

to stress that mythicists make a two-pronged argument: given the negative argument, that we have no reliable witness that even mentions a historical Jesus, and the positive one, that his story appears to have been modeled on the accounts told of other divinities, it is simplest to believe that he never existed but was invented as another supernatural being. In this reading of the evidence, Christianity is founded on a myth.

Before countering the claims of the mythicists, I will set out the evidence that has persuaded everyone else, amateur and professional scholar alike, that Jesus really did exist. That will be the subject of the next several chapters.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Non-Christian Sources for the Life of Jesus*

I AM EXPECTING TO GET a very different reaction from this book than from others I have written over the years. Typically, but to my honest surprise, I get accused—or thanked, depending on who is writing me—of being anti-Christian because of the things I say in my books. I find this surprising because I don't consider myself anti-Christian. When I tell people this, I often get a disbelieving response: of *course* you're anti-Christian. Look at all the ways you attack Christianity!

But I have never seen it this way. In my view, the only thing I attack in my writings (and not even directly) is a fundamentalist and conservative evangelical understanding of Christianity. But to say for that reason that I attack Christianity is like saying that if you don't like raspberry sherbet you don't like any kind of ice cream. You can make the case (and you would be right) that sherbet isn't ice cream at all, so not liking it has nothing to do with ice cream. But

even if you think sherbet is close enough to ice cream that you may as well call it ice cream, by saying you don't like raspberry sherbet you're simply saying that there is one flavor of it you would rather not eat, given the choice.

I certainly do not mean to say that I consider myself either a Christian or an apologist for Christian causes. I am neither. But in my writings I have never attacked Christianity itself. I have attacked a particular flavor of it. It is true that in my part of the world, the American South, the flavor I have attacked happens to be the flavor preferred by the majority of practicing Christians. But in a historical and worldwide perspective, highly conservative Protestant Christianity, whether fundamentalism or hard-core evangelicalism, is a minority voice. It is the voice that says that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, with no contradictions, discrepancies, or mistakes of any kind. I simply don't think this is true. And neither have most Christians over the course of history.

I do happen to think that the Bible is a great book or set of books. With this I may be disagreeing with many of my atheist, agnostic, and humanist friends who have been cheering me on from the sidelines. But I personally love the Bible. I read it all the time, in the original Greek and Hebrew; I study it; I teach it. I have done so for over thirty-five years. And I don't plan to stop any time soon. But I don't think the Bible is perfect. Far from it. The Bible is filled with a multitude of voices, and these voices are often at odds with one another, contradicting one another in minute details and in major issues involving such basic views as what God is like, who the people of God are, who Jesus is, how one can be in a right relationship with God, why there is suffering in the world, how we are to behave, and on and on. And I heartily disagree with the views of most of the biblical authors on one point or another.

Still, in my judgment all of these voices are valuable and they should all be listened to. Some of the writers of the Bible were religious geniuses, and just as we listen to other geniuses of our

tradition—Mozart and Beethoven, Shakespeare and Dickens—so we ought to listen to the authors of the Bible. But they were not inspired by God, in my opinion, any more than any other genius is. And they contradict each other all over the map.

Even though there are innumerable historical problems in the New Testament, they are not of the scope or character to call seriously into doubt the existence of Jesus. He certainly lived, and in my view he too was a kind of religious genius, even more than the later authors who wrote about him. At the same time, he probably was not well educated. He may have been only semiliterate. But he certainly lived, and his teachings have impacted the world ever since. Surely that is one gauge of genius.

Since that is the view I am sketching in this book, I can imagine readers who think me anti-Christian taking umbrage at my refusal to toe their line. And Christian readers may well be pleased to see that even someone like me agrees with them on key points (although they certainly won't like other things I have to say in the book). My goal, however, is neither to please nor to offend. It is to pursue a historical question with all the rigor that it deserves and requires and in doing so to show that there really was a historical Jesus and that we can say certain things about him.

### *Preliminary Remarks*

BEFORE I SHOW THE evidence for the existence of Jesus, I need to make a few preliminary remarks about historians and how they go about establishing what probably happened in the past. The first thing to stress is that this is, in fact, what historians do. We have no direct access to the past. Once something happens, it is over and done with. There is no way to repeat a past event all over again. This makes historical evidence different from the kinds of evidence used in the hard sciences. In science you can repeat an experiment.

In fact, you have to repeat the experiment. Once an experiment is repeated sufficiently and with the same results, a kind of predictive probability is established that the same results will obtain if the experiment is conducted one more time. An example that I use with my first-year undergraduates: if I want to prove that a bar of iron sinks in lukewarm water but that a bar of Ivory soap floats, all I need are a hundred tubs of water and a hundred bars of each kind. When I start tossing them in the water, the iron will sink every time and the soap will float. This proves what will no doubt happen if I decide to repeat the experiment yet another time.

With history, though, we don't have the luxury of being able to repeat an event once it happens, and so we look for other kinds of evidence. How do we know if we've proved something historically? Technically, we cannot prove a single thing historically. All we can do is give enough evidence (of kinds I will mention in a moment) to convince enough people (hopefully nearly everyone) about a certain historical claim, for example, that Abraham Lincoln really did deliver the Gettysburg Address or that Julius Caesar really did cross the Rubicon. If you want to demonstrate that either historical event actually occurred, you need to marshal some convincing evidence. In neither of these particular cases, of course, is there really much doubt.

What about the historical existence of Jesus? It has become somewhat common among mythicists to think that the default position on the question of Jesus's existence should be that he did not exist unless someone can demonstrate that he did. This is the position expressed cogently by Robert Price: "The burden of proof would seem to belong with those who believe there was a historical man named Jesus."<sup>1</sup> I myself do not think that is true. On one hand, since every relevant ancient source (as we will see) assumes that there was such a man, and since no scholar who has ever written on it, except the handful of mythicists, has ever had any serious doubts, surely the burden of proof does not fall on those who take

the almost universally accepted position. On the other hand, and to be a bit more generous to Price and his fellow mythicists, perhaps the matter should be put more neutrally. As my former colleague, E. P. Sanders, an eminent professor of New Testament studies at nearby Duke University, used to say, "The burden of proof belongs with whoever is making a claim." That is, if Price wants to argue that Jesus did not exist, then he bears the burden of proof for his argument. If I want to argue that he did exist, then I do. Fair enough.

Price enunciates another historical principle that I do agree with, however, one that ties in closely with what I just said, that historians cannot repeat the past and so have to base their judgments on evidence that establishes most probably what happened. In Price's clearly expressed judgment, "The historian does not claim clairvoyant knowledge of the past. . . . The historian, so to speak 'postdicts' based on traceable factors and analogy. *But it is all a matter of probabilities.*"<sup>2</sup> Unlike scientists, who can with almost certain reliability "predict" what will happen based on their knowledge of what *does* happen, historians "postdict," that is, they indicate what probably did happen based on their knowledge of the evidence.

But what kind of evidence is there? This is a basic methodological question: How can we establish with reasonable probability that anyone from the past actually existed, whether our aforementioned Abraham Lincoln and Julius Caesar, or anyone else: Harry Truman, Charlemagne, Hypatia, Jerome, Socrates, Anne Frank, or Bilbo Baggins?

### *The Kinds of Sources Historians Want*

HISTORIANS CAN APPEAL TO many different kinds of evidence to establish the past existence of a person. First, there is a real preference for hard, physical evidence, for example, photographs. It is rather hard to deny that Abraham Lincoln lived since we have all

seen photos. Of course, the photos could have all been doctored in some insidious plot to rewrite American history. And that is what the conspiracy theorists among us claim (not just about Lincoln but about even better documented events, such as the Holocaust). But for most of us, a stack of good photographs from different sources will usually be convincing enough.

In addition to physical evidence, we look for surviving products that can be traced with relative certainty back to the person. This might include pieces of construction in some cases: the houses and buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright, for example. But in even more cases it would include literary remains, writings. Julius Caesar left us an account of the Gallic Wars. Anne Frank left us a diary. And we have lots of writings that can be traced with some assurance back to a man (also photographed) named Charles Dickens. They all almost certainly existed.

Finally, historians look to other kinds of evidence not *from* the person but *about* the person—that is, reference to, quotations of, or discussions about the person by others. These are of course our most abundant kinds of historical sources, the kinds that we have for the vast majority of persons from the past, especially before the invention of photography. What do we look for in evidence of this kind, especially when dealing with someone like Jesus, a person who lived, if he lived, some two thousand years ago? What kinds of sources do historians need to be convinced of his existence?

Historians prefer to have lots of written sources, not just one or two. The more, obviously, the better. If there were only one or two sources, you might suspect that the stories were made up (although you would probably want to have some reasons for thinking so; it is not good enough to doubt a source simply because you have a mean, negative, or pessimistic streak and choose to do so). But if there are lots of sources—just as when there are lots of eyewitnesses to a car accident—then it is hard to claim that any one of them just happened to make it all up.

Historians also prefer to have sources that are relatively near the date of the person or event that they are describing. As time goes on, things do indeed get made up, and so it is much better to have near-contemporary accounts. If our first reports about Moses come from six hundred years after he allegedly lived, those reports are not nearly as trustworthy as reports that can plausibly be dated to six years after he lived. The closer in temporal proximity, the better.

Historians also like these numerous and early sources to be extensive in scope. If all you have is the mere mention of a person's name in a source, that is not nearly as good as having long and extensive stories told (in lots of ancient sources). Moreover, it is obviously best if these extensive stories are reported in sources that are disinterested. That is to say, if someone is biased toward the subject matter, the bias has to be taken into account. The problem, of course, is that most sources are biased: if they didn't have any feelings about the subject matter, they wouldn't be talking about it. But if we find stories that clearly do not serve the purposes of the persons telling the story, we have a good indicator that the stories are (reasonably) disinterested.

Moreover, in an ideal situation, the various sources that discuss a figure or an event should corroborate what each of the others has to say, at least in major points if not in all the details. If one ancient source says that Octavian was a Roman general who became the emperor but another source says that he was a North African peasant who never traveled outside his native village, you know that you have a problem, either with Octavian himself or, as in this case, with the source. But if you have multiple sources from near the time that tell many stories about the Roman emperor Octavian—that is, that corroborate one another's stories—then you have good historical evidence.

At the same time, it is important to know that the various sources are independent of one another and do not rely on each other for all of their information. If four ancient authors mention Marcus Billius

as a Roman aristocrat in Ephesus, but it turns out that three of these authors derived their information from the fourth, then you no longer have multiple sources but only one. Their agreements do not represent corroboration but collaboration, and that is much less useful.

In short, if a historian were drawing up a wish list of sources for an ancient person, she would want a large number of sources that derive from near the time of the person they discuss; that are extensive in what they have to say about that person; that are disinterested, to some extent, in what they say; and that corroborate one another's accounts without having collaborated.

With that wish list in mind, what can we say about the evidence for the existence of Jesus?

### *The Sources for Jesus: What We Do Not Have*

IT MAY BE USEFUL to start by considering what we do *not* have by way of historical records for Jesus, to set the stage for a more detailed consideration in the next chapter of what we *do* have.

#### Physical Evidence?

To begin with, there is no hard, physical evidence for Jesus (eighteen hundred years before photography was invented), including no archaeological evidence of any kind. This is not much of an argument against his existence, however, since there is no archaeological evidence for anyone else living in Palestine in Jesus's day except for the very upper-crust elite aristocrats, who are occasionally mentioned in inscriptions (we have no other archaeological evidence even for any of these). In fact, we don't have archaeological remains for any nonaristocratic Jew of the 20s CE, when Jesus would have been an adult. And absolutely no one thinks that Jesus was an upper-

class aristocrat. So why would we have archaeological evidence of his existence?

We also do not have any writings from Jesus. To many people this may seem odd, but in fact it is not odd at all. The vast majority of people in the ancient world could not write, as we will see in greater detail. There are debates about Jesus's literacy, if of course he lived. But even if he could read, there are no indications from our early sources that he could write, and there is no reference to any of his writings in any of our Gospels.<sup>3</sup> So there is nothing strange about having nothing in writing from him. I should point out that we have nothing in writing from over 99.99 percent of people who lived in antiquity. That doesn't mean, of course, that they didn't live. It means that if we want to show that any one of them lived, we have to look for other kinds of evidence.

#### Non-Christian Sources of the First Century?

It is also true, as the mythicists have been quick to point out, that no Greek or Roman author from the first century mentions Jesus. It would be very convenient for us if they did, but alas, they do not. At the same time, the fact is again a bit irrelevant since these same sources do not mention many millions of people who actually did live. Jesus stands here with the vast majority of living, breathing human beings of earlier ages.

Moreover, it is an error to argue, as is sometimes done by one mythicist or another, that anyone as spectacular as Jesus allegedly was, who did so many miracles and fantastic deeds, would certainly have been discussed or at least mentioned in pagan sources if he really did exist.<sup>4</sup> Surely anyone who could heal the sick, cast out demons, walk on water, feed the multitudes with only a few loaves, and raise the dead would be talked about! The reason this line of reasoning is in error is that we are not asking whether Jesus really

did miracles and, if so, why they (and he) are not mentioned by pagan sources. We are asking whether Jesus of Nazareth actually existed. Only after establishing that he did exist can we go on to ask if he did miracles. If we decide that he did, only then can we revisit the question of why no one, in that case, mentions him. But we may also decide that the historical Jesus was not a miraculous being but a purely human being. In that case it is no surprise that Roman sources never mention him, just as it is no surprise that these same sources never mention any of his uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces, or nephews—or in fact nearly any other Jew of his day.

In that connection, I should reiterate that it is a complete “myth” (in the mythicist sense) that Romans kept detailed records of everything and that as a result we are inordinately well informed about the world of Roman Palestine and should expect then to hear about Jesus if he really lived. If Romans kept such records, where are they? We certainly don’t have any. Think of everything we do not know about the reign of Pontius Pilate as governor of Judea. We know from the Jewish historian Josephus that Pilate ruled for ten years, between 26 and 36 CE. It would be easy to argue that he was the single most important figure for Roman Palestine for the entire length of his rule. And what records from that decade do we have from his reign—what Roman records of his major accomplishments, his daily itinerary, the decrees he passed, the laws he issued, the prisoners he put on trial, the death warrants he signed, his scandals, his interviews, his judicial proceedings? We have none. Nothing at all.

I might press the issue further. What archaeological evidence do we have about Pilate’s rule in Palestine? We have some coins that were issued during his reign (one would not expect coins about Jesus since he didn’t issue any), and one—only one—fragmentary inscription discovered in Caesarea Maritima in 1961 that indicates that he was the Roman prefect. Nothing else. And what writings do we have from him? Not a single word. Does that mean he didn’t

exist? No, he is mentioned in several passages in Josephus and in the writings of the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo and in the Gospels. He certainly existed even though, like Jesus, we have no records from his day or writings from his hand. And what is striking is that we have far more information about Pilate than about any other governor of Judea in Roman times.<sup>5</sup> And so it is a modern “myth” to say that we have extensive Roman records from antiquity that surely would have mentioned someone like Jesus had he existed.

It is also worth pointing out that Pilate is mentioned only in passing in the writing of the one Roman historian, Tacitus, who does name him. Moreover, that happens to be in a passage that also refers to Jesus (*Annals* 15). If an important Roman aristocratic ruler of a major province is not mentioned any more than that in the Greek and Roman writings, what are the chances that a lower-class Jewish teacher (which Jesus must have been, as everyone who thinks he lived agrees) would be mentioned in them? Almost none.

I might add that our principal source of knowledge about Jewish Palestine in the days of Jesus comes from the historian Josephus, a prominent aristocratic Jew who was extremely influential in the social and political affairs of his day. And how often is Josephus mentioned in Greek and Roman sources of his own day, the first century CE? Never.

Think of an analogy. If a historian sixty years from now were to write up a history of the American South in, say, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is he likely to mention Zlatko Plese? (Zlatko is my brilliant colleague who teaches courses in ancient philosophy, Gnosticism, varieties of early Christianity, and other subjects.) Almost certainly not. What does that prove? Technically speaking, it proves nothing. But it does suggest either that Zlatko never existed or that he did not make a huge impact on the political, social, or cultural life of the South. As it turns out, Zlatko does exist (I bought him dinner last night). So if he is not mentioned in a future history

of the South, it will no doubt be because he did not make a big impact on the South. To show he existed, one would have to look at other evidence, for example, copies of the two books he has written. (Unlike Jesus, Zlatko can write. And unlike the first century, we have the mass production and distribution of books plus libraries to house them in.) So too with Jesus. If he is rarely mentioned, it is barely relevant to the question of his existence. It is possible that he simply made too little impact, just like the overwhelming mass of people who lived in the Roman Empire of the first century. Many Christians do not want to hear that Jesus did not make an enormous splash on the world of his day, but it appears to be true. Does that mean he did not exist? No, it means that to establish his existence, we need to look to other kinds of evidence.

### Eyewitness Accounts?

Still, to press yet further on the issue of evidence we do not have, I need to stress that we do not have a single reference to Jesus by anyone—pagan, Jew, or Christian—who was a contemporary eyewitness, who recorded things he said and did. But what about the Gospels of the New Testament? Aren't they eyewitness reports? Even though that was once widely believed about two of our Gospels, Matthew and John, it is not the view of the vast majority of critical historians today, and for good reason.

The early church tradition held that the four Gospels of the New Testament were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Even in that tradition, Mark and Luke were not themselves eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus. Mark was allegedly the (later) companion of Peter, who heard him preach about Jesus and reorganized his teachings into a narrative that became the Gospel that goes under his name; even if we accept the tradition that Mark was indeed the one who wrote the Gospel, his information came secondhand. Luke was yet further removed: he was said to be a companion of the

apostle Paul, who was himself not one of Jesus's earthly followers. Luke was allegedly a Gentile physician who researched the life of Jesus and then wrote up his account. If the tradition about Luke is true, we are dealing with an author who was a disciple of someone who was not a disciple. Matthew, by contrast, was widely claimed to be one of the twelve disciples, the tax collector Jesus called to be one of his followers (see Matthew 9: 9–13). And John was thought to be the mysterious “Beloved Disciple” of the Fourth Gospel (see, for example, John 19:26–27), identified as one of Jesus's closest followers, John the son of Zebedee.

Scholars today, outside the ranks of fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals, are virtually unified in thinking that none of these ascriptions of authorship is probably correct. One important point to notice is that none of the Gospel writers ever identifies himself by name or narrates any of his stories about Jesus in the first person. The Gospels are all written anonymously, and the authors describe the disciples, including the disciples Matthew and John, in the third person, talking about what “they” did (not what “I” or “we” did). Even more important, the immediate followers of Jesus were, like him, lower-class Aramaic-speaking peasants from rural Galilee. Could they have written Gospels?

Several significant studies of literacy have appeared in recent years showing just how low literacy rates were in antiquity. The most frequently cited study is by Columbia professor William Harris in a book titled *Ancient Literacy*.<sup>6</sup> By thoroughly examining all the surviving evidence, Harris draws the compelling though surprising conclusion that in the very best of times in the ancient world, only about 10 percent of the population could read at all and possibly copy out writing on a page. Far fewer than this, of course, could compose a sentence, let alone a story, let alone an entire book. And who were the people in this 10 percent? They were the upper-class elite who had the time, money, and leisure to afford an education. This is not an apt description of Jesus's disciples. They were not upper-crust aristocrats.



In Roman Palestine the situation was even bleaker. The most thorough examination of literacy in Palestine is by a professor of Jewish studies at the University of London, Catherine Hezser, who shows that in the days of Jesus probably only 3 percent of Jews in Palestine were literate.<sup>7</sup> Once again, these would be the people who could read and maybe write their names and copy words. Far fewer could compose sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and books. And once again, these would have been the urban elites.

The issue becomes even sharper when one other consideration is thrown into the mix. The native tongue of Jesus, his disciples, and most people in Palestine was Aramaic. But the Gospels were written not in Aramaic but in Greek. And in very good Greek. Highly proficient Greek. The authors of the Gospels were unusually well-educated speakers and writers of Greek. They must have been from the relatively higher classes, and they almost certainly were from urban areas outside Palestine. Scholars typically date these Greek compositions to the end of the first century, with Mark probably being the first Gospel, written around 70 CE or so; Matthew and Luke being a bit later, possibly 80–85 CE; and John being last, around 90–95 CE. The authors of these books were not the original followers of Jesus or probably even followers of the twelve earthly disciples of Jesus. They were later Christians who had heard stories about Jesus as they circulated by word of mouth year after year and decade after decade and finally decided to write them down.

It is true that the Gospel writers may have had written sources in front of them as well as oral traditions they had heard, as we will see at greater length in the next chapter. Luke explicitly states that he knows of earlier written accounts of Jesus's life (1:1–4), and there are very good reasons for thinking that both he and Matthew had access to a version of Mark's Gospel, from which they derived many of their stories. They probably also both had access to a document that scholars have labeled Q (from the German word for "source," *Quelle*). This is a document that no longer survives, but it appears

to have once existed, in Greek, and consisted of a number of sayings and a few of the deeds of Jesus. Along with these two documents, Matthew and Luke may have had yet other sources for their accounts; we do not know what sources Mark had for his. John is a different case altogether, as the stories he narrates about Jesus are so different from those found in the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.<sup>8</sup>

My point in this discussion, in any event, is that the Gospels of the New Testament are not eyewitness accounts of the life of Jesus. Neither are the Gospels outside the New Testament, of which we have over forty, either in whole or in fragments.<sup>9</sup> In fact, we do not have any eyewitness report of any kind about Jesus, written in his own day.

This fact too, however, should not be overblown when considering the question of whether or not Jesus lived. The absence of eyewitness accounts would be relevant if, and only if, we had reason to suspect that we *should* have eyewitness reports if Jesus really lived. That, however, is far from the case. Think again of our earlier point of comparison, Pontius Pilate. Here is a figure who was immensely significant in every way to the life and history of Palestine during the adult life of Jesus (assuming Jesus lived), politically, economically, culturally, socially. As I have indicated, there was arguably no one more important. And how many eyewitness reports of Pilate do we have from his day? None. Not a single one. The same is true of Josephus. And these are figures who were of the highest prominence in their own day.

In no small measure this relates, again, to the problem of literacy in that time and place. Hardly anyone could write, and most of the people who could write did not produce writings that have survived from antiquity. As it turns out—this is as astounding as it is true—from Roman Palestine of the entire first century we have precisely one, only one, author of literary texts whose works have survived (by literary texts I mean literary books of any kind: fictional, historical, philosophical, scientific, poetic, political, you name it). That



one author is Josephus. We have no others. What is equally striking, in all of our historical records we know the name of only one other author of such writings, a man named Justin of Tiberius; his books, obviously, have not survived.<sup>10</sup>

So would we expect eyewitness accounts about Jesus if he had lived? How could we possibly expect them? The one and only Palestinian author of books of any kind that we have was an author (Josephus) who was born several years after Jesus died.

### *Non-Christian References to Jesus*

NOW THAT WE HAVE considered at some length the sources we do not have for establishing whether Jesus lived, we can begin to look at the sources we do have. I start with a brief survey of sources that are typically appealed to as non-Christian references to Jesus. I will restrict myself to sources that were produced within about a hundred years of when Jesus is traditionally thought to have died since writings after that time almost certainly cannot be considered independent and reliable witnesses to his life but were undoubtedly based simply on what the authors had heard about Jesus, probably from his followers. The same may be true with even the non-Christian references I discuss here, as we will see. For the sake of convenience I will categorize these non-Christian references as Roman, on the one hand, and Jewish, on the other.

#### **Roman References**

Within a century of the traditional date of Jesus's death, he is referred to on three occasions by Roman authors. None of them wrote, as we have seen, during Jesus's lifetime or even in the first Christian century. They were all writing about eighty to eighty-five years after the traditional date of his death.

#### *Pliny the Younger*

The first surviving reference to Jesus by a non-Christian, non-Jewish source of any kind appears in the writings of Pliny the Younger, the governor of the Roman province of Bithynia-Pontus in Asia Minor (now Turkey). Pliny is called "the Younger" in order to differentiate him from his even more famous uncle, Pliny "the Elder," who is best known to history not as a Roman administrator but as a natural scientist who wrote many scientific tomes that still survive. Pliny the Elder was inveterately curious, as scientists tend to be, and when he learned that Mount Vesuvius was erupting in 79 CE, he decided to get as close as he could in order to investigate. Unfortunately, his ship got too close, and he perished in the fumes. His nephew, Pliny the Younger, also observed the eruption, but from a considerable distance, and wrote about it in one of his surviving works.

Among scholars of early Christianity, the younger Pliny is best known for a series of letters that he wrote later in life to the Roman emperor, Trajan, seeking advice for governing his province. In particular, letter number 10 from the year 112 CE is important, as it is the one place in which Pliny appears to mention the existence of Jesus. The letter is not about Jesus himself; it is dealing with a political problem. In Pliny's province a law had been passed making it illegal for people to gather together in social groups. This may seem like an odd law, but it had a very practical function. The Roman authorities were afraid that people in that locale might band together for political reasons and that this might lead to armed uprisings. But by forbidding groups from coming together for any purpose whatsoever, the Romans had created a problem, though not one you might expect. The law applied to every social group, including fire brigades. As a result, there were no effective measures in Pliny's province to deal with the outbreak of fires, and so villages were burning.

In his letter 10 to the emperor Pliny discusses the fire problem, and in that context he mentions another group that was illegally gathering together. As it turns out, it was the local community of Christians.<sup>11</sup>

Pliny learned from reliable sources that the Christians (illegally) gathered together in the early morning. He provides us with some important information about the group: they included people from a variety of socioeconomic levels, and they ate meals together of common food. Pliny may tell the emperor this because of rumors, which we hear from other later sources, that Christians committed cannibalism. (They did, after all, eat the flesh of the Son of God and drink his blood.) Moreover, Pliny informs the emperor, the Christians “sing hymns to Christ as to a god.”

That is all he says about Jesus: the Christians worshipped him by singing to him. He does not, as you can see, even call him Jesus but instead uses his most common epithet, Christ. Whether Pliny knew the man’s actual name is anyone’s guess. One might be tempted to ask as well whether he knew that Christ was (at one time?) a man, but the fact that he indicates that the songs were offered to Christ “as to a god” suggests that Christ was, of course, something else.

This reference is obviously not much to go on. But it does tell us that there were Christians worshipping someone named Christ in the early second century in the region of Asia Minor. We already knew this, of course, from other (Christian) sources, as we will see in a later chapter. In any event, whatever Pliny knows about Christ he appears to have learned from the Christians who informed him, and so he does not provide us with completely independent testimony that Jesus actually existed, only the testimony of Christians living some eighty years after Jesus would have died. These Christians might have read some of the Gospels, and they certainly heard stories about Jesus. So at the least we can say that the idea of Jesus having existed was current by the early second century, but the reference of Pliny does not provide us with much more than that.

### Suetonius

Even less helpful is a reference found in the writings of the Roman biographer Suetonius, often also cited in discussions of the existence of Jesus. Suetonius is most famous for having produced twelve biographies of Roman emperors. His *Lives of the Caesar*, written in 115 CE, still makes for interesting reading today. It was, in fact, the basis for Robert Graves’s historical novel, *I Claudius* (1934), on which the even better-known BBC miniseries of the same name was based. It is in Suetonius’s biography of Claudius, emperor of Rome from 41 to 54 CE, that a second reference to Jesus is sometimes thought to occur. Suetonius indicates that at one point in his reign Claudius deported all the Jews from Rome because of riots that had occurred “at the instigation of Chrestus.”

He says nothing more about the man. But a large number of scholars over the years have thought that the situation in Rome is relevant for understanding early Christian history. In this theory, it was Roman Jews who believed that Jesus was the messiah, or Christ (Chrestus), who had stirred up the passions of Jews who did not believe. This led to violent reactions that got out of hand: the riots mentioned by Suetonius. And so Claudius expelled the whole lot of them.

The reading of the situation may receive some support from the New Testament book of Acts, which also refers to the incident (18:2). One problem with this reconstruction of events is that if Suetonius did have some such situation in mind, he misspelled Jesus’s epithet, since *Christ* in Latin would be *Christus*, not *Chrestus* (although this kind of spelling mistake was common). Moreover, since *Chrestus* itself could be a name, it may well be that there simply was a Jew named Chrestus who caused a disturbance that led to riots in the Jewish community.

In any event, even if Suetonius is referring to Jesus by a misspelled epithet, he does not help us much in our quest for non-

Christian references to Jesus. Jesus himself would have been dead for some twenty years when these riots in Rome took place, so at best Suetonius would be providing evidence, if he can count for evidence, that there were Christians in Rome during the reign of Claudius. But this could have been the case whether Jesus lived or not, since mythicists would argue that the “myth” of Christ had already been invented by then, as had the supposed life of the made-up figure of Jesus.

Whereas these first two sparse references are of limited use, a third by the Roman historian Tacitus seems more promising.

### *Tacitus*

Tacitus wrote his famous *Annals of Imperial Rome* in 115 CE as a history of the empire from 14 to 68 CE. Probably the best-known single passage of this sixteen-volume work is the one in which he discusses the fire that consumed a good portion of Rome during the reign of the emperor Nero, in 64 CE. According to Tacitus, it was the emperor himself who had arranged for arsonists to set fire to the city because he wanted to implement his own architectural plans and could not very well do so while the older parts of the city were still standing. But the plan backfired, as many citizens—including those, no doubt, who had been burned out of house and home—suspected that the emperor himself was responsible. Nero needed to shift the blame onto someone else, and so, according to Tacitus, he claimed that the Christians had done it. The populace at large was willing to believe the charge, Tacitus tells us, because the Christians were widely maligned for their “hatred of the human race.”

And so Nero had the Christians rounded up and executed in very public, painful, and humiliating ways. Some of them, Tacitus indicates, were rolled in pitch and set aflame while still alive to light Nero’s gardens; others were wrapped in fresh animal skins and had

wild dogs set on them, tearing them to shreds. It was not a pretty sight.

In the context of this gory account, Tacitus explains that “Nero falsely accused those whom . . . the populace called Christians. The author of this name, Christ, was put to death by the procurator, Pontius Pilate, while Tiberius was emperor; but the dangerous superstition, though suppressed for the moment, broke out again not only in Judea, the origin of this evil, but even in the city [of Rome].”

Once again, Jesus is not actually named here, but it is obvious in this instance that he is the one being referred to and that Tacitus knows some very basic information about him. He was called Christ, he was executed at the order of Pontius Pilate, and this was during the reign of Tiberius. Moreover, this happened in Judea, presumably, since that was where Pilate was the governor and since that was where Jesus’s followers originated. All of this confirms information otherwise available from Christian sources, as we will see.

Some mythicists argue that this reference in Tacitus was not actually written by him—they claim the same thing for Pliny and Suetonius, where the references are less important—but were inserted into his writings (interpolated) by Christians who copied them, producing the manuscripts of Tacitus we have today. (We have no originals, only later copies.)<sup>12</sup> I don’t know of any trained classicists or scholars of ancient Rome who think this, and it seems highly unlikely. The mythicists certainly have a reason for arguing this: they do not want to think there are *any* references to Jesus in our early sources outside the New Testament, and so when they find any such reference, they claim the reference was not original but was inserted by Christians. But surely the best way to deal with evidence is not simply to dismiss it when it happens to be inconvenient. Tacitus evidently did know some things about Jesus.

At the same time, the information is not particularly helpful in establishing that there really lived a man named Jesus. How would Tacitus know what he knew? It is pretty obvious that he had heard

of Jesus, but he was writing some eighty-five years after Jesus would have died, and by that time Christians were certainly telling stories of Jesus (the Gospels had been written already, for example), whether the mythicists are wrong or right. It should be clear in any event that Tacitus is basing his comment about Jesus on hearsay rather than, say, detailed historical research. Had he done serious research, one might have expected him to say more, if even just a bit. But even more to the point, brief though his comment is, Tacitus is precisely wrong in one thing he says. He calls Pilate the "procurator" of Judea. We now know from the inscription discovered in 1961 at Caesarea that as governor, Pilate had the title and rank, not of procurator (one who dealt principally with revenue collection), but of prefect (one who also had military forces at his command). This must show that Tacitus did not look up any official record of what happened to Jesus, written at the time of his execution (if in fact such a record ever existed, which is highly doubtful). He therefore had heard the information. Whether he heard it from Christians or someone else is anyone's guess.

These three references are the only ones that survive from pagan sources within a hundred years of the traditional date of Jesus's death (around the year 30 CE). At the end of the day, I think we can discount Suetonius as too ambiguous to be of much use. Pliny is slightly more useful in showing us that Christians by the early second century knew of Christ and worshipped him as divine. Tacitus is most useful of all, for his reference shows that high-ranking Roman officials of the early second century knew that Jesus had lived and had been executed by the governor of Judea. That, at least, is a start.

### Jewish Sources

As I have already indicated, we do not have nearly as many Jewish sources from within a hundred years of Jesus's life as we have pagan sources (Greek and Roman). The Dead Sea Scrolls, which do not

mention or allude to Jesus, despite what you might read in sensationalist books, were probably written in the first century BCE. We do have the writings of the important Jewish philosopher Philo from the early to mid-first century. He never mentions Jesus, but we would not expect him to do so, as Christianity had probably not reached his native Alexandria by the time of his death in 50 CE, whatever one thinks of the mythicist view of Jesus. From within Palestine, the only surviving author of the time is Josephus, as we have seen. The matter is hotly disputed by mythicists, but it appears, at least from the remains that survive, that Josephus does refer to Jesus twice.

### Josephus

Flavius Josephus is one of the truly important figures from ancient Judaism. His abundant historical writings are our primary source of information about the life and history of Palestine in the first century. He himself was personally involved with some of the most important events that he narrates, especially in his eight-volume work, *The Jewish Wars*.<sup>13</sup>

Josephus was born to an aristocratic family in Palestine some six or seven years after the traditional date of Jesus's death. Before he was an author he became actively involved in the political and military affairs of Jews in Palestine. In 66 CE there was a major uprising in which the Judeans sought to throw off the yoke of their Roman overlords. Josephus was appointed to be the general of the Jewish troops in the northern part of Palestine, Galilee. The Romans responded to the uprising by sending in the legions from Syria. To get to the heart of the rebellion they had to pass through Galilee, and they did so with relative ease, as Josephus's forces were no match for the Roman armies. As Josephus himself later tells us in his autobiography, he and his remaining troops were surrounded and chose to make a suicide pact rather than surrender to the enemy. The men each drew a num-

bered lot; the first man was to be killed by the second, who was to be killed by the third, and so on until only two remained, and these two were then to take their own lives. The troops did as they were told, and by luck or design, Josephus drew one of the final two lots. When all the other soldiers were dead, he then convinced his partner not to commit suicide but to turn themselves in to the Romans.

As an aristocrat and military leader, Josephus was brought before the Roman general in charge of the assault, a man named Vespasian. With his wits about him, Josephus did a very smart thing. He informed Vespasian that he had learned in a revelation from God that he, Vespasian, was destined to become the future emperor of Rome. As it turned out, Josephus's prophecy came true. After the emperor Nero committed suicide in 68 CE, there was a series of very brief reigns by three other emperors, after which Vespasian's troops declared him emperor. He returned to Rome to assume the position, leaving his son Titus in charge of the assault on Jerusalem.

Josephus himself was used as an interpreter during the three-year siege of the city. After it fell, the Jewish opposition was slaughtered and the holy Temple as well as much of the city was destroyed. Josephus was taken to Rome and given a prestigious place in the court of Vespasian, and with imperial support he then wrote his various historical works. The first was his account of all that had happened during the war in which he himself had played such an important part. About twenty years later (around 93 CE) he completed his magnum opus, a twenty-volume account of the history of the Jewish people from the time of Adam (the very beginning!) down to his own day, called *The Antiquities of the Jews*.

In his various writings Josephus mentions a large number of Jews, especially as they were important for the social, political, and historical situation in Palestine. As it turns out, he discusses several persons named Jesus, and he deals briefly also with John the Baptist. And on two occasions, at least in the writings as they have come down to us today, he mentions Jesus of Nazareth.

It is somewhat simpler to deal with these two references in reverse order. The second of them is very brief and occurs in Book 20 of the *Antiquities*. Here Josephus is referring to an incident that happened in 62 CE, before the Jewish uprising, when the local civic and religious leader in Jerusalem, the high priest Ananus, misused his power. The Roman governor had been withdrawn, and in his absence, we are told, Ananus unlawfully put to death a man named James, whom Josephus identifies as "the brother of Jesus, who is called the messiah" (*Antiquities* 20.9.1). Here, unlike the pagan references we examined earlier, Jesus is actually called by name. And we learn two things about him: he had a brother named James, and some people thought that he was the messiah. Both points are abundantly attested as well, of course, in our Christian sources, but it is interesting to see that Josephus is aware of them.

Mythicists typically argue that this passage was not originally in Josephus but was inserted by later Christian scribes. Before dealing with that claim I should consider the second passage, the one over which there is the most debate. This passage is known to scholars as the *Testimonium Flavianum*, that is, the testimony given by Flavius Josephus to the life of Jesus.<sup>14</sup> It is the longest reference to Jesus that we have considered so far, and it is by far the most important. In the best manuscripts of Josephus it reads as follows:

At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one should call him a man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. He was the messiah. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. For he appeared to them on the third day, living again, just as the divine prophets had spoken of these and countless other wonderous things about him. And up until this

very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out. (*Antiquities* 18.3.3)

The problems with this passage should be obvious to anyone with even a casual knowledge of Josephus. We know a good deal about him, both from the autobiography that he produced and from other self-references in his writings. He was thoroughly and ineluctably Jewish and certainly never converted to be a follower of Jesus. But this passage contains comments that only a Christian would make: that Jesus was more than a man, that he was the messiah, and that he arose from the dead in fulfillment of the scriptures. In the judgment of most scholars, there is simply no way Josephus the Jew would or could have written such things. So how did these comments get into his writings?

It needs to be remembered that Josephus, by his own admission, was something of a turncoat in the war with Rome. This is how most Jews throughout history have remembered him. Among his own people he was not a beloved author read through the ages. In fact, his writings were transmitted in the Middle Ages not by Jews but by Christians. This shows how we can explain the extraordinary Christian claims about Jesus in this passage. When Christian scribes copied the text, they added a few words here and there to make sure that the reader would get the point. This is *that* Jesus, the super-human messiah raised from the dead as the scriptures predicted.

The big question is whether a Christian scribe (or scribes) simply added a few choice Christian additions to the passage or whether the entire thing was produced by a Christian and inserted in an appropriate place in Josephus's *Antiquities*.

The majority of scholars of early Judaism, and experts on Josephus, think that it was the former—that one or more Christian scribes “touched up” the passage a bit. If one takes out the obviously Christian comments, the passage may have been rather innocuous, reading something like this:<sup>15</sup>

At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. He was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. When Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out.

If this is the original form of the passage, then Josephus had some solid historical information about Jesus's life: Jesus was known for his wisdom and teaching; he was thought to have done remarkable deeds; he had numerous followers; he was condemned to be crucified by Pontius Pilate because of Jewish accusations brought against him; and he continued to have followers among the Christians after his death.

Mythicists have argued, however, that the entire passage was made up by a Christian author and inserted into the writings of Josephus. If that is the case, then possibly the later reference to James as “the brother of Jesus, who is called the messiah” was also interpolated, in order to reinforce the point of the earlier insertion. One of the fullest arguments for this position is offered by Earl Doherty, both in his original work, *The Jesus Puzzle*, and in an amplified form in his more recent *Jesus: Neither God nor Man*. In his view, “a good case can be made for saying that Josephus wrote nothing about Jesus and was probably unaware of any such figure.”<sup>16</sup> Doherty mounts argument after argument against the view that Josephus made any reference at all to Jesus, often repeating the arguments of others, sometimes coming up with his own. Here I will consider his most important points.

First, some (such as G. A. Wells) have maintained that if one removes the entire *Testimonium* from its larger context, the preceding paragraph and the one that follows flow together quite nicely. This



one seems, then, intrusive.<sup>17</sup> As Doherty rightly notes, however, it was not at all uncommon for ancient writers (who never used footnotes) to digress from their main points, and in fact other digressions can be found in the surrounding context of the passage. So this argument really does not amount to much.

More striking for Doherty is the fact that no Christian authors appear to be aware of this passage until the church father Eusebius, writing in the early fourth century. In the second and third centuries there were many Christian writers (Justin, Tertullian, Origen, and so on) who were intent on defending both Christianity and Jesus himself against charges leveled against him by their opponents. And yet they never, in defense of Jesus, mention this passage of Josephus. Is that really plausible? Wouldn't Christian apologists want to appeal to a neutral witness in support of their claims about Jesus in the face of pagan opposition?

This too does not strike me as a strong argument. The pared-down version of Josephus—the one that others have thought was original, without the Christian additions—contains very little that could have been used by the early Christian writers to defend Jesus and his followers from attacks by pagan intellectuals. It is a very neutral statement. The fact that Jesus is said to have been wise or to have done great deeds would not go far in the repertoire of the Christian apologists. We have no way of knowing if they were familiar with this passage from Josephus, but if they were, I don't see that it would have seemed so striking to them that they would have used it to defend Jesus against pagan accusations. These accusations typically included such claims as that he was born out of wedlock to a peasant Jewish woman who was seduced by a Roman soldier; that he was an unskilled carpenter; that he could not control his temper; and that he died a shameful death on the cross.<sup>18</sup> Nothing in the possibly original statement of Josephus seems relevant to any of these charges.

Doherty goes on to claim that the passage does not ring true to Josephus otherwise, in part because “in the case of every other

would-be messiah or popular leader opposed to or executed by the Romans, he has nothing but evil to say.”<sup>19</sup> This is the case with all messianic pretenders of Josephus's day: he was completely opposed to anyone who might foment an uprising against Rome (remember: he was writing as a privileged guest in the court of the Roman emperor). But it needs to be stressed that in the possibly original form of the *Testimonium* there is not a word about Jesus being a messiah figure or even a political leader. He is simply a teacher with followers, accused on unknown grounds by (specifically) Jewish leaders and then executed. Moreover, if one reads the passage without the rose-tinted lenses of the Christian tradition, its view of Jesus can be seen as basically negative. The fact that he was opposed by the leaders of the Jewish people would no doubt have shown that he was not an upright Jew. And the fact that he was condemned to crucifixion, the most horrific execution imaginable to a Roman audience, speaks for itself. Even though Jesus may have been a good teacher, he was a threat to the state, or at least a nuisance, and so the state dealt with him fairly and strongly, by condemning him.

Doherty also objects to the idea that Josephus could call Jesus “wise” and one who appears to have taught the “truth.” If Josephus knew the teachings of Jesus—with which he surely would have vehemently disagreed—then he never could say any such things. To this it can easily be objected on one hand that there is no reason for thinking that Josephus knew any of the things that Jesus taught, and on the other that many of the things Jesus taught were in fact what many other famous teachers of Judaism taught: for example, that followers of God should love God above all else; that they should love their neighbors as themselves; that they should do good unto others; that they should feed the hungry and care for the poor and oppressed; and, well, lots of other things that have seemed through the ages to Christian believer and unbeliever alike as both wise and true.

Doherty makes many other points, but most of them, frankly, are even weaker than these and do not need to be given serious at-



tion here. In the revised edition of his book, however, he does devote an extended discussion to summarizing the views of Ken Olson, a graduate student at Duke University, who argues that the language of the *Testimonium* does not appear to be stylistically consistent with the language Josephus uses throughout his other works. Olson has been a student of mine (taking some of my graduate seminars at UNC) and is a very sharp fellow. For what it is worth, he is not a mythicist. Olson's Ph.D. dissertation is devoted to the *Testimonium*, and many of his key arguments are summarized in an article that he published in the academic journal *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* in 1999.<sup>20</sup> In this article Olson argues that the first author to mention the *Testimonium*, the Christian church father Eusebius (who was writing before any of our manuscripts of Josephus was produced), was in fact the one who forged it and so was ultimately responsible for its being inserted into Josephus's writings. The basis for the argument is a very careful analysis of the words and phrases used in the *Testimonium*. Olson argues in case after case that the wording and phrasing of the passage has numerous parallels with Eusebius's writings but not with those of Josephus. In other words, the vocabulary and style of the passage suggest that it was written by Eusebius.

Olson has made an intriguing case in his article, but I am afraid—as impressed by him as I am—that it has not held up under critical scrutiny. The responses to it by such scholars of Josephus and of early Christianity as J. Carleton Paget and Alice Whealey have been compelling.<sup>21</sup> There is in fact little in the *Testimonium* that is more like Eusebius than Josephus, and a good deal of the passage does indeed read like it was written by Josephus. It is far more likely that the core of the passage actually does go back to Josephus himself.<sup>22</sup>

An additional reason for thinking so is this: if a scribe (or Eusebius or anyone else) wanted to insert a strong testimony about the virtues of Jesus into the writings of Josephus (so that the *Testimonium* is a later interpolation), he surely would have done so in a much

more glowing and obvious way. Those who wrote apocryphal stories about Jesus are flamboyant both in what they relate (recounting lots of Jesus's miracles, for example) and in how they say it (stressing his divine nature, not simply that he was the messiah). The *Testimonium* is so restrained, with only a couple of fairly reserved sentences here and there, that it does not read like a Christian apocryphal account of Jesus written for the occasion. It reads much more like what you get elsewhere throughout the manuscript tradition of ancient writings: a touch-up job that a scribe could easily do.

The payoff is that most scholars continue to be convinced that Josephus did indeed write about Jesus, probably in something like the pared-down version that I quote above.

But that is not the main point I want to make about the *Testimonium*. My main point is that whether the *Testimonium* is authentically from Josephus (in its pared-down form) or not probably does not ultimately matter for the question I am pursuing here. Whether or not Jesus lived has to be decided on other kinds of evidence from this. And here is why. Suppose Josephus really did write the *Testimonium*. That would show that by 93 CE—some sixty or more years after the traditional date of Jesus's death—a Jewish historian of Palestine had some information about him. And where would Josephus have derived this information? He would have heard stories about Jesus that were in circulation. There is nothing to suggest that Josephus had actually read the Gospels (he almost certainly had not) or that he did any kind of primary research into the life of Jesus by examining Roman records of some kind (there weren't any). But as we will see later, we already know for lots of other reasons and on lots of other grounds that there were stories about Jesus floating around in Palestine by the end of the first century and much earlier. So even if the *Testimonium*, in the pared-down form, was written by Josephus, it does not give us much more evidence than we already have on the question of whether there really was a man Jesus.

If, by contrast, the *Testimonium* was not written by Josephus,

we again are neither helped nor hurt in our quest to know whether Jesus lived. There is certainly no reason to think if Jesus lived that Josephus must have mentioned him. He doesn't mention most Jews of the first century. Recent estimates suggest that there were possibly up to a million Jews living in Palestine at any one time in the early first century. (If you add up the different persons living in any given year, as new people are born and others die, the total numbers of Jews living throughout the period are obviously much higher.)<sup>23</sup> Josephus does not mention 99 percent of them—or rather, more than 99 percent. So why would he mention Jesus? You cannot say that he would have mentioned Jesus because anyone who did all those amazing miraculous deeds would surely be mentioned. As I pointed out earlier, the question of what Jesus actually *did* has to come after we establish that he lived, not before. As a result, even though both the mythicists and their opponents like to fight long and hard over the *Testimonium* of Josephus, in fact it is only marginally relevant to the question of whether Jesus existed.

### *Rabbinic Sources*

In order to complete my tally of early references to Jesus, I need to say a few words about the Jewish Talmud. This is not because it is relevant but because when talking about historical references to Jesus, many people *assume* it is relevant.<sup>24</sup> The Talmud is a collection of disparate materials from early Judaism: legal disputes, anecdotes, folklore, customs, and sayings. Most of the material relates directly to teachings of and stories about the early rabbis, that is, Jewish teachers. The collection was put together long after the days of Jesus.

The core of the Talmud is the Mishnah, a collection of rabbinic teachings about the Jewish law, based on oral traditions that had long been in circulation, and written in the early third century, some two hundred years after Jesus would have died. Most of the Talmud, however, consists of a series of commentaries by later

rabbis on the Mishnah, called the Gemara. There are two different sets of these commentaries, one produced in the fourth century by Jewish scholars who lived in Palestine, the other produced in the fifth century by scholars of Babylon. The latter is considered the more authoritative.

For a long time scholars treated the Talmud as if it presented historically accurate information about Jewish life, law, and custom from a much earlier period, all the way back to the first century. Few critical scholars take that view today. In both its iterations, it is a product of its own time, even though it is based on earlier oral reports.

Jesus is never mentioned in the oldest part of the Talmud, the Mishnah, but appears only in the later commentaries of the Gemara. One of the problems even with these very late references is that Jesus is not actually called by name even though it is reasonably clear that he is the one being referred to. There are some passages, for example, that refer to a person named “Ben [son of] Panthera.” Panthera was the name traditionally given to the Roman soldier who was said to have seduced Mary, who in these passages is called a hairdresser. Her child, then, was born out of wedlock. Scholars have long recognized that this tradition appears to represent a subtle attack on the Christian view of Jesus birth as the “son of a virgin.” In Greek, the word for virgin is *parthenos*, close in spelling to *Panthera*.

In other references in the Talmud we learn that Jesus was a sorcerer who acquired his black magic in Egypt. Recall the Gospel accounts of how Jesus fled with his family to Egypt soon after his birth and his abilities later in life to perform miracles. He is said in the Talmud to have gathered five disciples and to have been hanged on the eve of the Passover, after a herald proclaimed the charges of sorcery against him for forty days. Here again we may have a biased version of the Gospel accounts, where Jesus is killed during the Passover but with injudicious speed after a very quick trial, his execution occurring some twelve hours after his arrest.

These Talmudic references to Jesus were written hundreds of years after he would have lived and so are really of very little use for us in our quest. By the time they were set down, Christianity was a major force in the Roman Empire, and every single Christian telling stories about Jesus naturally assumed that he had really existed as a historical person. If we want evidence to support the claim that he did in fact once exist, we therefore have to turn to other sources.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *The Gospels as Historical Sources*

AT THE BEGINNING OF the last chapter I mentioned one criticism I have received over the years that has surprised me. And here is another. Sometimes in a review or an e-mail a reader will provide a short but hard-hitting laundry list of complaints about one or another book I've written, and two items on the list are (a) that I'm needlessly attacking the Bible (I objected to this complaint in chapter 2) and (b) that I am saying nothing new but am merely rehearsing what scholars have known for a long time. I find this two-pronged critique a bit odd for lots of reasons but in particular because the two prongs seem to be at odds with each other. How am I attacking *anything* if I am simply saying what scholars have long known? I don't see how a critic can have it both ways.

At the same time, I do understand the critique. Very conservative evangelical and fundamentalist Christians do not agree with what other scholars have long said about the Bible. And what the critics are objecting to is my decision to make this information public. Fair enough. But in my view, the public has the right to know

what scholars have discovered after spending countless hours, days, months, and years grappling with the hard issues. And to discount it all as “saying nothing new” is simply an ad hominem attack. My popular books (as opposed to my scholarly books, which are written for the six people in the world who care) are meant for laypeople and so are designed to show a wider audience, in nontechnical language, the findings of true and intriguing importance that scholars have made. How can anyone complain about making the public more knowledgeable?

The same complaint can well be made about the present chapter. In it I do not advance scholarship or come up with some new theory. What I discuss here is common knowledge among scholars in the field. In fact, most of it is standard information that even my conservative critics will by and large agree with, either to their pleasant surprise or to their dismay. It deals with why our Gospel sources are important for the question of whether Jesus existed, and my claim is that once one understands more fully what the Gospels are and where they came from, they provide powerful evidence indeed that there really was a historical Jesus who lived in Roman Palestine and who was crucified under Pontius Pilate. We will see in the chapters that follow that this is not the only kind of evidence we have for the existence of Jesus. Quite the contrary, there are other compelling data to consider. But the Gospels are the obvious place to start.

### *A Preliminary Comment on the Gospels as Historical Sources*

AS I WILL TRY to show momentarily, the Gospels, their sources, and the oral traditions that lie behind them combine to make a convincing case that Jesus really existed. It is not that one can simply accept everything found in the Gospels as historically accurate. Far from

it. The Gospels are filled with nonhistorical material, accounts of events that could not have happened. This is shown, for example, by the many discrepancies they contain in matters both great and small. If you have two contradictory accounts of the same event, both accounts cannot be accurate. And once you read the Gospels carefully, with keen attention to minute details, you will find such contradictions all over the map. Eventually these small details add up to big pictures, which also are sometimes at odds with one another.

At the same time, there is historical information in the Gospels. This historical material needs to be teased out by careful, critical analysis. Before doing so, I need to make a preliminary remark about the Gospels as historical sources. Sometimes the Gospels of the New Testament are separated from all other pieces of historical evidence and given a different kind of treatment because they happen to be found in the Bible, the collection of books that Christians gathered together and declared sacred scripture. The Gospels are treated in this way by two fundamentally opposed camps of readers, and my contention is that both of them are completely wrong. However else the Gospels are used—for example, in communities of faith—they can and must be considered historical sources of information.

At one end of the spectrum, fundamentalist and conservative evangelical Christians often treat the Gospels as literature unlike anything else that has ever been produced because, in their theological opinion, these books were inspired by God. In this view, inspired literature is not amenable to the same kind of historical and critical investigation as other kinds of literature.

I think this is wrong, and not simply because I am an agnostic who does not believe the Bible is the inspired word of God. I thought this approach was wrong even when I was a committed, believing Christian. It is wrong because whatever else you might think about the books of the Bible—whether you believe in them or not, whether you consider them inspired or not—they are still *books*.

That is, they were written by people in historical circumstances and contexts and precisely in light of those circumstances and contexts. There is no God-given way of interpreting God-given literature, even if such literature exists. It is still literature. And it has to be interpreted as literature is interpreted. There is no special hermeneutic handed down from above to direct the reading of these books as opposed to all others. Their authors were human authors (whether or not they were inspired); they wrote in human languages and in human contexts; their books are recognizable as human books, written according to the rhetorical conventions of their historical period. They are human and historical, whatever else you may think about them, and to treat them differently is to mistreat them and to misunderstand them.

At the other end of the spectrum is another group insisting that the books of the Bible need to be given separate treatment. These are certain agnostics and atheists who claim that since, say, the Gospels are part of Christian sacred scripture, they have less value than other books for establishing historical information. As odd as it might seem, the nonbelievers who argue this are making common cause with the fundamentalists who also argue it. Both groups treat the Gospels as nonhistorical, the fundamentalists because the Gospels are inspired and the atheists (those who hold this view) because the Gospels are accepted by some people as sacred scripture and so are not historical.

The (sometime) atheist opinion of the Bible as nonhistorical is no better than the (typical) fundamentalist opinion. The reality is that the authors of the books that became the Bible did not know they were producing books that would later be considered scripture, and they probably had no intention of producing scripture. The Gospel writers—anonymous Greek-speaking Christians living thirty-five to sixty-five years after the traditional date of Jesus's death—were simply writing down episodes that they had heard from the life of Jesus. Some of these episodes may be historically

accurate, others may not be. But the authors did not write thinking they were providing the sacred scriptures for the Christian tradition. They were simply writing books about Jesus.

These authors had nothing to do with later developments, such as that their books were considered inspired and were placed in a canon and called the New Testament. The authors were real, living, breathing, historical persons; they had heard reports about Jesus; they had probably read earlier accounts of his life; and they decided to write their own versions. "Luke" (whoever he really was and whatever name he had) tells us this himself, in the beginning of the third Gospel: "Whereas many have attempted to compile a narrative of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as the eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them over to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all these things closely from the beginning, to write for you an orderly account" (1:1-3).

I should stress that I am not saying that Luke and the other Gospel writers were trying to present disinterested accounts of the life of Jesus. These authors were anything but disinterested, and their biases need to be front and center in the critics' minds when evaluating what they have to say. But at the same time, they were historical persons giving reports of things they had heard, using historically situated modes of rhetoric and presentation. The fact that their books later became documents of faith has no bearing on the question of whether the books can still be used for historical purposes. To dismiss the Gospels from the historical record is neither fair nor scholarly.

Some mythicists, though, do precisely that. As just one example, the Gospel of Luke indicates that Jesus's hometown was Nazareth. As we will see later in the book, many mythicists deny that Nazareth even existed in the days of Jesus, and they refuse to take Luke's and the other Gospels' word for it, not deeming them as reputable historical sources since they are part of the Bible. But the reality is that Luke inherited oral traditions about Jesus and his connection with

Nazareth, and he recorded what he had heard. What he heard may have been right or it may have been wrong, but the fact that later Christians long after he was dead placed his book into the canon of the New Testament has nothing to do with it. Luke's writings about Jesus carry no more or less weight than the writings of any other ancient biographer (Suetonius, for example, or Plutarch)—or, perhaps a more apt comparison, of any other biographer of a religious person, such as Philostratus and his account of Apollonius of Tyana.

Consider an analogy. We don't dismiss early American accounts of the Revolutionary War simply because they were written by Americans. We take their biases into consideration and sometimes take their descriptions of events with a pound of salt. But we do not refuse to use them as historical sources. Contemporary accounts of George Washington, even by his devoted followers, are still valuable as historical sources. To refuse to use them as sources is to sacrifice the most important avenues to the past we have, and on purely ideological, not historical, grounds.

So too the Gospels. Whatever one thinks of them as inspired scripture, they can be seen and used as significant historical sources. With this major comment in view, what can we say about the Gospels and their witness to the life of the historical Jesus?

### *The Gospels and Their Written Sources*

ONCE IT IS CONCEDED that the Gospels can and should be treated as historical sources, no different from other historical sources infused with their authors' biases, it starts to become clear why historians have almost universally agreed that whatever else one might say about him, Jesus of Nazareth lived in first-century Palestine and was crucified by the prefect of Judea. It is not because "the Gospels say so" and that it therefore must be true (the view, of course, of fundamentalist Christians). It is for a host of other reasons familiar

to scholars who work in the field. This opening section will not be convincing to naysayers, for reasons I will explain, but we need to start somewhere, and the place to start is with the surviving witnesses that we have in hand.

We have already seen that historians, who try to establish that a past event happened or that a past person lived, look for multiple sources that corroborate one another's stories without having collaborated. And this is what we get with the Gospels and their witness of Jesus. Our earliest Gospel account of Jesus's life is probably Mark's, usually dated—by conservative and liberal scholars of the New Testament alike—to around 70 CE (some conservatives date it earlier; very few liberals date it much later). Eventually we will consider the question of Mark's sources; for now we are interested in the brute fact that within forty years or so of Jesus's (alleged) life, we have a relatively full account of many of the things he said and did and of his death by crucifixion. (How much of it we can trust as historically accurate is another question, which we will deal with at a later stage.)

It is almost (but not quite) universally thought among New Testament scholars that both Matthew and Luke had access to the Gospel of Mark and used it for many of their stories of Jesus. This is almost certainly right, for reasons that don't need to concern us here but are readily available elsewhere in a wide range of publications on the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> Some mythicists—as we will see in chapter 7—have taken this critical conclusion to a faulty end to argue that all of our Gospel accounts (even John, which has very little to do with Mark) ultimately go back to Mark so that we have only one source, not multiple sources, for the life of Jesus. Nothing could be further from the truth. Matthew and Luke did indeed use Mark, but significant portions of both Gospels are not related in any way to Mark's accounts. And in these sections of their Gospels Matthew and Luke record extensive, independent traditions about Jesus's life, teachings, and death. So while in their shared material they do not



provide corroboration without collaboration, in their unique material they do. These Gospels were probably written ten or fifteen years after Mark, and so by the year 80 or 85 we have at least three independent accounts of Jesus's life (since a number of the accounts of both Matthew and Luke are independent of Mark), all within a generation or so of Jesus himself, assuming he lived.

But that is not all. There are still other independent Gospels. The Gospel of John is sometimes described as the "maverick Gospel" because it is so unlike the synoptic accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.<sup>2</sup> Prior to the narrative leading up to Jesus's death, most of the stories in John are found only in John, whereas John does not include most of the stories found in the other three Gospels. And when they do share the same stories, John tells them in such a different way that he does not appear to have received his accounts from any or all of them.<sup>3</sup> This is especially the case, of course, in those passages (the majority of them) in which John's stories do not overlap with those of the synoptics. It is equally true of John's account of Jesus's death. John is generally considered the latest of our canonical Gospels, dated 90–95 CE. So within the first century we have four independent accounts of Jesus's life and death (Matthew and Luke being independent in a good number of their corroborative stories; John possibly in all, and certainly in most, of his).

Gospels continued to be written after John, however, and some of these later accounts are also independent. Since the discovery in 1945 of the famous Gospel of Thomas, a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus, scholars have debated its date.<sup>4</sup> Even though some continue to place the Gospel in the first century, possibly prior to all or some of the canonical Gospels, more widely it is thought that in its current form Thomas comes to us from the early second century, say 110–20 CE. Moreover, while some scholars think that Thomas relies on Matthew, Mark, and Luke for some of its sayings—there are overlaps in about half of them—it is more commonly thought that Thomas is independent, that it got its information from other

sources. In either event, a good portion of Thomas, if not all of it, does not derive from the canonical texts. To that extent it is a fifth independent witness to the life and teachings of Jesus.

The same can be said of the Gospel of Peter, discovered in 1886. This is a fragmentary account of Jesus's trial, death, and resurrection.<sup>5</sup> Once again, even though there is some similarity in portions of the account to what is found in the canonical Gospels, it is widely thought that Peter preserves an independent narrative, drawn from other, noncanonical, sources. There are protracted debates among scholars about how much material from the life of Jesus this account originally contained. The fragment that survives begins in the middle of a sentence during the scene in which Pilate washes his hands of Jesus's blood (a scene found as well in the Gospel of Matthew, but in Peter it is narrated differently and probably comes from some different source). Some scholars think that the Gospel recounted only Jesus's Passion, but others, somewhat more convincingly, maintain that in fact it was a complete Gospel with a narrative of Jesus's ministry as well.<sup>6</sup> In either event, since it is in part or in whole different from the other Gospels, in these passages—and probably in its entirety, though this judgment does not affect my argument—this would be a sixth independent Gospel account of Jesus's life and death.

Another independent account occurs in the highly fragmentary text called Papyrus Egerton 2.<sup>7</sup> Here again it is difficult to know how extensive the full Gospel contained in these partial remains originally was; what survives are four episodes from the life of Jesus, one of which has no parallel in the Gospels of the New Testament or in any other known Gospel.<sup>8</sup> Here then, at least in the nonparalleled story, but probably in all four, is a seventh independent account.

There are, of course, lots of other Gospels, some forty or so, down to the early Middle Ages, that are not found in the New Testament. These include narratives of Jesus as a newborn and as a young child, where he uses his miraculous powers sometimes for



mischievous and sometimes for good; narratives of his public ministry; narratives of his death and resurrection. Almost all of these accounts, of course, are highly legendary, and with the passing of time they become less and less valuable as independent, historical sources. But if we restrict ourselves here, as we did earlier, to a hundred years after the traditional date of Jesus's death, we have at least seven independent accounts, some of them quite extensive. (It is important to recall: even if some of these sources are dependent on one another in some passages—for example, Matthew and Luke on Mark—they are completely independent in others, and to that extent they are independent witnesses.) And so it is quite wrong to argue that Mark is our only independent witness to Jesus as a historical person. The other six accounts are either completely or partially independent as well. For a historian these provide a wealth of materials to work with, quite unusual for accounts of anyone, literally anyone, from the ancient world.

And that is not nearly all. It may be easy to discount these seven witnesses on the grounds that they are not close to the time of the events they narrate (the earliest is four decades removed) and that they are heavily biased toward their subject matter. I will deal with the matter of bias soon. For now it is important to begin moving behind these independent accounts to see from where they found their information about Jesus.

### *Written Sources for the Surviving Witnesses*

WHAT IS SOMETIMES UNDERAPPRECIATED by mythicists who want to discount the value of the Gospels for establishing the historical existence of Jesus is that our surviving accounts, which began to be written some forty years after the traditional date of Jesus's death, were based on earlier written sources that no longer survive. But they obviously did exist at one time, and they just as obviously had

to predate the Gospels that we now have. The opening words of the Gospel of Luke bear repeating: "Whereas many have attempted to compile a narrative of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as the eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them over to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all these things closely from the beginning, to write for you an orderly account" (1:1-3).

As we will see more fully in a later context, one needs to approach everything that the Gospel writers say gingerly, with a critical eye. But there is no reason to suspect that Luke is lying here. He knew of "many" earlier authors who had compiled narratives about the subject matter that he himself is about to narrate, the life of Jesus. Since the mid-nineteenth century there has been a wide consensus among scholars concerning what these earlier sources were and what to call them. Again, I do not mean to say that every scholar agrees on every detail. On the contrary, scholars vigorously debate many specific issues. But in broad outline, which is what matters for my purposes here, there is considerable agreement, based on very thorough investigation of all the relevant issues by scholars who have devoted their entire lives to studying the question.

Virtually everyone agrees that Luke had as one of his predecessors the Gospel of Mark. This in itself is a matter of interest since Luke seems to imply, by what he says about the "many" who "attempted to compile a narrative" before him, that he did not consider these earlier attempts successful, that in fact they needed some correcting. That is why he himself (in contrast to them?) wants to provide "an orderly account." If that is Luke's implication, we can infer that he did not have a very high view of Mark's Gospel or at least that he thought it was inadequate for his purposes. And so he produced his own. But he certainly liked a good deal of Mark, as he copied many of Mark's stories in constructing his own Gospel, sometimes verbatim. But he had other sources as well.

One of them I have already mentioned, the no-longer-surviving

Gospel account that scholars have called Q.<sup>9</sup> The reason for thinking that this source was written prior to the synoptic Gospels, and that it was available to them, has to do with the literary relationship of Matthew, Mark, and Luke to one another. There is obviously some kind of relationship since they tell many of the same stories, often in the same sequence and frequently even in the same words. Someone is copying. Even though Matthew and Luke used Mark as one of their sources, they share a number of passages that are not found in Mark, such as the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes. The two later Gospels obviously did not get these passages from Mark since he didn't include them. And there are solid reasons for thinking that one of them did not derive these materials from a copy of the other. The best solution to the question of where they got these passages, then, is that they derived them from some other shared source.<sup>10</sup> The German scholars who most fully developed this theory called this other source the "sayings *Quelle*," the sayings source. The word *Quelle* is shortened in common parlance to Q. Q, then, is the material that Matthew and Luke have in common that is not found in Mark. And it derived from a written Gospel that no longer survives.

Q appears to have been made up predominantly of the sayings of Jesus, much like the later Gospel of Thomas. In the judgment of most scholars, Q did not include an account of Jesus's death and resurrection since Matthew and Luke do not share any stories of the Passion not also found in Mark. In my opinion it is very hard to know whether or not Q lacked a passion narrative. It would have been possible, for example, for Matthew to copy some of the stories of the Passion from Q and for Luke not to include those stories. If so, we would have no way of knowing whether the stories found only in Matthew—including some of the passages in the passion narrative—were in fact Q stories that Luke simply decided not to reproduce for reasons of his own.

Whether or not Q included an account of Jesus's death and resurrection, it appears that the source must date to a period no later

than Mark, and a good number of scholars have dated it earlier, say, to the 50s.

Luke used other sources as well, as he intimates. He doesn't tell us how many. A lot of stories are found only in Luke, however, such as Jesus's parables of the prodigal son and of the good Samaritan. Luke must have gotten these from somewhere else: scholars have long offered good reasons for thinking Luke didn't just make everything else all up. And so they call this other now-lost source *L*, for Luke's special source. *L* may have been one document; it may have been a large number of documents; or it may have included both written documents and oral traditions about Jesus (I will be talking about oral traditions soon).

Matthew as well is based on written sources. As pointed out, he used Mark, even more than Luke did, and Q. But he too includes many stories found only in his Gospel: the visit of the wise men to worship the infant Jesus, for example, and the parable of the sheep and the goats at the last judgment. These then must have come from Matthew's special source(s), which scholars have therefore labeled *M*. Like *L*, *M* may have been a single written document, a number of documents, or a combination of oral traditions and written sources.

When dealing only with Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the synoptic Gospels, then, we are talking not just about three books written late in the first century. We are talking about at least four sources: Mark, Q, M, and L, the latter two of which could easily have represented several, or even many, other written sources.

Many leading scholars of the Gospel of Mark think that it too was compiled not just of oral traditions that had been circulating down to the author's day but of various written sources. It is often thought that Mark used a passion narrative that had been written years earlier in which the episodes of Jesus's arrest, trials, death, and resurrection were already put into written form. The most recent and most authoritative two-volume commentary on Mark, by Joel

Marcus, contends that Mark used a source, or a number of sources, for his account of Jesus's words and deeds prior to the passion narrative.<sup>11</sup> If this is right, then not just our later synoptics but even our earliest surviving Gospel was based on multiple sources.

The Gospel of John too is widely thought to have been based on written sources that no longer survive. As I have indicated, the reason for thinking that John does not rely on the synoptics is that whenever they tell the same story, it is in radically different ways and never in the same words. But scholars have long suspected that John had at his disposal an earlier written account of Jesus's miracles (the so-called Signs Source), at least two accounts of Jesus's long speeches (the Discourse Sources), and possibly another passion source as well.<sup>12</sup>

I have been speaking so far only of the four canonical Gospels. It cannot be determined with absolute certainty whether any of the later Gospels—say the Gospel of Peter or the Gospel of Thomas—go back to written sources although in both of these cases some scholars have mounted strenuous arguments that they do. The most plausible case has been made for the Gospel of Thomas by April De-Conick, who makes a strong argument, based on a careful literary study of the text, that the core of the surviving Gospel of Thomas goes back to a Gospel in circulation prior to 50 CE.<sup>13</sup>

All of these written sources I have mentioned are earlier than the surviving Gospels; they all corroborate many of the key things said of Jesus in the Gospels; and most important they are all independent of one another. Let me stress the latter point. We cannot think of the early Christian Gospels as going back to a solitary source that “invented” the idea that there was a man Jesus. The view that Jesus existed is found in multiple independent sources that must have been circulating throughout various regions of the Roman Empire in the decades before the Gospels that survive were produced. Where would the solitary source that “invented” Jesus be? Within a couple of decades of the traditional date of his death, we have numerous ac-

counts of his life found in a broad geographical span. In addition to Mark, we have Q, M (which is possibly made of multiple sources), L (also possibly multiple sources), two or more passion narratives, a signs source, two discourse sources, the kernel (or original) Gospel behind the Gospel of Thomas, and possibly others. And these are just the ones we know about, that we can reasonably infer from the scant literary remains that survive from the early years of the Christian church. No one knows how many there actually were. Luke says there were “many” of them, and he may well have been right. And once again, this is not the end of the story.

### *The Oral Traditions About Jesus*

THE FURTHER QUESTION THAT needs to be asked is where all these Gospel sources—Mark, Q, M, L, sayings source, passion narratives, proto-Thomas and so on—got their stories. This is a question that has occupied New Testament scholars for nearly a hundred years. In the early part of the twentieth century there was a group of scholars in Germany who developed a method of studying the Gospels to address this question. The method has traditionally been called, in English, “form criticism.”

#### **Form Criticism and Oral Traditions About Jesus**

The original impetus for the form-critical approach to the Gospels came from a well-known New Testament scholar named Karl Ludwig Schmidt; the approach was developed, in different ways, by the even more famous Martin Dibelius and especially by the most famous of them all, Rudolf Bultmann, arguably the greatest and most influential scholar of the New Testament in the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup>

These form critics were principally interested in knowing what happened while the stories about Jesus were being transmitted orally.

Their assumption was that after Jesus's life, when Christian missionaries founded churches throughout the Mediterranean, stories about Jesus were told and retold in various kinds of situations that Christians found themselves in. These scholars were called "form" critics because they wanted to know how different kinds of stories came to assume the shape or form they have. Why is it that so many miracle stories seem to follow the same basic pattern? A person comes up to Jesus, his or her problem (or illness) is described, there is a brief interchange with Jesus, Jesus agrees to heal the person, he does so by a word or by a touch, and all the crowds marvel. Every miracle story seems to have the same elements.

Or take the controversy stories. Jesus or his disciples do something that offends the Jewish leaders; the leaders protest; Jesus has a conversation with them; and the story ends with Jesus delivering a withering one-liner that shows that he gets the better of them. Time after time, same form.

The form critics were invested in two issues: what was the "situation in life" (German: *Sitz im Leben*) in which different kinds of stories about Jesus were told? And how did the various kinds of stories assume their various forms (so that there is one kind of form for miracle stories, another for controversy stories, and so on)? These critics did not agree among themselves on the specifics of their views. But their overarching understanding of the oral traditions about Jesus was fairly consistent. The stories about Jesus came to be shaped in the process of telling and retelling, as they assumed their characteristic forms. This means that the stories were changed, sometimes radically, when they were retold, and thus formed over the years. And some stories were made up in the process, developed to speak to the needs the Christian communities and to address the situations they found themselves in. If a community, for example, was facing opposition from the Jews of the local synagogue because they did not observe the Sabbath laws strictly, they might come up

with a story in which Jesus himself was confronted by his Jewish opponents over the same issue. And watch! Jesus outshines his opponents by delivering a devastating rejoinder to their objections.

So far as I know, there are no longer any form critics among us who agree with the precise formulations of Schmidt, Dibelius, and Bultmann, the pioneers in this field. But the most basic idea behind their approach is still widely shared, namely, that before the Gospels came to be written, and before the sources that lie behind the Gospels were themselves produced, oral traditions about Jesus circulated, and as the stories about Jesus were told and retold, they changed their form and some stories came to be made up. I have already intimated that this was the case when speaking about the sources M and L, when I conceded that these may not have simply been written documents but entirely or partly oral traditions. This appears to be true of all of our sources for the historical Jesus. They are all based on oral traditions, and this has significant implications for our quest to determine if Jesus actually lived.

The reality appears to be that there were stories being told about Jesus for a very long time not just before our surviving Gospels but even before their sources had been produced. If scholars are right that Q and the core of the Gospel of Thomas, to pick just two examples, do date from the 50s, and that they were based on oral traditions that had already been in circulation for a long time, how far back do these traditions go? Anyone who thinks that Jesus existed has no problem answering the question: they ultimately go back to things Jesus said and did while he was engaged in his public ministry, say, around the year 29 or 30. But even anyone who just wonders if Jesus existed has to assume that there were stories being told about him in the 30s and 40s. For one thing, as we will see in the next chapter, how else would someone like Paul have known to persecute the Christians, if Christians didn't exist? And how could they exist if they didn't know anything about Jesus?

Mythicists often reply that the Christians known to the persecutor Paul before he was himself a Christian—as well as the later Christians in the churches he founded after converting—did not know anything about a historical Jesus but worshipped the divine Christ, who was based on pagan myths about dying and rising gods. We will see the flaws in this argument later, and we will also note that Paul does in fact talk about Jesus as a human being who delivered important teachings and was crucified at the instigation of Jewish leaders in Palestine. But even if we leave Paul out of the equation, there is still more than ample reason for thinking that stories about Jesus circulated widely throughout the major urban areas of the Mediterranean from a very early time. Otherwise it is impossible to explain all the written sources that emerged in the middle and end of the first century. These sources are independent of one another. They were written in different places. They contain strikingly different accounts of what Jesus said and did. Yet many of them, independent though they be, agree on many of the basic aspects of Jesus's life and death: he was a Jewish teacher of Palestine who was crucified on order of Pontius Pilate, for example. Where did all these sources come from? They could not have been dreamed up independently of one another by Christians all over the map because they agree on too many of the fundamentals. Instead, they are based on oral traditions. These oral traditions had been in circulation for a very long time before they came to be written down. This is not pure speculation. Aspects of the surviving stories of Jesus found in the written Gospels, themselves based on earlier written accounts, show clearly both that they were based on oral traditions (as Luke himself indicates) and that these traditions had been around for a very long time—in fact, that they had been around since Christianity first emerged as a religion in Palestine itself.

### The Aramaic Origins of (Some) Oral Traditions

Here is one piece of evidence. Even though the Gospels were written in Greek, as were their sources, some of the surviving traditions were originally spoken in Aramaic, the language of Palestine. These traditions date at least to the early years of the Christian movement, before it expanded into the Greek-speaking lands elsewhere in the Mediterranean.

The evidence, in part, is this. In several passages in the Gospels a key word or phrase has been left in the original Aramaic, and the author, writing in Greek, has had to translate it for his audience. This happens, for example, in the intriguing account of Mark 5, where Jesus raises a young girl from the dead. The story begins by describing how the girl's father, Jairus, comes to Jesus and begs him to heal his very sick daughter. Jesus agrees to come, but he gets interrupted on the way. Before he can get to the girl, the household slaves appear and tell Jairus that it is too late, the girl has died. Jesus is not to be deterred, however. He goes to the house, comes into the girl's room, takes her lifeless hand, and says to her, "Talitha cumi." That is not a Greek phrase. It is Aramaic. And so Mark translates it for his readers: "It means, 'Little girl, I say to you, arise.'" She does so, to much rejoicing.

This is a story that was originally told in Aramaic, but when it was translated into Greek, the translator left the key line in the original language so that it required translation for those who were not bilingual. This might seem odd to readers, but it is not. It happens a lot in multilingual societies even today. In graduate school I had a professor who had spent a good deal of time in Germany and was fluent in the language. We too were supposed to know German in order to do our research. But most of us had learned only to read German, not speak it. My professor didn't appreciate our shortcomings, however. He would often tell a joke (in English) about something that had

happened to him in Germany, but when he got to the punch line, he would revert to German. It was much funnier in the original, and we were supposed to understand. We would laugh heartily on cue, having no idea what he had just said but not wanting him to know.

That sort of thing happens in the Gospels. The punch line is left in Aramaic. And so, for example, at the end of Mark's Gospel, when Jesus is in his final moments on the cross, he cries out to God in Aramaic, "Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani" (Mark 15:34), and Mark then explains what it means in Greek: "which means, 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"

Mark is not the only Gospel where this occurs. The Gospel of John, independently of Mark or the others, includes a number of Aramaic words. In John 1:35-52 alone there are three instances. Two disciples have learned from John the Baptist that Jesus is the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world," and they want to meet him for themselves. They approach him and say to him "Rabbi," an Aramaic word that the author translates, "which means, 'Teacher.'" When Andrew, one of the two, becomes convinced of who Jesus is, he runs off to his brother Simon and tells him, "We have found the messiah." *Messiah* is the Aramaic word; John translates it: "which means Christ." Jesus then speaks with Simon and tells him, "You will be called Cephas." Once again, it is an Aramaic word, which John translates, "which means Peter."

There is very little dispute that some of the Gospel stories originated in Aramaic and that therefore they go back to the earliest stages of the Christian movement in Palestine. This is clearly shown, as well, by a second kind of evidence. Some Gospel passages do not contain Aramaic words, but they make sense only when their Greek words and phrases are translated back into Aramaic. This means they originated as Aramaic traditions that only later came to be transmitted in Greek.

One of the clearest examples is in Mark 2:27-28, where Jesus

delivers a withering two-liner to silence his critics. His disciples have been walking through the grain fields on the Sabbath, and since they were hungry they started eating some of the grain. The Pharisees see this (the Pharisees seem to be *everywhere* in Mark) and protest that the disciples are breaking the Sabbath. For Jesus, though, as Mark portrays him, human needs (in this case hunger) take priority over strict interpretations about the Sabbath. And so he informs his opponents, "Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

That last line doesn't really make sense in the context, for two reasons. For one thing, even if Jesus, who is the Son of Man in Mark's Gospel, is the Lord (master) of the Sabbath, what has that to do with his critics' objection? They are objecting not to what he has done but to what his disciples have done. Even more, the last line doesn't follow at all from the first line. I sometimes tell my students that when they see the word *therefore* in a passage, they should ask, what is the *therefore* there for? The *therefore* in this case doesn't make sense. Just because Sabbath was made for humans and not the other way around, what does that have to do with Jesus being the Lord of the Sabbath?

Both problems are solved once you translate the passage back into Aramaic. As it turns out, Aramaic uses the same word for *man* and for *son of man*. It is the word *barnash*. And so the two-liner originally said, "Sabbath was made for *barnash*, not *barnash* for the Sabbath. Therefore *barnash* is lord of the Sabbath." Now the *therefore* makes sense. The reason that humans (*barnash*) are the lords of the Sabbath is because of what he just said: Sabbath was made for humans, not the other way around. Moreover, now the last line makes sense in the context of the story. The disciples (the *barnash*) are masters of the Sabbath, which was created for their sake.

Originally, then, this story circulated in Aramaic. When it came to be translated into Greek, the translator decided to make it not just



about the disciples but also about Jesus. And so he translated *barnash* in two different ways, twice to refer to “humans” in general (“man”) and once to refer to Jesus in particular (“the Son of Man),” creating a problem in the Greek that was not there in the Aramaic. The story stems from an Aramaic-speaking community of Christians located in Palestine during the early years of the Jesus movement.

I might add that this business of translating the Greek of the Gospels back into Aramaic has other significant payoffs for those interested in knowing what Jesus really said and did, a matter I will address later in the book once I’ve established more fully that Jesus almost certainly existed. As it turns out, some sayings of Jesus cannot be translated into Aramaic. Jesus could not have said these things since he spoke Aramaic. Let me give one rather famous example.

In John 3 comes the well-known story of Jesus’s conversation with the rabbi Nicodemus. Jesus is in Jerusalem, and Nicodemus comes up to him and tells him that he knows he is a teacher from God. Jesus tells him: “Unless you are born *anōthen* you will not be able to enter into the kingdom of God.” I have left the key word here in Greek. *Anōthen* has two meanings. It can mean “a second time,” and it can mean “from above.” And so this is the passage in which Jesus instructs his follower that he has to be “born again.” At least that’s how Nicodemus understands the word because he is shocked and asks how he can possibly crawl back into his mother’s womb and be born a second time. But in fact Jesus does not mean “a second time”; he means “from above.” This is what the word *anōthen* means in the other instances it is used in John’s Gospel, and it is what Jesus means by it here, as he then corrects Nicodemus and launches into a lengthy explanation that a person needs to be born from the Spirit who comes from above (the upper realm) if he wants to enter into the kingdom of God.

This is a conversation, in other words, that is rooted in the double meaning of the key word *anōthen*, which Nicodemus under-

stands in one way but Jesus means in another. Without that double entendre, the conversation does not flow and does not quite make sense. But here’s the key point. Even though the Greek word *anōthen* has this double meaning, the double meaning cannot be replicated in Aramaic. The Aramaic word for “from above” does not mean “a second time,” and the word for “a second time” does not mean “from above.” In other words, this conversation could not have been carried out in Aramaic. But Aramaic was the language Jesus spoke—and the language he certainly would have been speaking in Jerusalem with a leading Jewish rabbi (even if he were able to speak another language, which is doubtful). In other words, the conversation could not have happened as it is reported.

But other traditions in the Gospels certainly do go back to Aramaic originals. This is highly significant. Aramaic Jews in Jesus’s native land were telling stories about him well before Paul wrote his letters in the 50s of the Common Era, arguably from within a few years of the traditional date of his death. One reason this matters is that most mythicists want to argue that the since the epistles of the New Testament were written earlier than the Gospels, and since the epistles, especially those of Paul, say little or nothing (it is argued) about the historical Jesus but instead speak only of the mythical Christ who like the pagan gods (again, it is argued) died and rose from the dead, then the earliest records of Christianity do not support the idea that Jesus actually lived; he was only a mythical concept. I will argue that this perspective is wrong on all counts. One major question, as we will see, is whether there was a common mythology of dying and rising gods. Moreover, it stretches credulity to think that such a mythology, if it existed, played any role in the world of Jesus’s earliest Jewish followers in Palestine. In addition, there is good reason for thinking that Paul knew full well that there was a historical Jesus, whom he spoke of and actually quoted. Paul did think that this historical person was exalted to the level of divin-



ity, but to Paul he was not a dying-rising god like those discussed among the pagans, if in fact there was such a pagan view at all.

### *Conclusion*

THE EVIDENCE I OFFER in this chapter is not all there is. It is simply one part of the evidence. But it is easy to see why even on its own it has proved to be so convincing to almost every scholar who ever thought about the issue. We are not dealing with just one Gospel that reports what Jesus said and did from sometime near the end of the first century. We have a number of surviving Gospels—I named seven—that are either completely independent of one another or independent in a large number of their traditions. These all attest to the existence of Jesus. Moreover, these independent witnesses corroborate many of the same basic sets of data—for example, that Jesus not only lived but that he was a Jewish teacher who was crucified by the Romans at the instigation of Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. Even more important, these independent witnesses are based on a relatively large number of written predecessors, Gospels that no longer survive but that almost certainly once existed. Some of these earlier written texts have been shown beyond reasonable doubt to date back at least to the 50s of the Common Era. They derive from locations around the Mediterranean and again are independent of one another. If historians prefer lots of witnesses that corroborate one another's claims without showing evidence of collaboration, we have that in relative abundance in the written sources that attest to the existence of the historical Jesus.

But most significant of all, each of these numerous Gospel texts is based on oral traditions that had been in circulation for years among communities of Christians in different parts of the world, all of them attesting to the existence of Jesus. And some of these traditions must have originated in Aramaic-speaking communities

of Palestine, probably in the 30s CE, within several years at least of the traditional date of the death of Jesus. The vast network of these traditions, numerically significant, widely dispersed, and largely independent of one another, makes it almost certain that whatever one wants to say about Jesus, at the very least one must say that he existed. Moreover, as we will now see, there is yet more evidence.