Christ (*carmenque Christo, quasi Deo, dicere*).

Other pagan writers

The remaining [pagan](#) witnesses are of less importance: In the second century Lucian sneered at Christ and the [Christians](#), as he scoffed at the [pagan](#) gods. He alludes to [Christ's death on the Cross](#)

, to His [miracles](#)
, to the mutual [love](#) prevailing among the [Christians](#) ("Philopseudes", nn. 13, 16; "De Morte Peregr"). There are also alleged allusions to Christ in Numenius ([Origen](#) , [Against Celsus](#) [IV.51](#)), to His parables in Galerius, to the earthquake at the Crucifixion in Phlegon ([Origen](#) , [Against Celsus](#) [II.14](#)). Before the end of the second century, the *logos alethes* of Celsus, as quoted by [Origen](#) ([Contra Celsus](#) , *passim*), testifies that at that time the facts related in the Gospels were generally accepted as historically [true](#) . However scanty the [pagan](#) sources of the life of Christ may be, they bear at least testimony to His existence, to His [miracles](#) , His parables, His claim to Divine worship, His death on the Cross, and to the more striking characteristics of His religion.

Jewish sources

Philo

[Philo](#) , who dies after A.D. 40, is mainly important for the light he throws on certain modes of thought and phraseology found again in some of the [Apostles](#) . [Eusebius](#) ([Church History](#) [II.4](#)) indeed preserves a legend that [Philo](#)

had met St. Peter in

[Rome](#)

during his mission to the Emperor Caius; moreover, that in his work on the contemplative life he describes the life of the

[Christian Church in Alexandria](#)

founded by St. Mark, rather than that of the

[Essenes](#)

and Therapeutae. But it is hardly probable that

[Philo](#)

had heard enough of Christ and His followers to give an historical foundation to the foregoing legends.

Josephus

The earliest non-Christian writer who refers Christ is the Jewish historian [Flavius Josephus](#); born A.D. 37, he was a contemporary of the Apostles, and died in

[Rome](#)

A.D. 94. Two passages in his "Antiquities" which confirm two facts of the

[inspired Christian records](#)

are not disputed. In the one he reports the

[murder](#)

of

["John called Baptist"](#)

by

[Herod](#)

(Ant., XVIII, v, 2), describing also John's character and work; in the other (Ant., XX, ix, 1) he disapproves of the sentence pronounced by the

[high priest](#)

Ananus against "James,

[brother of Jesus](#)

Who was called Christ." It is antecedently probable that a writer so well informed as

[Josephus](#)

, must have been well acquainted too with the

[doctrine](#)

and the history of

[Jesus Christ](#)

. Seeing, also, that he records events of minor importance in the history of the

[Jews](#)

, it would be surprising if he were to keep silence about

[Jesus Christ](#)

. Consideration for the

[priests](#)

and

[Pharisees](#)

did not prevent him from mentioning the judicial

[murders](#)

of

[John the Baptist](#)

and the Apostle James; his endeavour to find the fulfilment of the

[Messianic](#)

prophecies in

[Vespasian](#)

did not induce him to pass in silence over several Jewish

[sects](#)

, though their tenets appear to be inconsistent with the

[Vespasian](#)

claims. One naturally expects, therefore, a notice about

[Jesus Christ](#)

in

[Josephus](#)

.

Antiquities

XVIII, iii, 3, seems to satisfy this expectation:

About this time appeared [Jesus](#), a wise man (if indeed it is right to call Him man; for He was a worker of astonishing deeds, a teacher of such men as receive the

[truth](#)

with

[joy](#)

), and He drew to Himself many

[Jews](#)

(many also of Greeks. This was the Christ.) And when

[Pilate](#)

, at the denunciation of those that are foremost among us, had condemned Him to the cross, those who had first

[loved](#)

Him did not abandon Him (for He appeared to them alive again on the third day, the holy

[prophets](#)

having foretold this and countless other marvels about Him.) The tribe of

[Christians](#)

named after Him did not cease to this day.

A testimony so important as the foregoing could not escape the work of the critics. Their conclusions may be reduced to three headings: those who consider the passage wholly spurious; those who consider it to be wholly authentic; and those who consider it to be a little of each.

Those who regard the passage as spurious

First, there are those who consider the whole passage as spurious. The principal reasons for this view appear to be the following:

- [Josephus](#) could not represent [Jesus Christ](#) as a simple moralist, and on the other hand he could not emphasize the [Messianic](#) prophecies and expectations without offending the Roman susceptibilities;
- the above cited passage from [Josephus](#) is said to be unknown to [Origen](#) and the earlier patristic writers;
- its very place in the Josephan text is uncertain, since [Eusebius](#) ([Church History II.6](#)) must have found it before the notices concerning [Pilate](#), while it now stands after them.

But the spuriousness of the disputed Josephan passage does not imply the historian's [ignorance](#) of the facts connected with [Jesus Christ](#).

[Josephus's](#) report of his own juvenile precocity before the Jewish teachers (Vit., 2) reminds one of the story of [Christ's](#) stay in the Temple at the age of twelve; the description of his shipwreck on his journey to [Rome](#) (Vit., 3) recalls [St. Paul's](#) shipwreck as told in the Acts; finally his arbitrary introduction of a deceit practised by the [priests](#) of Isis on a Roman lady, after the chapter containing his supposed allusion to [Jesus](#), shows a disposition to explain away the virgin birth of [Jesus](#) and to prepare the falsehoods embodied in the later Jewish writings.

Those who regard the passage as authentic, with some spurious additions

A second class of critics do not regard the whole of [Josephus's](#) testimony concerning Christ

as spurious but they maintain the interpolation of parts included above in parenthesis. The reasons assigned for this opinion may be reduced to the following two:

- [Josephus](#) must have mentioned [Jesus](#), but he cannot have recognized Him as the Christ; hence part of our present Josephan text must be genuine, part must be interpolated.
- Again, the same conclusion follows from the fact that [Origen](#) [knew](#) a Josephan text about [Jesus](#), but was not acquainted with our present reading; for, according to the great Alexandrian doctor, [Josephus](#) did not believe that [Jesus](#) was the [Messias](#) ("In Matth.", xiii, 55; [Against Celsus](#) I.47).

Whatever force these two arguments have is lost by the fact that [Josephus](#) did not write for the [Jews](#) but for the Romans; consequently, when he says, "This was the Christ", he does not necessarily imply that [Jesus](#) was the Christ considered by the Romans as the founder of the [Christian religion](#).

Those who consider it to be completely genuine

The third class of scholars believe that the whole passage concerning [Jesus](#), as it is found today in [Josephus](#), is genuine. The main arguments for the genuineness of the Josephan passage are the following:

- First, all [codices](#) or [manuscripts](#) of [Josephus's](#) work contain the text in question; to maintain the spuriousness of the text, we must suppose that all the copies of [Josephus](#) were in the hands of [Christians](#), and were changed in the same way.
- Second, it is [true](#) that neither [Tertullian](#) nor [St. Justin](#) makes use of [Josephus's](#)

passage concerning

[Jesus](#)

; but this silence is probably due to the contempt with which the contemporary

[Jews](#)

regarded

[Josephus](#)

, and to the relatively little authority he had among the Roman readers. Writers of the age of

[Tertullian](#)

and

[Justin](#)

could appeal to living witnesses of the

[Apostolic tradition](#)

.

- Third, [Eusebius](#) ("Hist. Eccl.", I, xi; cf. "Dem. Ev.", III, v) [Sozomen](#) ([Church History](#) [I.1](#)

), Niceph. (Hist. Eccl., I, 39),

[Isidore of Pelusium](#)

(Ep. IV, 225),

[St. Jerome](#)

(catal.script. eccles. xiii),

[Ambrose](#)

,

[Cassiodorus](#)

, etc., appeal to the testimony of

[Josephus](#)

; there must have been no

[doubt](#)

as to its authenticity at the time of these illustrious writers.

- Fourth, the complete silence of [Josephus](#) as to [Jesus](#) would have been a more eloquent testimony than we possess in his present text; this latter contains no statement incompatible with its Josephan authorship: the Roman reader needed the information that

[Jesus](#)

was the Christ, or the founder of the

[Christian religion](#)

; the wonderful works of

[Jesus](#)

and His

[Resurrection from the dead](#)

were so incessantly urged by the

[Christians](#)

that without these attributes the Josephan

[Jesus](#)

would hardly have been acknowledged as the founder of

[Christianity](#)

.

All this does not necessarily imply that [Josephus](#) regarded [Jesus](#) as the Jewish [Messias](#); but, even if he had been convinced of His Messiahship, it does not follow that he would have become a [Christian](#). A number of possible subterfuges might have supplied the Jewish historian with apparently sufficient reasons for not embracing [Christianity](#).

Other Jewish sources

The historical character of [Jesus Christ](#) is also attested by the hostile Jewish literature of the subsequent centuries. His birth is ascribed to an illicit ("Acta Pilati" in Thilo, "Codex apocryph. N.T.", I, 526; cf. [Justin](#), "Apol.", I, 35), or

even an adulterous, union of His [parents](#)

(
[Origen](#)

,
[Against Celsus](#)
[I.28 and I.32](#)

). The father's name is Panthera, a common soldier (Gemara "Sanhedrin", viii; "Schabbath", xii, cf. Eisenmenger, "Entdecktes Judenthum", I, 109; Schottgen, "Horae Hebraicae", II, 696; Buxtorf, "Lex. Chald.", Basle, 1639, 1459, Huldreich, "Sepher toledhoth yeshua hannaceri", Leyden, 1705). The last work in its final edition did not appear before the thirteenth century, so that it could give the Panthera myth in its most advanced form. Rosch is of opinion that the myth did not begin before the end of the first century.

The later Jewish writings show traces of acquaintance with the [murder](#) of the [Holy Innocents](#) (Wagenseil, "Confut. Libr. Toldoth", 15; Eisenmenger op. cit., I, 116; Schottgen, op. cit., II, 667), with the flight into

[Egypt](#)

(cf.

[Josephus](#)

, "Ant." XIII, xiii), with the stay of

[Jesus](#)

in the Temple at the age of twelve (Schottgen, op. cit., II, 696), with the call of the disciples ("Sanhedrin", 43a; Wagenseil, op. cit., 17; Schottgen, loc. cit., 713), with His

[miracles](#)

(
[Origen](#)

,

[Against Celsus](#)

[II.48](#)

; Wagenseil, op. cit., 150; Gemara "Sanhedrin" fol. 17); "Schabbath", fol. 104b; Wagenseil, op. cit., 6, 7, 17), with His claim to be

[God](#)

(

[Origen](#)

,

[Against Celsus](#)

[I.28](#)

; cf. Eisenmenger, op. cit., I, 152; Schottgen, loc. cit., 699) with His betrayal by

[Judas](#)

and His death (

[Origen](#)

, "Contra cels.", II, 9, 45, 68, 70; Buxtorf, op. cit., 1458; Lightfoot, "Hor. Heb.", 458, 490, 498; Eisenmenger, loc. cit., 185; Schottgen, loc. cit., 699 700; cf. "Sanhedrin", vi, vii). Celsus (

[Origen](#)

,

[Against Celsus](#)

[II.55](#)

) tries to throw

[doubt](#)

on the

[Resurrection](#)

, while Toldoth (cf. Wagenseil, 19) repeats the Jewish fiction that the body of

[Jesus](#)

had been

[stolen](#)

from the sepulchre.

Christian sources

Among the [Christian](#) sources of the life of [Jesus](#) we need hardly mention the so called [Agr](#)
[apha](#)

and

[Apocrypha](#)

. For whether the

[Agrapha](#)

contain Logia of

[Jesus](#)

, or refer to incidents in His life, they are either highly uncertain or present only variations of the Gospel story. The chief value of the

[Apocrypha](#)

consists in their showing the

[infinite](#)

superiority of the Inspired Writings by contrasting the coarse and

[erroneous](#)

productions of the

[human](#)

[mind](#)

with the simple and sublime

[truths](#)

written under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost.

Among the Sacred Books of the [New Testament](#), it is especially the four Gospels and the four great [Epistles](#) of [St. Paul](#) that are of the highest importance for the construction of the [life of Jesus](#).

The four great Pauline Epistles ([Romans](#), [Galatians](#), and [First and Second Corinthians](#)) can hardly be overestimated by the student of

[Christ's](#)

life; they have at times been called the "fifth gospel"; their authenticity has never been assailed by serious critics; their testimony is also earlier than that of the Gospels, at least most of the Gospels; it is the more valuable because it is incidental and undesigned; it is the testimony of a highly

[intellectual](#)

and cultured writer, who had been the greatest enemy of

[Jesus](#)

, who writes within twenty-five years of the events which he relates. At the same time, these four great Epistles bear witness to all the most important facts in the life of Christ: His Davidic descent, His poverty, His Messiahship, His moral teaching, His preaching of the

[kingdom of God](#)

, His calling of the apostles, His

[miraculous power](#)

, His claims to be

[God](#)

, His betrayal, His institution of the

[Holy Eucharist](#)

, His passion, crucifixion, burial,

[resurrection](#)

, His repeated appearances (

[Romans 1:3-4](#)

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[5:11](#)

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[8:2-3](#)

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[8:32](#)

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[9:5](#)

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[15:8](#)

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[Galatians 2:17](#)

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[3:13](#)

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[4:4](#)

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[5:21](#)

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[1 Corinthians 6:9](#)

;

[13:4](#)

; etc.). However important the four great Epistles may be, the gospels are still more so. Not that any one of them offers a complete biography of

[Jesus](#)

, but they account for the origin of

[Christianity](#)

by the life of its

[Founder](#)

. Questions like the authenticity of the Gospels, the relation between the Synoptic Gospels, and the Fourth, the Synoptic problem, must be studied in the articles referring to these respective subjects.