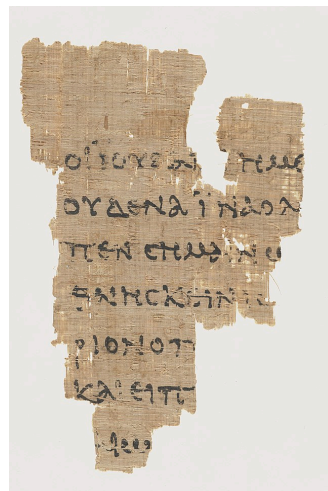


## The Land of Jesus' Time



The P52 Fragment, dating from about 125 AD contains the words from John 18:31-33



# ANCIENT WORLDS *of the* BIBLE

Study Guide 5

by Pastor Daniel McFeeters

## A Man Named Jesus

In 1909, Arthur Drews launched an intellectual assault on Christian origins with *The Christ Myth*, claiming the apostle Paul knew nothing of a historical Jesus and that the Gospels were Gnostic fantasies. He argued that Paul's letters were mystic forgeries from the second century and that even the early Church showed little concern for historical fact.

But Drews' sweeping claims collapse under the weight of historical evidence.

Within a few decades of Jesus' death, Christians were already numerous enough in Rome to be blamed by Nero for the great fire of AD 64. The Roman historian Tacitus, no Christian sympathizer, records that "Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius." This firmly places Jesus in history, under a named Roman official. Tacitus adds that the "pernicious superstition" about Jesus, though repressed, "broke out again"—first in Judea, then Rome.

The Pilate Stone, discovered in 1961 in Caesarea Maritima, corroborates the existence of Pontius Pilate, providing archaeological confirmation of the very governor Tacitus and the Gospels name.

Even the Jewish historian Josephus, writing near the end of the first century, mentions Jesus twice. Though parts of his description were likely embellished by later Christians, most scholars agree he acknowledged Jesus as a crucified teacher with a growing following.

And what of Paul? Despite Drews' dismissals, Paul repeatedly refers to Jesus as a real, crucified man from Israel, descended from David (Romans 1:3), who had brothers (Galatians 1:19) and was executed (1 Corinthians 2:8).

## Questions for Reflection & Discussion

As Bart Ehrman, an agnostic scholar, puts it: “Jesus existed, and those vocal persons who deny it do so not because they have considered the evidence with the dispassion required of the historian, but because they have some other agenda...”

Or as N.T. Wright quips: “It would be easier... to believe that Tiberius Caesar was a figment of the imagination.”

History affirms what faith proclaims: Jesus of Nazareth lived, taught, and died—and left behind a movement the world could not silence.

### Evidence Adds Up

Critics argue that the Gospels are contradictory myths, yet their very differences point toward authenticity. The four Gospel accounts—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—offer varied perspectives on Jesus’ life, not a harmonized script. In ancient historiography, this diversity is a strength. Each author writes with a unique voice and audience, yet all converge on the central claims: Jesus taught with authority, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and rose again.

The P52 fragment, the earliest known manuscript of the New Testament, contains a portion of John’s Gospel and dates to around 125 AD—far too early for the entire narrative to have developed as pure legend. This fragment shows that John’s Gospel, often dismissed as late and theological, was already in circulation within living memory of eyewitnesses.

The Nag Hammadi Codices, discovered in 1945, do contain Gnostic texts with radically different portraits of Jesus—but their very divergence from the canonical Gospels underscores that by contrast, the early church preserved a coherent tradition rooted in a real historical figure.

Then there’s the resurrection. The Gospels report that women were the first witnesses—a detail that would have been scandalous in a patriarchal society where women’s testimony lacked legal weight. Fabricated accounts are unlikely to include such culturally embarrassing details. Add to this the cowardice of the disciples turning to bold proclamation overnight, and we face an enigma: something happened that transformed their lives.

History testifies to the reality of the Gospel story. Yet the Bible asks more—not simply acknowledging the historical truth but, by faith, entering into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

**SCRIPTURE:** *“For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures...”*

*1 Corinthians 15:3-4*

**REFLECTION:** Historical and textual evidence overwhelmingly supports the fact that Jesus lived and died, and that the account of His resurrection sparked a global movement. How does this evidence strengthen your faith in the gospel account? Why might it matter that our faith is rooted in history, not in myth?

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**EXPERIENCE:** Think of a time when you questioned the foundation of your faith. What helped restore your trust—or what kind of evidence would have?

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**EXPERIENCE:** Have you ever shared your faith with someone who doubted Jesus even existed? What was your response?

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**QUESTION:** If the resurrection was invented, why would the early writers include inconvenient details like women being the first witnesses or the disciples’ fear and failure?

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**RESPONSE:** With so much evidence pointing to a real Jesus, we are invited not to blind belief but to informed faith. Will you choose to believe in Jesus and accept His claims on your life?

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