

# Vridar

Musings on biblical studies, politics, religion, ethics,  
human nature, tidbits from science

2020-07-02

## Prof. “Errorman” and the non-Christian sources — Hermann Detering’s Review of Bart Ehrman’s *Did Jesus Exist?*



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by Neil Godfrey [\[Edit this post\]](#)

**Filed under:** [Uncategorized](#)

The following translation of Hermann Detering’s review of Bart Ehrman’s *Did Jesus Exist?* has been sent to me and I am thrilled to be able to make it available on this blog. It is over 7000 words, too long, I think, for a blog post, so I am posting here just the first part of the review. The rest to follow. I have modified the translation in a few places to make it flow easier and to iron out some obscurities. I have also replaced the English translation of Detering’s German language quotes of Ehrman’s words with the original English versions. All hyperlinks and notes in the “\*see also” inset box are my additions, as also are the images. Endnotes are Detering’s, of course, and I have relocated these in other inset boxes, too.

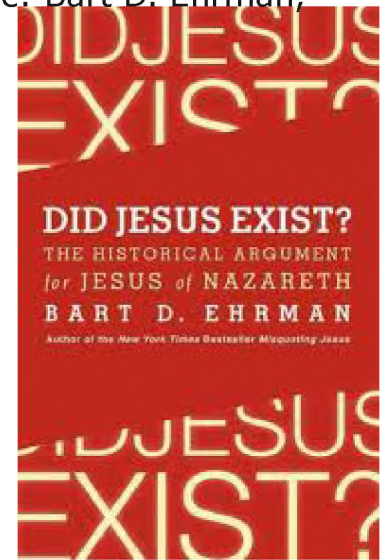


Hermann Detering (1953-2018)

## Prof. “Errorman” and the non-Christian sources

### 1. Bart Ehrman’s book, *Did Jesus exist?*

The introduction to the book ushers us into the following scene: Bart D. Ehrman, PhD, Distinguished Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, actually wanted to write a completely different, more important work, namely about how a Jewish end-time prophet named Jesus became a divine being or God. But then he was startled by some emails. He suddenly found himself taken up by a scene that was apparently unknown to him until then: Mythicists who appealed to his authority for their claim that there had been no Jesus! Reason enough for a conscientious “New Testament scholar” to take a closer look at the matter.



Although Ehrman had by then read “thousands of books about Jesus in English and other European languages, the New Testament and early Christianity,” he was “like most colleagues completely unaware of the extent of sceptical literature [on the subject]” (p. 2). For a professor of theology and biblical scholar who should be up to date and in daily conversation with his students, this long phase of ignorance is astonishing enough, especially since the question of the historical existence of the man from Nazareth must have occurred again and again in the mass of Jesus literature he read. For example, in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* by Albert Schweitzer, often quoted by Ehrman, in which this very subject is dealt with on many hundreds of book pages. This book and others should at least have curbed Ehrman’s boundless surprise and shown him that the question “Did Jesus exist?” is not an entirely fanciful one, and that New Testament research has been periodically occupied with it. Moreover, it is not just since yesterday that the question has been on the agenda of those American “humanists” who read his books and with whom, according to his own statement, he has been in contact for a long time.

However, not everything Ehrman writes should be taken quite so literally. The reader of his book, which is written in a casual conversational tone, has to get used to this and other contradictions. The “casual conversational tone” is not meant as hidden criticism: one should be grateful for the good readability, especially since it saves German readers with “mediocre” English skills a lot of reference work in the dictionary. The fact that the casual presentation and simple language always turns into pure superficiality is, of course, the other side of the coin that we still have to get to grips with.

Instead of immediately shining with new perspectives and objective examination of the mythicists’ theses, Ehrman deals with the mythicists and – again and again with pleasure – with himself. Ehrman about Ehrman – a broad field... The professor strives for clear demarcation:

*There* — the “breed” (Ehrman in an interview\*) of mythicists, a shadowy group that shies away from the light,

\* see also:

concocting dark conspiracy theories in the worldwide channels of the network. With a few exceptions, neither academic degrees nor titles legitimize them to make a meaningful contribution to the difficult historical and religious-historical problems with which Professor Ehrman and his peers have struggled for decades at the forefront of science. In addition, loud, brash and aggressive in appearance, enemies of religion, atheists, and thrown from cliff to cliff by half-knowledge, stupidity and error. Avanti Dilettanti!

*Here* — the “New Testament scholar”, in the full splendour of his academic titles, honours and prizes, among his numerous students, whose questions he answers conscientiously and competently, proven author of numerous non-fiction books, who as such receives tons of e-mails (“Like most authors, I receive tons of e-mail”, p. 94) (apropos, how do you actually weigh e-mails?). A textbook example of biblical scholarship and theology as he is – imbued with his subject matter, which includes reading the Bible by him daily in the original Greek or Hebrew; who has been studying and teaching for over 35 years and “I don’t plan to stop any time soon” (p. 36). Yes, why should he? Does anyone want to stop him? The mythicists for instance?!

***these deniers of Jesus are at the same time denouncers of religion – a breed of human now very much in vogue.*** Ehrman, Bart D. 2012. “Did Jesus Exist?” *HuffPost* (blog). March 20, 2012. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/did-jesus-exist\\_b\\_1349544](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/did-jesus-exist_b_1349544).

***Richard Carrier is one of the new breed of mythicists.*** Ehrman, Bart. 2012. “Fuller Reply to Richard Carrier.” *The Bart Ehrman Blog* (blog). April 25, 2012. <https://ehrmanblog.org/fuller-reply-to-richard-carrier/>.

***this rare breed . . . comprises a growing cadre . . .*** Ehrman, Bart. 2012. “Did Jesus Exist? The Birth of a Divine Man.” *The Bart Ehrman Blog* (blog). May 11, 2012. <https://ehrmanblog.org/did-jesus-exist-the-birth-of-a-divine-man-for-members/>.

And yet no apologist! Ehrman wants to be understood as a pure historian, who is only interested in historical evidence. “I am not a Christian, and I have no interest in promoting any Christian cause or agenda. I am an agnostic with atheist leanings and my life and views would be approximately the same whether or not Jesus existed... The answer to the question about the historical existence of Jesus will not make me more or less happy, content, hopeful, likable, rich, famous, or immortal” (p. 5f).

With these words Ehrman sets aside all suspicions that could possibly arise in answering the question “Did Jesus exist?” — all bias is set aside. No, this man is not only competent, not out for sensation or filthy mammon, like most book-writing deniers of the historical Jesus, but completely unbiased,

[1] “Jesus has existed”, 2x, “Jesus has existed”, p. 6, “he certainly lived”, p. 37, 2x, “has certainly existed”, p. 173, “had a real historical existence”, p.

a selfless fighter for historical truth. This is the point of view that the book, with its suggestively repeated thesis "Jesus certainly / actually / really lived!", should be understood [1]. "From a dispassionate point of view, there was a Jesus of Nazareth" (p. 7)

But wait! Wasn't there a recent interview where Ehrman postulated: "Jesus' teachings of love, and mercy and forgiveness, I think, really should dominate our lives, on the personal level, I agree with many of the ethical teachings of Jesus and I try to model my life on them, even though I don't agree with the apocalyptic framework in which they were put." [2]

92, "was a real man ... a man of flesh and blood", p. 117, "really lived", p. 177, "he lived", p. 185, cf. p. 204, and finally the final sentence: "Jesus existed, whether we like it or not", p. 339

[2] Bart D. Ehrman re: Did Jesus exist on NPR's All Things Considered.

<https://www.npr.org/transcripts/149462376?t=1592237446871>

But for now, let's take it from Ehrman that he approaches the matter without prejudice, even if the tone he takes in his book and in previous interviews against the mythicists whom he compares with Holocaust deniers (p. 5) sounds a little too irritable and rude by academic standards. The intention to examine without prejudice the question of the existence of the man from Nazareth deserves respect in any case. Respect for the other's opinion and good academic manners should, however, also dictate that good will in the search for historical truth should not be denied to the other side. What counts in the end anyway is not only the good intentions or the respective ideological background, but the better historical arguments.

It is of course correct that there are also quite big differences in quality among the publications of the "Christ-mythicist". It is clear that the arguments with which Acharya S. D. M. Murdock, for instance, presents her theses in books like *The Christ Conspiracy: The Greatest Story Ever Sold* (!) etc., are not always able to convince a professional biblical scholar. Also, the *Jesus Mysteries* of the author duo Freke-Gandy contain historically highly problematic and partly quite outdated theses. A number of errors and sloppiness in both books cannot be overlooked. And yet, of course, it would be completely absurd to generalize the picture that emerges from them and apply it to all "mythicists" or radical critics. By this method, Ehrman could be lumped together with the author of the Da Vinci Code, since both authors are obviously convinced of the historical existence of the man from Nazareth. Mythicists could now claim that the thesis that Jesus existed is absurd, if only because Dan Brown and other bestselling authors continually presuppose his existence in their books. Logic according to Ehrman's sense...

The accusation repeatedly made by Ehrman in interviews against Timothy Freke and other mythicists that they deny the existence of Jesus only to sell books is disingenuous. As a man of honor, Ehrman should rather be thankful to them for the fact that their books gave him the opportunity to sell a public bestseller himself,



even with his own trailer (see his [Facebook page](#)). If he himself were only interested in the unselfish dissemination of his ideas, he could put his book as a pdf file on his website for free.



2016 Facebook page, "New York Times bestselling author Bart D...." The [current Facebook page](#) has the same trailer.

As for the claim that "mythicists" generally do not possess a theological or other doctoral or equivalent title that would legitimize them for the work, Ehrman himself knows and names exceptions, e.g. Robert M. Price, Richard Carrier or Tom Harpur. He could have included Darrell Doughty, whom I admired so much and who unfortunately died all too soon. With Google's help and a quick glance across the pond, the author of these lines might have come to his mind, who since his dissertation in 1992, *The Fabricated Paul*, 1995, or *The False Witnesses*, 2011, as well as in many articles on his website and elsewhere, has dealt with this topic and has taken a radically critical position. Worse, however, Ehrman also completely ignores the representatives of the so-called Dutch Radical Critique, whom he should have known from Albert Schweitzer's book: theologians with doctorates, practising pastors, university lecturers – and most of them deniers of the historicity of Jesus. The last of them, G.A. van den Bergh van Eysinga, "Grand Master of Radical Criticism", died in 1957.

Well, that too was a while ago. And yet a glance at these honorable gentlemen who by definition must be uneducated dilettantes and fanatical atheists could have cured Professor Ehrman of his obsession with denying the historical Jesus. Ignoring these radical critics of the New Testament does not bear good testimony to the research work of the American professor. As a professional biblical scholar, Ehrman should not spend too much time dealing with easy opponents like Acharya or Freke-Gandy, but – so much self-confidence is needed! – to fight against equal sparring partners.

Apparently Ehrman wants to deduce already from the mere marginal existence or non-existence of mythicists

at the biblical science / theological faculties that their theories are nonsense. But since when is the question of (historical) truth decided by majorities? Have not all new theories once started small and often had to face bitter resistance and academic conceit? And is the thing with the unhistorical Jesus really so abstruse that it does not find academic teachers who take pity on it? Obviously not, because how else – according to Ehrman’s own statement – could it infect more and more people, so that scepticism threatens to become more and more a phenomenon of our culture? Is the problem not rather that candidates for the theological chair – apart from the scientific qualification – must still today fulfil certain theological and ideological basic conditions and prerequisites? The case of [Lüdemann](#) was, at least for German theologians, a quite revealing eye-opener. One could also learn from the case of [Mohammed Kalisch](#). Against this background Ehrman’s omissions must appear either completely thoughtless or cynical.



*Kalisch*



*Lüdemann*

But after this banter, to which Ehrman’s strange fixation on silly accessories such as doctorates and other academic vanities seduces again and again, let us turn to the real issue, i.e. the arguments for and against. It is astonishing enough that Ehrman needs about 370 pages to refute a thesis which he considers to be scientifically absolutely unfounded. After his interviews and introductory remarks, one would expect that a few sentences or psychiatric reports would have sufficed.

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## 2. Pliny the Younger

Ehrman goes to great lengths to introduce us to the sources which, in his opinion, reliably attest to the existence of a historical Jesus. To quote Horace, “Parturiunt montes, nascetur ridiculus mus.” Before the curtain finally opens and reveals a considerable number of Jesus witnesses to the curious gaze of the reader, a series of preliminaries and fundamental methodological considerations must be made. What we learn in the relevant chapters about the value and worthlessness of historical sources is indeed informative, but will have little new to offer to all those who have attended a historical proseminar once in their lives. Be that as it may, Ehrman advocates good and healthy principles, such as that multiple testimonies please the heart of the historian, or that “disinterested” and independent sources deserve preference over others, etc. (p. 41) – one only wished that he himself would also give them due consideration in the later sections. In a section on sources that we do not have, he also admits that we do not have authentic illustrations of Jesus, nor scriptures written by himself, nor eyewitness accounts (p. 49).

*The mountains are in labor, a ridiculous mouse will be brought forth. (Horace, [The Art of Poetry](#))*

This is all well and good but could be further elaborated when applied to specific cases, which Ehrman certainly does not feel is necessary. Ehrman could have taken the trouble to make clear to the reader the full extent of the difficulties in which the defenders of Jesus' historicity find themselves when they refer to external witnesses. For example, it is correct that no authentic images of Jesus have been handed down. But far more interesting is that the type of Jesus in the portraits we possess almost completely resembles the portraits of other late antique healers, so that archaeologists even today find it difficult to distinguish Jesus from, for example, Attis or Orpheus. With regard to the question of possible models for the Christian Saviour, this should not be an unimportant observation. As I already mentioned in my book *Falsche Zeugen: Außerchristliche Jesuszeugnisse auf dem Prüfstand* (only in German; *False Witnesses. Non-Christian Testimonies Tested*, 2011 (Alibri)), I have already shown that from the 1st to the middle of the 2nd century no archaeological evidence for the existence of Christianity can be found at all. For [Graydon F. Snyder](#), the Christian faith as a cultural-historical phenomenon only dates from around 180 AD according to the archaeologists. Even that reference to Roman catacombs and catacomb art, with which one used to love to argue in former times, is no longer possible. The archaeologists, Larry W. Hurtado points out, who formerly dated the whole of Christian catacomb art with confidence to the 2nd century, now suspect it probably only originated in the third century [3].

Speculations about a supposed "[House of Peter](#)" are based on dubious speculations and are only significant in so far as they contribute, not significantly, to the revival and promotion of the tourism industry in the "Holy Land". [4]

Moreover, it's a pity that Ehrman goes far too little into detail when asked about the "sources we don't have". For example, there is no reference to the so-called [Remsburg List](#), which can impressively demonstrate to anyone who wants to delve a little deeper

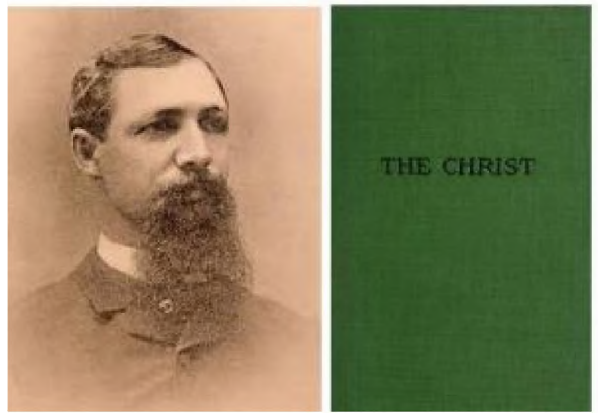
[3] Hurtado 2007, pp. 2-3: "If correctly dated to about 200, the Aberkio inscription (found in Hierapolis) remains perhaps our oldest identifiable Christian inscription. Although in some older publications one finds certain references to the catacombs and catacomb art of the second century, it is now generally accepted among experts that these too should probably be dated to sometime in the third century".

[4] Theißen, Merz 1997, p. 160f. All that can be said about it is that it is possibly the site visited by the Spanish pilgrim Egeria sometime between 381-384 AD, which has been given as the house of Peter since Constantinian times. Everything else is conjecture and belongs at best in a travel guide, but not in a serious scientific work.

Vridar note: see [3] [Hurtado 2006](#) and [4] [Theissen & Merz 1998](#)



into the position of the mythicists how ignorance about the man from Nazareth and the Christian community reaches deep into the second century. Even if it can be objected that the ancient sources also keep silent about many other people, it makes a difference about whom they keep silent. After all, according to the Gospels, the effect that Jesus had during his brief activity in Galilee and Jerusalem was so overwhelming that even non-Christian contemporaries who were religiously open-minded, such as Philo



*John Remsburg*

or Plutarch, could hardly overlook it. There is constant talk of the “great crowd” that accompanies Jesus in his ministry and witnesses his miracles and healings, whose fame spread throughout Galilee (Mark 1:28) and beyond (Matthew 4:24). The New Testament scholar Gert Theißen reckons with “miracle stories ... outside the followers of Jesus” and with “popular shifting and enrichment” of the miracle stories, thus assuming that a special Jesus tradition had formed in the population. Should nothing at all – apart from the Christian tradition itself – have survived?

But Ehrman now thinks that this is not the right way to approach the question. Before one can ask whether Jesus did miracles, one must “decide” whether he existed at all (p. 43).

But how can this question be “decided”? Based on which criteria? The problem is that Jesus is portrayed in all the ancient testimonies as a divine miracle worker or as a (semi-) divine being. That applies – with one exception (Tacitus) – also to the few non-Christian testimonies.

**That’s why the smart professor uses a common scientific trick: He who cannot answer questions declares them methodically illegitimate.**

For the rest, it all depends on what is meant by “miracles”. Those “miracles” to which Jesus owes his fame according to Christian sources, and which are said to have led whole nations to seek him out, are first and foremost healing miracles or healings. Even if we do not know how they came about, we need not question the existence of such a phenomenon any more than we do the existence of other ancient miracle healers. But Ehrman does not even do this much; for example, he states on p. 269 that Jesus “developed a reputation for being able to heal the sick and cast out demons.” Shouldn’t we ask then, why the person responsible for such sensational healings was not given any attention by pagan authors? The question is valid but obviously doesn’t give Ehrman any comfort. That’s why the smart professor uses a common scientific trick: He who cannot answer questions declares them methodically illegitimate.



**This information seems not unimportant to us. That Ehrman is withholding it from us does seem a little manipulative.**

Finally, Ehrman also refers to Justus of Tiberias, although he calls him "Justin of Tiberius" (p. 50), a Jewish historian living and working in the second half of the first century, who, like Josephus, wrote a history of the Jewish people in the first century after Christ. Ehrman mentions that his books "did not survive". Whether this refers to the work of later Christian censors and book burners, he leaves open. However, he fails to address the crucial point. Although the writings of the historian from the immediate neighbourhood of Jesus' supposed residence have indeed been lost, we know at least from a paper of the Christian Patriarch Photius from Constantinople (9th century) what was not in it: "He does not mention the coming of Christ, nor his deeds, nor the miracles he performed. This information does seem not unimportant to us. That Ehrman withholds it from his readers does come across as a little manipulative. Indeed, it would not seem easy for advocates of the existence of a historical Jesus to explain why a first-century Jewish historian from Galilee forgot the famous man from the neighboring city in his writings.



*Photius records for us what the Galilean historian of the second half of the first century did not mention.*

The number of non-Christian witnesses who, according to Ehrman, should prove the existence of Jesus is very small. Usually New Testament scholars cite a canon of six texts at this point:

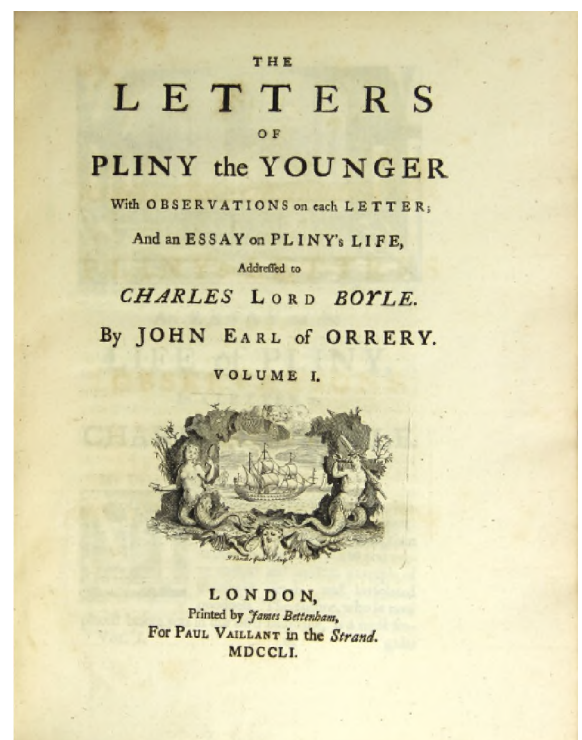
1. the twofold testimony of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (Ant 20,200 and Ant 18,63-64, so-called Testimonium Flavianum),
2. the testimony of the Roman historian Tacitus on the burning of Rome and the Neronian persecution of Christians (Ann 15:44;),
3. the report of the Roman governor Pliny the Younger in a letter to the Emperor Trajan and his reply (ep 10,96-97;)
4. two passages from the work of the Roman historian Sueton (Suet. Claud. 25,4; Suet. Nero 16,2)
5. a letter of the Syrian Mara bar Serapion to his son Serapion, which was only recently brought into play, and which is said to have been written sometime after 72 AD,
6. and an ominous passage from the lost historical work of Thallus (after 50 AD), which has only been preserved in excerpts in Julius Africanus and Georgius Synkellos.

In Ehrman's case, the already very small number is reduced even further to the four witnesses Josephus, Tacitus, Pliny and Suetonius, although only Josephus and Tacitus, and possibly Pliny, are of significance. This decision, which Ehrman does not discuss further, is very wise, since not many can be impressed by the excluded two guarantors anyway because of their questionable dating.

Anyone who thought that Ehrman would enter into a conversation with the radical deniers of a historical Jesus and discuss in detail the handwritten tradition, origin and earliest testimony of his four sources or even shine with new points of view will be disappointed. His statements merely repeat what has been known for decades anyway, and contain nothing that has not long since been considered or refuted by the radical deniers of Jesus since Arthur Drews. The authenticity of the sources is loudly claimed but not proven. What remains is, at least as the testimony of Josephus and Tacitus shows, that Jesus lived and was executed by the Roman governor of Judea. "That, at least, is a start." (p. 56)

Of course, it could also be a grandiose false start, as there is a chance that the four horses that Ehrman has harnessed in front of his triumphal chariot will be exhausted on the next climb. Ehrman neglected to vet his witnesses.

For example, there is the so-called Christian Letter of the younger Pliny, which is said to have been written at the beginning of the first decade of the 2nd century AD, and of which Ehrman claims that it is a completely independent proof of the historical existence of Jesus (p. 52). The questions connected with this letter and the reply letter of Emperor Trajan are not even touched upon. Ehrman erroneously speaks of the letter "number ten" – i.e. he seems not even to know that it is letter No. 96 in the 10th book of Pliny's correspondence. To mention only some of the problems and questions that I discuss in detail in my book "False Witnesses":



*Why does the governor write a question to the emperor about the proceedings against the Christians at all? Did Ehrman ask himself why a lawyer like Pliny, who was so well-informed, needed such imperial tutoring? After all, it must be remembered that we are not*

dealing with a beginner, but with an experienced administrative official. The jurist Pliny was at times even a member of the imperial cabinet, so he was at the highest level of the Roman state! How is it possible that he nevertheless did not know under what charge the Christians were to be placed and what punishments were intended for them? Especially since he proudly claims of himself elsewhere: "Often I spoke in court, often I was a judge myself, often I took part in the deliberations" (ep 1,20). The unbiased reader has rather the impression of the "caricature of an official" in front of him, "who is incapable of making decisions independently" (F. F. Bruce). The philologist Ludwig Schaedel once posed the justified question: "How can one imagine that the governor of Bithynia was allowed... to approach the throne with questions that would have demonstrated his utter unsuitability for a higher administrative post?"

Folly and error also appear in the other letters: In letter 75, the absent-minded governor expects the emperor to decide on the use of an inheritance without specifying the amount of the inheritance! Even stranger is only that the emperor does not inquire about it in his reply letter, ep 76! – Why does the lawyer Pliny have to be told by "more experienced people" that his masseur, the Egyptian Harpocras, must first be granted Alexandrian citizenship before he can be granted full Roman citizenship (ep 10,6)?

But back to the "Letter to the Christians": What was the nature of the investigations of which Pliny had heard, who presided over them and where did they take place?

Surely not in Bithynia, because otherwise it would be difficult to explain the governor's complete ignorance of the course of the trial.

And why does Pliny react so late? If the situation has become so difficult because of the large number of Christians, as he claims, why does he not address the problem in his earlier letters, i.e. immediately after he took office as governor? Or did the governor not notice it when he took office a year earlier? Very unlikely. In view of the dimension of the problem, it could have been the occasion for a lively exchange between Rome and Bithynia; instead, the topic is only mentioned once in the entire correspondence. Pliny only makes use of his *ius referendi* when the greatest danger has already passed. The trend is downward. The success is great. But why then a letter at all at that stage? And a message of success should have been formulated differently.

Why didn't Pliny first discuss the problem with his predecessor in office, the friendly Maximus Quaestor, to whom he addresses ep 8, 24? How is it possible that Christianity was so widespread in Bithynia around 112 that the pagan temples were no longer visited? According to the first Epistle of Peter, written in the first half of the 2nd century, the "strangers of the diaspora" (1 Peter 1:1) lived here.

Since when could Christians be forced to curse Christ alongside the imperial sacrifice? [Maledictio](#) is a Jewish custom (Iust. Dial. C. Tryph. 93,4;108,3) – but here we are dealing with a Roman legal procedure. Such a measure is completely unknown in Roman law, and in general incompatible with the spirit of Roman jurisprudence.

The chant of the Christians, the "Christo quasi deo dicere secum invicem" can, strictly speaking, only be understood as an antiphonal chant because of the *secum invicem*.<sup>[5]</sup> There is a problem: an antiphonal chant has not yet been proven at all at such an early time.

The real problem of the origin of the collection is that the letters could not be edited by Pliny himself, since he died in 113. Who then published them? Was a confidential correspondence between emperor and governor allowed to be made public at all without an imperial imprimatur? Where is the corresponding reference?

What about the authenticity of the 10th book of correspondence between Pliny and Trajan? The entire correspondence between Pliny and the Emperor contains 124 letters. Of these,

[5] Cf. [Salzmann 1994](#), p. 140f.

Vridar note: Salzmann cites p. 166f of Fourrier who points out that the phrase in Pliny's account, *secum invecum*, in the context of chant or song points us to the fixed liturgy alternating between two groups — an antiphonal chant not known until the time of Saint Augustine.

Fourrier, F. 1964. "La Lettre de Pline à Trajan Sur Les Chrétiens (X, 97)." *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale* 31: 161–74.



only the last 109 letters are said to refer to the correspondence in Bithynia; 61 of them were written by Pliny, 48 by Trajan. The period of Pliny's governorship in Bithynia lasted about 18 months due to his early death. Many letters

<http://www.jstor.com/stable/26187695>

in such a short time! Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the conditions for transporting letters did not correspond to those of today and that the governor certainly had to wait several weeks for replies from the emperor, who lived in Rome some 2,000 km away. In view of their length, many letters have the character of short telegrams. It is difficult to see in them letters which, especially in view of their sometimes completely meaningless content, were laboriously transported by land and sea for days and weeks.

In letter 100 Pliny speaks of the "vows taken in the previous years" (*vota, domine, priorum annorum nuncupata*), which he claims to have taken for the emperor with his servants and inhabitants of the province. Curiously, Pliny has only been one year in Bithynia at this time?

**If you don't know any problems, the world is all right for you!**

These and many other problems need to be clarified when examining the question of the external testimony of the 10th book of correspondence which Ehrman, of course, pays little attention to, not to say completely ignores. Without going into further details, which are dealt with in detail in *False Witnesses*, we may note: the collection of letters seems to have come to the light of public attention for the first time through the discovery of the monk, theologian, antiquarian and architect Fra Giocondo (around the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries). Its authenticity was controversial from the beginning! The allusions that can be found in the literature of the Church Fathers after Tertullian, in reality, all go back to a passage in Tertullian. The passage in his apology was not a reference to the Epistle of Pliny, as is often assumed, but probably – as so often – an imaginative invention of the Church Father. As is well known, he knows a number of other questionable documents. For example, he claimed that Pilate, who was "himself already a Christian in his innermost being, had reported about Christ to the then Emperor Tiberius". The scripture mentioned by Tertullian probably refers to the *Acta Pilati*, but its existence is disputed and, if it should have existed, it was certainly not authentic. Also, the "Christian Letter" of Tertullian was, if it should have existed, an equally imaginative Apocryphon.

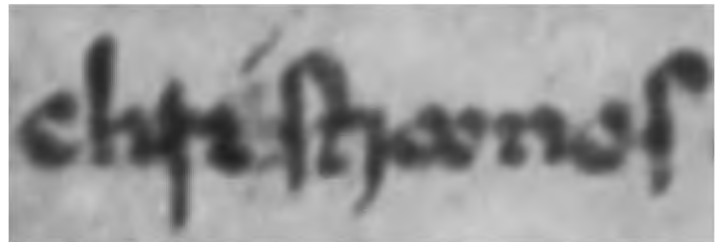
In other words: Obviously the text of Tertullian in the *Apologeticum* served the later forger (Fra Giocondo?) as a prompt and inspiration for the writing of the so-called "Christian letter". This suspicion can be further substantiated by a closer comparison of the text of Pliny with the passage in Tertullian's *Apologeticum*.

Anyone who has taken a closer look at the problems of Pliny's Letters to Christians can guess that Ehrman's great self-confidence is obviously based simply on ignorance of the problems! If you don't know any problems, the world is all right for you! Let him have it – only he should not denigrate critics who have dealt with it a little more than he has.

### 3. Tacitus and Josephus

The information we get from Ehrman about Tacitus and the *Testimonium Taciteum*, which he highly values, on 2 (two!) pages of the book is not enough to keep skin and bones together. We are only briefly informed about the content and the historical background of this testimony, but about the problems with it Ehrman has almost nothing at all to say. Ehrman speaks of the Roman

historian Tacitus and his "famous Annals of Imperial Rome in 115 CE" (p. 54) and the passage that reports on the burning of Rome and the subsequent persecution of Christians by the Emperor Nero. According to Ehrman, Tacitus is said to have considered Nero the arsonist, but this is not true. If Ehrman had studied the text more thoroughly, he would have noticed that although Tacitus assumes that Nero was interested in the burning of Rome, he leaves the question of guilt in the balance – unlike Suetonius, to which Ehrman presumably refers. In any case, there are mass executions of Christians, here called "*Chrestiani*", some of whom are torn apart by wild dogs and others burned alive to illuminate the imperial park at night. In this context, there is now also talk about the author of this name, Christ (the "Chrestus", as the magnifying glass on the cover of this website shows), who 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 home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue."



The word "Christianos" – with an "e" scraped and replaced with an "i" – as it appears in *Madicean II* under ultraviolet light. From [UU Humanist Skeptic](#)

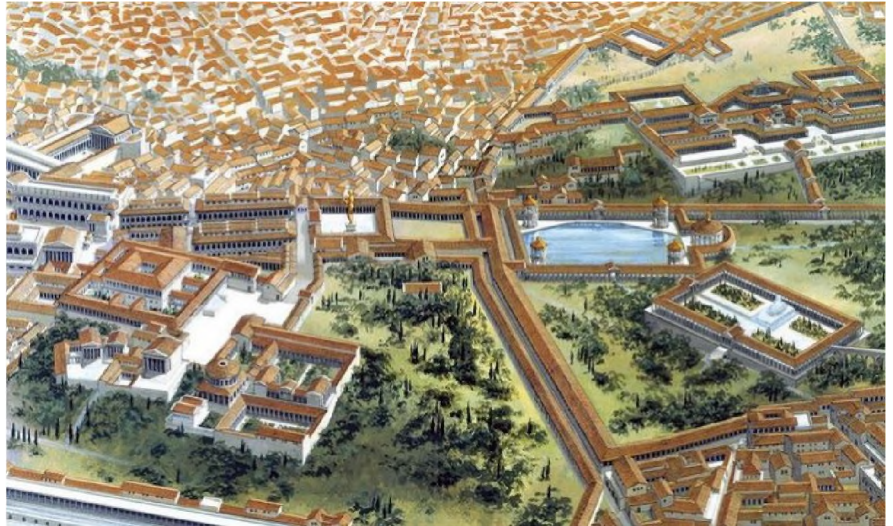
Ehrman sees here a testimony to the historicity of Jesus, even though he admits that the text does not speak of Jesus but of Christ and that it is based on Christian sources. Moreover, Ehrman suggests that some mythicists argue that the *Testimonium Taciteum* was not written by Tacitus but interpolated "by Christians, who copied them [Tacitus, Pliny, Suetonius]" (p. 55).

Unfortunately, however, he keeps the arguments they put forward for this viewpoint to himself – if he knows them at all. Ehrman considers these arguments to be a merely a trick to explain everything that doesn't fit the bill as a later falsification.

**Ehrman does not need to be convinced by this argument. But he should at least know it so that he can deal with it.**

However, the radical critics who speak of interpolation will certainly have given reasons. What are they?

Since Ehrman remains stubbornly silent, let's name a few. They arise from a (literary-critical) consideration of the context in which the passage of Tacitus is embedded. The 42-43rd chapter was about Nero's lively building activity. After the fire in Rome, the emperor first used the situation to create new parks and gardens, and then to build houses and



Nero's rebuilt Rome: From [brewminate.com](http://brewminate.com)

apartments according to a new, more spacious design. Chap. 45 continues this theme after the section on the persecution of Christians with an introductory "*interea*" (meanwhile). Now it is emphasized that the money for the building projects came primarily from the provinces and that even some temples in Rome were robbed of their gold to finance the emperor's projects.

The text that has been handed down thus offers an extremely strange train of thought: Nero has the Christians burned, the people have pity on them – "meanwhile" (*interea*) the Roman Empire is being plundered. It is obvious that such a nonsensical train of thought could by no means have been the intention of the narrator. Between chapters 44 and 45 there is no connecting point to which the "*interea*" could refer. If it is to establish a meaningful connection, it can, in terms of content, only tie up to Ch. 43 but not to 44: Rome is being rebuilt – in the meantime the empire is being plundered for it! Ehrman does not need to be convinced by this argument. But he should at least know it so that he can deal with it.

In addition, a number of problems of content could be mentioned, which make it difficult to consider the *Testimonium Taciteum* as an authentic text from the pen of the Roman historian. That the Christians in Rome in the year 64 are said to have been already a "huge crowd" cannot be proved even from Christian sources. Origen speaks of the martyrs as a "small crowd that is easy to count" (Orig Cels 3:8). The fact that hatred of the human race (*odium humani generis*) is said to have been sufficient to punish people with death is difficult to reconcile with Roman law and has often been questioned again and even more recently.

Added to this is the lack of external testimony: Up to the monk Sulpicius Severus, who wrote in the 5th century, the testimony is not mentioned by any of the Church Fathers – which is very surprising, since the passage at Tacitus can hardly have escaped their notice in view of the monstrous events reported in it. One should not rush over such oddities as Ehrman does. But even Sulpicius Severus cannot easily be considered a textual witness. Although the section on the burning of Rome in his *Historia Sacra* contains a number of literal similarities, the question is: Is Tacitus really the source used by Sulpicius Severus, or is it perhaps the other way around? In other words, is the passage considered to be the text of Tacitus possibly an interpolation that goes back to Sulpicius Severus? A detailed comparison of the two passages, which is explained in my book mentioned earlier, could prove this. One indication of this could be, among other things, the word sequence *humanum genus* instead of *genus humanum*, which is unique to Tacitus. For Sulpicius also always writes *humanum genus*, but never *genus humanum*!

**anyone who wants to make a scientifically responsible judgement about the *Testimonium Taciteum* cannot carelessly pass over these and many other problems**

In any case, anyone who wants to make a scientifically responsible judgement about the *Testimonium Taciteum* cannot carelessly pass over these and many other problems that I deal with in my book, as Ehrman does. Since Ehrman, as we know, travels in many languages, he could have found out about this from my book, which was published six months before his. Perhaps he should also take a closer look at some of his “graduate students”, who, according to Robert M. Price, procured the material for his book for him, and check their academic suitability.

## ***Josephus***

**It appears that the absent-minded professor must have been in a hurry to finish this book!**

Even more disappointing than his Tacitus section are Ehrman’s omissions about the two Josephus passages, which have always been cited as testimony to the historicity of Jesus. Not only does Ehrman once again have nothing new to offer, but worse, he fails to engage in scholarly discussion with those who would have something new to offer: such as his former student Ken Olson, who in 1999 published some exciting theses on the *Testimonium Flavianum*, one after the other.

For Vidar posts addressing some of Ken Olson’s discussion of the *Testimonium Flavianum* (evidence he cites for its Eusebian origin) see

1. [The \*Testimonium Flavianum\*: more clues from Eusebius](#)



Ehrman begins with *Ant* 20,200-203 (= 20.9.1), i.e. with the passage about the execution of a man named James, who is described as “the brother of Jesus, the so-called Christ”. Ehrman does not hesitate to identify him with the church leader brother James because of this. With reference to Jesus, this means for Ehrman, “We learn two things about him: he had a brother named James and some people mistook him for the Messiah” (59). However, Ehrman also knows mythicists, radical critics who consider the passage to be interpolated, and announces that he will deal with them after the treatment of the *Testimonium Flavianum*. Well, good things take time, the reader thinks, flicks on and looks forward to the discussion announced by Ehrman at a later passage. But at the end of the section he feels disappointed. Not a trace of an answer from Ehrman! Neither in the corresponding chapter nor anywhere else. In fact, after a few pages, the author seems to have forgotten his announced promise completely. It appears that the absent-minded professor must have been in a hurry to finish this book!

2. [Jesus in Josephus — Eusebian clues — point 4](#)

3. [Jesus in Josephus — pts 5-12](#)

4. [Jesus in Josephus — “not extinct at this day”](#)

See the bibliography at end of this post for published articles by Ken Olson.

In fact, it would have been extremely strange if Josephus had called Jesus “so-called Christ” just by the way. This is above all due to the political implications that the term “Christ” had, especially for Jews and especially for Josephus. One cannot accuse Josephus of naivety, that he did not know what the meaning of this term (Christ = Messiah) was: That it had an eminently political dimension besides the religious one – it was, after all, just the same title that apparently pretenders to the Messiah such as Simon, Menahem and John had also claimed for themselves, who, according to Josephus, bore the responsibility for the downfall of Israel. In the period after the Jewish War, in which Josephus wrote his work, the title “Christ” may have had about the same ring to it at the Roman court as – *mutatis mutandis* – the term “Führer” had had in the ears of the Allies after the Second World War. The only “Christ” that Josephus could have accepted was the Roman Emperor Vespasian (*Bel* 6:313). This also seems to be the reason why Josephus himself avoided speaking of “Christ” where this would have made reasonable sense, namely with the Jewish pretenders to the Messiah just mentioned. The Jewish pensioner at the Roman court would probably all too easily have fallen into a reputation of political unreliability and would easily have been suspected of flirting with the former Jewish freedom fighters. For him, the word “Christ” for Jesus would have been tantamount to a confession of faith in the Jewish underground.

If it is quite unlikely that Josephus is said to have spoken of the “so-called Christ” without comment, it can by no means be excluded that the phrase “brother of Jesus” is actually original. However, it obviously did not at first refer at all to Jesus of Nazareth, but rather in an obvious way probably only to that very Jesus, the son of

Damnaeus, who is mentioned at the end of the passage quoted above as the successor of the younger Annas who was deposed from his office:

*"But Agrippa, as a result of this incident, shocked him after only three months in office of his dignity and appointed Jesus, the son of Damnaeus, as high priest" (Ant 20,203).*

It seems that a later Christian believed that the Lord's brother James was the same James Josephus spoke of and simply added the phrase "who is called Christ". The fact that the martyrdom of the Damnaeus son James reported by Josephus is identical with the martyrdom of the leader brother reported by Hegesippus is based, as I show in my book, on an imagined illusion. Like the later forger of the James Ossuary, the interpolator was able to turn an otherwise unknown James into the church's head brother with the stroke of a pen, so to speak.

### **How faith can still move mountains among Bible scholars!**

When asked about the authenticity of the other Josephus passage, the *Testimonium Flavianum*, Ehrman, as expected, joins the faction of biblical scholars who believe that Josephus originally had a short form of the same. This could have looked like the passage proposed by J.P. Meier, whom Ehrman seems to follow.

*At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise 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. And when [or better: although] 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.*

Detering's German language article I have been given appears to have the full TF (not Meier's shortened proposal) at this point. I have substituted Meier's shortened version in the main post. For comparison, here is the full TF as it currently stands in Ant. 18:

*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*

How faith can still move mountains among Bible scholars! Are Ehrman and all those who follow Meier seriously of the opinion that with the short form that they have arbitrarily reconstructed, the problems of the TF, above all the question of the missing external testimony, have been solved? Does not the TF still offer a virtually radiant picture of Christianity or its founder even after the Christian confessions have been removed? The Christian apologists should not have had any reason to refer to the image of the "wise man", "performer of unbelievable deeds" and teacher of truth in order to ward off pagan insults against their teacher? Anyone who wants to can believe that.

*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 wondrous things about him. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out?*

In addition, the three passages deleted by Meier are so closely interwoven with the context that they cannot be deleted without leaving painful gaps in the text. Ken Olson in particular has pointed this out:

*The sentence that Jesus was "one who performed surprising deeds" is only meaningful if one knows the statement deleted by Meier and previously in the TF, "if indeed one ought to call him a man". And how is it to be explained that the "tribe of Christians" calls itself after Christ, when the sentence "He was the Christ" is missing? How, finally, is it to be understood why "those who had first come to love him (Jesus) did not cease", if one does not know that the reason for this lies in the resurrection of the one condemned on the cross, which is mentioned in the next sentence, also deleted by Meier?*

Addressing Ehrman, one would like to say: It is not enough to know your students personally, one should also read what they have written now and then.

It is not worthwhile at this point to deal further with the fourth testimony of the Roman historian Suetonius presented by Ehrman, especially since Ehrman does not bring anything new here either and does not seem to value the text from the *Vita Claudii* (25,4) very highly himself.

That Ehrman has not even informed himself about the ammunition in his own arsenal is shown by the fact that he fails to refer to the second passage in the Nero biography (16,2) of Suetonius, according to which the emperor "punished the

Christians with death penalties”, that Christians were “a sect that had surrendered to a new superstition that was dangerous to the public.” Perhaps it’s just as well, because this passage is also not original, as I have shown in the *False Witnesses*.

One may forgive me if I formulate it somewhat drastically and ungentlemanly, in good old Lutheran German, so to speak: Ehrman didn’t even smell the radical critics when they shit in front of him.

*Finis*

= Man möge mir verzeihen, wenn ich es etwas drastisch und unfein, sozusagen in gutem alten Lutherdeutsch, formuliere: Ehrman hat noch nicht einmal hingerochen, wo die radikalen Kritiker vor ihm hingesch... haben. -dd

Martin Luther: “Now they forget the God who rescued them when in sheer fright they shit their pants. We still smell the stench whenever one of these bigwigs is near.” ([Annotated Luther. Vol 6](#))

The original article by Detering is at [http://radikalkritik.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Ehrman\\_Kritik.pdf](http://radikalkritik.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Ehrman_Kritik.pdf)

Some of Ken Olson’s publications on the TF:

Olson, K. A. 1999. “Eusebius and the Testimonium Flavianum.” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61 (2): 305. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43723559>

Olson, Ken. 2013a. “A Eusebian Reading of the Testimonium Flavianum.” In *Eusebius of Caesarea: Tradition and Innovations*, edited by Aaron Johnson and Jeremy Schott, 97–114. Washington, D.C: Center for Hellenic Studies. <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/5871.5-a-eusebian-reading-of-the-testimonium-flavianum-ken-olson>

———. 2013b. “The Testimonium Flavianum, Eusebius, and Consensus (Guest Post) – Olson.” *The Jesus Blog* (blog). August 13, 2013. <http://historicaljesusresearch.blogspot.com.au/2013/08/the-testimonium-flavianum-eusebius-and.html>