

Getting Started

Jesus is one of the most influential figures in human history. In fact, over half of Australians consider Jesus' life to be *extremely* or *very important* in terms of the history and culture of the world.¹ Yet, despite Jesus being recognised as important, most people only know a few things about his life, death, and claims.

Quick Facts and Background: When and Where

- Jesus was born in 4/6AD and died in 30/33AD (we don't know the precise date as there were no universal calendar systems at the time and people didn't generally record this information).
- Jesus spent most of his years in Palestine.
- The Romans had ruled for only three decades.
- Prior to the Romans, the Greeks (or "Hellenists") had ruled for many centuries. As a result, the Greek culture was still very influential in architecture, language (most written material was in Greek during this period), and way of life. Hence why the culture is often referred to as 'Greco-Roman'.
- The Jewish people had lived under the rule of other empires for some time. Throughout this period, there had been occasional rebellion against the ruling powers (with 70AD being a very significant period, resulting in the Romans destroying the Temple).

¹ McIndle (2017). "Faith and Belief in Australia: A National Study on Religion, Spirituality, and Worldview Trends." Source: <https://bit.ly/2v63l6H>

How Do We Know What We Know?

We have **three** main sources of information about Jesus.

1. Greco-Roman Sources

- Thallus (c.55AD): An early historian who wrote a three-volume history of the Mediterranean world.
- Cornelius Tacitus (56-120AD): A Roman historians and senator.
- Pliny the Younger (61-c.113AD): A lawyer, author, and magistrate.

Some of these people were not big fans of Jesus or Christianity, yet we learn quite a bit from what they wrote. *For example:*



Thallus in his writings (*"Histories Volume 3"*) mentions that darkness (as a natural eclipse) coincided with Jesus' crucifixion.



Tacitus refers to Jesus' execution under Pontius Pilate, referring to the Christian movement as a 'deadly superstition'.



Pliny the Younger mentions that early Christianity didn't just recognise Jesus as a teacher, but worshipped Jesus as a God.

"On the eve of Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, "He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Any one who can say anything in his favour, let him come forward and plead on his behalf." But since nothing was brought forward in his favour he was hanged on the eve of the Passover." *Tacitus (43a-b)*

2. Jewish Sources

- Josephus (37-c.100AD): A Roman-Jewish historian, best known for his works, “*Jewish History*” which had emphasis on the first century and the First Jewish-Roman War (66-70AD).
- The Talmud (100-200AD): The central text in Rabbinic Judaism which is a source of Jewish religious law and theology.

From these sources, we learn quite a bit about Jesus. *For example:*



Josephus recounts Jesus’ fame as a teacher, healer, and martyr. Josephus also wrote that Jesus’ resurrection was reported by his followers.



Josephus in *Jewish Antiquities* recounts the martyrdom of a man called James, describing him as the “brother of Jesus, the so-called” Messiah.



The Talmud contains a passage that justifies Jesus’ execution at the time of the Jewish Passover on the basis that he led Israel astray and “practised sorcery”.



The Talmud also insists the Jesus’ mother (Mary) was adulterous.

“...he assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned.” *Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews*

In fact, combining the Greco-Roman and Jewish sources that we have access to, we know:²

- The name ‘Jesus’.
- The place/time-frame of his public ministry (Palestine during Pontius Pilate’s governorship, 26-36).
- The name of his mother (Mary).
- The ambiguous nature of his birth.
- The name of one of his brothers (James).
- His fame as a teacher.
- His fame as a miracle-worker/sorcerer.
- The attribution to him of the title ‘Messiah/Christ’.
- His ‘kingly’ status in the eyes of some.
- The time and manner of his execution (crucifixion around the Passover festival).
- The involvement of Roman and Jewish leadership in his death.
- The coincidence of an eclipse at the time of his crucifixion.
- The report of Jesus’ appearances to his followers after his death.
- The flourishing of a movement that worshipped Jesus post death.

But we don’t just have the **Greco-Roman** and **Jewish** sources, we also have **Christian** sources that inform us about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

3. Christian Sources: The New Testament

The New Testament (which forms the second ‘half’ of the Christian Bible) is a collection of 27 books (with many independent sources) that provide the most detailed source of evidence regarding Jesus.

² Dickson, John. (2005). A Spectators Guide to Jesus (p. 12). Sydney: Blue Bottle Books.

Historians (even those *who do not claim to be Christians*) utilise the New Testament as the most reliable source of information not only about Jesus, but also the first-century Greco-Roman world.

They can do this because of the:

- **Quantity of Sources:** We have very early fragments and - from later on - manuscripts (over 5000 Greek, 10000 latin, and 9300 others!) that help establish the reliability of the New Testament. These are readily available online and in libraries (they're not hidden away somewhere!).
- **Time Between Events and Writing:** The gap between the event and the time of writing is very short. For example, Paul's letters were written between 50 and 64AD, and the Gospel of Mark was written around 70AD. The gap compares very favourably to other biographies written of other influential religious figures. For example, the first writings about Buddha were 350 years after his death, and the first writings about Tiberius (written by Tacitus) were written 77 years after his death. It also means that many people could check claims about Jesus with many witnesses who were still alive at the time of writing.
- **Reliability of the Oral Tradition:** Whilst in the modern world we tend to be suspicious of what we are told and trusting of what we read (e.g., stories on the internet!), in the ancient world the reverse tended to be true: *people were suspicious of things written and trusting of words spoken*. This is because there was a strong tradition and practice in relaying events or stories, and that if someone told you something their integrity was on the line. We also know that people had an excellent ability to remember things with precision, sometimes even using music or poetry as memory devices (throughout the New Testament there is lots of evidence to suggest that this was also the case).

So What Does the New Testament Tell Us About What Jesus Did?

Whilst some people might be comfortable to just think of Jesus as a 'teacher' or a 'healer', it's clear that the first followers of Jesus believed (and claimed) him to be much more.

In fact, the beginning of Mark's Gospel begins with a grand claim!

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God... (Mark 1:1)

The first followers of Jesus didn't believe that he was simply a man, but that he was the long-awaited king (that's what "Messiah" means) and God himself! We see clues of that throughout many of things that Jesus did in his life in the authority he displayed.

What authority does Jesus display in these passages?



Read Mark 1:16-20



Read Mark 1:21-28



Read Mark 2:1-12



Read Mark 5:35-43

Can you think of other examples of the type of authority that Jesus displayed throughout his life?

Does Jesus' life point to the possibility of him being God?

Next Steps this Week



Read Mark Chapter 1-5

As you read these chapters, note anything that **doesn't make sense**, anything that **surprises** you, or any **questions** that you think of.

Other Helpful Resources

A Doubter's Guide Jesus: An Introduction to the Man from Nazareth for Believers and Skeptics (by John Dickson)

This short book is a good introduction to Jesus as portrayed in the earliest sources available. As a historian and scholar, John Dickson deals with the complexity of who Jesus is in a succinct way.

How God Became King (by Tom Wright)

Through the Gospels, Tom Wright explores the claim of Jesus' kingship and the shape of his Kingdom.

The Christ Files (by John Dickson)

This DVD set outlines much of the evidence for Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It also helpfully explores the reliability of the various sources that inform our understanding of Jesus.

Family Resource: The Jesus Storybook Bible

This is an excellent Bible that helps readers (of all ages) understand how the Bible points to Jesus.