

# Did Jesus Even Exist?

DID JESUS EXIST?

by Frank R. Zindler

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*I have taken it for granted that Jesus of Nazareth existed. Some writers feel a need to justify this assumption at length against people who try from time to time to deny it. It would be easier, frankly, to believe that Tiberius Caesar, Jesus' contemporary, was a figment of the imagination than to believe that there never was such a person as Jesus.*

- N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Fortress, 1996)

For most of my life, I had taken it for granted that Jesus, although certainly not a god, was nevertheless an historical personage - perhaps a magician skilled in hypnosis. To be sure, I knew that some of the world's greatest scholars had denied his existence. Nevertheless, I had always more or less supposed that it was improbable that so many stories could have sprung up about someone who had never existed. Even in the case of other deities, such as Zeus, Thor, Isis, and Osiris, I had always taken it for granted that they were merely deified human heroes: men and women who lived in the later stages of prehistory - persons whose reputations got better and better the longer the time elapsed after their deaths. Gods, like fine wines, I supposed, improved with age.

About a decade ago, however, I began to reexamine the evidence for the historicity of Jesus. I was astounded at what I didn't find. In this article, I would like to show how shaky the evidence is regarding the alleged existence of a would-be messiah named Jesus. I now feel it is more reasonable to suppose he never existed. It is easier to account for the facts of early Christian history if Jesus were a fiction than if he once were real.

## Burden of Proof

Although what follows may fairly be interpreted to be a proof of the non-historicity of Jesus, it must be realized that the burden of proof does not rest upon the skeptic in this matter. As always is the case, the burden of proof weighs upon those who assert that some thing or some process exists. If someone claims that he never has to shave because every morning before he can get to the bathroom he is assaulted by a six-foot rabbit with extremely sharp teeth who trims his whiskers better than a razor - if someone makes such a claim, no skeptic need worry about constructing a disproof. Unless evidence for the claim is produced, the skeptic can treat the claim as false. This is nothing more than sane, everyday practice.

Unlike N. T. Wright, quoted at the beginning of this article, a small number of scholars have tried over the centuries to prove that Jesus was in fact historical. It is instructive, when examining their "evidence," to compare it to the sort of evidence we have, say, for the existence of Tiberius Cæsar - to take up the challenge made by Wright.

It may be conceded that it is not surprising that there are no coins surviving from the first century with the image of Jesus on them. Unlike Tiberius Cæsar and Augustus Cæsar who adopted him, Jesus is not thought to have had control over any mints. Even so, we must point out that we do have coins dating from the early first century that bear images of Tiberius that change with the age of their subject. We even have coins minted by his predecessor, Augustus Cæsar, that show Augustus on one side and his adopted son on the other. <sup>1</sup> Would Mr. Wright have us believe that these coins are figments of the imagination? Can we be dealing with figments?

Statues that can be dated archaeologically survive to show Tiberius as a youth, as a young man assuming the toga, as Cæsar, etc. <sup>2</sup> Engravings and gems show him with his entire family. <sup>3</sup> Biographers who were his contemporaries or nearly so quote from his letters and decrees and recount the details of his life in minute detail. <sup>4</sup> There are contemporary inscriptions

all over the former empire that record his deeds.<sup>5</sup> There is an ossuary of at least one member of his family, and the Greek text of a speech made by his son Germanicus has been found at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt.<sup>6</sup> And then there are the remains of his villa on Capri. Nor should we forget that Augustus Cæsar, in his *Res Gestæ* ("Things Accomplished"), which survives both in Greek and Latin on the so-called *Monumentum Ancyranum*, lists Tiberius as his son and co-ruler.<sup>7</sup>

Is there anything advocates of an historical Jesus can produce that could be as compelling as this evidence for Tiberius? I think not, and I thank N. T. Wright for making a challenge that brings this disparity so clearly to light.

There is really only one area where evidence for Jesus is even claimed to be of a sort similar to that adduced for Tiberius - the area of biographies written by contemporaries or near contemporaries.<sup>a</sup> It is sometimes claimed that the Christian Bible contains such evidence. Sometimes it is claimed that there is extrabiblical evidence as well. Let us then examine this would-be evidence.

### **The Old Testament "Evidence"**

Let us consider the so-called biblical evidence first. Despite the claims of Christian apologists, there is absolutely nothing in the Old Testament (OT) that is of relevance to our question, apart from the possible fact that some prophets may have thought that an "anointed one" (a rescuer king or priest) would once again assume the leadership of the Jewish world. All of the many examples of OT "predictions" of Jesus are so silly that one need only look them up to see their irrelevance. Thomas Paine, the great heretic of the American Revolution, did just that, and he demonstrated their irrelevance in his book *An Examination of the Prophecies*, which he intended to be Part III of *The Age of Reason*.<sup>b</sup>

### **The New Testament "Evidence"**

The elimination of the OT leaves only the New Testament (NT) "evidence"

and extrabiblical material to be considered. Essentially, the NT is composed of two types of documents: letters and would-be biographies (the so-called gospels). A third category of writing, apocalyptic, of which the Book of Revelation is an example, also exists, but it gives no support for the historicity of Jesus. In fact, it would appear to be an intellectual fossil of the thought-world from which Christianity sprang - a Jewish apocalypse that was reworked for Christian use. <sup>8</sup> The main character of the book (referred to 28 times) would seem to be "the Lamb," an astral being seen in visions (no claims to historicity here!), and the book overall is redolent of ancient astrology. <sup>9</sup>

The name Jesus occurs only seven times in the entire book, Christ only four times, and Jesus Christ only twice! While Revelation may very well derive from a very early period (contrary to the views of most biblical scholars, who deal with the book only in its final form), the Jesus of which it whispers obviously is not a man. He is a supernatural being. He has not yet acquired the physiological and metabolic properties of which we read in the gospels. The Jesus of Revelation is a god who would later be made into a man - not a man who would later become a god, as liberal religious scholars would have it.

## **The Gospels**

The notion that the four "gospels that made the cut" to be included in the official New Testament were written by men named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John does not go back to early Christian times. The titles "According to Matthew," etc., were not added until late in the second century. Thus, although Papias ca. 140 CE ('Common Era') knows all the gospels but has only heard of Matthew and Mark, Justin Martyr (ca. 150 CE) knows of none of the four supposed authors. It is only in 180 CE, with Irenæus of Lyons, that we learn who wrote the four "canonical" gospels and discover that there are exactly four of them because there are four quarters of the earth and four universal winds. Thus, unless one supposes the argument of Irenæus to be other than ridiculous, we come to the conclusion that the gospels are of unknown origin and authorship, and there is no good reason to suppose they

are eye-witness accounts of a man named Jesus of Nazareth. At a minimum, this forces us to examine the gospels to see if their contents are even compatible with the notion that they were written by eye-witnesses. We cannot even assume that each of the gospels had but one author or redactor.

It is clear that the gospels of Matthew and Luke could not possibly have been written by an eye-witness of the tales they tell. Both writers plagiarize <sup>d</sup> (largely word-for-word) up to 90% of the gospel of Mark, to which they add sayings of Jesus <sup>e</sup> and would-be historical details. Ignoring the fact that Matthew and Luke contradict each other in such critical details as the genealogy of Jesus - and thus cannot both be correct - we must ask why real eye-witnesses would have to plagiarize the entire ham-hocks-and-potatoes of the story, contenting themselves with adding merely a little gravy, salt, and pepper. A real eye-witness would have begun with a verse reading, "Now, boys and girls, I'm gonna tell you the story of Jesus the Messiah the way it really happened..." The story would be a unique creation. It is significant that it is only these two gospels that purport to tell anything of Jesus' birth, childhood, or ancestry. Both can be dismissed as unreliable without further cause. We can know nothing of Jesus' childhood or origin!

## **Mark**

But what about the gospel of Mark, the oldest surviving gospel? Attaining essentially its final form probably as late as 90 CE but containing core material dating possibly as early as 70 CE, it omits, as we have seen, almost the entire traditional biography of Jesus, beginning the story with John the Baptist giving Jesus a bath, and ending - in the oldest manuscripts - with women running frightened from the empty tomb. (The alleged postresurrection appearances reported in the last twelve verses of Mark are not found in the earliest manuscripts, even though they are still printed in most modern bibles as though they were an "authentic" part of Mark's gospel.) Moreover, "Mark" being a non-Palestinian non-disciple, even the skimpy historical detail he provides is untrustworthy.

To say that Mark's account is "skimpy" is to understate the case. There really isn't much to the gospel of Mark, the birth legends, genealogies, and childhood wonders all being absent. Whereas the gospel of Luke takes up 43 pages in the New English Bible, the gospel of Mark occupies only 25 pages - a mere 58% as much material! Stories do indeed grow with the retelling.

I have claimed that the unknown author of Mark was a non-Palestinian non-disciple, which would make his story mere hearsay. What evidence do we have for this assertion? First of all, Mark shows no first-hand understanding of the social situation in Palestine. He is clearly a foreigner, removed both in space and time from the events he alleges. For example, in Mark 10:12, he has Jesus say that if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery. As G. A. Wells, the author of *The Historical Evidence for Jesus*<sup>10</sup> puts it,

*Such an utterance would have been meaningless in Palestine, where only men could obtain divorce. It is a ruling for the Gentile Christian readers... which the evangelist put into Jesus' mouth in order to give it authority. This tendency to anchor later customs and institutions to Jesus' supposed lifetime played a considerable role in the building up of his biography.*

One further evidence of the inauthenticity of Mark is the fact that in chapter 7, where Jesus is arguing with the Pharisees, Jesus is made to quote the Greek Septuagint version of Isaiah in order to score his debate point. Unfortunately, the Hebrew version says something different from the Greek. Isaiah 29:13, in the Hebrew reads "their fear of me is a commandment of men learned by rote," whereas the Greek version - and the gospel of Mark - reads "in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men" [Revised Standard Version]. Wells observes dryly [p. 13], "That a Palestinian Jesus should floor Orthodox Jews with an argument based on a mistranslation of their scriptures is very unlikely." Indeed! Another powerful argument against the idea that Mark could have been an eye-witness of the existence of Jesus is based upon the observation that the author of Mark displays a profound lack of familiarity with Palestinian geography. If he had actually lived in Palestine, he would not have made the blunders to be found in his gospel. If he never lived in Palestine, he could not have been an eye-witness of Jesus. You get the point.

The most absurd geographical error Mark commits is when he tells the tall tale about Jesus crossing over the Sea of Galilee and casting demons out of a man (two men in Matthew's revised version) and making them go into about 2,000 pigs which, as the King James version puts it, "ran violently down a

steep place into the sea... and they were choked in the sea."

Apart from the cruelty to animals displayed by the lovable, gentle Jesus, and his disregard for the property of others, what's wrong with this story? If your only source of information is the King James Bible, you might not ever know. The King James says this marvel occurred in the land of the Gadarenes, whereas the oldest Greek manuscripts say this miracle took place in the land of the Gerasenes. Luke, who also knew no Palestinian geography, also passes on this bit of absurdity. But Matthew, who had some knowledge of Palestine, changed the name to Gadarene in his new, improved version; but this is further improved to Gergesenes in the King James version.

By now the reader must be dizzy with all the distinctions between Gerasenes, Gadarenes, and Gergesenes. What difference does it make? A lot of difference, as we shall see.

Gerasa, the place mentioned in the oldest manuscripts of Mark, is located about 31 miles from the shore of the Sea of Galilee! Those poor pigs had to run a course five miles longer than a marathon in order to find a place to drown! Not even lemmings have to go that far. Moreover, if one considers a "steep" slope to be at least 45 degrees, that would make the elevation of Gerasa at least six times higher than Mt. Everest!

When the author of Matthew read Mark's version, he saw the impossibility of Jesus and the gang disembarking at Gerasa (which, by the way, was also in a different country, the so-called Decapolis). Since the only town in the vicinity of the Sea of Galilee that he knew of that started with G was Gadara, he changed Gerasa to Gadara. But even Gadara was five miles from the shore - and in a different country. Later copyists of the Greek manuscripts of all three pig-drowning gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) improved Gadara further to Gergesa, a region now thought to have actually formed part of the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. So much for the trustworthiness of the biblical tradition.

Another example of Mark's abysmal ignorance of Palestinian geography is found in the story he made up about Jesus traveling from Tyre on the Mediterranean to the Sea of Galilee, 30 miles inland. According to Mark 7:31, Jesus and the boys went by way of Sidon, 20 miles north of Tyre on the Mediterranean coast! Since to Sidon and back would be 40 miles, this means that the wisest of all men walked 70 miles when he could have walked only 30. Of course, one would never know all this from the King James version which - apparently completely ignoring a perfectly clear Greek text - says "Departing from the coasts of Tyre and Sidon, he came unto the Sea of Galilee..." Apparently the translators of the King James version also knew their geography. At least they knew more than did the author of Mark!

## John

The unreliability of the gospels is underscored when we learn that, with the possible exception of John, the first three gospels bear no internal indication of who wrote them. Can we glean anything of significance from the fourth and latest gospel, the gospel of John? Not likely! It is so unworldly, it can scarcely be cited for historical evidence. In this account, Jesus is hardly a man of flesh and blood at all - except for the purposes of divine cannibalism as required by the celebration of the rite of "holy communion."

"In the beginning was the word, and the word was with god, and the word was god," the gospel begins. No Star of Bethlehem, no embarrassment of pregnant virgins, no hint that Jesus ever wore diapers: pure spirit from the beginning. Moreover, in its present form, the gospel of John is the latest of all the official gospels. <sup>f</sup>

The gospel of John was compiled around the year 110 CE. If its author had been 10 years old at the time of Jesus' crucifixion in the year 30 CE, he would have been 80 years old at the time of writing. Not only is it improbable that he would have lived so long, it is dangerous to pay much attention to the colorful "memories" recounted by a man in his "anecdotalage." Many of us who are far younger than this have had the unpleasant experience of discovering incontrovertible proof that what we thought were clear memories of some event were wildly incorrect. We also might wonder why an eye-witness of all the wonders claimed in a gospel would wait so long to write about them!

More importantly, there is evidence that the Gospel of John, like Matthew and Luke, also is a composite document, incorporating an earlier "Signs Gospel" of uncertain antiquity. Again, we ask, if "John" had been an eye-witness to Jesus, why would he need to plagiarize a list of miracles made up by someone else? Nor is there anything in the Signs Gospel that would lead one to suppose that it was an eye-witness account. It could just as easily



have been referring to the wonders of Dionysus turning water into wine, or to the healings of Asclepius.

The inauthenticity of the Gospel of John would seem to be established beyond cavil by the discovery that the very chapter that asserts the author of the book to have been "the disciple whom Jesus loved" [John 21:20] was a late addition to the gospel. Scholars have shown that the gospel originally ended at verses 30-31 of Chapter 20. Chapter 21 - in which verse 24 asserts that "This is the disciple which testifieth of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his testimony is true" - is not the work of an eye-witness. Like so many other things in the Bible, it is a fraud. The testimony is not true.

### **Saint Saul And His Letters**

Having eliminated the OT and the gospels from the list of possible biblical "evidences" of the existence of Jesus, we are left with the so-called epistles.

At first blush, we might think that these epistles - some of which are by far the oldest parts of the NT, having been composed at least 30 years before the oldest gospel - would provide us with the most reliable information on Jesus. Well, so much for blushes. The oldest letters are the letters of St. Saul - the man who, after losing his mind, changed his name to Paul. Before going into details, we must point out right away, before we forget, that St. Saul's testimony can be ignored quite safely, if what he tells us is true, namely, that he never met Jesus "in the flesh," but rather saw him only in a vision he had during what appears to have been an epileptic seizure. No court of law would accept visions as evidence, and neither should we.

The reader might object that even if Saul only had hearsay evidence, some of it might be true. Some of it might tell us some facts about Jesus. Well, alright. Let's look at the evidence.

According to tradition, 13 of the letters in the NT are the work of St. Saul. Unfortunately, Bible scholars and computer experts have gone to work on

these letters, and it turns out that only four can be shown to be substantially by the same author, putatively Saul.<sup>8</sup> These are the letters known as Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians. To these probably we may add the brief note to Philemon, a slave-owner, Philippians, and 1 Thessalonians. The rest of the so-called Pauline epistles can be shown to have been written by other and later authors, so we can throw them out right now and not worry about them.

Saul tells us in 2 Corinthians 11:32 that King Aretas of the Nabateans tried to have him arrested because of his Christian agitation. Since Aretas is known to have died in the year 40 CE, this means that Saul became a Christian before that date. So what do we find out about Jesus from a man who had become a Christian less than ten years after the alleged crucifixion? Precious little!

Once again, G.A. Wells, in his book *The Historical Evidence for Jesus*[pp. 22-23], sums things up so succinctly, that I quote him verbatim:

*The...Pauline letters...are so completely silent concerning the events that were later recorded in the gospels as to suggest that these events were not known to Paul, who, however, could not have been ignorant of them if they had really occurred.*

*These letters have no allusion to the parents of Jesus, let alone to the virgin birth. They never refer to a place of birth (for example, by calling him 'of Nazareth'). They give no indication of the time or place of his earthly existence. They do not refer to his trial before a Roman official, nor to Jerusalem as the place of execution. They mention neither John the Baptist, nor Judas, nor Peter's denial of his master. (They do, of course, mention Peter, but do not imply that he, any more than Paul himself, had known Jesus while he had been alive.)*

*These letters also fail to mention any miracles Jesus is supposed to have worked, a particularly striking omission, since, according to the gospels, he worked so many...*

*Another striking feature of Paul's letters is that one could never gather from them that Jesus had been an ethical teacher... on only one occasion does he appeal to the authority of Jesus to support an ethical teaching which the gospels also represent Jesus as having delivered.*

It turns out that Saul's appeal to the authority of Jesus involves precisely the same error we found in the gospel of Mark. In 1 Cor. 7:10, Saul says that "not I but the Lord, [say] that the wife should not separate from the husband." That is, a wife should not seek divorce. If Jesus had actually said what Saul

implies, and what Mark 10:12 claims he said, his audience would have thought he was nuts - as the Bhagwan says - or perhaps had suffered a blow to the head. So much for the testimony of Saul. His Jesus is nothing more than the thinnest hearsay, a legendary creature which was crucified as a sacrifice, a creature almost totally lacking a biography.

## Extrabiblical "Evidence"

So far we have examined all the biblical evidences alleged to prove the existence of Jesus as an historical figure. We have found that they have no legitimacy as evidence. Now we must examine the last line of would-be evidence, the notion that Jewish and pagan historians recorded his existence.

## Jewish Sources

It is sometimes claimed that Jewish writings hostile to Christianity prove that the ancient Jews knew of Jesus and that such writings prove the historicity of the man Jesus. But in fact, Jewish writings prove no such thing, as L. Gordon Rylands' book *Did Jesus Ever Live?* pointed out nearly seventy years ago:

*...all the knowledge which the Rabbis had of Jesus was obtained by them from the Gospels. Seeing that Jews, even in the present more critical age, take it for granted that the figure of a real man stands behind the Gospel narrative, one need not be surprised if, in the second century, Jews did not think of questioning that assumption. It is certain, however, that some did question it. For Justin, in his Dialogue with Trypho, represents the Jew Trypho as saying, "ye follow an empty rumour and make a Christ for yourselves." "If he was born and lived somewhere he is entirely unknown." That the writers of the Talmud [4th-5th centuries CE, FRZ] had no independent knowledge of Jesus is proved by the fact that they confounded him with two different men neither of whom can have been he. Evidently no other Jesus with whom they could identify the Gospel Jesus was known to them. One of these, Jesus ben Pandira, reputed a wonder-worker, is said to have been stoned to death and then hung on a tree on the eve of a Passover in the reign of Alexander Jannæus (106-79 BC) at Jerusalem. The other, Jesus ben Stada, whose date is uncertain, but who may have lived in the first third of the second century CE, is also said to have been stoned and hanged on the eve of a Passover, but at Lydda. There may be some confusion here; but it is plain that the Rabbis had no knowledge of Jesus apart from what they had read in the Gospels. <sup>11</sup>*

Although Christian apologists have listed a number of ancient historians who allegedly were witnesses to the existence of Jesus, the only two that consistently are cited are Josephus, a Pharisee, and Tacitus, a pagan. Since Josephus was born in the year 37 CE, and Tacitus was born in 55, neither could have been an eye-witness of Jesus, who supposedly was crucified in 30 CE. So we could really end our article here. But someone might claim that these historians nevertheless had access to reliable sources, now lost, which recorded the existence and execution of our friend JC. So it is desirable that we take a look at these two supposed witnesses.

In the case of Josephus, whose *Antiquities of the Jews* was written in 93 CE, about the same time as the gospels, we find him saying some things quite impossible for a good Pharisee to have said:

*About this time, there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.*<sup>12</sup>

Now no loyal Pharisee would say Jesus had been the Messiah. That Josephus could report that Jesus had been restored to life "on the third day" and not be convinced by this astonishing bit of information is beyond belief. Worse yet is the fact that the story of Jesus is intrusive in Josephus' narrative and can be seen to be an interpolation even in an English translation of the Greek text. Right after the wondrous passage quoted above, Josephus goes on to say, "About the same time also another sad calamity put the Jews into disorder..." Josephus had previously been talking about awful things Pilate had done to the Jews in general, and one can easily understand why an interpolator would have chosen this particular spot. But his ineptitude in not changing the wording of the bordering text left a "literary seam" (what rhetoricians might term *aporia*) that sticks out like a pimped nose.

The fact that Josephus was not convinced by this or any other Christian claim is clear from the statement of the church father Origen (ca. 185-ca. 154 CE) - who dealt extensively with Josephus - that Josephus did not believe in Jesus as the Messiah, i.e., as "the Christ." Moreover, the disputed passage was never cited by early Christian apologists such as Clement of Alexandria (ca.150-ca. 215 CE), who certainly would have made use of such ammunition had he had it!

The first person to make mention of this obviously forged interpolation into the text of Josephus' history was the church father Eusebius, in 324 CE. It is

quite likely that Eusebius himself did some of the forging. As late as 891, Photius in his *Bibliotheca*, which devoted three "Codices" to the works of Josephus, shows no awareness of the passage whatsoever even though he reviews the sections of the *Antiquities* in which one would expect the disputed passage to be found. Clearly, the testimonial was absent from his copy of *Antiquities of the Jews*.<sup>13</sup> The question can probably be laid to rest by noting that as late as the sixteenth century, according to Rylands,<sup>14</sup> a scholar named Vossius had a manuscript of Josephus from which the passage was wanting.

Apologists, as they grasp for ever more slender straws with which to support their historical Jesus, point out that the passage quoted above is not the only mention of Jesus made by Josephus. In Bk. 20, Ch. 9, §1 of *Antiquities of the Jews* one also finds the following statement in surviving manuscripts:

*Ananus... convened the judges of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man named James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned.*

It must be admitted that this passage does not intrude into the text as does the one previously quoted. In fact, it is very well integrated into Josephus' story. That it has been modified from whatever Josephus' source may have said (remember, here too, Josephus could not have been an eye-witness) is nevertheless extremely probable. The crucial word in this passage is the name James (Jacob in Greek and Hebrew). It is very possible that this very common name was in Josephus' source material. It might even have been a reference to James the Just, a first-century character we have good reason to believe indeed existed. Because he appears to have borne the title Brother of the Lord,<sup>h</sup> it would have been natural to relate him to the Jesus character. It is quite possible that Josephus actually referred to a James "the Brother of the Lord," and this was changed by Christian copyists (remember that although Josephus was a Jew, his text was preserved only by Christians!) to "Brother of Jesus" - adding then for good measure "who was called Christ."

According to William Benjamin Smith's skeptical classic *Ecce Deus*,<sup>15</sup> there are still some manuscripts of Josephus which contain the quoted passages, but the passages are absent in other manuscripts - showing that such interpolation had already been taking place before the time of Origen but did not ever succeed in supplanting the original text universally.

Pagan Authors Before considering the alleged witness of Pagan authors, it is worth noting some of the things that we should find recorded in their histories if the biblical stories are in fact true. One passage from Matthew should suffice to point out the significance of the silence of secular writers:

Matt. 27:45. Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour... Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost. 51. And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; 52 And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, 53 And came out of the graves after his resurrection [exposed for 3 days?], and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.

Wouldn't the Greeks and Romans have noticed - and recorded - such darkness occurring at a time of the month when a solar eclipse was impossible? Wouldn't someone have remembered - and recorded - the name of at least one of those "saints" who climbed out of the grave and went wandering downtown in the mall? If Jesus did anything of significance at all, wouldn't someone have noticed? If he didn't do anything significant, how could he have stimulated the formation of a new religion?

Considering now the supposed evidence of Tacitus, we find that this Roman historian is alleged in 120 CE to have written a passage in his *Annals* (Bk 15, Ch 44, containing the wild tale of Nero's persecution of Christians) saying "Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus..." G.A. Wells [p. 16] says of this passage:

[Tacitus wrote] at a time when Christians themselves had come to believe that Jesus had suffered under Pilate. There are three reasons for holding that Tacitus is here simply repeating what Christians had told him. First, he gives Pilate a title, procurator [without saying procurator of what! FRZ], which was current only from the second half of the first century. Had he consulted archives which recorded earlier events, he would surely have found Pilate there designated by his correct title, prefect. Second, Tacitus does not name the executed man Jesus, but uses the title Christ (Messiah) as if it were a proper name. But he could hardly have found in archives a statement such as "the Messiah was executed this morning." Third, hostile to Christianity as he was, he was surely glad to accept from Christians their own view that Christianity was of recent origin, since the Roman authorities were prepared to tolerate only ancient cults. (*The Historical Evidence for Jesus*; p.16).

There are further problems with the Tacitus story. Tacitus himself never again alludes to the Neronian persecution of Christians in any of his voluminous writings, and no other Pagan authors know anything of the outrage either. Most significant, however, is that ancient Christian apologists made no use of the story in their propaganda - an unthinkable omission by motivated partisans who were well-read in the works of Tacitus. Clement of Alexandria, who made a profession of collecting just such types of

quotations, is ignorant of any Neronian persecution, and even Tertullian, who quotes a great deal from Tacitus, knows nothing of the story. According to Robert Taylor, the author of another freethought classic, the *Diegesis* (1834), the passage was not known before the fifteenth century, when Tacitus was first published at Venice by Johannes de Spire. Taylor believed de Spire himself to have been the forger. <sup>i</sup>

So much for the evidence purporting to prove that Jesus was an historical figure. We have not, of course, proved that Jesus did not exist. We have only showed that all evidence alleged to support such a claim is without substance. But of course, that is all we need to show. The burden of proof is always on the one who claims that something exists or that something once happened. We have no obligation to try to prove a universal negative. <sup>j</sup>

It will be argued by die-hard believers that all my arguments "from silence" prove nothing and they will quote the aphorism, "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." But is the negative evidence I have referred to the same as absence of evidence? It might be instructive to consider how a hypothetical but similar problem might be dealt with in the physical sciences.

Imagine that someone has claimed that the USA had carried out atomic weapons tests on a particular Caribbean island in 1943. Would the lack of reports of mushroom-cloud sightings at the time be evidence of absence, or absence of evidence? (Remember, the Caribbean during the war years was under intense surveillance by many different factions.) Would it be necessary to go to the island today to scan its surface for the radioactive contamination that would have to be there if nuclear explosions had taken place there? If indeed, we went there with our Geiger-counters and found no trace of radioactive contamination, would that be evidence of absence, or absence of evidence? In this case, what superficially looks like absence of evidence is really negative evidence, and thus legitimately could be construed as evidence of absence. Can the negative evidence adduced above concerning Jesus be very much less compelling?

It would be intellectually satisfying to learn just how it was that the Jesus character condensed out of the religious atmosphere of the first century. But scholars are at work on the problem. The publication of many examples of so-called wisdom literature, along with the materials from the Essene community at Qumran by the Dead Sea and the Gnostic literature from the Nag Hammadi library in Egypt, has given us a much more detailed picture of the communal psychopathologies which infested the Eastern Mediterranean world at the turn of the era. It is not unrealistic to expect that we will be able, before long, to reconstruct in reasonable detail the stages by which Jesus came to have a biography.

## They Should Have Noticed

John E. Remsburg, in his classic book *The Christ: A Critical Review and Analysis of the Evidence of His Existence* (The Truth Seeker Company, NY, no date, pp. 24-25), lists the following writers who lived during the time, or within a century after the time, that Jesus is supposed to have lived:

Josephus	Silius Italicus
Philo-Judæus	Statius
Seneca	Ptolemy
Pliny Elder	Appian
Arrian	Phlegon
Petronius	Phædrus
Dion Pruseus	Valerius Maximus
Paterculus	Lucian
Suetonius	Pausanias
Juvenal	Florus Lucius
Martial	Quintius Curtius
Persius	Aulus Gellius
Plutarch	Dio Chrysostom
Pliny Younger	Columella
Tacitus	Valerius Flaccus
Justus of Tiberius	Damis
Apollonius	Favorinus
Quintilian	Lysias
Lucanus	Pomponius Mela
Epictetus	Appion of Alexandria
Hermogones	Theon of Smyrna

According to Remsburg, "Enough of the writings of the authors named in the foregoing list remains to form a library. Yet in this mass of Jewish and Pagan literature, aside from two forged passages in the works of a Jewish author, and two disputed passages in the works of Roman writers, there is to be found no mention of Jesus Christ." Nor, we may add, do any of these authors make note of the Disciples or Apostles - increasing the embarrassment from the silence of history concerning the foundation of Christianity.

## NOTES:

<sup>a</sup> It is sometimes claimed that the "miraculous" spread of Christianity in the early Roman Empire is evidence of an historical Jesus - that such a movement could not have gone so far so fast had there not been a real person at its inception. A similar argument could be made, however, in the case of the



earlier rapid spread of Mithraism. I am unaware of any Christian apologists who would argue that this supports the idea of an historical Mithra!

<sup>b</sup> A profusely annotated paperback edition of Paine's book is available from American Atheist Press for twelve dollars. (Order No. 5575, [click here](#))

<sup>c</sup> An apocalypse is a pseudonymous piece of writing characterized by exaggerated symbolic imagery, usually dealing with the expectation of an imminent cosmic cataclysm wherein the deity destroys the wicked and rewards the righteous. Apocalyptic writing abounds in hidden meanings and numerological puzzles. Parts of a number of Judæo-Christian apocalypses other than Revelation have been preserved, but only the latter (if one does not consider the Book of Daniel to be entirely apocalyptic) was accepted into the Christian canon - and it almost didn't make it, having been rejected by several early Church Fathers and Church Councils.

<sup>d</sup> The opposite theory, often referred to as "Griesbach's hypothesis," that the author of Mark had "epitomized" the two longer gospels, keeping only the "essential" details, is today almost entirely rejected by bible scholars. While the arguments to support this nearly universal rejection are too involved to even summarize here, it may be noted that shortening of miracle stories is completely out of keeping with the principles of religious development seen everywhere today. Stories invariably get "better" (*i.e.*, longer) with the retelling, never shorter!

<sup>e</sup> There is compelling evidence indicating that these alleged sayings of Jesus were taken from another early document known as Q (German, for Quelle, 'source'). Like the so-called Gospel of Thomas found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, Q appears to have been a list of wisdom sayings that at some point became attributed to Jesus. We know that at least one of these sayings ("We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced..." Matt. 17:11; Luke 7:32) derives from Æsop's Fables, not from a sage of Galilee!

<sup>f</sup> I say "official gospels" because there are, in fact, many other gospels known. Once people started making them up, they sort of got stuck in over-

drive. Only later on in Christian history did the number get pared back to four.

<sup>g</sup> Even the letters supposed to contain authentic writings of Saul/Paul have been shown by a number of scholars to be as composite as the gospels (e.g., L. Gordon Rylands, *A Critical Analysis of the Four Chief Pauline Epistles: Romans, First and Second Corinthians, and Galatians*, Watts & Co., London, 1929). According to such analyses, the core Pauline material in these letters is what might be termed a pre-Christian Gnostic product. This material is surrounded by often contradictory material added by proto-Catholic interpolators and redactors who succeeded thus in claiming a popular proto-Gnostic authority for the Church of Rome. In any case, the Greek text of these letters is heavy with terms such as Archon, Æon, etc. - jargon terms popular in the more astrologically conscious forms of Gnosticism. It would appear that the Christ of Paul is as astral a being as the Lamb of Revelation. Like the god of Revelation, the god of Paul communicates via visions, not physically, face-to-face.

<sup>h</sup> Originally, this would have been the title born by a member of a religious fraternity associated with the worship of Yahweh, who in Greek was always referred to as kurios ('Lord'). This was carried over into primitive Christianity, where we know from I Cor. 9:5 that there existed a governing class coordinate with apostles that was called "Brethren of the Lord." Misunderstanding of the original meaning of the title led to the belief that Jesus had siblings - an error that can be found already in the earliest of the canonical gospels.

Interestingly, the embarrassing passages in the gospels where Jesus is rude to his mother and brethren would seem to derive from a period where a political struggle had developed between apostolically governed sects and those governed by "Brethren of the Lord," who claimed authority now by virtue of an alleged blood relationship to Jesus - who had by then supplanted Yahweh as "Lord." The apostolic politics of the gospel writers could not resist putting down the Brethren Party by having Jesus disregard his own

family. If Jesus didn't pay serious attention to his own family, the argument would go, why should anyone pay attention to their descendants? This is the only plausible explanation for the presence of such passages as John 2:4 ("Woman, what have I to do with thee?") or Mark 3:33 ("Who is my mother, or my brethren?").

Latinists often dispute the possibility of the passage being a forgery on the grounds that Tacitus' distinctive Latin style so perfectly permeates the entire passage. But it should be noted that the more distinctive a style might be, the easier it can be imitated. Then too, there is a lapse from normal Tacitean usage elsewhere in the disputed passage. In describing the early Christians as being haters "of the human race" (*humani generis*), the passage reverses the word order of normal Tacitean usage. In all other cases, Tacitus has *generis humani*.

<sup>j</sup> Curiously, in the present case, it would seem that such proof is in fact possible. Since Jesus is frequently referred to as "Jesus of Nazareth," it is interesting to learn that the town now called Nazareth did not exist in the first centuries BCE and CE. Exhaustive archaeological studies have been done by Franciscans to prove the cave they possess was once the home of Jesus' family. But actually they have shown the site to have been a necropolis - a city of the dead - during the first century CE. (Naturally, the Franciscans cannot agree!) With no Nazareth other than a cemetery existing at the time, how could there have been a Jesus of Nazareth? Without an Oz, could there have been a Wizard of Oz?

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Illustrated in Robin Seager, *Tiberius*, Eyre Methuen, London, 1972. For more detailed numismatic documentation of Tiberius, see also C. H. V. Sutherland, *Roman History and Coinage 44 BC-AD 69*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987; by the same author, *Coinage in Roman Imperial Policy 31 B.C.-A.D. 68*, Sanford J. Durst Numismatic Publications, NY, 1978.<sup>2</sup> Illustrated in Seager, *op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Illustrated in Seager, *op. cit.*

- <sup>4</sup> Examined in Sutherland, 1987, op. cit. See also Victor Ehrenberg and A. H. M. Jones, Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Augustus & Tiberius, 2nd Edition, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1955.
- <sup>5</sup> See Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae, edidit Hermannus Dessau, reprinted in 4 vols. by Ares Publishers Inc., Chicago, 1979.
- <sup>6</sup> Illustrated in Seager, op. cit.
- <sup>7</sup> See Acta Divi Augusti, Regia Academia Italica, Rome, 1945.
- <sup>8</sup> In her Anchor Bible Volume 38, Revelation (Doubleday, Garden City, NJ, 1975), J. Massyngberde Ford proposed that the core of Revelation was material written by Jewish followers of John the Baptist. Even if the Baptist had been an historical figure (which is extremely doubtful), this still would make Revelation in essence a pre-Christian, Jewish apocalypse.
- <sup>9</sup> For more astrological aspects of Revelation, see Bruce J. Malina, On The Genre And Message Of Revelation: Star Visions and Sky Journeys, Hendrickson, Peabody, MA, 1995.
- <sup>10</sup> George A. Wells, The Historical Evidence for Jesus, Prometheus Books, Buffalo, NY, 1982, p. 13.
- <sup>11</sup> L. Gordon Rylands, Did Jesus Ever Live?, Watts & Co., London, 1929, p. 20.
- <sup>12</sup> This so-called Testimonium Flavianum appears in Bk 18 Ch 3 §3 of Josephus: Jewish Antiquities Books XVIII-XIX, IX, translated by L. H. Feldman, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1981, pp. 48-51.
- <sup>13</sup> J. P. Migne, Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Græca, Tomus CIII. Photius Constantinopolitanus Patriarcha, Garnier Fratres, Paris, 1900, Cod. 47, 76, and 238.
- <sup>14</sup> Rylands, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> William Benjamin Smith, *Ecce Deus: Studies Of Primitive Christianity*, Watts & Co., London, 1912, p. 235.