

The search for Jesus

Outside of the New Testament,
what evidence is there about Jesus?



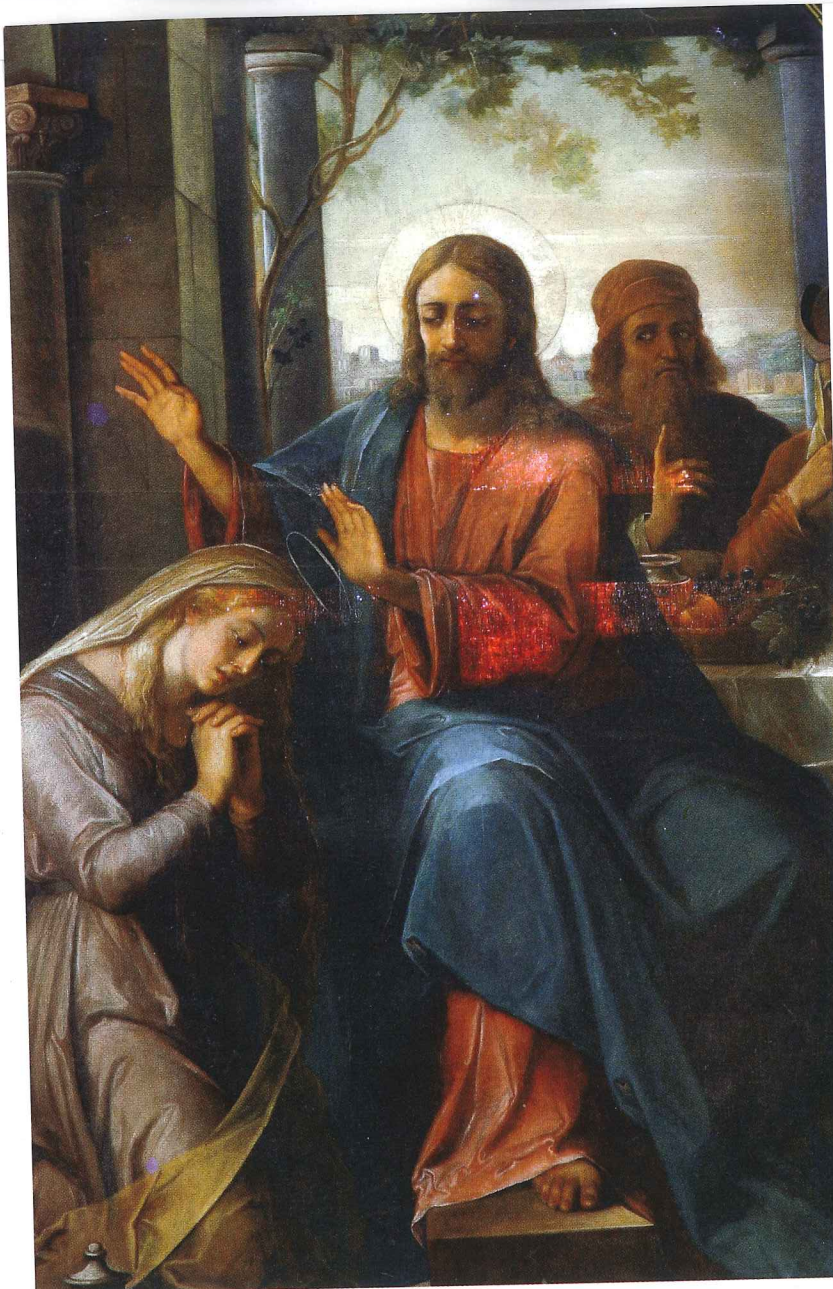
BY MARK FAIRCHILD



ON OCT. 19, 2013, A well-advertised symposium in London unveiled a shocking new discovery. An ancient confession had been found that stated, “We invented Jesus Christ.” Based on this discovery, a self-described “biblical scholar” claimed that Roman aristocrats created the story of Jesus in order to promote a Jewish Messiah who supported peace.







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There is no evidence in any ancient writings that Jesus was married. However, the best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code* purports that Mary Magdalene was His wife.

In 2003, the mystery-thriller novel *The Da Vinci Code* was published. The book alleges that groups inside the Roman Catholic Church have masterminded a colossal cover-up to hide the fact that Jesus married and bore a child. Author Dan Brown claimed that the history recorded in the novel was accurate. The book sold over 80 million copies worldwide. Polls taken in the years after its release showed that most of the people who read the book believed that Jesus had indeed had a child.

In both of these instances, the vast majority of scholars denounced these supposed discoveries. However, the media is often quick to hype controversial findings but slow to report the objections of scholars. That leads us to the question: Outside of the evidence in the New Testament, what can we know with confidence about Jesus?

Jesus in Early Christian Writings

In spite of persistent opposition, Christianity thrived within Palestine during the first century A.D. Not only was the faith increasingly embraced by non-Jews, the speed with which Christianity spread through the Roman Empire was truly remarkable. By the end of the first century, Christians could be found throughout the Mediterranean world.

Dozens of writings from this time survive and provide us with the earliest testimony for the life of Christ. Foremost among these are the 27 books of the New Testament, particularly the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Additional Christian writings from the first century were never canonized. These include the *Didache*, the First Epistle of Clement, the Epistle of Barnabas and the gospel of Thomas, although there is some dispute about the dating of Thomas. These writings seldom provide us with new historical insights into the life of Christ but they often corroborate the traditions that are found in the New Testament. Many additional non-canonical gospels that date to the second and third centuries supply us with numerous sayings and narratives that cannot be found in the New Testament Gospels. Most scholars feel that the late date of these works raises questions about their trustworthiness.

Jesus in Ancient Roman and Pagan Writings

A few non-Christian sources offer testimony of Jesus and the early Christian movement. The information from these sources, however, is scant. The Romans were not interested in Jewish affairs on the far eastern periphery of the empire; they were even less interested in an executed Jewish religious teacher.

The Roman historian Tacitus, writing around A.D. 115, described Nero's attempt to deflect blame for the great fire in Rome and to incriminate the Christians:

Nero falsely accused and inflicted the most intense tortures upon those people called Christians, who were notorious for their abominations. The originator of the name, Christus, was executed as a criminal by the procurator Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius; and though repressed, this pernicious superstition broke out again, not only in Judea, where this evil originated, but also throughout the city of Rome, where all horrible and shameful ideas

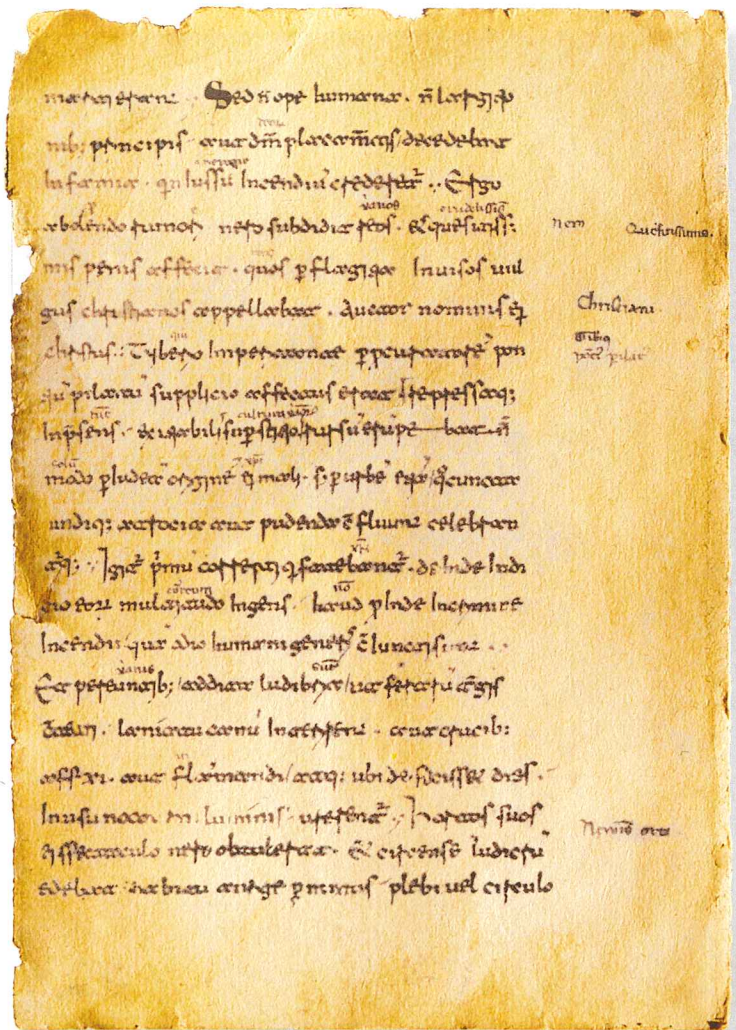
flow and become popular. Then those who confessed that they were Christians were arrested and next, using the information they provided, a vast multitude was convicted, not so much for the crime of burning the city, but for hatred of the human race.

It's clear Tacitus views these early Christians with a great deal of contempt. Leaving that aside, this account affirms several key elements that are central to the early Christian traditions. First, Tacitus confirms the dating of the Gospel story. He describes Christ as having lived during the reign of the emperor Tiberius, and more specifically during the rule of the procurator Pontius Pilate. Second, Tacitus writes that Jesus was executed by Roman authorities. Third, Tacitus confirms that these events took place in Judea, far from the capital city, and that by the time of Nero (A.D. 54 to 68) Christianity had already spread to Rome and the western empire.

Also important is that Jesus is never mentioned in the passage. Rather, He is referred to as "Christus," with the explanation that His followers adopted this name for themselves. By referring to Jesus as Christus, which is equivalent to the Hebrew term for Messiah, Tacitus makes it clear that Jesus' early followers believed that He was the Jewish Messiah.

Less clear is a letter from Mara bar Serapion to his son. According to most scholars, this letter, held in the British Museum, was written by a pagan sometime after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. In it, the author describes the execution of three wise men — Socrates, Pythagoras and a Jewish wise king — and the negative consequences that followed these three deaths. "What benefit did the Jews gain by executing their wise king? Shortly after that their kingdom was abolished. God justly avenged these three wise men." Later in the letter, Mara claimed that the Jewish wise king lived on because of the "new law" that He had given His followers.

Although Mara bar Serapion's letter never mentions Jesus or the term Christ, it is clear that the reference is to Jesus. Calling Jesus a king, rather than Christ (or Messiah) is a reflection of the Roman point of view. According to the Romans, Jesus was executed as a political troublemaker rather than as a religious leader. The claim that the wise king lived on because of the "new law" is the kind of statement that one would expect from a Roman of the time who was not terribly familiar with Christianity.



Jesus in Early Jewish Writings

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus lived through the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. He refers to Jesus twice in *Antiquities of the Jews*. A controversial paragraph reads:

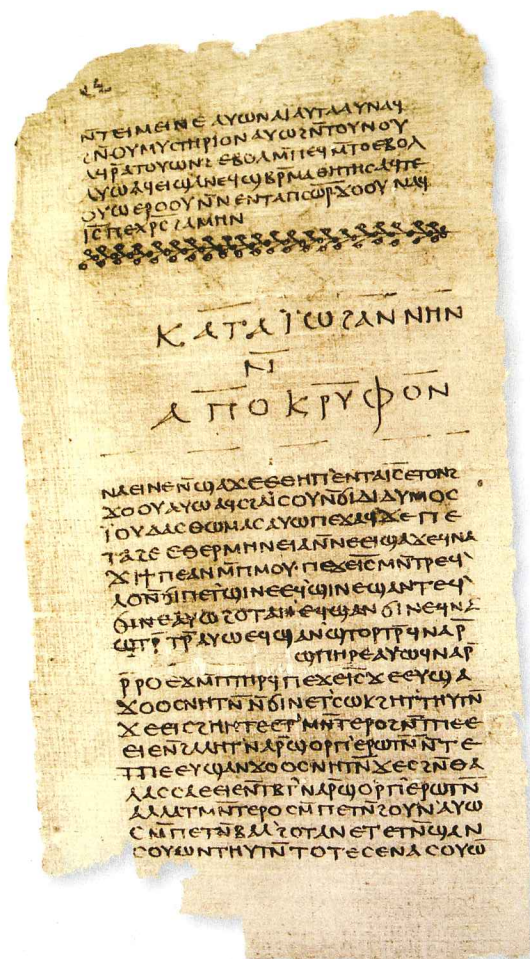
At this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed he could be called a man, for he performed amazing deeds. He was a teacher of men who received the truth with pleasure and he persuaded many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. This one was the Christ. And when he was accused by the principle men among us, Pilate condemned him to a cross. Those who first loved him did not cease to do so. For, he appeared to them again, alive on the third day. The divine prophets foretold these things concerning him and a thousand other marvelous deeds. Still to the present day, the tribe of Christians named after him, have not disappeared.

It is widely believed that this passage has been supplemented by later Christian writers who added to Josephus' account. While most scholars

This ancient writing by Tacitus offers testimony of Jesus and the early movement of Christianity.



Coins from the time of Pontius Pilate (above). A page from the Nag Hammadi Codex II (right) shows the end of the Secret Book of John and the beginning of the gospel of Thomas.



believe that the passage is largely authentic, the phrases "he was the Christ" and "he appeared to them again, alive on the third day" are believed to have been added. Even without these passages, Josephus' testimony gives us additional information that conforms to the earliest Christian literature.

A second, less disputed and much shorter reference to Jesus in Josephus' writings mentions James, "the brother of Jesus, the so-called Messiah." Even if the earlier passage is disputed, Josephus makes it clear in this piece that Jesus' followers believed that he was the Messiah.

Two brief references to Jesus can be found in the *Talmud*. The first is:

On Passover eve they hanged Yeshua (Jesus). For forty days in advance a herald went out proclaiming, "He is going to be stoned, because he has practiced magic and led Israel astray. If anyone has anything to say in his defense, let him come and speak for him." But they found nothing in his favor, so they hanged him on Passover eve. (Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 43a.)

The second reference to Jesus in rabbinic literature is part of a hopelessly conflated story

that concludes with the statement: "Jesus the Nazarene practiced magic and led Israel astray." (*Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 107b.*)

These accounts both assert that Jesus practiced "magic," which was a somewhat common occupation in the Mediterranean world, performed by persons who claimed to be endowed with divine powers. (Christians, of course, distinguish between the occult practices of magicians and the miracles of Jesus.)

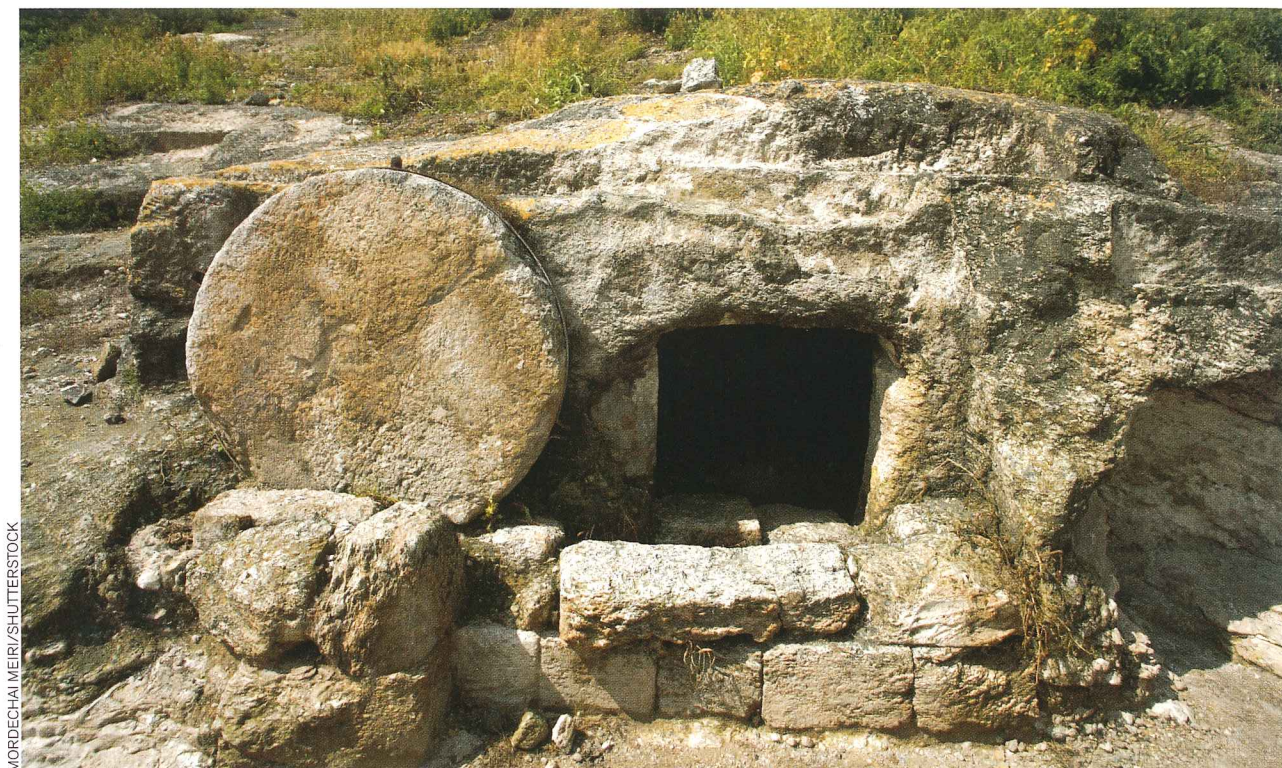
Jesus and Archaeological Data

The chances of finding an artifact belonging to anyone from 2,000 years ago are slim. The relics preserved throughout Europe (pieces of the cross, nails from Jesus' crucifixion, pieces of the crown of thorns) are of little value to scholars. Proving these artifacts to be genuine is impossible, and their authenticity is questionable.

Some artifacts, such as the burial shroud of Turin and the ossuary of James — inscribed with the words "brother of Jesus" — have received much attention. Scientific testing on both of these artifacts has led most scholars to doubt the shroud, while the scholarly verdict on the ossuary is still a tossup. Most recently, reports of the discovery of Jesus' family tomb and

The ossuary (burial box) of Caiaphas, the high priest during Jesus' trial, was found in Jerusalem in 1990.





MORDECHAI MEIR/SHUTTERSTOCK

a first century inscription bearing his name have captured media attention. But again, archaeologists are not convinced.

In spite of its limitation, archaeology does indeed assist scholars in the search for Jesus. Important archaeological discoveries, such as the burial box of Caiaphas (the high priest during Jesus' trial), an inscription from Caesarea mentioning Pontius Pilate and numerous coins stamped with the names of emperors and governors, corroborate information about historical events and timelines found in the Gospels.

Other discoveries substantiate the small background details of the Gospels. Many tombs have been found in Israel that confirm the description of Jesus' tomb provided by the Gospels. The crucified remains of a first-century Jew testify to the Roman practice of execution. Many first-century Galilean cities have been excavated, including Sepphoris, Capernaum, Chorazin and Bethsaida (the last three mentioned in the Gospels) and discoveries in these cities correspond with many of the details of life in Galilee that we read about in the Gospels. The names of people and places, the descriptions of cities and their inhabitants, and references to occupations, customs, buildings, boats and topography are frequently confirmed with inscriptions and

archaeological excavations.

As one would expect, occasionally the findings or lack of findings by archaeologists are hard to reconcile with what is written in the Gospels. For instance, archaeological evidence indicates that there were no Roman troops permanently stationed in Galilee, although Matthew 8:5-13 seems to imply there were. Of course, archaeological evidence does not always survive for 2,000 years — the absence of evidence is not always evidence of absence.

Finding Jesus

The consensus of scholarship and the testimony of archaeology largely affirm the bulk of what we read in the Gospels. There is broad agreement among scholars on issues such as Jesus' Galilean ministry, the tremendous appeal of His teachings, Jesus' conflicts with Jewish leaders and His crucifixion in Jerusalem. There is, of course, disagreement over Jesus' miracles and the authenticity of His teachings. History and archaeology cannot recover all of the past. Some things require faith. ✚

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This tomb near Nazareth dates to the first century and is similar to Jesus' tomb, including a stone that can be rolled over the entry.