

Should there be More Extra-Biblical references to Jesus?

Wouldn't the miraculous actions of Jesus as reported in the gospels have resulted in far more extra-Biblical written evidence? The argument is that since such extra-Biblical sources do not exist, shouldn't we distrust the gospel portraits of Jesus? This a valid question, but it relies on anachronistic assumptions. As we will see, when placed in historical context, it loses its force. First, let us assess the miracles of Jesus and steel man the argument as best as we can.

The Miracles of Jesus

There were many public miracles performed by Jesus such as the feedings of the multitudes and the gospels do say things like the following:

- **Luke 4:40-41:** At sunset, people brought their sick with various diseases, and Jesus laid hands on each one, healing them and casting out demons.
- **Luke 6:19:** The entire crowd attempted to touch him because power was flowing from him and healing everyone.
- **Matthew 8:16-17:** As evening approached, many demon-possessed people were brought, and he cast out spirits with a word and healed all the sick, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy.
- **Matthew 15:29-31:** On a mountain near the Sea of Galilee, great crowds brought the lame, blind, crippled, and mute, laying them at Jesus' feet to be healed.

Also, the anointing at Jesus's baptism seems to have been a public event. It is true that in some places Jesus drew large crowds due to his miraculous powers. The strongest argument for the skeptical position seems to lie in the two feeding miracles. Note that Jesus didn't feed 5,000 people as per Matthew 14:21 that figure does not include the women and children. If you factor them in, we could be looking at a number closer to 15,000. That is certainly a large crowd being privy to Jesus's supernatural reenactment of God feeding Israel manna and quail while in the wilderness. In addition, villages in Galilee would have only a few thousand people so this represents a crowd that is coming from multiple regions.

Some Christians might see a bit of missionary exuberance in these numbers and inquire as to whether the apostles actually counted how many people Jesus fed. But this isn't necessary because Jesus was known as a miracle worker to both friend and foe. Even the Jewish historian Josephus reports, "he brought over many" so we can take it Jesus also gathered large crowds at times.

I would like to note there may have been a million Jews in Palestine in the year 30 AD and society was mostly agrarian with small settlements of a few thousand people. This would impact how we view this material as spreading as we will see later. It is also difficult for us to be certain when a miracle occurred during the ministry of Jesus. The gospels can

certainly narrate stories thematically rather than chronologically. It is quite plausible very public supernatural miracles like the feedings of the multitudes occurred later in his ministry. This coheres well with Jesus commanding several people and demons to be silent when he healed them. It seems that Jesus wanted to control the flow of information about him and temper crowd sizes as times. The importance of this will be demonstrated later as his death would naturally snuff out his credibility to the outside world.

It should be noted that a lot of Jesus's other miracles were actually quite private. Some were witnessed by the disciples only. For example, the transfiguration, walking on water, and the stilling of the storm seem to have been observed by only this group. The transfiguration itself was only witnessed by three of the disciples as was the raising of Jairus's daughter (her parents were in the room as well). The coin in the fish's mouth would have been witnessed by Peter alone. Thus, a number of nature defying miracles were not public events.

A significant portion of Jesus's miracles were performed in front of small audiences. For example, how many at the wedding in Cana would know Jesus turned water into wine? This was not proclaimed to all present and imagine after a few drinks hearing someone claim a person in the back turned water into wine.

There are times when Jesus could not heal due to a lack of faith (Mark 6:5-6 and Matthew 13:58). Likewise, there are times when Jesus refuses to give a sign (Mt 12:38-42). Jesus occasionally takes people to private locations to heal them. For example, the blind man at Bethsaida is led out of the village and healed (Mark 8:23). Jesus takes a deaf/mute man away from the crowd in Mark 7:33 to heal him. Jesus commands demons and people to be silent about his healings (though the people do not listen at times). He clearly was intending to keep a low profile at times while at others being very open about things. The feeding miracles would seem to be the strongest piece of evidence in favor of the objection being discussed in this paper.

What Do Critical Scholars think?

First, let us start with a quote from one of the most widely respected historical Jesus scholars of the third quest¹:

“Jesus became such an important man in world history that it is sometimes hard to believe how unimportant he was during his lifetime, especially outside Palestine. Most of the first-century literature that survives was written by members of the very small elite class of the Roman empire. To them, Jesus (if they heard of him at all)

¹ For readers that don't know, historical Jesus research is usually broken into time periods referred to as quests. Currently, some consider this to be the end of the third quest and believe we are on the cusp of a new one. Historical Jesus research today appears to be undergoing an epistemological crisis.

was merely a troublesome rabble-rouser and magician in a small, backward part of the world. . . . When he was executed, Jesus was no more important to the outside world than the two brigands or insurgents executed with him – whose names we do not know.” –EP Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* , p.49.

Sanders identified as a protestant Christian as best as I could tell but he was not a conservative apologist as anyone familiar with his critical works could attest. In the same work he writes: “That Jesus’ followers (and later Paul) had resurrection experiences is, in my judgment, a fact. What the reality was that gave rise to the experiences I do not know.” The vast majority of all historians are flatly convinced Jesus existed. Quotes establishing this could be mined until the cows come home from Jewish, Christian and atheist scholars. We have to be careful though. Some of these scholars would reject that Jesus performed the miracles attributed to him in the gospels. They might reconstruct a more minimalist version of Jesus that was not a supernatural miracle worker. For example, Sanders would consider many of the miracles in the gospel accounts as apologetic fictions. The question being asked here is far more nuanced than wondering if a Jewish teacher named Jesus was crucified by Rome 2,000 years ago. The crucifixion of Jesus is an accepted historical fact in the field along with the idea that some of Jesus’s first followers believed he rose from the dead shortly after he died. But I think the question being asked is if Jesus was healing hundreds or thousands of people, performing miracles in front of tens of thousands of people (the feedings), controlling the weather, raising the dead, exorcising demons, walking on water and so on, wouldn’t we have detailed records of him from outside sources? Surely that man would draw a crowd and authorities would want to check out what happened for themselves. So while maybe a historical Jesus did exist and was crucified, can we trust the general picture of him in the gospels with this in mind?

Whether or not the gospels are consistent with one another or reliable has to be determined on other grounds, but I think we can say this objection does not have a lot of force. Before digging deeper, I would like to note at the outset that it is an argument from silence. Arguing from what is not written in a historical record is speculative and fallacious unless it can be reasonably established something would be mentioned. This can be done but sometimes authors just forget to mention things we find important. But I’ll give you a case of a good argument from silence. On the day after 9/11, one could reasonably assume what the front page of the New York Times and virtually every other major American newspaper would include on the front page. So can a person reasonably establish that the outside world would mention Jesus if the gospel portrait is largely true? Let us take a look.

A Short Ministry Public Ministry Ended by Crucifixion

The gospels describe Jesus as having a short public ministry of between 1-3 years. In fact, the entirety of Mark could fit into a period much shorter than a full year. The three-year ministry comes from John because that is how many Passovers are narrated. **The gist of the gospels is that Jesus has a short public ministry.** Combining the short ministry with how it terminated largely gives us the answer to the question under consideration. Jesus was executed by Rome. He was tortured and crucified under Pontius Pilate. Should we think that after Jesus was nailed to the cross, anyone but those who believed he rose from the dead or witnessed a miracle would necessarily have believed these stories, cared about, investigated or bothered to write about them to the extent this objection requires? Josephus himself was highly skeptical of prophets and healers of his time, often labeling them "deceivers" (*apateônes*) and "impostors" (*goêtes*). He did attribute miracles to Jesus but the issue is that once Jesus is crucified, to anyone in the outside Roman world, he was just a rabble rouser put to death by Rome. To many Jews he would most likely be portrayed as a false messianic claimant.

This means there is no reasonable expectation that any sources outside Palestine should be mentioning Jesus because they are enamored by reports of his wondrous deeds. The fact that he was executed as a criminal against Rome makes this virtually certain. So the argument from silence ends in failure. Are people from Rome going to come investigate whether this crucified Jew really performed miracles? No. The general rationale could be something along the lines of: "If he was such a god-man, then how did Rome execute him?" Even people who saw him perform miracles could believe they were done by Beelzebub or something else after being crucified. Would most Jews believe God was really empowering this man that Rome nailed to a cross? Matthew 27:39-44 says as much: "save yourself," "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross," "He saved others; he cannot save himself." "let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to, for he said, 'I am God's Son.'" 44 The rebels who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way. Matthew records that those who passed by, the chief priests and elders, and even those crucified with him, all taunted him in this way. Crucifixion was a very shameful and humiliating death in antiquity. Not to mention barbaric and painful. It was meant to be public and deterring. Once Jesus is executed he loses credibility and so does his movement. As Paul tells us, the cross is "a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23). Christianity was a pernicious superstition to most of the world.

Anachronism: Literacy, News and Miracles then and Now

The majority of the population in the ancient world could not read and write, and the latter was much more difficult and expensive than it is today. If stories were passed around about Jesus—and they certainly were—they would have initially been spread by word of mouth as this is an oral culture we are dealing with. I don't think this objection appreciates or understands this major difference between 1st century Palestine and now. In its ancient context, the argument should be "why didn't more people talk about Jesus if he did all those miracles" and of course this argument then immediately loses its force because how does the person asking know what or was not talked about in private conversations by people in the 30s, 40s, or 50s AD? For all we know, many tens of thousands of people heard of Jesus—possibly more—in some form as he was engaged in his public ministry. These oral conversations are not accessible to us. Even most of the written material produced in the first century has been lost. Let us not forget the Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 CE. Any records kept there would be lost. Our surviving literature represents a very small amount of what was actually written, and much more than that was spoken. Even Papias, a Christian writing around the turn of the first century who may very well have been aware of Matthew and Mark said he did not think the information from books helped him as much as information from a "living and abiding voice." Oral teaching was the primary method of relaying information at the time.

I also suspect some people do not realize how news spread in antiquity. There weren't newspapers or televisions airing nightly news stories that recapped world events. Travel was slow and more difficult. How do people in Rome, which is thousands of miles from Nazareth, hear of Jesus's miracles during what the gospels describe as a short ministry (1-3 years)? There is also the language barrier between Aramaic speaking Jews and Greek speaking Romans that would hinder communication of these miracles. The objection needs to seriously model how such information and rumors would disseminate geographically and chronologically. You can argue Jesus would be more well known inside Palestine and I would say that's true. Crowds came to him and his fame spread and eventually the Jewish leaders had him executed. There is absolutely not evidence Jesus was not considered a miracle worker. This is true inside the gospels and outside as we will see below

Finally, I think people sometimes confuse how they understand miracles today with how our ancestors did. While they would not outright doubt miraculous powers, I also suspect some Romans would be skeptical of these Jewish tales or superstitions but even that is not necessarily the case. Celsus was a critic of Christianity in the later second century, but he

didn't even feel compelled to deny that Jesus was a miracle worker. According to Origen, Celsus claims Jesus invented his virgin birth and was

“born in a certain Jewish village, of a poor woman of the country, who gained her subsistence by spinning, and who was turned out of doors by her husband, a carpenter by trade, because she was convicted of adultery; that after being driven away by her husband, and wandering about for a time, she disgracefully gave birth to Jesus, an illegitimate child, who having hired himself out as a servant in Egypt on account of his poverty, and having there acquired some miraculous powers, on which the Egyptians greatly pride themselves, returned to his own country, highly elated on account of them, and by means of these proclaimed himself a God.”

The miraculous powers of Jesus are not disputed by Celsus. He considers them something that could be learned or acquired in Egypt. Of course, this does not mean he believed all the gospel stories were true, but we are not dealing with not post-enlightenment Westerners. Miracle workers could be frauds, they could be working for Beelzebub (as Jesus's opponents accuse him), or legitimate agents of God or whatever gods you believed in. We are conditioned to be skeptical of miracles so someone breaking the laws of physics by walking on water or healing someone with their saliva is something every news station would flock to—assuming they didn't dismiss the story out of hand first. And that is the real issue, news naturally would spread slower in antiquity through oral means – largely via hearsay – and this process was thwarted when Jesus's healing hand was held back by deepened nails.

The Devil in the Details: What Sources Should mention Jesus that Don't?

As already noted, oral discourse was the norm at the time and we mostly lack access to private and public conversations at the time. But even in the case of written discourse, I think some people mistakenly assume we have a large number of documents from the 30s in Palestine reporting all sorts of events and news that happened. In reality, very little literature that is relevant to what we want to know survives. It is a rare exception that there is written evidence pointing to any person's existence in antiquity. Most people who lived have died without any written sources or public records attesting to their existence. In the case of Jesus, we have comparatively large corpus of surviving literature after his death which is an exception to the rule. As Sanders wrote: “Most of the first-century literature that survives was written by members of the very small elite class of the Roman empire.” We don't expect them to focus on the mischief, or magical deeds of a rabble rouser from a backwater hamlet (Nazareth) in rural Galilee with simple and indigenous Jewish homes. To them, Jesus was a nobody from nowhere. Even his peers asked, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” To the Jewish authorities, Jesus was a blasphemer, working for Beelzebub

and worthy of death. The only ones who we should expect to be talking about a crucified messiah are the Christians who believed he rose from the dead and that is the literature we mainly see.

There are plenty of Christian sources that mention Jesus. All four gospels, the letters of Paul and several other epistles and Christian works from the 1st century (e.g. 1 Clement, Didache, et al). These occur anywhere from the year 40 CE to about 100 CE, 10 to 70 years after Jesus died. I can expand this greatly by including 2d century literature. It is cherry-picking or suppressing evidence to summarily dismiss Christian sources as invalid. All sources have bias and a critical historian doesn't treat documents as "inside the Bible" vs "outside the Bible." All ancient sources are treated the same in that they are evaluated using critical, historical tools and vetted for information. Not to mention, how else do you reconstruct the life of a person from antiquity that left behind no writings of his own? You would naturally want to know what those who knew him the best and what those they spoke to about him believed. Is it bias to want to know what earliest Christian followers thought of the person they followed or the start of a sound historical strategy?

Yet, there are several non-Christian references to Jesus from prominent historians who lived just after Jesus was killed. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus was born ca. 37 and wrote several works including the *Antiquities of the Jews* which mentions Jesus twice. The Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus was born ca. 55 and wrote *The Annals where Jesus* is mentioned. Josephus mentions Jesus in two different locations. The longer reference is known as the "Testimonium Flavianum" and many scholars consider it to have a number of Christian interpolations. Since Josephus was not Christian, he would not have said a few of the things found in the manuscripts attributed to him. Scholars believe they can isolate this material and reconstruct what Josephus did say about Jesus from the text. This is the position the majority of scholars have taken on the issue but in a recent work, Schmidt has argued for the substantial integrity of the majority of the account: "I maintain that the TF found in extant manuscripts of the *Antiquities* is essentially authentic, and that it has merely lost two or three words that can still be found preserved in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Arabic, and Armenian textual witnesses." [T.C. Schmidt, *Josephus and Jesus*] I find him to be persuasive but this is a controversial issue so while I use his translation below, I also include John Dominic Crossan's version of the Testimonium Flavianum--which has been the predominant position up until this point--for the sake of thoroughness. Note that in Crossan's version anything italicized and in bold is considered a later Christian interpolation and not part of Josephus's original writing. In Schmidt's 2025 version, the bold material shows how his interpretation or translation of Josephus differs in key areas and leads to an uncontroversial text that doesn't require us to excise portions of it.

| Josephus per Schmidt | Josephus Per Crossan | Tacitus per Crossan |
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| <p>And in this time there was a certain Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man, for he was a doer of incredible deeds, a teacher of men who receive truisms with pleasure. And he brought over many from among the Jews and many from among the Greeks. He was [thought to be] the Christ. And, when Pilate had condemned him to the cross at the accusation of the first men among us, those who at first were devoted to him did not cease to be so, for on the third day it seemed to them that he was alive again given that the divine prophets had spoken such things and thousands of other wonderful things about him. And up till now the tribe of the Christians, who were named from him, has not disappeared.</p> | <p>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 marvellous things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.”</p> | <p>“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 the moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue.”</p> |

These two non-Christian historians include same four elements in their description of Christianity per John Crossan: movement, execution, continuation and expansion. Jesus started a movement, was crucified by Pilate in an attempt to quell the movement, and it failed to work as the movement spread after his death. Josephus states that Jesus performed miracles and it is important to note that he can be very critical of miracle

workers. As Schmidt tells us in a footnote: “Josephus laughs at the idea of wizards in Life 150. He also does not hesitate to portray certain so-called prophets and miracles as lying and false; Antiquities 20.97–9, 142, 167–72; War 2.258–63.” Per the Jewish historian Josephus, Jesus drew a large following and performed incredible deeds. Isn’t that exactly what the objection is claiming does not exist?

There are several other potential references to Christians and Jesus in the record. Though written later, the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 43a) says Jesus was executed on the eve of Passover, "practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy." The Roman historian Suetonius mentions Jews being expelled from Rome as the instigation of one named “Chrestus” (widely believed to be Jesus). Nowhere do we see any source deny that Jesus could work miracles except possibly outside those who taunted him while he was on the cross.

Conclusion: critical scholars agree that Jesus was viewed as a miracle worker by his contemporaries. Even atheist scholars accept this. Based on this study, it does not seem that the alleged lack of outside references to Jesus is a strong reason for doubting the supernatural portraits of Jesus in the gospels. We do not need to doubt the basic substance of what the gospels teach based on our surviving materials. We have no access to oral reports that would have been the chief means of discourse at the time. Our incomplete record does have many early references to Jesus from Christian and non-Christian sources and this is not the norm for most people. Couple a low literacy rate, language and cultural barriers, the lack of modern technology and a slower dissemination of news with a short ministry followed by crucifixion and we have the answer. All of this would certainly impede a rabble rouser and magician from a backwater hamlet in an obscure part of the Roman Empire from being well known to the outside world. The source material that does survive is mostly from an elite class of authors and the people we mostly expect to be writing about a crucified messiah are the Christians who believed he rose from the dead and that is the literature we mainly see. The extrabiblical references which include, but are not limited to, Josephus and Tacitus, are icing on the cake.