

Briefing Document: Jesus, Who Was and Who Is?

November 12, 2025

Executive Summary

This briefing synthesizes an analysis of the person of Jesus Christ, examining the distinction between who He *was* as a historical figure and who He *is* as a living, divine Lord. The core argument posits that a comprehensive understanding of Jesus's verifiable existence and earthly life is foundational to grasping His theological significance and exclusive claims. Extensive evidence from independent, non-Christian historical sources—including Roman and Jewish writers—establishes Jesus as a genuine figure from first-century Galilee, whose existence is better documented than any other contemporary from that region. Furthermore, His identity as a miracle worker is acknowledged not only in scripture but also within the texts of other major world religions.

The central challenge identified for modern Christians is the tendency to relegate Jesus to a historical memory rather than engaging with Him as an active, present Lord. This disconnect often results in a lack of spiritual victory and tangible "fruit" in a believer's life. The solution presented is to embrace the resources Christ provided—His living Word and the Holy Spirit—which offer guidance and conviction. Ultimately, a believer's relationship with Jesus should be dynamic, with an understanding that whoever He was to them in the past, He must become more significant today, moving from a past salvation event to a daily, active pursuit of His kingdom.

Historical Corroboration of Jesus's Existence

The historical existence of Jesus is supported by a body of evidence that makes the argument against his existence untenable. This validation comes from both supporters and non-supporters, providing a robust, multi-faceted confirmation of his life in first-century Galilee.

Independent Historical Sources

- **Quantity of Sources:** There are at least 14 independent sources from seven authors written within a century of the crucifixion that attest to Jesus's existence. Some scholarly estimates place the number higher, at approximately 30 independent sources from 25 authors. This volume of evidence is significantly greater than that available for any other notable individual from the same time and place.
- **Tacitus (Roman Historian):** In his work *Annals* (c. 116 AD), Tacitus reports on Emperor Nero's decision to blame Christians for the great fire of Rome. He states: "Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by

the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus."

- **Pliny the Younger (Roman Governor):** In a letter to Emperor Trajan (c. 112 AD), Pliny seeks advice on legal proceedings against accused Christians. He notes that a "great multitude of every age, class, and sex" stood accused and describes their practices: "They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up."

- **Josephus (Jewish Historian):** In his *Jewish Antiquities* (c. 93 AD), Josephus mentions Jesus in two separate passages. One refers to James as "the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ," and the other describes Jesus as a wise man who performed miraculous deeds and was crucified by Pontius Pilate.

- **Scholarly Consensus:** Based on the available evidence, there is a near-universal scholarly consensus that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist and crucified under the authority of Pontius Pilate.

The Earthly Testimony: Who Jesus Was

Understanding Jesus as a historical man is essential to appreciating the significance of His life and ministry. His human occupation and his publicly witnessed miracles established his identity and drew the attention of both followers and adversaries.

The Carpenter from Nazareth

- Scripture identifies Jesus's trade as that of a carpenter. The people of his hometown questioned his authority, asking, "*Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary...?*" (*Mark 6:3*). He is also referred to as the "carpenter's son" in *Matthew 13:55*.
- The Greek word for carpenter, *Tecton*^[1], carries a broader meaning than its direct English translation. It can signify a skilled craftsman, builder, stonemason, or even an architect.
- This broader definition creates a significant thematic link to Jesus's divine role as the architect of creation. It resonates with biblical imagery, such as his statement, "*...on this rock I will build My church...*" (*Matthew 16:18*) and the messianic prophecy, "*The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone.*" (*Psalms 118:22*).

The Miracle Worker

- The Gospels record between 35 and 40 distinct miracles performed by Jesus, though it is noted that these represent only a fraction of his works. As stated in *John 21:25*, "*...there are also many*

other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

- Crucially, Jesus's miracles were not denied even by his most powerful opponents. The chief priests and Pharisees, upon seeing the effect of His works, gathered a council and said, *"What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation."* (John 11:47-48). Their concern was not the validity of the miracles, but the political and religious implications of them.

Acknowledgment in Non-Christian Religions

Further validation of Jesus's historical impact comes from his inclusion in the texts and traditions of other major world religions. While these religions reinterpret His identity to fit their own theological frameworks, their acknowledgment of his existence and supernatural acts is significant.

- **Judaism:** The *Toledot Yeshu*, a collection of medieval Jewish parodies of the Gospels, portrays Jesus as one who "practiced magic and led Israel astray." However, in doing so, it affirms His role as a miracle worker, recounting instances where He healed a lame man and resurrected the dead.
- **Islam:** The Quran acknowledges Jesus in multiple significant ways, affirming his virgin birth, his role as a prophet and messenger to Israel, and his power to perform miracles by Allah's leave, including creating a bird from clay, healing the blind and lepers, and bringing the dead to life.
- **Hinduism:** While some Hindu perspectives view Jesus as a symbol of what humans can achieve through self-realization rather than a unique historical person, this acknowledgment still points to his valid and influential place in world history.

The Divine Identity: Who Jesus Is

While historical and cross-religious sources establish that Jesus *was*, the central Christian claim rests on who Jesus *is*. This requires moving beyond external observations to accept what Jesus claimed about Himself.

The Transition from Historical Figure to Divine Lord

- All the aforementioned religions and historical accounts give credit to Jesus for what he did, with many attributing his power to some form of divine source. However, Jesus's own teachings stand in stark contrast to their inclusive or reinterpetive views.
- He made an exclusive claim to divinity and the path to salvation, stating unequivocally in *John 14:6*, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."*

- He further affirmed his unity with God the Father (*"I and My Father are one."* - John 10:30) and His eternal nature (*"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,"* says the Lord, *"who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."* - Revelation 1:8).

The Purpose of the Incarnation

- Jesus's mission on earth was not to condemn, but to save: *"For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."* (John 3:17).
- This salvation required a price to be paid for humanity's sins—a price no one else could pay. To accomplish this, Jesus *"made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men."* (Philippians 2:7).
- This act of becoming fully human cannot be overlooked. By experiencing human life—including pain, fatigue, hunger, and temptation—He demonstrated the full extent of God's love and understanding. As stated in *Hebrews 4:15*, He is a High Priest who can *"sympathize with our weaknesses,"* having been *"in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin."* His ability to combat the devil with scripture while in a physically weakened state serves as the ultimate example for believers.

Application for the Modern Believer

Recognizing Jesus as both a historical man and the living Lord has profound implications for the Christian life. The primary challenge is to prevent this understanding from becoming a static, intellectual assent.

Moving from Memory to a Living Lord

- A common pitfall for modern Christians is treating Jesus as a cherished memory—a figure from the past who prompted a one-time decision—rather than an active, reigning Lord with a daily presence in their lives.
- Jesus anticipated this and provided for a continuing relationship through the Holy Spirit. He said, *"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you..."* (John 14:26-27). The Spirit provides ongoing conviction, guidance, and peace.

The Evidence of a Transformed Life

- A genuine, living relationship with Christ is evidenced by tangible results. Jesus stated the connection plainly: *"If you love Me, keep My commandments."* (John 14:15). The production of spiritual fruit is not a supernatural phenomenon for a select few; it is the natural evidence of a life connected to the Spirit.

- The absence of this fruit often points to a problem at the root of a believer's faith. Christianity is not a passive state but a call to active discipleship: *"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me."* (Luke 9:23). There is no "retirement" from serving God.

The Unchanging Standard

- In a world offering countless solutions for life's problems, from psychological "modalities" to other religions with ever-changing texts (such as the thousands of revisions to the Book of Mormon), the Bible stands apart as an unchanging standard.
- When a person only knows Jesus as a historical figure (*Jesus was*) but not as the living Lord (*Jesus is*), the Bible loses its authority in their life. Without this common ground of an acknowledged standard, there can be no true accountability or lasting growth. True freedom is found not in ignoring the obstacles of life, but in negotiating them through the unchanging wisdom of God's Word.

Greek Word Reference

Word	Greek Spelling	Phonetic Pronunciation	Definition
Tecton ^[^1]	τέκτων	tek'-tōn	A skilled craftsman, artisan, or builder. Can refer to a carpenter, stonemason, or architect.

[^1]: As referenced in the discussion of Jesus's occupation.