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University of Oxford

“This much-needed book provides a mine of information for Christians wanting to know more about the historical background to the Gospels and offers a series of challenges to those skeptical of what we can know about Jesus. Peter Williams has distilled a mass of information and thought into this short and accessible book, and it deserves careful reading both inside and outside the church.”

Simon Gathercole, Reader in New Testament Studies,
University of Cambridge

“Despite the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, Christians today find themselves unwilling to testify to their faith, as much from confusion as from fear. To this puzzled, anxious flock, Peter Williams offers liberation in the form of a concise yet complete education. His powerful instruction manual on the reliability of the Gospels escorts the ‘faithful seeking understanding’ through a series of historically responsible explanations for questions they have and questions they never imagined. This highly detailed, accurate, and eminently readable volume—rich in charts and tables—strikes a chord so resonant, Christians and skeptics alike can profit. An up-to-date apologia and superlative guide—unbelievers, beware!”

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author, *Luke-Acts and the Rhetoric of History*; *Baptist Traditions and Q*; and *Hebrews as Pseudepigraphon*; Editor, *Early Christianity*

“With his expert knowledge and skill, yet in a remarkably easy-to-follow way, Williams, one of the world’s leading authorities on the text of the New Testament, takes the reader through various lines of evidence supporting the historical reliability of the Gospels. This book shows why it is rational to trust the Gospels.”

Edward Adams, Professor of New Testament Studies,
King’s College London

Can We Trust the Gospels?

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Peter J. Williams

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For my parents-in-law,
David and Joan Eeley

Contents

List of Illustrations	11
Preface	13
Introduction	15
1 What Do Non-Christian Sources Say?	17
2 What Are the Four Gospels?	37
3 Did the Gospel Authors Know Their Stuff?	51
4 Undesigned Coincidences	87
5 Do We Have Jesus's Actual Words?	97
6 Has the Text Changed?	111
7 What about Contradictions?	123
8 Who Would Make All This Up?	129
General Index	141
Scripture Index	147

Illustrations

Tables

1.1	Writings of Tacitus	18
1.2	Writings of Josephus	32
2.1	Main sources about Emperor Tiberius	40
2.2	Main sources about Jesus	40
2.3	Correlations among the Gospels	45
2.4	Proposed dates of Gospel composition	48
3.1	Gospel writers' references to towns	52
3.2	Gospel writers' references to regions	53
3.3	Gospel writers' references to bodies of water	54
3.4	Gospel writers' references to other places	54
3.5	Frequency of geographical references	56
3.6	Popular Jewish names in Palestine	65
3.7	Correlation of names by percentages per category	65
3.8	Frequency of particular Jewish names in Egypt versus Palestine	66

Figure

4.1	Tiberias precipitation	93
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Preface

I have long felt the need for a short book explaining to a general audience some of the vast amount of evidence for the trustworthiness of the four Gospels. There are various great treatments of this topic, and each book has its own focus.¹ This one seeks to present a case for the reliability of the Gospels to those who are thinking about the subject for the first time. I could have made the book far longer by giving more examples and references or by considering objections, but for the sake of brevity I have cut out everything unnecessary. I have sought to give enough information for interested readers to check the evidence, but I have generally avoided referring to the literally millions of pages of New Testament scholarship, of which I have read only the tiniest part.

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1. My top recommendations are Charles E. Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Lydia McGrew, *Hidden in Plain View: Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels and Acts* (Chillicothe, OH: DeWard, 2017); Brant Pitre, *The Case for Jesus: The Biblical and Historical Evidence for Christ* (New York: Image, 2016); and at greater length, Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016).

Hardyman, Jack Haughton, Dr. John Hayward, Dr. Martin Heide, Peter Hunt, Dr. David Instone-Brewer, Dr. Dirk Jongkind, Mark and Becky Lanier, Kevin Matthews, Peter Montoro, Phil and Judy Nussbaum, Philip and Helen Page, Lily Rivers, Laura Robinson, Professor Rodney Sampson, Anna Stevens, Julie Woodson, and Dr. Lorne Zelyck have all assisted in some way in the production of this book, as have the Tyndale House staff and trustees. I am also grateful to family members Diana, Kathryn, Magdalena, and Leo Williams for their support and critical comment. It has been a pleasure to write this book within the setting of Tyndale House in Cambridge, whose library some regard as the best place on earth for conducting biblical research. Many thanks must go to my friends at Crossway for their extraordinary work in publication.

Introduction

It is common today to speak of *world faiths* or to describe some people as having faith, as if others do not. Faith is seen as a non-rational belief—something not based on evidence. However, that is not what faith originally meant for Christians. Coming from the Latin word *fides*, the word *faith* used to mean something closer to our word *trust*. Trust, of course, can be based on evidence.

This book's title, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, is therefore carefully chosen. It addresses the question by looking at evidence of the Gospels' trustworthiness. The great thing about trust is that it is something we all understand to a degree because we all exercise it.

Most of us regularly place our personal safety in the hands of others. We trust food suppliers, civil engineers, and car manufacturers literally with our lives. We also depend on friends, social media, and financial services. Of course, our trust is not absolute and unquestioning. If we see flagrant breaches of hygiene in a restaurant, we probably stop eating there. But trust is still something we exercise daily. We place qualified trust in news sources, both for information that affects our lives and for information that does not. It is a version of that everyday sort of trust that we are going to consider in this book as we

ask whether we can trust the accounts of Jesus's life, namely, the four Gospels found in the second major part of the Bible, called the New Testament.

Trusting the Gospels is both the same as trusting other things and different. It is the same in that we often have to evaluate the credibility of people and things in daily life. It is different in that the Gospels contain accounts of miracles and of a man, Jesus Christ, who is presented as the supernatural Son of God who can rightfully claim ownership of our lives.¹ But before we consider such claims, we need to ask whether the Gospels show the signs of trustworthiness we usually look for in things we believe.

Of course, as we examine the Gospels, I would first encourage you to read them. You should be able to do that comfortably out loud in under nine hours. You might worry about which translation to use, but it makes little difference. If you find the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John online or in a printed Bible, you will probably have enough to make sense of this book.

1. Though the word *supernatural* may imply a gulf between a mechanical natural order and a supernatural realm, I do not mean to imply anything more here than that the Gospels relate miraculous events that are unparalleled in the daily experience of most people.

What Do Non-Christian Sources Say?

It is hardly surprising that Christian texts are our main source of information about the origins of Christianity. Most books on archery, baseball, or cooking are by enthusiasts of those activities. Christians were the most enthusiastic about Christianity and naturally wrote more about it. The four Gospels were, of course, written by advocates of belief in Jesus as the promised deliverer. They may therefore be said to be biased, in the sense that they are not impartial records but ones aiming to foster belief in Jesus Christ.

However, their bias does not mean we should distrust their record. An innocent man accused of a crime may have a deep interest in proving his innocence, but this bias is not a reason to dismiss evidence he produces. The question, then, is not whether the Gospel writers had an agenda, but whether they reported accurately.

Some sources, however, cannot be accused of bias in favor of Christianity. These include non-Christians who wrote within

ninety years of the origins of Christianity and left us with records we can investigate. We will begin by considering three writers: Cornelius Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, and Flavius Josephus. Each of these had his own reason for writing, but in no case was it the promotion of Christianity. Tacitus and Pliny were, in fact, openly hostile to Christianity.

Cornelius Tacitus

Tacitus was born around the year AD 56. He held a series of distinguished Roman offices, including being a senator and a consul. He is now most famed for his writings, which include those shown in table 1.1.¹

Table 1.1. Writings of Tacitus

Short Title	Content	Length	Approximate Date
<i>Agricola</i>	About Tacitus's father-in-law, Julius Agricola, governor of Britain, including a description of Britain and its people	1 book	AD 98
<i>Germania</i>	A description of Rome's dealings with the Germanic tribes	1 book	AD 98
<i>Histories</i>	A narrative of Roman history covering the years AD 69–96	14 books	AD 109
<i>Annals</i>	A narrative of Roman history covering the years AD 14–68	16 books	AD 115–117

Tacitus certainly had biases. He recounted history in order to give moral instruction, praising those he approved of and often applying a whole armory of rhetorical strategies to damn those he disliked. However, his ability to record factual information is first-rate. He could accurately describe remote places he had never visited and was the first to provide literature on

1. Tacitus may also have written the *Dialogue on Oratory*, which has a somewhat different style.

the lochs in Scotland. He appears to have had access to sources that allowed him to relate detailed stories from more than four decades before he was born.² We therefore have little reason to doubt the broad facts underlying his account of the early Christians as found in his *Annals*. To quote the *Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, “The *Annals* in particular show Tacitus to have been one of the greatest of historians, with a penetrating insight into character and a sober grasp of the significant issues of the time.”³

Tacitus wrote about the Great Fire in Rome, which occurred in July AD 64. He told of how it was thought that the mad emperor Nero had started the fire and yet blamed the many Christians then in Rome, accusing them of arson. In his career in Rome, Tacitus would have been able to talk to many adults about its events and to have access to Rome’s official records. We therefore have every reason to treat the outline of facts he provides as reliable.

This is how Tacitus tells the story, using the common early spelling of *Christians* as *Chrestians*:⁴

2. See Ronald Syme, “Tacitus: Some Sources of His Information,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 72 (1982): 68–82.

3. M. C. Howatson, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 548.

4. The oldest manuscript of this passage, Codex Laurentianus Mediceus 68.2, has *Chrestianos*, which a later scribe has corrected to *Christianos* (accusative plural of *Christianus*). The spelling with *e* rather than *i* is extremely common in early centuries, but Tacitus learnedly states that while the “crowd” called the group *Chrestiani*, with *e*, the correct origin of the name was from *Christus*, with *i*. There is continual evidence of vowel confusion for the centuries following Tacitus. Justin Martyr (*First Apology* 4), writing in Greek to the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius in the mid-second century, makes a play on the name Christian and the word “good” (*chrēstos*). Around AD 200, Tertullian, *Apology* 3, complains that opponents wrongly call Christians *Chrestiani*. At the beginning of the fourth century, Lactantius, *Divine Institutions* 4.7, notes that Latin speakers sometimes mistakenly call Christ *Chrēstus*. In biblical manuscripts, although the spelling of Christ and Christian with *i* is attested early (see manuscript TM 61617 for *Christos*, and Papyrus 72 at 1 Peter 4:16 for *Christianos*), it is not clearly in a majority before the fifth century, especially since the name *Christ* is usually spelled in New Testament manuscripts as an abbreviation, which does not reveal the vowel. Though Greek pronunciation was also shifting, there is plenty of evidence from before the fifth century for the use of vowels other than Greek *iota*, which was the normal representation of an *i* sound. Codex

But neither human help, nor gifts from the emperor, nor all the ways of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order [of Nero]. 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 called *Chrestians*. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital [Rome] itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and become fashionable. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the clothes of a charioteer, or mounted on his chariot. Hence, in spite of a guilt which

Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus (both fourth century) are the earliest manuscripts for the three New Testament occurrences of the term *Christian* (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16). Vaticanus has *Chrestianos* (Greek, χρεστιανος), and Sinaiticus has *Chrestianos* (Greek, χρηστιανος). Vaticanus also spells *antichrist* and *pseudochrist* with *ei* (ει) and uses *ei* on the two occasions when it spells out the name *Christ* in full (see Matthew 24:24; Mark 13:22; 2 Corinthians 10:7; 1 Peter 1:11; 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7). The form with *eta* is the main spelling in the earliest Coptic versions of the New Testament. The close alignment of *iota* and *eta* allows Greek word play on the word "good" (*chrestos*) and the word "Christ" (*Christos*) in 1 Peter 2:3. Some scholars distinguish the group mentioned in Tacitus from the later Christians, but this ignores widespread evidence for the vowel interchange in Latin and Greek and involves supposing that Tacitus was gravely confused. It also does not explain why Suetonius, *Life of Nero* 16, calls a group Nero punished at this time *Christiani*. Moreover, it invents an otherwise unattested group called the *Chrestiani*, who are present in Rome in large numbers and are persecuted at a time and in ways that later Christians remembered they were persecuted. These hypothetically widespread *Chrestiani* then disappear off the globe.

had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrifices not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man.⁵

The question should be raised how we know Tacitus actually wrote this. Is it not possible that the work of this pagan writer was tampered with by later Christian scribes? This has been the claim of a few scholars but has remained a marginal view for several reasons, of which I will give just two.

First, it should be remembered that *all* Greek and Latin literature transmitted to us from the classical period to the Middle Ages was handed down by *Christian* scribes. They preserved the references to Greek and Roman gods and faithfully copied religious ideas that differed from their own Christian views. In the last century or so, much-older manuscripts from before Christian times have been found in the dry sands of Egypt, and these show that scribes generally copied faithfully. The burden of proof is therefore on those who want to maintain that texts have been changed since classical times.

Second, Tacitus had a unique style of Latin, part of what is commonly called silver Latin, to distinguish it from Latin of the golden age of Cicero (107/106–43 BC). As every century passed, Latin changed, as all languages do. Medieval scribes were educated in medieval Latin and would not have been aware of all the differences between their own Latin and that of Tacitus. It would have been difficult for them to imitate Tacitus's style of Latin for more than a few phrases at the most. That is why classical scholars today treat this as a reliable account, at least in regard to the main events.

5. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44. Translation lightly adapted for readability from *Tacitus Annals Books 13–16*, Loeb Classical Library 322 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 283, 285. I have also adapted the translation to use the spelling *Chrestians* rather than *Christians*.

The narrative provides significant information. We obviously learn that Tacitus did not like Christians (he calls the religion a “disease”), and yet he helps us establish some useful facts. He uses the name *Christus*, the Latin word from which we get *Christ*. Tacitus regards *Christus* as the source of the name, and his followers were a group that others called *Chrestiani*, with the well-documented vulgar Latin substitution of *e* for *i*.⁶ We note that Tacitus says it was the crowd who named them Chrestians, not the followers themselves. This fits with the three occurrences of the word *Christian* in the New Testament (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16). The term was first applied by non-Christians and only later was adopted by Christians themselves.

Latin *Christus* is simply a transliteration of the Greek word *Christos*, which means “anointed” and is equivalent to the Hebrew word *Messiah*. As the Messiah was the promised deliverer whom many Jews were expecting, the name *Christian* tells us clearly of this group’s belief that the promised Jewish deliverer had come. As we will see, Christianity arose in the cradle of Judaism, and the further back we go in time, the more Jewish all our records of Christianity are. This means we are able to guess certain elements of the beliefs of this group even without considering their writings.

We may also establish certain other things. Tacitus tells us that Christ was put to death while Tiberius was emperor, thus between AD 14 and AD 37. Tacitus also tells us that this happened while Pontius Pilate was in charge of Judaea, which was between AD 26 and AD 36. Tacitus thus gives us an approximate fixed point for the founding events of Christianity.

6. For evidence of the interchange of *e* and *i* see E. H. Sturtevant, *The Pronunciation of Greek and Latin: The Sounds and Accents* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1920), 15–29, 120. It is common that initial contact with a group involves mispronunciation of their name, followed by subsequent correction. Thus in the West the less accurate spelling *Moslem* was only recently replaced by the more accurate spelling *Muslim*.

In addition to giving us this chronological framework, Tacitus helps us with geographical information. He tells us that the “disease” named after Christ started in Judaea, which is where all the Christian sources also claim Christianity started. Christian texts tell us that Jesus Christ was executed near Jerusalem, the spiritual center of Judaea. Tacitus tells us that at the time of the Great Fire in AD 64, there were many Christians in Rome. He uses the Latin phrase *multitudo ingens*, “vast multitude.” Christianity had clearly spread a long way, since the distance, as the crow flies, between Jerusalem and Rome is around 2,300 kilometers (1,430 miles), greater than the distance between Edinburgh and the north of Morocco, or between New York City and Havana.

Tacitus also explains how Nero treated the Christians cruelly and many of them were put to death for pursuing their religion. We may therefore conclude from Tacitus that Christianity spread far and fast and that being a Christian could be very difficult. The time span between the beginnings of Christianity and the Great Fire in Rome was considerably under forty years.

The rapid spread of Christianity may have relevance for investigating the reliability of the Gospels. Surely, the more widespread Christianity became, the harder it would have been for anyone to change its message and beliefs. This would have been particularly so if the Christians were paying a high price for their faith. Scholars who argue that core Christian beliefs, such as the idea that Jesus rose from the dead after his crucifixion, were innovations arising as Christianity spread by word of mouth need to suggest *when* this might have happened. The idea that core beliefs arose decades after Christianity began to spread does not explain why Christianity proved popular in the first place or how people who adhered to a version of Christianity without these beliefs later came to adopt them.

The later agreement of Christians that Jesus Christ was God's Son, prophesied by the Jewish Scriptures, crucified for sins, and raised from the dead by God is best explained by supposing that these and other central beliefs were established *before* Christianity began to spread.

Pliny the Younger

We come now to our second Roman witness, Pliny the Younger (born AD 61/62; died after AD 111). Toward the end of a distinguished career, during which he held many public offices, Pliny became governor of Bithynia and Pontus, a region in northwest Turkey. He governed there around 109–111.⁷ He wrote specifically to the emperor Trajan (ruled 98–117) on a number of occasions. Pliny's most famous letter is the one he wrote to Trajan asking for advice on how to deal with Christians (*Epistles* 10.96). He wrote:

It is my rule, sir, to refer to you all matters of which I am unsure. For who is more capable of guiding my uncertainty or informing my ignorance? Having never been present at any trials of the Christians, I am unacquainted with the method and limits to be observed either in examining or punishing them. I have also been in great doubt whether any difference is to be made on account of age, or any distinction allowed between the youngest and the adult; whether recanting allows a pardon, or whether if a man has been once a Christian it does not help him to recant; whether the mere profession of Christianity, albeit without crimes, or only the crimes associated with it are punishable.

In the meanwhile, the method I have observed towards those who have been denounced to me as Christians is this: I interrogated them whether they were Christians. If they

7. Or perhaps AD 111–13.

confessed it I repeated the question a second and a third time, adding the threat of capital punishment. If they still persevered, I ordered them to be led off to execution. For whatever the nature of their belief might be, I could at least feel no doubt that stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy deserved punishment. There were others also possessed with the same madness, but being citizens of Rome I directed them to be sent there.

These accusations spread (as is usually the case) from the mere fact of the matter being investigated and several forms of the mischief came to light. A placard was put up, without any signature, accusing a large number of persons by name. Those who denied that they were, or ever had been, Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered adoration, with wine and incense, to your statue, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose, together with the images of the gods, and who finally cursed Christ—all things it is said that no real Christian can be forced to do—I thought they should be discharged. Others who were named by that informer at first confessed themselves Christians, but soon after denied it, saying that they had been, but they had ceased, some three years ago, others many years ago, and a few as much as twenty years ago. They all worshipped your statue and the images of the gods, and cursed Christ.

They affirmed, however, the whole of their guilt or error was that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, and of singing in alternate verses a hymn to Christ as to a god, and of binding themselves by a solemn oath, not to wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor to deny a pledge when they were called upon to deliver it up. After this it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an

ordinary and innocent kind. Even this practice, however, they had abandoned after the publication of my edict, by which, according to your orders, I had forbidden political associations. I therefore thought it the more necessary to extract the real truth, with the assistance of torture, from two female slaves, who were called deaconesses: but I could discover nothing more than depraved and excessive superstition.

I have therefore adjourned the proceedings and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me well worth referring to you—especially considering the numbers endangered. Many persons of all ages and ranks and of both sexes are being and will be called to trial. For this contagious superstition is not confined only to the cities, but has also spread through the villages and rural districts. It seems possible, however, to check and correct this. It is certain at least that the temples, which had almost become deserted, are now beginning to be visited again; and the sacred rites, after a long interlude, are again being revived. There is a general demand for sacrificial animals, for which up to now only rarely were purchasers found. From this it is easy to imagine that a multitude of people may be reclaimed from this error, if a door is left open for them to change their minds.⁸

Trajan then replied more briefly to Pliny (whom he called Secundus; *Epistles* 10.97):

The method you have pursued, my Secundus, in sifting the cases of those denounced to you as Christians is proper. It is not possible to lay down any general rule which can be applied as the fixed standard in all cases of

8. My translation is freely adapted from William Melmoth, *Pliny, Letters*, rev. W. M. L. Hutchinson, vol. 2 (London: William Heinemann, 1924), 401–5.

this nature. No search should be made for these people. When they are denounced and found guilty they must be punished; with the restriction, however, that when an individual denies that he is a Christian, and gives proof of it, i.e. by adoring our gods, he shall be pardoned on the ground of repentance, even though he may have formerly incurred suspicion. Anonymous accusations must not be admitted in evidence against anyone, as it is introducing a very dangerous precedent, and by no means agreeable to our times.⁹

Large Numbers of Christians

We can draw several conclusions from this correspondence. One is that neither Pliny nor Emperor Trajan liked Christians. Another is that it was often difficult to be a Christian. A third is that there appear to have been large numbers of Christians in Pliny's area, a theme found also in Tacitus's *Annals*. Tacitus spoke of a "vast number" in Rome, and here the governor of Bithynia is writing to the emperor saying that so many people in his area had become Christians that temples were becoming nearly deserted, and sellers of sacrificial meat actually struggled to find purchasers. Of course, we can detect rhetorical flourish behind Pliny's depictions of deserted temples and rare purchasers of sacrificial meat. But despite this, he was writing to the emperor and certainly would not have wanted to risk giving Trajan the impression that he was reporting untruthfully on his province.

The situation in this non-Christian source is strikingly similar to one described in the book of Acts in the New Testament, which is relevant to the question of Gospel reliability, since the style of the book of Acts indicates that it was written

9. My translation is freely adapted from Melmoth, *Pliny, Letters*, 2:407.

by the same person who wrote Luke's Gospel. Acts 19 describes the situation further south in Ephesus, where a huge riot arose because so many people were turning to Christianity that the silversmiths were not able to sell their images of the gods.

The most natural reading of these sources together is that very large numbers of people were becoming Christians. The mere existence of many Christians does not for one moment have to mean that their beliefs were true. False belief can spread fast. The numbers do, however, make some explanations of early Christianity more difficult.

Those who might say that Christian belief arose by a gradual evolution usually maintain that some of the core beliefs arose only after a long time. But if core ideas, such as that Jesus Christ died as a sacrifice for sins and then rose again bodily, are only late additions to Christian belief, how do we explain the wide geographical distribution of Christians with these beliefs? Many independent early Christian sources contain these beliefs explicitly or implicitly. It is not really possible to account for the later uniformity in Christian belief on these matters if the vast numbers of earlier Christians did not also believe them. Nor can one suppose that in those days, when it was difficult and even dangerous to travel, it would have been possible for any group without political authority to *impose* a major change of beliefs on so large and widespread a set of adherents.

Just One God

A further feature of the correspondence is worth dwelling upon. Pliny and Emperor Trajan agreed on the test to be applied to suspected Christians: suspects had to show that they were not Christian by worshipping the Roman gods. The emperor dem-

onstrated an awareness of what Christians stood for when he wrote, “When an individual denies that he is a Christian, and gives proof of it, i.e. by adoring our gods . . .” Trajan knew enough about Christian belief to be satisfied that this was an adequate test.

Pliny himself had several tests. Other than cursing Christ, all the other tests revolved round worshiping the Roman gods (among whom the emperor was, in some ways, included). None of this is surprising, given what we know of later Christian belief in one sole God. This belief is reflected consistently in the earliest surviving Christian documents.¹⁰ Nor is it hard to find where this came from since everyone agrees that Christianity arose from within Judaism, which had a strong belief that there was only one God and that he alone should be worshiped. The simplest view of the evidence is that Christians *maintained* the earlier belief of the Jews that there was just one God, the Creator, who was absolutely distinct from everything he had created.

However, this is where Pliny’s letter to Trajan surprises us, because it reports an early Christian meeting, as described by those who had renounced Christianity three years, “many” years, or even as much as twenty years previously. Go back roughly twenty years from about the year AD 111, and we see that the governor of Bithynia was giving the emperor a description of a *first-century Christian meeting*.

Apart from the recurring emphasis on integrity in business and family and on general honesty, we also see that early Christians are depicted as assembling before dawn and *singing to Christ* “as to a god” in a way that it is hard to view as anything other than worship. There is no mention of singing to God; rather Christ is the focus of the early Christian

10. E.g., 1 Corinthians 8:6; Ephesians 4:6; 1 Timothy 2:5.

service. Since there is no indefinite article in Latin, Pliny's phrase *quasi deo* could mean "as if to God" or "as if to a god." But we have just seen that, according to the emperor, the foolproof test of whether someone was a Christian was whether he or she was prepared to worship Roman gods. Christians were *not* prepared to do so precisely because they retained the Jewish rejection of worship of any being except the Creator God.

How then could they worship Christ? The answer is as simple as it is mathematical.

In popular ideas of how Christianity arose, it is often suggested that worshipping Christ and treating him as God must have arisen through a gradual developmental process. A problem with this is that the Jewish monotheism from which Christianity arose maintained a sharp dichotomy between the one Creator and everything he created. There was a strict cap on the number of gods at just one. That means that those adhering to Jewish categories would not have imagined Christ as a demigod somewhere in a transition from merely human to fully divine. In Judaism there were no half gods, and so Christ would never have been considered halfway from human to divine, resulting in the impossible number of one and a half gods. In classic Jewish categories, there simply was no evolutionary path of gradually assigning more and more honor to a being until it was viewed as God.¹¹

Besides, even *after* Trajan heard of how the early Christians sang worship to Christ, he still maintained that mere worship

11. Rabbinic expert Daniel Boyarin claims that "many Israelites at the time of Jesus were expecting a Messiah who would be divine and come to earth in the form of a human." This position is controversial but still maintains that belief in Jesus's divinity was early. Boyarin says, "The idea of Jesus as divine-human Messiah goes back to the very beginning of the Christian movement, to Jesus himself, and even before that." See Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: New Press, 2012), 6, 7.

of the Roman gods was enough evidence that someone was no longer a Christian. So, as far as the emperor understood Christianity, he presumed that Christ was effectively the deity of the early Christians.

In summary, the picture we get from Tacitus and Pliny agrees in important ways with what we find within the New Testament. We can conclude that Christ was executed under Pontius Pilate and was shortly afterward treated as God by a group of people who retained the core Jewish belief in one God. Christianity also spread rapidly, and it was at times difficult to be a Christian.

All of this raises the question of why Christianity spread so quickly and how someone who had been publicly executed by the Romans, and thus shown to be a loser, could so soon be viewed as one to be worshiped. Jews were averse to worshipping mere humans, and though some non-Jews (Gentiles) admired the Jews, many did not. The spread of a religion that would have looked so Jewish among large numbers of non-Jews in the Roman Empire requires a convincing explanation.

Flavius Josephus

Our third non-Christian writer is the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. He was born around the year AD 37 or 38 and died some time after AD 100. Josephus was commander of the Jewish forces in Galilee during their initial rebellion against Rome in AD 66. He was captured by the Romans in 67 and claims to have predicted that Vespasian would become emperor in July 69. Josephus found favor with Vespasian and subsequent emperors, became a citizen of Rome, and took the name Flavius in accordance with Vespasian's family's name. During his later life in Rome, he wrote the works shown in table 1.2.

Table 1.2. Writings of Josephus

Short Title	Content	Length	Approximate Date
<i>Jewish War</i>	On the Jewish conflict with Rome, AD 66–73	7 books	AD 79
<i>Jewish Antiquities</i>	A history of the Jews, beginning with creation	20 books	AD 93
<i>Life of Josephus</i>	An autobiography focused on the Jewish conflict with Rome	1 book	AD 93
<i>Against Apion</i>	A defense of Judaism stressing its antiquity	2 books	AD 95

Josephus is the single most important historian for events in first-century Palestine, and is of particular interest since his history *Jewish Antiquities* speaks about Jesus Christ and also John the Baptist,¹² a major figure in the Gospels.

The Greek manuscripts of Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* mention Jesus Christ in two places, of which one is judged by many scholars to be a secondary addition (i.e., not by Josephus) or to have suffered contamination during textual copying.¹³ The other passage tells of how the Jewish high priest Ananus, making the most of a power vacuum while there was no governor in AD 62, acted as follows: “[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.”¹⁴ At the time of this report Josephus was an adult, and this event took place in his own city of Jerusalem, where he was probably then living. It confirms the statements in Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3 that Jesus had a brother called

12. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.116–19. See also the discussion under the heading “Two Wives,” beginning on p. 94.

13. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.63–64.

14. Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.200, Loeb Classical Library 456 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 107–9.

James.¹⁵ According to first-century Christians, James was the leader of the Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13; Galatians 1:19; 2:9). So it seems that the high priest Ananus was engaging in religious persecution of James and other Christians, perceiving them to be violators of the Jewish law.

The portrait of this situation given by Josephus fits well with what we have already seen from Tacitus and Pliny, as well as with the frequent accounts of persecution within the New Testament. The non-Christian sources basically agree with the Christian ones in recording the difficulties early Christians experienced.

However, the reference in Josephus is also rather different from references in Tacitus and Pliny. Those two classical writers give evidence for how far and how fast Christianity spread. Josephus, however, lets us see that even after Christianity had been going for several decades, there were still family members involved in the movement of Jesus's followers. This is interesting because, to have such a role, James would have had to believe, or at least pretend to believe, that his crucified brother was the promised Jewish deliverer, the Messiah, since that is what the name *Christ* means. Moreover, James's death for his faith makes it far more natural to assume his sincerity and that he genuinely believed his brother to be the Messiah.

Certain things follow from this. A brother, even a younger brother, is usually knowledgeable about the lives of other members of his family. For instance, James would most likely have grown up hearing about where his brother Jesus was born, something of his ancestry, and whether his parents presented Joseph as the biological father to Jesus. If James was both a family member and sincere in believing his brother to be the Messiah, his leadership of the church in Jerusalem would probably *not*

15. "Brother" could mean "half-brother," and in Matthew 13:55 the use of this title is presented as compatible with the view in Matthew 1:18–25 that neither Joseph nor any other man had contributed to Mary's pregnancy.

have provided an environment in which major new teachings were easily accepted.

Matthew and Luke, which are normally dated to the first century, testify to the belief that Jesus was born of a virgin in Bethlehem, the town the Old Testament prophet Micah had said would be the place from which the future ruler of Israel would arise (Micah 5:2). All four Gospels attest to the belief that Jesus was descended from David.¹⁶ Skeptical readers of the New Testament might naturally assume that these beliefs arose through exaggerations over time as word of Jesus as Messiah spread. The problem with this is finding a context in which such embellishments *could* spread.

It is actually most natural to assume that in the first thirty or so years of Christianity, more than one sincere member of the family of Jesus held a key role in the early church. According to 1 Corinthians 9:5 (written ca. AD 56) not just one brother, but “the brothers” of Jesus traveled with their wives, spreading the Christian message. This suggests a situation in which the sprouting of novel beliefs about the family origins of Jesus would have been hard.

But is it then likely that such beliefs arose after AD 62, when James had died? The problem with supposing that novel beliefs arose later is that, by then, Christianity had spread so far and so fast that it would have been difficult to introduce innovations. For a start, anyone wanting to spread a new doctrine would have had to travel widely to advance the belief, and would also have had to overcome resistance as he sought to displace the established belief.

16. In John 7:42, the belief that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and descended from David is conveyed using irony. For possible material evidence that some people at the time of the New Testament claimed that they could trace their genealogy back to David, see *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae*, vol. 1, *Jerusalem, Part 1: 1–704*, ed. Hannah M. Cotton, Leah Di Segni, Werner Eck, Benjamin Isaac, Alla Kushnir-Stein, Haggai Misgav, Jonathan Price, Israel Roll, and Ada Yardeni (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 88–90.

Take, for instance, the idea that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. If we ignore for the moment the remarkable nature of the claims that an individual who was descended from the founder of Israel's great royal dynasty was born of a virgin in the town from which a prophet had predicted a future ruler would arise, the most straightforward view of the documentary evidence would be that these beliefs were in place from when Christianity first started spreading. If a non-miraculous but otherwise similar set of beliefs was attested in documents as close to the events as were the Gospels and among people as widespread as were early Christians, few people would have any difficulty in believing these facts to be true. This would especially be the case if sincere family members were around for the opening decades of the spread of the message.

We will deal in chapter 8 with the question of the miraculous, which is a problem for some people in taking the Gospel accounts as historical. All I want to establish at this stage is that, were it not for the amazing nature of the claims made about Jesus, few would have any problem believing biographical details recorded so close to the alleged events.

We have now looked at three non-Christian writers and what they said about Jesus Christ or Christians. We have seen

- the confirmation of basic facts from the New Testament, such as Christ's death under Pontius Pilate in Judaea between AD 26 and AD 36,
- that Christ was worshiped as God early on,
- that Christ's followers often experienced persecution,
- that Christians spread far and fast,
- that some early Christian leaders would have known of Christ's family origins.