

DO YOU BELIEVE?
A BOOK SERIES FROM RATIO CHRISTI

**PEOPLE IN THE
BIBLE CONFIRMED
IN ANCIENT
INSCRIPTIONS**

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FAITH & REASON are at odds in our culture. For many, faith has come to mean little more than wishful thinking and blind belief. Such a concept is completely foreign to the pages of Scripture and historical Christianity. As Edward Feser notes, “In short, reason tells us that there is a God and that he has revealed such-and-such a truth; faith is then a matter of believing what reason has shown God to have revealed. In that sense faith is not only not at odds with reason but is grounded in reason.”

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INTRODUCTION

I could hardly take my eyes off of it. Slowly, silently, my lips formed the word: *Wow*.

As a graduate student, I had just run across a picture of a Hebrew inscription that referred by name to a king in the Bible: Hezekiah. He lived in the 700s BC. According to the article I was reading, it came from Hezekiah's time. (Ancient inscriptions are writings usually found on hard surfaces such as stone or in hardened clay.)

His name was in tiny writing impressed into a lump of clay the size of a fingernail, called a bulla ("BULL-ah"). The impression was made by a hard seal, typically made of stone, with letters carved in it, perhaps set in a signet ring. Many ancient seals were made of lovely, semiprecious stones of various colors, often used as jewelry.

This inscription, considered very ancient, was from outside of the Bible, but it referred to someone in the Bible! I had no idea that any such thing existed.

Since then, I have searched for other ancient inscriptions that seem to refer to people in the Bible. Some candidates look good at first but turn out to be false leads. I had to start by figuring out, mostly by trial and error, ways to know whether a person in an inscription is the one in the Bible. Now, about thirty years and hundreds of inscriptions later, I am presenting my best, previously published results.

At least 55 people in the Old Testament (also called the Hebrew Bible) are strongly confirmed in inscriptions of their times. Most of these inscriptions are from the lifetimes of the biblical people they refer to. Also, at least 30 people in the New Testament have been confirmed in inscriptions and historical writings from their times. So in my publications until now, the total is at least 85 confirmed people in the whole Bible.

This number will likely grow, because occasionally, ancient inscriptions uncovered in archaeological digs name "new" people (really from many centuries ago). So in the future, other researchers, including some who are now students, will discover new people in inscriptions who might also be in the Bible!

The Pursuit of Ancient Writings that Mention People in the Bible

The search for evidence of biblical persons outside the Bible is a unique field of study and at times daunting because it's so unusual to find people in the Bible mentioned in writings of their times. Why is that? Those writings had to survive various kinds of destruction for *2,000 to 3,000 or more years*. During those thousands of years, wars, looting, earthquakes, erosion, fires, and floods have destroyed, scattered, and buried a vast quantity of physical evidence.

Also, modern archaeological work is very incomplete. Even today, many places that could be dug are still untouched. Even at the excavated sites, usually only a small percentage of their area has actually been dug.

The good news is the Bible itself is ancient. That's why, where outside evidence has survived, it finds many remarkable confirmations. Whereas this study focuses on people in the Bible, other studies cover confirmed biblical events and places (see Hays in "For Further Reading" below).

Archaeology does not always provide what we might hope for. Its overall picture has successes and failures. But inscriptions from Bible times that refer to people in the Bible are tiny but wonderful "sweet spots" of historical evidence. Here's a sweet spot...

King David in Two Inscriptions

The first three kings of Israel ruled the whole nation: Saul, David, and Solomon. Because they ruled so long ago, around 1000 BC, it seemed very unlikely that any of these three would be confirmed outside of the Bible. In 1992, two scholars' books proclaimed that King David was just an invented hero who never existed.

Meanwhile, for 25 years, the archaeological team led by Avraham Biran had been digging at Tel Dan, far north in modern Israel. In 1993 and 1994, they discovered three fragments of an inscription that changed the whole picture.

One afternoon in 1993, the team's surveyor, Ms. Gila Cook, glanced at a low wall that had been excavated. She had seen it many times, but this time she thought she saw writing on it. It was in a middle row of stone blocks that formed the wall. The rays of the afternoon sun were shining at just the angle that revealed letters carved into the face of the stone. She called out to Biran, and when they looked closely, Biran exclaimed, "My God, we have an inscription!"

Originally, an enemy king had conquered the city of Dan and carved the inscription on a large stone to celebrate his victories. Later, the Israelites reconquered their city and smashed their enemy's victory monument to pieces. The largest piece mentions "the king

of Israel,” and on the next line, “the house of David.” Yes, *David!* At the time when the victory monument was carved, in the 800s BC, Israel was divided into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom (ten tribes) was called Israel (just as all Israel, twelve tribes, had been called earlier), and the “house” (descendants) of David ruled the southern kingdom of Judah. The victory inscription exactly matched the historical situation of its day as described in the Bible.

Also, by comparing inscriptions from elsewhere in the region, experts learned that in royal inscriptions, the phrase “the house of,” plus a person’s name, refers to a family line of rulers, and the person named after that phrase, “the house of,” was the one who founded the family of rulers. In the Bible, David founded the ruling family in the southern kingdom of Judah. The inscription and the Bible both refer to David as the founder of a ruling family whose descendants were kings. This perfect match confirms the historical King David.

That victory inscription, nicknamed the “house of David” inscription, is on the Tel Dan stele (pronounced “*STEE*-lee”) or stela (pronounced “*STEE*-lah”). A stele is a carved, upright stone slab or column.

Another victory stele from the 800s BC, called the Mesha stele, also names David in the same phrase, “the house of David,” although breaks in the stone make it hard to read.

David is only one of many people in the Bible who are confirmed in inscriptions.

PEOPLE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

All 55 confirmed Old Testament people I have published through 2021 are in the three lists below: A. Hebrew monarchs, B. Gentile (non-Hebrew) monarchs, and C. Officials, priests, and others.

Note: Most of the content below about confirmed Old and New Testament figures has appeared in *Biblical Archaeology Review* magazine and on the Biblical Archaeology Society's blog. See "For Further Reading" at the end of this booklet.

Hebrew Monarchs

The first three Hebrew kings ruled the whole nation of Israel, but after that, the kingdom split into two kingdoms, each of which had twenty Hebrew monarchs, for a total of 43.

Saul, the first Hebrew king, started ruling about 1050 BC. The last one ruled until 586 BC. It is remarkable that we have even one inscription that names one of them. Why? Because they ruled from more than 3,000 years ago to about 2,600 years ago, to have 3/8 confirmed in inscriptions of their times is amazing!

Overall, inscriptions from the period of Hebrew kingdoms confirm 16 of 43 Hebrew monarchs in the Bible which is **37.2%**, almost 3/8. Looking only at the period of the northern kingdom of Israel and southern kingdom of Judah, 15 kings of 40 is **37.5%**, exactly 3/8.

Surprisingly, most of the confirmations of Hebrew kings come from their enemies, who listed kings whom they boastfully claimed to have conquered. Hebrew kings had victory monuments, but the surviving, broken evidence does not reveal much.

CONFIRMED PERSONS

Confirmations of people do not exist merely in theory. Inscriptions mention 13 of the 16 confirmed Hebrew kings *in relation to historical events*. Here are two examples:

Assyrian king Sennacherib wrote that during his siege, he kept King Hezekiah "like a

TABLE 1: CONFIRMED HEBREW MONARCHS

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All Israel, 1050 - 930 BC

<i>Saul</i>	David	<i>Solomon</i>
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Three kings ruled over all Israel for about 40 years each, from around 1050 to 930 BC: Saul, David, and Solomon. David was 1/3 of them (33%). In inscriptions, he is confirmed only as king of Judah (David ruled over Judah alone for about 7 years— 1010-1004 BC—and ruled Judah + Israel together for 33 years, 1003–970BC).

The Northern Kingdom of Israel, 930 - 722 BC

<i>Jeroboam I</i>	<i>Nadab</i>	<i>Baasha</i>	<i>Elah</i>
<i>Zimri</i>	<i>Tibni</i>	Omri	Ahab
<i>Abaziah</i>	Jehoram	Jehu	<i>Jeohabaz</i>
Jehoash	Jeroboam II	<i>Zechariah</i>	<i>Shallum</i>
Menahem	<i>Pekahiah</i>	Pekah	Hoshea

9 of 20 kings are confirmed = 45%

The Southern Kingdom of Israel, 930 - 586 BC

<i>Rehoboam</i>	<i>Abijah</i>	<i>Asa</i>	<i>Johnshaphat</i>
<i>J(eb)oram</i>	Ahaziah	<i>Athaliah</i>	<i>Joash</i>
<i>Amaziah</i>	Uzziah	<i>Jotham</i>	Ahaz
Hezekiah	Manasseh	<i>Amon</i>	<i>Josiah</i>
<i>Jeohabaz</i>	<i>Jehoiakim</i>	Jehoiachin	<i>Zedekiah</i>

6 of 20 monarchs are confirmed = 30%. Adding David as 1st of 21 makes these 33%.

Bolded = confirmed in inscriptions
Italicized = not confirmed

bird in a cage” in Jerusalem—as described in 2 Kings 18:16–19:37.

Babylonian records of prison food rations mention Jehoiachin, king of Judah, imprisoned after one of the Babylonian conquests of Jerusalem—as in 2 Kings 24:8–15.

Also, some seals and bullae present *potential evidence* for confirmed persons being involved in historical events. As with the bulla already mentioned, fingernail-sized seals and bullae (blobs of clay impressed by hard seals) are so small that they can only list two or three names and a title, in tiny letters—not enough space to describe historical events.

But certain seals and bullae display names and titles of biblical people, and can be dated by shapes of letters of the alphabet used during certain periods and/or which layer of earth they were discovered in. These reveal that certain people in the Bible were *in a position, at the right time and in the right place, to do exactly what the Bible says they did*, showing that the Bible is historically plausible, not far-fetched.

One of these royal servants is Shaphan the scribe, who brought the book of the law to King Josiah and read it to him (2 Kings 22:8–10). Shaphan is mentioned in a perfectly dated bulla of his son Gemariah, who was also a royal servant (Jeremiah chapter 36).

BULLA OF A ROYAL SERVANT OF KING JEROBOAM II



Author's drawing from photos of a bronze cast of the Megiddo stone seal "of Shema, the Minister of Jeroboam."

The seal of Shema was discovered in 1904 in the German excavations by Gottlieb Schumacher at ancient Megiddo in northern Israel. Because it was in undisturbed, ancient layers of soil, it cannot be a forgery. It was lost in a museum in Istanbul, but before that, a bronze cast was made, which is the only reliably accurate physical copy. That copy is in Jerusalem's Rockefeller Museum,

It is almost 1½ inches long, and made of semiprecious jasper stone, which is soft

enough to carve into it the image of a roaring lion, writing, and lines. The odd shapes under the lion's belly and behind its hind feet are chips in the stone.

The inscription above the lion reads, "Belonging to Shema." The Bible does not happen to mention Shema, but it does mention the king he served. The inscription under the lion's feet means, "Servant of Jeroboam." The Hebrew word for *servant* that appears there is 'ebed,' pronounced "EH-vehd." When it appears in the Bible, it simply means, "servant," but in ancient personal seals (or bullae) like this one, which belonged to Shema, its meaning is much more specific.

Whenever the word appears in ancient personal seals and bullae, it's an official title. The word(s) following it is either the name of a king, the phrase "the king," or the name of a god. Because Jeroboam is only a man's name, in this seal, the Jeroboam mentioned must have been a king.

But in the Hebrew Bible, two kings named Jeroboam ruled northern Israel. By using the years given in the Bible, scholars calculate that Jeroboam I ruled from ca. 930 until 909 BC, and Jeroboam II ruled from 790 until ca. 750 BC. (In ancient times, new years didn't start in winter, but later in the year—like our school years—so ancient dates are usually approximate.)

Which Jeroboam does this seal refer to? Again, from looking at many ancient seals, experts learned that in the earlier period, of Jeroboam I, personal seals of people in Israel had only pictures and geometric figures on them, not writing. Writing in seals and seal impressions only came in later centuries, such as that of Jeroboam II, so the seal must refer to him. Because this seal is another source of information besides the Bible, it confirms the historical reality of Jeroboam II as king of the northern kingdom of Israel.

SUMMARY

When two or more independent sources, such as the Bible and ancient inscriptions, confirm the same historical fact, that strengthens the evidence. Bit by bit, these confirmations repeatedly disprove the mistaken assumption that the Bible is nothing but a bunch of myths.

Jeroboam II is just one example of the nine kings of the northern kingdom of Israel who are confirmed outside the Bible. These are nine out of 20, or 45%!

Similarly, we have an excavated royal bulla of Hezekiah, one of the seven confirmed kings of Judah, counting David.¹ Seven out of 21 are 33.33%!

Overall, 16 out of 43 Hebrew monarchs are confirmed in inscriptions outside the Bible, that is, 37.3%, or about 3/8 (37.5%)—after about 3,000 to 2,600 years!

Gentile Monarchs

Table 2 on the following pages shows that, where evidence exists, much of the world presented in the Bible corresponds to the world of its times.

Also, the Old Testament is concerned not only with the Hebrew people and their kingdoms (as in the previous section) but also with Gentile kingdoms (that is, non-Hebrew or non-Jewish kingdoms) as well as Gentile cities and Gentile rulers of its times. As early as Genesis 12:1–3, God promises Abraham he will bless *all the families of the earth* through his “seed,” meaning his descendants, eventually narrowed down specifically to Jesus Christ. King Solomon’s dedication of the Jerusalem Temple shows that from its very beginning, it was expected that Gentiles would come there to worship the God of Israel (1 Kings 8:41–43).

In the book of Jonah, even the cruel, ancient Assyrians of Nineveh at one point repented and received God’s mercy. In the New Testament, God expressed his love for all people most profoundly in Jesus’s death for the sins of the *world*. Jesus’s Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20 echoes the promise to Abraham and reaches worldwide fulfillment in Revelation 7:9 and 19:6. So it is no surprise that the Bible mentions many real Gentile kingdoms and rulers, as confirmed in inscriptions.

Officials, Priests, & Others

Confirmations of officials and others who were not monarchs convey even greater credibility than confirmations of then well-known monarchs, because they provide convincing detail. In modern times, although many people can name past heads of state, few can name the head of a particular government department two administrations ago. If someone can do that accurately, their credibility increases.

Similarly, although kings in the ancient world made their names well known, as indeed they were expected to do, the names of their officers and administrators were relatively little known. Therefore, ancient sources that give such detailed information gain credibility. Table 3 on the following pages illustrates that.

TABLE 2: CONFIRMED GENTILE MONARCHS²

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Egypt

Shishak (Sheshonq I)	So (Osorkon IV)	Tirhakah (Taharqa)
Neco II (Necho II)	Hophra (Apries, Wahibre)	

Assyria

Tiglath-pileser III	Shalmaneser V	Sargon II
Sennacherib	Esarhaddon	

Persia

Cyrus II, the Great	Darius I, the Great	Xerxes I (Ahasuerus)
Artaxerxes I (Longimanus)	Darius II (Ochus or Nothus)	

Aram-Damascus

Hadadezer	Bar-hadad, son of Hadadezer	Hazael
Bar-hadad, son of Hazael	Rezin	

Babylonia

Merodach-baladan II	Nebuchadnezzar II
Evil-merodach (Awel/Amel Marduk)	Belshazzar (a co-regent)

Moab

Mesha

These are the 25 of roughly 160 Gentile Monarchs confirmed in inscriptions, or about 15%.

As a note, since we're only listing the confirmed, we decided not neither bold nor italicize.

TABLE 3: CONFIRMED ROYAL OFFICIALS, PRIESTS, & THEIR FATHERS³

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Judahite royal officials or their fathers

Shaphan the scribe, and his son, **Gemariah** the official

Shelemiah, and his son, **Jehucal** (Jucal) the official

Pashhurn, and his son, **Gedaliah** the official

Assyrian Prince

Adrammelech (Arda-mullisu/Arad-mullissu, son & assassin of Sennacherib)

Babylonian royal officials of King Nebuchadnezzar II

Nebo-sarsekim the chief official **Nergal-sharezer** the sin-magir officer

Nebuzaradan, a chief officer

Jerusalem High Priests

Hilkiah the high priest, and his son, **Azariah** the high priest

Governors of Persian Provinces

Sanballat “I,” governor of Samaria

Tattenai (Tatnai/Sissenes), governor of the province called “Beyond the River” (the Euphrates River)

There are a total of 14 royal officials, priests, and their fathers confirmed in inscriptions. Please note: some evidence I have not yet published shows that other ancient inscriptions likely confirm several other officials in the Hebrew Bible. This list is the fourteen based on what I have published.

OFFICIALS, PRIESTS, & OTHERS—TWO EXAMPLES

The two royal officials, Jehucal, son of Shelemiah and Gedaliah, son of Pashhur, flourished within the reign of the last king of Judah, Zedekiah, who ruled 597–586 BC, so both fathers would have lived during the late seventh century BC. The book of Jeremiah mentions them as follows (NJPS version):

Yet King Zedekiah sent Jehucal son of Shelemiah and Zephaniah son of the priest Maaseiah, the priest, to the prophet Jeremiah, to say, “Please pray on our behalf to the Lord our God.”

JEREMIAH 37:3

Shephatiah son of Mattan, Gedaliah son of Pashhur, Jucal son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur the son of Malchiah heard what Jeremiah was saying to all the people . . .

JEREMIAH 38:1

Below are photos of two clay bullae discovered in the oldest part of the city of Jerusalem, which is the City of David, in 2005 and 2008. The shapes of the letters are the ones used in the kingdom of Judah during the time of Jehucal, son of Shelemiah, and Gedaliah, son of Pashhur. They are translated:

“belonging to Yehucal be[n]
Shelemyahu
ben Shobi”

“belonging to Gedalyahu
ben [P]ashhur”



Photos by Gaby L. Aron, The Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. All rights reserved © Dr. Eilat Mazar publications.

NOTE: the ending “-iah” on Hebrew names is a shortened form of the ending “-yahu.” Also, “Jucal” in Jeremiah 38:1 is a short form of the name “Jehucal” in Jeremiah 37:3. In Hebrew, these two names are equivalent to “Yucal” and “Yehucal.” As in German, the letter j expresses the sound of y in Hebrew and English.

COMPARING INSCRIPTIONAL & BIBLICAL DATA

My dissertation created three criteria to compare information from the inscription and information from the Bible. These criteria make it clear whether a person in an inscription is the same person who is mentioned in the Bible. (A precaution: interpret inscriptions by other inscriptions, not the Bible. Using biblical data as the determining factor in interpreting inscriptions can lead to circular reasoning that too easily produces faulty biblical confirmations.)

Criterion 1: Authentic Information: the information from the two bullae and the information from the Bible are authentic, not forged. The two bullae could not have been forged, because they were excavated from undisturbed dirt that had been there for thousands of years. That took place in 2005 & 2008, respectively, in the City of David, the oldest part of Jerusalem. The excavation leader, the late Professor Eilat Mazar of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, published the bullae with analyses and conclusions.

Also, the personal names in Jeremiah are well supported in the Hebrew Bible and in the ancient Greek and Syriac translations.

Criterion 2: Same Society/Kingdom and Same Lifetime (even the same city): the bullae are Judahite. We know this because archaeologists discovered them in the capital city of the kingdom of Judah, and because their writing is in the distinctive style used in seals and bullae from Judah.

Analysis of tiny slices of the clay of these bullae under a microscope shows that the clay of both bullae is the same terra rosa that is found only in the Jerusalem area. This means that the bullae were made in Jerusalem, not carried in from other places, indicating that the people whose names appear in the bullae worked in Jerusalem, just as Jehucal and Gedaliah in the book of Jeremiah did.

Those things show us that the bullae are from the kingdom of Judah and from the city of Jerusalem. This matches where the Bible says these two men were from. But what about when they lived?

The Yehucal and Gedalyahu mentioned in the bullae lived in the late 7th to early 6th century BC. We know this by means of datable changes in letter shapes. Both bullae have a Hebrew letter shape that first appeared in late 7th century BC. and continued in the early 6th century. That matches the Old Testament putting Jehucal and Gedaliah in late 7th to early 6th century BC.

So then, authentic data (in Criterion 1) place both inscriptional persons in the same setting (in Criterion 2), that is, the same time and place, namely, in Judah and specifically in Jerusalem during the early sixth century. These matching settings *permit the bullae* “of Yehucal be[n] Shelemyahu . . .” and “of Gedalyahu ben [P]ashhur” to refer, *potentially*, to Jehucal, son of Shelemiah, and Gedaliah, son of Pashhur, in the Bible.

But what if another man named Shelemyahu had a different son named Yehucal, and what if another man named Pashhur had a different son named Gedalyahu? To avoid potential problems like this. we need another criterion that requires a matching, third

distinctive fact about each, to show whether they were the same as the Jehucal and the Gedaliah in the book of Jeremiah.

Criterion 3: Three or More Matching Marks: usually these marks include such things as the person's name, the name of that person's father or husband, the person's official title, and the place where the person worked.

In this instance, and in both bullae, the person's name, the father's name, and the location of their work all match. Regarding the work location, archaeologists discovered one bulla inside an administrative building in which these royal officials may have worked, and the other bulla a few steps away, beside the building. The remains of that building are within less than 250 yards from their biblical workplaces south of the Temple. The Bible depicts Jehucal, son of Shelemiah, and Gedaliah, son of Pashhur, in the service of the king. His palace was in the City of David, south and within 250 yards downhill from the Temple. Archaeologists excavated these two bullae from that very same area. There are indeed three matching facts about each person (Criterion 3). Thus, they meet all three criteria. The bullae refer to the corresponding people in the Bible.

(In addition, due to limited information, several other biblical persons are considered "uncertain but reasonable candidates" for confirmation in inscriptions of their times.)

PEOPLE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

At least 30 people in the New Testament are confirmed in inscriptions and historical writings of their times. They appear in three lists in the following sections: A. Jesus of Nazareth, B. Religious Figures, and C. Political Figures.

(Note: Most of the content below about Jesus and religious and political figures appeared in *Biblical Archaeology Review* magazine and on the *Biblical Archaeology Society* web site. See “For Further Reading” below.)

Jesus of Nazareth

The apostle Paul could call Jesus “the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5) because he was fully man and fully God (John 1:1, 14). Here our concern is with historical sources outside of the Bible that confirm people *in* the Bible. Theology and miracles are different subjects. We pursue the question: Is there evidence *outside* the Bible that Jesus existed?” Obviously, ancient Christian writings strongly confirm his existence. Even stronger evidence is in *non-Christian* writings, because several come from people who would have preferred that Jesus had *not* existed. The writings we consider are classical (that is, from the ancient Greek and Roman world) and from Jewish authors who were not followers of Jesus.

NO ONE CLAIMED THAT JESUS DID NOT EXIST

The most basic, important historical fact about Jesus of Nazareth is that every single non-Christian source from ancient times recognizes, implicitly or explicitly, that he was a real person who really existed. Not one ancient source disagrees with the fact that he was a real, historical man.⁴ It was only in modern times, centuries beyond a millennium after Jesus walked on earth, that people began to deny that he existed. All ancient evidence recognizes that he did.

TACITUS

The Roman senator Tacitus (pronounced *TASS*-sit-us)—whose full name was Caius (or Gaius) Cornelius Tacitus (AD 55/56–ca. 118)—was among the best of Roman historians. Two facts are especially important for modern readers of his comments on Jesus:

First, unlike most Romans, Tacitus was exceptionally well informed regarding religious groups that were active in the city of Rome. As a high-ranking priest of Roman religion, in AD 88, he became a member of The Board of Fifteen for Performing Sacrifices, which regulated the practice of religions in Rome that the Romans considered foreign.

Although Judaism was legal, Christianity did not have legal status, so Board members had to be able to tell the difference between Judaism and Christianity. That required detailed knowledge, because Christianity began as an outgrowth of Judaism. It is likely that conversations with senior members of the Board of Fifteen, and probable access to official, written records, as well, provided Tacitus with some accurate knowledge about the man he called “Christus.” His official tone suggests the use of written records when he remarks that the “deadly superstition” (Christianity) was suppressed for a time but flared up again in Judea.

Second, Tacitus had the habit of carefully warning his readers when he was not certain of something in his histories. He gives no such warning when he writes about Jesus, and that clearly implies he was confident that what he wrote was accurate. His confidence most likely came from using written records and spoken information from when he served on The Board of Fifteen who oversaw religions that were foreign to Romans. We cannot say exactly which records or people he consulted, because, like classical authors in general, Tacitus does not reveal the sources he used.

His remarks about “Christus” appear in his last major work, titled *Annals*, written around AD 116–117 as part of a biography of Nero. In AD 64, during a fire in Rome that lasted many days, people began to suspect that the Emperor Nero had secretly ordered the burning of a part of town where he wanted to carry out a building project. So he tried to blame Christians instead. It was in this connection that Tacitus mentioned Christians, whom he despised. The following excerpt from his *Annals* is translated from Latin by Robert Van Voorst:

[N]either human effort nor the emperor’s generosity nor the placating of the gods ended the scandalous belief that the fire had been ordered [by Nero]. Therefore, to put down the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits and punished in the most unusual ways those hated for their shameful acts ... whom the crowd called “Chrestians.” The founder of this name, Christ [Christus in Latin], had been executed in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate ... Suppressed for a time, the deadly superstition erupted again not only in Judea, the origin of this evil, but also in the city [Rome], where all things horrible and shameful from everywhere come together and become popular.⁵

Tacitus clearly confirms the New Testament on at least four points about Jesus:

1. The Latin word *Christus*, meaning Christ, used by Tacitus to refer to Jesus, was a term used by New Testament authors to refer specifically to him, as Tacitus did, even though he mistakenly thought it was a personal name rather than a title.
2. This *Christus* was associated with the beginning of the movement of Christians, whose group name originated from *Christus*.
3. The Roman governor of Judea had *Christus* executed.
4. The time of *Christus*'s death was during Pontius Pilate's governorship of Judea, during the reign of the Emperor Tiberius. Many New Testament scholars date Jesus' death to around AD 30 (some say 33). Both fit well within the years that Pilate governed Judea: AD 26–36. Those years fit within Tiberius's years as emperor, AD 14–37.

JOSEPHUS

Besides Tacitus, the other major, non-Christian source about Jesus from his times is Flavius Josephus (pronounced “Joe-*SEE*-fuss”). His full birth name was Yosef ben Matityahu. In modern English translation, we would say Joseph, son of Matthew. He came from a Jewish priestly family, grew up in first-century Roman Palestine, was well educated, and had some wealth. By an unusual series of events, he ended up living in Rome, supported financially and politically by three emperors, one right after another: Vespasian and two of his sons who became emperors after him, beginning with Titus (pronounced “*TIE*-tuss”). There in Rome, between AD 71 and ca. 94, he wrote his histories. His works introduce Romans to the excellence of Jewish history, culture, and religion.

Josephus's two great histories are *The Jewish War* and *Jewish Antiquities*, both written in Greek, because that was the language that educated Romans learned to read, and Josephus wrote for them. It was in his *Antiquities* that Josephus mentions Jesus—twice: once in a short reference, and once in a long paragraph.

Josephus's shorter mention of Jesus is accepted by almost all historians as strong, straightforward evidence that Jesus existed. It comes later in the book than the longer description of Jesus. Because someone else later tampered with the longer description, it requires more analysis and explanation (see point 2 below). so it receives much more attention from scholars. Because it is advisable to go from what is clear to what is unclear, we will first consider Josephus's shorter, second mention of Jesus.

1. Josephus's Shorter Reference to Jesus

The shorter of the two references to Jesus is in “Book” 20 of the *Jewish Antiquities*, which functions as a chapter. Josephus is trying to pinpoint who Jesus' brother James was,

who led the church in Jerusalem. (Precisely, if they were not just relatives but siblings, Jesus's virgin birth made them half-brothers.) To do that, Josephus has to refer to Jesus. So his reference to Jesus is only incidental to what he says about James. Historians love incidental statements, because they are usually very reliable.

In Roman Palestine, home to a large Jewish population, the Roman governor Festus died, so there was no governor there until his replacement, Albinus, arrived in AD 62. Impulsively taking advantage of the absence of a governor, the high priest Ananus son of Ananus, opposed to and likely feeling politically threatened by the Jesus movement, decided to execute Jesus's brother James.

Being therefore this kind of person [meaning he was heartless], Ananus, thinking that he had a favorable opportunity because Festus had died and Albinus was still on his way, called a meeting of judges and brought into it the brother of Jesus-who-is-called-Messiah, James by name, and some others. He made the accusation that they had transgressed the law, and he handed them over to be stoned.⁶

James is barely noticed, just a minor figure in Josephus's lengthy book, only mentioned because his death resulted in Ananus losing his position as high priest.

James (the English equivalent of the Hebrew name Jacob) was a common Jewish name. Because Josephus mentioned many men named James, he needed to say which one he meant. The usual custom of simply giving the father's name (James, son of Joseph) would not work here, because James's father's name was also quite common. Therefore Josephus identified this James by reference to his famous brother, Jesus. But Jesus was also a common name. Because Josephus mentioned at least 12 other men named Jesus, he specified *which* Jesus he was referring to by adding the phrase "who is called Messiah." Since he was writing in Greek, he used the Greek word for Messiah, which is *Christos* (*Christ* in English). By specifying which Jesus, Josephus was able to tell his readers which James he meant. This incidental reference to Jesus would have made no sense if Jesus had not been a real person.

Only a few scholars have ever doubted that Josephus wrote this short description of who Jesus was, in Book 20. The huge scholarly majority accepts it as from Josephus.

In his books, when Josephus mentioned someone for the first time, he normally explained who someone was, then assumed readers remembered that when he mentioned them again. So his later references to that person are briefer. Therefore, the phrase that tells *which* Jesus he means, translated "who is called Christ," signifies either that this Jesus was described earlier in the book or that most readers already knew who he was before they read the book. But his Roman readers in general had no idea who Jesus was or what *Christos* meant. So it is safe to conclude that this Jesus was described earlier in the book, *Jewish Antiquities*, and in fact, a description of Jesus does appear earlier, in Book 18. The fact that the term "Messiah" or "Christ" is not defined in Book 20 indicates that an earlier

passage in Jewish Antiquities has already described what it seemed to mean to Josephus.

The phrase translated “who is called Christ” is also appropriate for the Jewish historian Josephus, who was not a follower of Jesus. It suits Josephus because the reference to Jesus is a noncommittal, neutral statement about what Jesus was called, not a personal confession of faith that claims he was Christ.

This short identification of James by the title that some people used in order to specify his brother has credibility with historians as an affirmation of Jesus’ existence, ironically, because the passage is not about Jesus. Rather, his name appears incidentally. The only way it could be useful for the identification of James is that it refers to a real person, namely, “Jesus who is called Christ.”

2. Josephus’s Longer Reference to Jesus

The longer passage in Josephus’s *Jewish Antiquities*, which gives details about who Jesus was, is in “Book” 18. It is a paragraph known as the *Testimonium Flavianum*, which means “the Flavian testimony,” that is, the testimony given by Flavius Josephus (his Roman name). It is advisable to consider the description in Book 18 as *additional* evidence for Jesus’ existence, because the short mention of Jesus in Book 20 is clearer, stronger, evidence.

The *Testimonium Flavianum* reads as follows. The late John P. Meier marked the parts that sound Christian in bold:

*Around this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, **if indeed one ought to call him a man.** For he was one who did surprising deeds, and 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 among us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who in the first place came to love him did not give up their affection for him, **for on the third day, he appeared to them restored to life. The prophets of God had prophesied this and countless other marvelous things about him.** And the tribe of Christians, so called after him, have still to this day not died out.*

The Greek manuscript copies of the *Testimonium Flavianum* that survive contain the same version of this passage, with no significant differences.

Did Flavius Josephus write this entire report about Jesus and his followers, or did someone else alter it, or possibly insert the whole report?

Today almost no scholar thinks that Josephus wrote the whole passage, because he was an advocate who wrote in favor of Judaism, not Jesus or Christianity.

On the other hand, scholars generally do not consider the whole *Testimonium Flavianum* to be a complete forgery, inserted into *Jewish Antiquities*. One reason this view

is unlikely is that the wording fits much better with Josephus's writings than with early Christian writings, which call him "the Lord" or "the Savior" and lavish praise on him. Another reason, mentioned above, is that Josephus almost always gives a description when introducing someone, then later on he assumes that readers know what he said earlier and keeps his references brief. This is exactly what his brief reference without explanation in Book 20 assumes about the *Testimonium* in Book 18.

The overwhelming majority of scholars holds the view that the *Testimonium* is only partly authentic, containing some material from Josephus, but also some later additions or subtractions by another person(s).

Early translations from Josephus's Greek original into three ancient languages, Latin, Syriac, and Arabic, all include a similar sequence of statements about Jesus that amount to most of the *Testimonium Flavianum*, but they do not include statements that are clearly Christian. The simplest and best explanation for these similar accounts in these three ancient translations is that they all came from the same original account that Josephus wrote, in Greek, as shown in the following crucial statement:

- Jerome's Latin version of this passage in Josephus says Jesus "was believed to be the Messiah."
- The Syriac-language version of Michael the Patriarch of Antioch translates what Josephus wrote in a sentence that can be translated either as "He was thought to be the Messiah" or as "Perhaps he was the Messiah."
- And the more loosely translated Arabic version, part of a longer writing by Agapius of Hierapolis, a Christian bishop, also presents what Josephus wrote merely as a passing possibility: "He was perhaps the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders."

These ancient translations do not make Josephus's statement a confession of faith in Jesus. Instead, they reveal that another person(s) altered the ancient Greek manuscripts of the *Testimonium* to make it seem that Josephus said that Jesus "was the Christ." Josephus's view of Jesus, whom he mentioned only in passing, was neutral.

3. Tacitus and Josephus, non-Christians, confirm several New Testament Facts

The following statements about Jesus, which agree with the New Testament, are confirmed by Tacitus and Josephus:⁷

- a. He existed as a man. The historian Josephus grew up in a priestly family in first-century Palestine and wrote only decades after Jesus' death. Jesus's known associates, such as his apostles and his brother James, were his contemporaries. The historical and cultural context was second nature to Josephus. "If any

Jewish writer were ever in a position to know about the non-existence of Jesus, it would have been Josephus. His implicit affirmation of the existence of Jesus has been, and still is, the most significant obstacle for those who argue that the extra-Biblical evidence is not probative [that is, having the effect of proof] on this point,” Robert Van Voorst observes (p. 99). And Tacitus was careful enough not to report real executions of nonexistent people.

- b. His personal name was Jesus, as Josephus informs us.
- c. He was called *Christos* in Greek, which is a translation of the Hebrew word Messiah, both of which mean “anointed” or “(the) anointed one,” as Josephus states and Tacitus implies, unaware, by reporting, as Romans thought, that his name was Christus.
- d. He had a brother named James (Jacob), as Josephus reports.
- e. He won over both Jews and “Greeks” (Gentiles of Greek culture, numerous in Galilee and other northern territories), according to Josephus.
- f. Jewish leaders of the day expressed unfavorable opinions about him, at least according to some versions of the *Testimonium Flavianum*.
- g. Pilate rendered the decision that he should be executed, as both Tacitus and Josephus state.
- h. His execution was specifically by crucifixion, as explicit in Josephus and suggested by Tacitus.
- i. He was executed during Pontius Pilate’s governorship over Judea (26–36 AD), as Josephus implies and Tacitus states, adding that it was during Emperor Tiberius’s reign.
- j. Josephus informs us, and Tacitus complains (regarding their spread to Rome), that many of Jesus’ followers did not abandon their personal loyalty to him even after his crucifixion. Instead, they submitted to his teaching, believing that Jesus had later appeared to them alive, in accordance with prophecies found in the Hebrew Bible.
- k. A well-attested link between Jesus and Christians is that the Hebrew term for “the anointed one”: Messiah, *Christos* in Greek, *Christus* in Latin was used to identify Jesus, becoming, Tacitus reports, the basis of the term for his followers: Christians.
- l. The Christian movement began in Judea and spread from there, according to Tacitus. As for its continuance, Josephus observes that it endured during the first century, and Tacitus deplores its spread to Rome during the second century.

Other Sources

Several other writers of the first and early second centuries also mention Jesus, all considering him to be a real human being in history. These include the Greek satirist Lucian of Samosata, who despised Jesus for being convicted and crucified. Platonist philosopher Celsus considered him a magician. Pliny the younger and several others referred to Jesus indirectly. Not one claimed he did not exist.

RELIGIOUS FIGURES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT CONFIRMED IN ANCIENT WRITINGS

An Overview of Confirmed Religious Figures in the New Testament

It turns out that in addition to Jesus of Nazareth, six religious figures who are confirmed in non-Christian writings of their times. are among the most important people at pivotal points in the New Testament:

- Jesus, the Lord's Messiah (anointed one, Christ), is the central figure of the New Testament, whose death for our sins, burial, and resurrection from the dead, all according to the Old Testament, are nothing less than *the gospel* (1 Corinthians 15:1–4). Even non-Christian sources, especially Tacitus and Josephus, confirm that he was called Christ, was crucified, and continued to have followers long afterward.
- John the Baptist is confirmed in Josephus's *Antiquities*. The Gospels present him as Jesus's forerunner, who prepared the way for him by preaching repentance to the Jewish people.
- Jesus's brother James, who did not follow Jesus before the crucifixion, became a prominent leader of the earliest church, in Jerusalem, AD ca. 30–62 (Acts 15 and 21). Josephus's *Antiquities* confirms him in his martyrdom.
- Annas the son of Seth/Sethi, high priest AD 6–15, and Caiaphas, high priest AD 18–36/ 37, are also confirmed in Josephus's *Antiquities*. The Gospels present them overseeing phases of Jesus's trial.
- Gamaliel the Elder, who ministered in Jerusalem AD ca. 20–50, is confirmed in Josephus's short autobiography, *The Life*, and at least several times in the Mishnah, a great, ancient treasury of Jewish tradition. Acts chapter 5 tells how he saved the apostles from execution by the angry Jerusalem Sanhedrin. At

that time, their deaths would have been catastrophic for the new, first-ever church, which was in Jerusalem and needed their leadership. He was also the highly esteemed teacher of Saul, who became the apostle Paul (Acts 22:3).

- Ananias, son of Nebedaios, high priest AD 53–59, is confirmed in Josephus's *Antiquities*. In Acts 23, he oversaw the trial of the apostle Paul.

POLITICAL FIGURES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT CONFIRMED IN ANCIENT WRITINGS

At least 23 political figures in the New Testament are confirmed in sources outside of it.

The four Roman emperors mentioned in the New Testament are confirmed so often in monuments and ancient histories, such as Tacitus's, that these need not be specified: Augustus/Octavian (r. 31 BC–AD 14), Tiberius (r. AD 14–37), Claudius (r. AD 41–54), and Nero (r. AD 54–68). (The New Testament does not happen to mention Gaius, nicknamed Caligula, ruling between Tiberius and Claudius.)

The other 19 confirmed political figures are as follows. In this list are two abbreviations: *Ant.* means Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, and *War* means Josephus, *Jewish War*.

The Herodian Family

Herod I, the Great, Rome's king of the Jews, in Matthew 2:1; Luke 1:5. Founder of the Herodian dynasty, he ruled Roman Palestine 37–4 BC. Confirmed in *Ant.* and *War*, as well as in his coins.

Herod Archelaus, oldest son of Herod the Great, in Matthew 2:22. Ethnarch of Judea, Samaria and Idumea 4 BC–AD 6. Confirmed in *Ant.*, *War*, and his coins.

Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great and second husband of Herodias, in Luke 3:1; 13:31–32; 23:7–12; Mark 6:14; 6:16–28; 8:15. Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea (in Transjordan) 4 BC–AD 39, he ordered the execution of John the Baptist. Antipas is confirmed in *Ant.*, *War*, and his coins.

Herod Philip, son of Herod the Great but not a ruler, in Matthew 14:3–4; Mark 6:17–18; Luke 3:19. Flourishing ca. 6 BC–AD 20s, he was Herodias's uncle and first husband, and father of their daughter Salome. Herod Philip is confirmed in *Ant.* and *War*.

Herodias, granddaughter of Herod the Great, in Matthew 14:2–11; Mark 6:17–28; Luke 3:19–20. She flourished AD ca. 20s–39, as niece and wife of Herod Philip, mother of his daughter Salome, then Herod Antipas's wife. She brought about Antipas's order to

execute John the Baptist. Herodias is confirmed in *Ant.* and *War*.

Salome, daughter of Herodias and Herod Philip, in Matthew 14:3–12; Mark 6:17–29. She flourished AD ca. 28/29–after 52. Her dance led to the execution of John the Baptist. Grandniece and later wife of Philip the Tetrarch. Confirmed in *Ant.* and in the coins of her second husband, Aristobulus, king of Chalcis, some of which bear her profile.

Philip the Tetrarch, son of Herod the Great, in Luke 3:1. Ruler of Trachonitis, Iturea, and other northern portions of Roman Palestine 4 BC–AD 34. Eventually husband of his grandniece Salome. Confirmed in *Ant.*, *War*, and his coins.

Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great, in Acts 12:1–6, 18–23. Brother of Herodias and King of Trachonitis, Batanea, and gradually all of Roman Palestine AD 37–44. Executed James the son of Zebedee and imprisoned Peter. Confirmed in *Ant.*, *War*, and his coins.

Herod Agrippa II, son of Herod Agrippa I, in Acts 25:13–26:32. The last ruler in the Herodian dynasty. Initially Tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis, then also over parts of Galilee and Perea (in Transjordan), and Chalcis. Later also king of some northern territories AD 50–ca. 93/94. Rumored lover of his sister, Iulia Berenice. Festus appointed him to hear Paul's defense. Confirmed in *Ant.*, *War*, and his coins.

Berenice/Iulia Berenice/Bernice, in Acts 25:13, 23; 26:30. Sister and companion of Herod Agrippa II, her rumored lover. Flourished AD ca. 41/43–81. Attended Paul's trial before Festus. Confirmed in *Ant.*, *War*, and in a fragmentary inscription of King Herod Agrippa II in Beirut.

Drusilla, in Acts 24:24. Flourished AD 49/50–79. Sister of Herodias and Herod Agrippa I; Jewish wife of Roman governor Felix. Confirmed in *Ant.*

Roman Legate and Governors

Publius Sulpicius **Quirinius/Cyrenius**, in Luke 2:2. Roman imperial legate AD 6–9 and possibly earlier, brought in to govern Syria-Cilicia after Herod Archelaus's rule led to rebellion. Confirmed in *Ant.*, *War*, and in the Lapis Venetus inscription discovered in Beirut.

Pontius Pilate, Roman prefect of Judea AD 26–36, in Matthew 27:11–26; Mark 15:1–15; Luke 3:1; 23:1–24; John 18:28–19:22. He conducted the final phase of Jesus' trial and ordered his crucifixion. Confirmed in *Ant.* and *War*; Tacitus, *Annals*; Philo, *De Legatione ad Gaium*; in the so-called Pilate Stone discovered at Caesarea Maritima in 1961; and in his coins.

Lucius Junius **Gallio**, Roman proconsul of Achaia AD ca. 51–55, in Acts 18:12–17. He convened and dismissed the trial of Paul in Corinth. Confirmed in Seneca, *Letters*; Tacitus, *Annals*; and a stone inscription discovered in Delphi, Greece.

Marcus Antonius **Felix**, Roman procurator of Judea AD 52–ca. 59, in Acts 23–24. He held initial hearings in the trial of the apostle Paul, then left him in prison for two years. Confirmed in *Ant.*, *Wars*, and his coins.

Porcius **Festus**, Roman procurator of Judea after Felix, in Acts 24:27–25:27; 26:24–32. He conducted a hearing in the trial of Paul, during which Paul appealed to Caesar and Festus sent him to Rome. Confirmed in *Ant.* and his coins.

Other Political Figures

Aretas IV, greatest Arabian king of Nabatea AD 9–40, in 2 Corinthians 11:32. Father of Herod Antipas's first wife, before Herodias. Confirmed in *Ant.* and *War*, in his coins, and in inscriptions at Petra, etc.

The unnamed Egyptian rebel leader in Acts 21:38. Roman procurator Felix suppressed his Jerusalem-area insurrection during Felix's term, AD ca. 52–59. Confirmed in *Ant.* and *War*.

Judas of Galilee, rebel leader against a Roman census, in Acts 5:37. Fought against legate Quirinius during AD 6–9 or earlier. Confirmed in *Ant.* and *War*.

CONCLUSION

Inscriptions from Bible times that thus far confirm at least 85 people in the Bible are an admittedly tiny but disproportionately significant portion of the evidence for the historical reliability of the Bible, because these confirmations are clear and direct.

Application of rigorous, established identification criteria to people mentioned in inscriptions of Old Testament times reveals references (most from their lifetimes) to at least 55 individuals mentioned in the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible).

These direct references from outside the Bible confirm 45% of the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel and at least 30% of Judah's monarchs. These multiple confirmations make the historicity of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah strongly evident.

Also, at least 25 Gentile monarchs are similarly confirmed, out of some 160 in the Old Testament, revealing, where evidence survives, that the Bible corresponds to the real world, and illustrating God's concern for the whole world. Confirmations of at least 14 Old Testament officials and other, minor figures in inscriptions produce a high degree of credibility through verified historical detail. After 3,000 to 2,400 years, at least 55 Old Testament figures, great and small, from King David onward, stand confirmed.⁸

So do at least 30 New Testament figures mentioned in inscriptions and ancient writings by non-Christians, from around the time of Jesus and the early church. These range from 37 BC with Herod the Great, to the last Herodian ruler, Herod Agrippa II, AD ca. 93/94. These figures include most notably Jesus, who was and is called Christ; his forerunner John the Baptist; his brother James; high priests Annas and Caiaphas, who conducted phases of his trial; and Pontius Pilate, who sentenced him to crucifixion.

Sources outside the Bible regarding people in the Bible reveal a clear, substantial, and significant measure of historical reliability in the Old and New Testaments, which remains despite honest questions raised in scholarly inquiry.

ENDNOTES

1 <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/news/king-hezekiah-in-the-bible-royal-seal-of-hezekiah-comes-to-light/>

2 For details, see <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/50>

3 Ibid.

4 See Van Voorst, p. 15, note 35, quoted in Mykytiuk’s “Did Jesus Exist? Searching for Evidence Beyond the Bible,” in note 34 among the “voluminous notes” of the *Biblical Archaeology Society’s* blog version. Trypho’s remark is merely a hypothetical suggestion intended to raise doubt, and it is abandoned immediately afterward.

5 Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 43–44.

6 Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.9.1, quoted in John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume I: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 57.

7 Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament*, 99–102.)

8 Beyond the 53 people in Biblical Archaeological Review, two confirmed Hebrew kings, Joram of Israel and Ahaziah of Judah (included in Table 1 above), are in Mykytiuk’s book chapter, “Don’t Pave the Way for Circular Reasoning!” in *Epigraphy, Iconography, and the Bible* (ed. Meir Lubetski and Edith Lubetski; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2021), 112–134.

FOR FURTHER READING

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Mykytiuk also published two confirmed Old Testament kings in a 2021 book chapter (see endnote 5).

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