

NON-CHRISTIAN HISTORIANS' REFERENCES TO JESUS IN THE FIRST AND SECOND CENTURIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to systematically present a detailed list of non-Christian historians from the first and second centuries who mentioned or referred to Jesus Christ. By compiling references from figures such as Josephus, Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, and several others—including some frequently overlooked sources—the study seeks to offer both direct quotations and concise interpretations of these historical remarks. Careful attention is given to quoting each relevant passage or statement, highlighting not only the mention of Jesus but also the distinct perspectives these writers held regarding his role and influence. The breadth of included sources ensures that the paper addresses both prominent and minor non-Christian commentators active during the specified timeframe. In doing so, the research contributes to a broader understanding of the historical context in which Jesus was referenced outside of Christian writings.

I. INTRODUCTION

Examining non-Christian historical references to Jesus Christ from the first and second centuries offers valuable context for understanding how he was perceived outside Christian circles. These independent accounts, authored by figures such as Josephus, Tacitus, and others, provide external attestations to aspects of Jesus's life and the movement he inspired. This paper focuses exclusively on historians and writers operating during the first two centuries CE, establishing clear temporal boundaries to maintain historical precision. Each reference is presented by quoting the relevant passage directly and then offering a concise summary of the historian's viewpoint regarding Jesus. Through this approach, the study provides readers with both the primary source material and a focused synthesis of each author's assessment, facilitating a deeper appreciation of the historical discourse surrounding Jesus in antiquity.

Major Non-Christian Historians Referencing Jesus

Among the earliest non-Christian historians to mention Jesus was Flavius Josephus, whose writings have been the subject of substantial scholarly scrutiny. In his "Antiquities of the Jews," Josephus is traditionally attributed with the passage now known as the Testimonium Flavianum, which states: "At this time there was a wise man called Jesus... He drew over to him many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles... When Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at first did not forsake him" (Schmidt, 2025). However, debate continues regarding the authenticity of Josephus's references, as some scholars argue that portions of the passage bear marks of later Christian interpolation (Jormakka, 2023). Despite doubts over the exact wording, Josephus's surviving references to Jesus—including his identification of James as "the brother of Jesus"—convey a neutral, minimally engaged stance, portraying Jesus as a notable figure who attracted followers and incited official response.

Additionally, the Roman historian Tacitus offered a notable reference to Jesus in his *Annals*, specifically in the context of Emperor Nero's persecution of Christians following the fire of Rome. Tacitus wrote: "Christus, from whom the name [Christian] had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome." This passage, found in *Annals* 15.44, demonstrates that Tacitus viewed Christianity as a deeply troublesome and disruptive movement, labeling it a "mischievous superstition" rather than a legitimate faith. The wording, as well as the context provided by Tacitus's harsh tone, suggests a view of Jesus as the executed founder of a problematic sect.

rather than a revered figure (Hansen, 2023). Tacitus's account stands as a Roman perspective rooted in official skepticism and associating Jesus with social disturbance rather than with religious innovation.

Furthermore, Pliny the Younger provides another valuable example of a non-Christian official referencing Jesus within his correspondence with Emperor Trajan, dated around 112 CE. In one of his letters, Pliny describes the examination and punishment of Christians, remarking, "They were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery" (Keddie, 2022). Rather than offering theological commentary, Pliny's account focuses on the administrative problem presented by Christians and the perceived risks their gatherings posed to Roman order. Pliny expresses uncertainty about the legitimacy of persecuting individuals solely for their faith and highlights his concern that such assemblies, if left unchecked, could evolve into dangerous conspiracies. This perspective, as interpreted through his correspondence and in contemporary analysis, reflects a pragmatic outlook rooted more in Roman governance than in moral or religious opposition to Jesus himself (Keddie, 2022).

Moreover, Suetonius, another prominent Roman historian, provides a brief yet intriguing reference in his work "The Lives of the Twelve Caesars." He remarks, "Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome," a statement found in his biography of Claudius. The passage has prompted discussion among scholars regarding whether "Chrestus" is a misspelling or variant of "Christus," and thus a possible allusion to Jesus (Williams, 2022). Suetonius's account does not elaborate on the nature of Chrestus or directly connect him to Christian doctrine, but the disturbance described suggests a reaction to the growing conflict between Jews who accepted Jesus and those who did not. His perspective is largely administrative, regarding such unrest as a challenge to imperial authority, rather than engaging with the theological significance of Jesus or Christianity.

In addition, Mara bar Serapion offers a distinctive non-Christian account that references Jesus indirectly but recognizably. Writing from a Syrian context, Mara composed a letter to his son in which he laments the unjust fate of wise men throughout history, mentioning Jesus as "the wise king." The relevant passage states, "What benefit did the Jews gain from executing their wise king? It was just after that their kingdom was abolished." This phrase situates Jesus among other figures who suffered consequences for their wisdom, highlighting the perceived injustice of his death without explicitly assigning religious or messianic status. Mara bar Serapion's viewpoint, therefore, frames Jesus as a sage whose teachings and execution brought adverse consequences for his people, illustrating how some classical authors engaged with Jesus as a historical and philosophical figure outside Christian belief systems (Williams, 2022).

Similarly, Lucian of Samosata offers a satirical appraisal of Jesus and his followers, providing a unique perspective among non-Christian commentators from the period. In his work "The Passing of Peregrinus," Lucian writes mockingly that "the Christians... worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account," highlighting both the veneration of Jesus and Lucian's skepticism about Christian beliefs (Irene Fantappiè, 2019). Lucian's characterization frequently underscores his incredulity toward the sincerity and rationality of Christians, depicting them as gullible and prone to deception. Through his biting humor, Lucian recognizes the historical existence of Jesus, but frames him as the leader of a misguided group whose devotion borders on folly. This satirical treatment reveals Lucian's broader disdain for emerging religious movements and illustrates the diverse and sometimes hostile reactions provoked by references to Jesus in the wider Greco-Roman world.

On the other hand, Celsus presents one of the most openly hostile accounts of Jesus among non-Christian writers of the second century. In his treatise "The True Word," Celsus targets both the person of Jesus and the intellectual foundations of Christianity, dismissing Jesus as a mere "sorcerer" who performed miracles through magic rather than divine power. He states, "It was by means of sorcery that he was able to accomplish the wonders which he appears to have performed," offering a pointed rejection of supernatural claims associated with Jesus (Williams, 2022). Celsus's critique extends to ridiculing the social origins of Jesus and his followers, portraying them as naïve and uneducated. As a result, his negative perspective is rooted in philosophical

skepticism and a deliberate effort to undermine the credibility and appeal of Christian teachings within Roman intellectual circles (Williams, 2022).

Likewise, the Babylonian Talmud includes several indirect references to Jesus, offering perspectives that differ markedly from those found in Greco-Roman sources. Notably, passages within Tractate Sanhedrin recount the account of a figure referred to as "Yeshu," narrating details about his trial and execution, such as, "On the eve of Passover Yeshu was hanged," a phrase that alludes to his crucifixion without overt acknowledgment of his messianic claims (Federico, 2019). The broader context of these Talmudic narratives is shaped by the social and theological dynamics of the surrounding Sasanian Empire, which influenced how Jewish scholars depicted competing religious figures, including Jesus (Rubenstein, 2020). These passages generally portray Jesus as a contentious figure within Judaism, connecting him to accusations of sorcery and wayward teachings, rather than attributing any prophetic or divine significance to his actions. In summary, the Talmudic writers' approach demonstrates guarded distancing, framing Jesus as a problematic individual while reflecting the interreligious tensions characteristic of their time.

Additionally, Thallus stands among the earliest non-Christian writers to reference events related to Jesus's crucifixion, specifically addressing the phenomenon of darkness described in Christian accounts. His work itself is lost, but a fragment preserved by later historian Julius Africanus reports, "Thallus, in the third book of his histories, explains away this darkness as an eclipse of the sun." This brief mention highlights not only Thallus's awareness of a notable event coinciding with the time of Jesus's death but also his preference for a naturalistic, rather than supernatural, explanation. Thus, Thallus's perspective demonstrates a tendency among some early historians to rationalize purported miracles historically tied to Jesus, offering alternative interpretations in line with broader Hellenistic approaches to historiography. His commentary exemplifies the diversity of non-Christian responses and underscores how even minimal references contributed to ongoing debates about the historical reliability of biblical narratives (Schlichter, 2022).

Furthermore, Phlegon also addressed events connected to the period surrounding Jesus's crucifixion, primarily describing remarkable occurrences that coincided with his death. In preserved fragments cited by later authors, Phlegon is reported to have written of "an eclipse of the sun" and "a great earthquake," timed to "the reign of Tiberius Caesar, in the fourth year, when the greatest eclipse of the sun occurred, and it became night in the sixth hour of the day, so that even the stars appeared in the heavens." Phlegon's reference is frequently interpreted as an attempt to account for the darkness noted in Christian narratives, proposing a physical explanation rooted in natural phenomena. This approach aligns with broader Hellenistic tendencies to rationalize events, positioning Phlegon within the cohort of early writers who sought to provide secular interpretations for episodes described in biblical literature (Schlichter, 2022). Thus, Phlegon's mention is notable not for theological endorsement, but for reflecting an interest in harmonizing reported supernatural occurrences with established historical chronology.

Additional and Lesser-Known Historians

Conversely, the established focus on major non-Christian historians necessitates a careful exploration of additional and lesser-known figures who may have referenced Jesus during the first and second centuries. Identifying these individuals is important for capturing the full spectrum of external testimony relevant to the historical Jesus, as their remarks, while often briefer or less direct, supplement the accounts provided by more prominent writers. For the purposes of inclusion, historians and commentators must not only operate within the designated timeframe but also provide evidence of either direct mention or clear allusion to Jesus or events associated with his life and death. This approach enables the recognition of a broader range of references that might otherwise be overlooked in surveys focused solely on the major voices of the period (Williams, 2022). While these lesser-known commentators vary in the depth of their engagement, their contributions collectively enrich the historiographical landscape and warrant systematic attention in any comprehensive analysis.

Moreover, Tacitus's references to Jesus outside of the Annals remain a subject of historical debate, as none of his other surviving works—including the Histories and minor writings—contain explicit mention of Jesus by name. Despite the prominence of Annals 15.44 in scholarly literature, researchers continue to investigate whether Tacitus alluded to Christian figures or related events elsewhere in his oeuvre (Hansen, 2023).

However, a thorough review of the extant material demonstrates that the only substantial reference to Jesus appears in the Annals, with no corresponding quotations or parallel passages found in his other texts. The absence of additional references is significant, signaling that Tacitus's interest in Christianity was contextually bound to his narrative on Nero's persecution rather than being indicative of a broader engagement with Jesus or Christian origins. This singular focus suggests that Tacitus's portrayal of Jesus and Christians was shaped by specific historical circumstances rather than sustained commentary throughout his corpus (Hansen, 2023).

Similarly, the Roman historian Cassius Dio, writing in the late second and early third centuries, does not provide a direct mention of Jesus in his extant works. Although his multi-volume "Roman History" is comprehensive regarding the political and social context of his era, references to Christians are relatively brief and rarely elaborate on the movement's origins or central figures. Notably, Cassius Dio mentions periods of unrest during the reigns of emperors such as Nero, making cursory reference to disturbances that may have involved Christians, but he refrains from explicitly naming Jesus or discussing doctrinal matters (Williams, 2022). In the passages where he addresses incidents attributed to followers of new religious practices, early Christians are often depicted as part of disruptive groups provoking administrative concern rather than being recognized for religious distinctiveness. Therefore, Cassius Dio's surviving works suggest an indirect and administrative view of early Christianity, illustrating the limits of engagement some classical authors maintained with the figure of Jesus in historical literature (Williams, 2022).

Additionally, among Stoic philosophers of the first and second centuries, direct allusions to Jesus are notably absent, with Epictetus representing a chief example. While Epictetus's "Discourses" and "Enchiridion" often address ethical principles and the conduct of individuals in turbulent times, there is no known passage explicitly referencing Jesus or early Christianity by name. This silence is noteworthy given the overlap between Stoic moral teachings and certain ethical precepts later embraced by Christian writers, fostering scholarly speculation about indirect engagements or points of comparison. Nonetheless, the absence of a quotation or clear reference in Epictetus's extant works suggests that Stoic philosophers, including others like Seneca or Musonius Rufus, did not engage in recorded critiques or analyses specifically targeting Jesus, even as they contended with broader social changes of their era (Williams, 2022). Thus, any parallelisms remain thematic rather than evidentiary, and their perspectives on Jesus must be inferred from general attitudes toward new religious movements of the period.

Furthermore, the renowned physician Galen, active in the second century, presents a possible but ambiguous reference to Jesus in his medical and philosophical writings. Although Galen does not directly name Jesus, he remarks on Christians as "followers of the man who taught them these doctrines," highlighting their discipline and commitment to a distinctive moral code (Williams, 2022). This statement suggests that Galen was aware of the foundational role an individual—presumed by scholars to be Jesus—played in shaping early Christian conduct. His assessment does not address supernatural claims or the details of Jesus's life, but instead focuses on the practical influence that Jesus's teachings exerted on his followers' behavior. Galen's view, therefore, is primarily concerned with the ethical and communal aspects of early Christianity, reflecting a broader trend of intellectual engagement with the new movement among classical authors (Williams, 2022).

Moreover, the writings of Juvenal and other Roman satirists from the first and second centuries largely omit direct mention of Jesus, despite their keen observation of contemporary religious and social phenomena. Upon close examination of Juvenal's satires, scholars have failed to identify explicit references to Jesus or overt allusions to his life and teachings. Instead, Juvenal targets broader religious trends, occasionally satirizing superstitions and the behavior of foreign cults within Rome but without naming Christian figures specifically or addressing the nascent Christian movement's founder (Williams, 2022). This absence is notable given the satirists' penchant for critiquing emerging religious groups and the increased prominence of Christianity during the period. As such, the silence of Juvenal and his peers regarding Jesus reveals either limited awareness of the movement's leader or a conscious decision to focus their social commentary elsewhere within the fabric of Roman society (Williams, 2022).

Likewise, Roman governors and officials occasionally referenced Jesus or the early Christian movement in their official correspondence, although their remarks tended to focus on administrative issues rather than

theological assessments. Among the most prominent examples is Pliny the Younger, whose letter to Emperor Trajan described Christians gathering to sing hymns “to Christ as to a god,” while emphasizing that these assemblies were viewed primarily as matters of public order rather than as spiritual claims (Williams, 2022). Pliny’s reports highlight a pragmatic and often cautious approach, documenting his uncertainty regarding the appropriate legal response to individuals who identified as followers of Jesus. He took care to investigate the practices of Christians, noting their refusal to participate in Emperor worship but ultimately portraying them as law-abiding apart from their stance on traditional Roman religion. This perspective typifies the broader administrative attitude held by Roman governors, who generally regarded Jesus and his followers as sources of potential unrest or legal ambiguity rather than objects of philosophical or religious inquiry (Williams, 2022).

Additionally, the corpus of Greek and Roman geographers and chroniclers from the first and second centuries provides limited, often indirect, evidence regarding Jesus or early Christians. While major geographical compendia such as that of Strabo do not reference Jesus, later chroniclers occasionally allude to the movement’s presence without explicit detail. Notably, some geographers document the spread of Christian communities within the provinces, indicating an awareness of their emergence but usually abstaining from theological commentary or naming Jesus directly (Williams, 2022). Where indirect references occur, they typically focus on the social or demographic characteristics associated with Christian groups, acknowledging their separation from established religious or civic practices. As a result, the geographical and chronicler sources contribute to an understanding of early Christians as a distinct but socially peripheral collective, reflecting broader attitudes of classical authors who mostly remained detached from the movement’s internal doctrines or narratives (Williams, 2022).

Furthermore, material traces such as inscriptions and papyri have been scrutinized for explicit references to Jesus from the first and second centuries, though findings are notably sparse. Among these, isolated artifacts including certain funerary inscriptions and ostraca have been proposed as containing allusions to Jesus or early Christian groups; however, the decisive identification of such references remains contested in scholarly discourse. The majority of documentary and non-literary evidence from this period that might imply a connection to Jesus, such as rare Greek or Latin graffiti, typically centers around Christian identity markers rather than clear historical attestations naming Jesus directly (Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, 2022). This evidentiary pattern aligns with broader studies of rabbinic literature, which demonstrate that even within texts such as the Babylonian Talmud, direct mentions of Jesus are limited and frequently embedded within complex cultural and interreligious contexts (Goldstone, 2019). As a consequence, the significance of these non-literary sources lies predominantly in their reflection of the gradual social recognition and boundary formation of Christian communities, rather than in providing detailed contemporary testimony about Jesus as a historical figure.

In summary, a comprehensive review of both prominent and lesser-known non-Christian historians from the first and second centuries reveals a spectrum of attitudes toward Jesus, ranging from guarded neutrality to open skepticism. These figures, while differing in the detail and nature of their remarks, generally present Jesus as an influential contemporary whose execution provoked significant social and religious reactions. Prominent sources such as Josephus, for example, have their references scrutinized for authenticity and possible Christian influence, with scholarship suggesting that his *Testimonium Flavianum* may represent a paraphrased Christian account rather than a wholly independent narrative (Goldberg, 2021). Meanwhile, many lesser-known or indirect references focus primarily on the disruptive effects of the new movement associated with Jesus, rather than on his personal attributes or teachings. Collectively, these testimonies highlight a pattern in which Jesus is depicted not as a messianic or divine figure, but as a catalyst for unrest, philosophical discussion, and administrative concern within the diverse societies of antiquity.

II. CONCLUSION

Taken together, the testimonies of non-Christian historians from the first and second centuries provide a valuable contribution to the study of early Christianity and the historical figure of Jesus. These accounts, though varying in their level of detail and interpretive frameworks, collectively serve as external attestations to Jesus’s life, his crucifixion, and the subsequent emergence and spread of the Christian movement. Importantly, the range of perspectives—from official skepticism and administrative concern to dismissive satire and

philosophical critique—underscores the diversity of reactions that Jesus and his followers elicited in antiquity. The presence of both direct mentions and indirect allusions in sources external to Christian tradition supports the existence of Jesus as a person whose impact was noticed by contemporary observers outside the nascent church. As a result, these references play an essential role in contextualizing the historical Jesus within the broader sociopolitical, intellectual, and religious currents of the ancient Mediterranean world.

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