The Apologetics of Jesus: A Defense of His Deity

Dr. Patrick Zukeran

Dr. Zukeran shows us that the greatest defense of the deity of Jesus was made by Jesus Himself. Claiming to be God in the flesh, His words and His actions had to be an apologetic for His claim. People could see He was a man; He had to prove to them that He was also deity, God in the flesh.

Jesus was one of the greatest leaders, teachers, and remarkable individuals that ever lived, but few realize that Jesus was also the greatest apologist. Apologetics is the rational defense of Christianity. Christian apologists use reason and evidence to present a convincing case for Christianity, challenge unbelief, expose errors, and defend the message of the gospel. Apologetics was an essential part of Jesus’ ministry. If it was important in His ministry, it certainly should be in all ministries looking to impact the unbelieving world for Christ.

The Bible commands us in 1 Peter 3:15, “But set apart Christ as Lord in your hearts. Always be prepared to give an answer [apologia] to everyone who asks you the reason for the hope that you have.” We are commanded to provide a well-reasoned answer for our faith in Christ to an unbelieving world. Jesus commanded us to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Mt. 22:37). Apologetics involves knowing why you believe and complies with Christ’s command of loving God with your mind.

There exists some misunderstanding among Christians as to whether apologetics is necessary. Some believe that our belief in Christ is based on “faith” and thus
does not require solid reasons or evidence to support it. Therefore, in witnessing to unbelievers, some mistakenly suppose that apologetics is ineffective in leading anyone to faith. The call of the Christian is to simply present the gospel, and the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures will do the rest. However, this was not the example of Christ.

Christ made extraordinary claims to be the divine Son of God. He made such claims as being the source of life, forgiver of sins, the embodiment of truth, and authority over the Old Testament Law. Such claims were met with skepticism, doubt, and hostility. Jesus knew He was making remarkable claims, and He did not expect people to simply believe His message without good reasons. He was not seeking or wanting people to exercise "blind faith." Jesus understood that we are rational and moral beings, for we are created in the image of God who is a rational and morally perfect being. For this reason, we exercise our rational capacity and investigate the evidence before making decisions.

Christ knew He would have to make a convincing case to uphold His claims and He did. Throughout His ministry, Christ presented compelling reasons and evidence to uphold His claim to be the divine Son of God. Jesus’ apologetics included the testimony of witnesses, miracles, the resurrection, prophecy, reason, the use of parables and more. The apologetic methods of Jesus serve as a model for every believer who desires to engage and impact an unbelieving world for Christ.

The Testimony of Witnesses

A man ill for thirty-eight years lay beside the Pool of Bethesda along with a multitude of crippled individuals. Suddenly an unknown stranger walks up and asks him a strange question. “Do you want to get well?” As the lame man begins to explain his situation, the stranger orders the man to “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk!” Immediately, strength enters his legs and he rises and walks, carrying his mat as the stranger orders. Soon afterwards the Pharisees arrive and an examination ensues.

What should have been a moment of rejoicing turns into a serious interrogation.
The Jewish leaders in John 5 confront Jesus seeking an opportunity and reason to kill Him. Instead of praising God in the healing of the lame man, the focus of the Jewish leaders is on the apparent violation of their Jewish tradition by Jesus.

Jesus responded saying, “My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I, too, am working.” (Jn. 5:17). The following verse states, “For this reason, the Jews tried all the harder to kill Him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.” (Jn. 5:18). In this chapter Jesus performed some remarkable feats and made some extraordinary claims. When questioned, Jesus gave an answer or an *apologia*, a defense of His work and character. In His answer, we see that He was the greatest apologist and that apologetics was a key component in the ministry of Jesus.

In the passage that follows, Jesus presents one of the clearest and strongest cases regarding His nature as the divine Son of God. New Testament scholar Leon Morris states, “Nowhere in the Gospels do we find our Lord making such a formal, systematic, orderly, regular statement of His own unity with the Father, His divine commission and authority, and the proofs of His Messiahship, as we find in this discourse.”{1}

What was the apologetic method Jesus used in this instance? Jesus’ apologetic involved the testimony of witnesses. According to Jewish law, a testimony is valid only if there were at least two witnesses who could testify to the truth of an individual’s claims (Deut. 19:15). Jesus knew these men needed solid testimony to confirm His claims but also testimony that would convict them of their error regarding their understanding of His identity.

Jesus brings forth five witnesses that testify on His behalf; John the Baptist (5:32-35), His works (5:36), the Father (5:37), the Old Testament Scriptures (5:39-40), and Moses (5:41-46). There were no more authoritative witnesses than these. In a brilliant presentation, Jesus makes His case. The testimony of witnesses was part of the apologetics of Jesus.
Apologetics in the Parables

It is a well-known fact that Jesus was a great storyteller. His stories captivated the audience and taught a valuable lesson. The term “good Samaritan” and “the prodigal Son,” are recognized all over the world because of the unforgettable stories told by Jesus. One of the best ways to communicate truth is to illustrate it through stories which are also an effective way to penetrate into hardened hearts that would not be receptive to a direct gospel presentation. The parables of Christ are some of the most remarkable lessons ever taught. However, did you know that the parables of Christ were also powerful apologetic presentations of our Lord?

Through the use of these stories, Jesus makes a declaration and a defense of His ministry and claims. The images He selects are used in the Old Testament and later Jewish literature in reference to God. Jesus uses these images and applies them often to Himself. Philip Payne states, “Out of the fifty-two recorded narrative parables, twenty depict Him in imagery which in the Old Testament typically referred to God. The frequency with which this occurs indicates that Jesus regularly depicted Himself in images which were particularly appropriate for depicting God.”{2}

By applying these images to Himself Jesus indicates his self-understanding as the divine Son of God and was communicating this truth to His audience. Payne identifies ten prominent images used in the parables in which images used in reference to God in the Old Testament Jesus applies to Himself.{3} Jesus’ repeated use of such images indicates He wanted His audience to recognize His divinity and that He was carrying out the very will of God in His ministry on earth.

Here are a few examples where Christ declares His divinity in the gospels. The image of the rock is used to describe God, especially in the Psalms (Ps. 19:14, 28:1, 42:9, 61:2, 62:2, 71:3, 78:35). In the parables of Jesus, He states that those who build their lives upon His teachings have built their lives upon “a rock” (Matt. 7:24-26 and Lk. 6:46-49). In Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34, God is portrayed as a shepherd. In John 10 Jesus identifies Himself as the good shepherd. In another parable, Jesus uses the example of a bridegroom. In Isaiah 49, 54, Jeremiah 2, and Hosea, God is pictured as a bridegroom. In Mk. 2:19, Matt. 9:15, and Lk. 5:34-35,
Jesus identifies Himself as the bridegroom. The parables were powerful stories Jesus used to communicate truth but they were also part of the apologetics of Jesus.

### The Use of Reason

Jesus commanded us to “Love the Lord your God with all your . . . mind” (Mt. 22:37). Jesus exemplified what it meant to love God with “all your mind.” He was the greatest thinker who ever set foot upon the earth. Philosopher Dallas Willard states,

> We need to understand that Jesus is a thinker, that this is not a dirty word but an essential work, and that his other attributes do not preclude thought, but only insure that he is certainly the greatest thinker of the human race: ‘the most intelligent person who ever lived on earth.’ He constantly uses the power of logical insight to enable people to come to the truth about themselves and about God from the inside of their own heart and mind.\[4\]

Jesus understood that we are created in the image of God. Our creator is a reasonable and rational being. We are thus endowed with the capacity for reason and rationality. In Isaiah 1:18, God invited Israel saying, “Come now let us reason together.” God wanted the people of Israel to use their ability to reason and consider the consequences of their behavior.

Jesus showed Himself to be a brilliant apologist who used the laws of logic to reveal truth, demolish arguments, and point out error. The communication of truth and discerning error requires the use of reason. Since our faith is a reasonable faith, reason was part of the apologetics of Jesus.

An example of the use of reason is found in Matthew 12:22-28. Here the Pharisees accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the power of the Devil. Through the use of reason, Jesus showed their accusation to be false. The argument He used is the argument known as *reductio ad absurdum* [Latin for “reduction to the absurd”]. This is an argument that demonstrates if the primary premise is supposed to be
true, then it leads to a contradiction that is absurd. One would then inevitably have to conclude that the original premise is false.

Jesus responded stating that “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out?” Jesus points to the illogical nature of their accusation and further points to the testimony of His miracles that confirm His authority being from God.

**Apologetics of Miracles**

Something had gone terribly wrong. The Messiah had arrived but the Kingdom, which would be characterized by liberty, freedom, and the just rule of God, had not arrived. Instead, John the Baptist found himself in prison awaiting execution. Confused and discouraged, John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask Him, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Lk. 7:20). Jesus responds by pointing to the testimony of His miracles: “Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” (Lk. 7:22-23). When asked by John if He was indeed the Messiah, Jesus defends His claim by pointing to the testimony of His miracles. Miracles represent another component in the apologetics of Jesus.

A miracle is a special act of God that interrupts the normal course of events. Natural laws describe what occurs regularly by natural causes, but miracles describe what happens rarely, by supernatural causes. A miracle is an act of God designed to confirm the word of God through a messenger of God.\[5\]

Throughout the Old Testament, God used miracles to confirm His message and His messenger. Christ’s miracles demonstrated that what He claimed about Himself was true and that God’s confirming hand was on the message He preached. Jesus performed a vast array of miraculous signs that demonstrated His divine authority over every realm of creation.
When friendly as well as hostile audiences questioned Jesus, He defended His claims with the testimony of miracles (Mk. 2:1-12, Jn. 2, and 10:22-42). Many who witnessed Christ’s miracles made the connection. Nathaniel, witnessing the omniscience of Christ, responded exclaiming, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.” (Jn. 1:49). Nicodemus in his evening visit meets Jesus saying, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.” (Jn. 3:2).

When Christ establishes His kingdom, all creation will be subject to Him. Sin, sickness, death, and disease will be overcome and the subjects of the kingdom will never be in want. The miracles of Christ reflect His divine character and demonstrate the King of the Kingdom has arrived.

Apologetics was an essential component of Christ’s ministry and should be an important part of any ministry looking to engage this lost world for Christ. The Bible commands us to defend our faith, and Christ set the supreme example for us to follow.

To learn more about the apologetics of Jesus and gain valuable practical lessons from His examples, check out the online store at Probe.org and purchase a copy of the in depth book, *The Apologetics of Jesus* written by Norman Geisler and myself.

Notes

3. Ibid., 313-17.
Is Jesus the Only Way? - Part 2

Paul Rutherford explains how reason, Christ’s resurrection, and the Bible all testify that Jesus is the only way to heaven.

I can’t drive around town seven days straight without passing at least one car with a bumper sticker that reads, “Coexist” on the back. You know the one. It spells the word using symbols associated with the world’s faiths, ancient and modern.

The popularly held mantra is that “all religions are equally valid ways to heaven.” This is what’s called pluralism. So is there room in this brave new world for the words of an ancient and historically respected faith?

Jesus once said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) That sounds offensive and inflammatory today. I will remind you that Jesus said it, not me.
Even more important is the truth question. It is perhaps even more offensive! Are Jesus’ words true?

I fully acknowledge even the question itself may strike you as antiquated, out of date. Perhaps I sound to you like an eccentric, soured-up, fuddy-duddy. I may be. But if the words of Jesus are true, then far more than your offended sense of style is at stake here. Far, far more.

So listen up. And take note because this crazy sounding first-century Jewish rabbi made some crazy-big statements about the nature of man, the nature of reality, and how to live the good life, here, now, and forever. Does that at least sound appealing to you? If even just for the sake of a little controversy?

Explore with me the words of this rabbi. In this article we’ll think through three reasons you should agree with him. And maybe you’ll even find eternal life in the process. If you’re a long-time listener to Probe radio, or a regular listener, this may sound familiar. I have another program exploring the position that Jesus is the only way to God. This one is part two. In this one I give you three reasons Jesus is in fact the only way to heaven. In the previous program, I defended Jesus’ statement against three lines of criticism. So in the next sections I’ll explain how reason, the resurrection, and the Word all testify that Jesus is the only way to heaven.

**Jesus the Only Way Because of Reason**

Western culture today is more pluralistic and secular than ever before. This means at least in one small part, that people believe multiple religions lead to heaven. Western culture has been moving this way for some decades. Now it has reached mainstream. Pop culture increasingly accepts this. It is therefore so much more important to consider this exclusive claim Jesus made. He said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.” (John 14:6)

This is an increasingly unpopular teaching. Before I defend it, allow me to clarify. It was made by the Lord Jesus himself. I didn’t make it up. I am merely defending
it.

So today I want to talk about how it is reasonable to believe this statement—why it is that you should yourself believe Jesus is the only way to heaven.

Today’s reason is logic itself. I will base this conclusion on two points: first, that the belief in one God is more logically defensible than believing in multiple creator gods; and second, that the belief in Jesus Christ as God is more reasonable than claims to deity made by others.

The first point is that believing in one creator God is more reasonable than believing in multiple. The god Aristotle believed in (the unmoved mover) was eternally simple. That is, at the root of all things is ultimately one thing—one cause, one source, one origin to which all other things owe their existence.\(^1\) This position beautifully avoids the difficulty of what philosophers call *reductio ad absurdum*—or the problem of infinite regression—or the problem of which came first, the chicken or the egg? The search for the first, original, or ultimate source, does not continue on and on forever. It cannot.

The second point is that Jesus is the most reasonable candidate for divinity. I respect the Buddha. But he never claimed to be God. Neither did Mohammad. Jesus was very clear. He claimed to be God.

Consider His teachings. They have not been surpassed in excellence in the two millennia that have passed since He walked the earth. Consider His actions. History’s best biographies about the man Jesus, record Him loving His enemies, healing the sick, and showing compassion to outcasts. Jesus’ life exemplified extraordinary moral rectitude.

I conclude, therefore, that it is more reasonable to believe Jesus is the only way to God given that it is more reasonable to believe in only one creator God, and given that Jesus has the best case for divinity among man’s founders of faith.
Jesus the Only Way Because of the Resurrection

We have a saying in American culture that nothing is certain but death and taxes. So if the taxman doesn’t come to call, the grim reaper will eventually. Death finds each of us, so we must face our own mortality.

By the best historical accounts Jesus also died and was buried, just like so many of His human brothers before Him. But Jesus, on the other hand, experienced something unique, declaring Him God above all others.

I speak, of course, of resurrection. Jesus Christ is the only person ever to have raised up Himself from the dead of his own volition, and by His own power.

This one point may be the most compelling of the three I offer this week. It is perhaps the most intuitive case for Jesus being the only way to Heaven. If Jesus really died and raised Himself from the dead, then His power exceeds those of any other man before Him, or after, for that matter. Surely He must be God.

No other religious figure can make that claim. In a class by Himself, Jesus reigns over all the founders of world religions. Muhammad’s burial site is a common tourist destination in Saudi Arabia for contemporary pilgrims. Buddha’s cremation site is in northern India. No such site exists today in contemporary Israel for Jesus. His body has no confirmed remains.

The tomb is empty. That much is clear. Records indicate He definitely died and was buried. The empty tomb demands an explanation. Resurrection makes the most sense. Jesus is the only way because He is the only one who has died and raised himself up to new life.

We have several excellent articles at our website devoted to just this topic. Go check them out for more detail. Jesus is who He said he is, “The way, the truth, and the life.” (John 14:6) So the question is, do you want some? Believe in Jesus today by faith.
Jesus the Only Way Because the Word Declares It

Western culture today increasingly accepts the belief that multiple religions are equally valid and they are all ways to eternal life. I propose to you today another reason to believe something diametrically opposed to this—namely that the Jesus Christ revealed in the Bible, is the only way to eternal life. As the gospel writer John quoted Him, He is, the way, the truth, and the life (14:6). No one comes to the Father except through Him.

This third and final line of reasoning that Jesus is the only way to eternal life, springs from the Bible—from the very word of God itself.

You may not accept the Bible as God’s word. That’s ok. Just hear me out. Let me explain how this line of reasoning at least makes sense. Then after you’ve heard it, you can judge for yourself if it’s true or not.

So first, the Bible claims to be God’s word (2 Timothy 3:16). If we therefore assume the very commonly held conception that God is good and perfect, then that includes the words He speaks as well. So if He speaks good words, then those words must be true. They must accurately describe reality.

The Bible also makes this claim. Jesus in a famous prayer to the Father asks him to sanctify His disciples with the truth before stating, “Your word is truth.” (John 17:17) It’s a profound statement.

So if God’s word is true, and God says in His word that Jesus is, in fact, the only way to God—that none can come to Him except by Jesus, then that means it’s true. See how simple that is?

But this statement is also made in another part of the Bible, Acts 4:12. Peter and John have been arrested and are being examined by the Jewish leaders. Peter declares Jesus to them and explains, “There is no other name under heaven, given among men, by which we must be saved.”

I fully admit this line of reasoning rests on you acknowledging the authority of the
Bible—in which case you may not have needed to be convinced in the first place. But if you had not already been convinced of the truth of God’s word, I am very sincerely relying on the power of the Spirit at work in you to believe this truth. (Isaiah 55:11)

**Conclusion**

In this article we considered the truth of a controversial claim. It might be one of the most hotly contested claims in religion today—that Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven.

This is not popular these days in America, Europe, anywhere in the English speaking West, or the non-English speaking West. To hear responses to criticisms against the claim, check out [part one](#) of this two part series.

Jesus was Himself no stranger to controversy. He died a criminal’s death at the hands of His enemies. He was killed and buried. The Jewish and Roman leaders were smugly satisfied they’d dispatched this unquiet voice.

But when Jesus’ enemies attempt to end his earthly ministry, they unknowingly ushered in a spiritually unending ministry of atonement and reconciliation. By his death Jesus paid the price of sin—death—satisfying the just wrath of God. Jesus made peace with God on your behalf. Believe in Him by faith today and you can have peace with God. Would you like to have peace with him? Tell Him right now. Use your voice or pray silently. But tell Him. Go ahead.

The only thing required of you to receive eternal life is to believe Jesus is Lord. One of Jesus’ most famous sayings is, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

Confess this belief with your mouth that Jesus Christ is God and believe in your heart that God has raised up his Son from the dead. And you can be saved. (Romans 10:9)
Jesus is the only way to God because there is no other way to get to God but by Jesus. Mankind is imperfect. You are dead in your transgressions and sins. The only way to satisfy God’s holy wrath is to give Him what is due: death. Jesus died that death for you. He’s the only one who could ever have paid your debt. And He did.

Human reason leads us to this beautiful conclusion that Jesus is the only way. God has declared it himself clearly in his divinely inspired book—the Bible. His resurrection seals it.

If you believed this for the first time today you are now heir to an eternal throne. Pick up a Bible and read Jesus’ life story in the book of John. Tell a friend who’s a Christian. Make plans to join them at their church Sunday. Keep praying and reading the Bible. You can discover the wonderful adventure of life in Jesus Christ, the only way to God.

Notes

1. Metaphysics, Lambda.
2. Matthew 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 19
3. Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20

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The Answer Is the Resurrection

Steve Cable

Steve Cable shows us that the resurrection is the key apologetic for those seeking to evangelize. As we share our faith, understanding the evidence for the resurrection helps prepare us to answer questions raised by a seeker after the truth.

Making a Defense for Your Living Hope

A key verse for our ministry at Probe is 1 Peter 3:15 where Peter writes, “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence.”{1}

I want to encourage you to make this verse a motivator for your own walk as an ambassador for Christ. You might say, “I am not equipped to make a defense. Surely, this verse is talking to pastors and people like the researchers at Probe.” A deeper look at Peter’s letter shows us that this is not the case. Peter makes it clear that these instructions are for all Christians.{2} In addition, Peter wrote this verse in the imperative tense, meaning that it is a command, not a suggestion.

Okay. I want to be ready to give an account for the hope that is in me, but I need be clear on what that hope is. Fortunately, Peter answers that for us in chapter 1 where he writes, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance
which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you.”{3}

So, our hope is a living hope for an eternal inheritance reserved for us in heaven. If I am to make a defense for this hope of eternal life, I need to be able to explain why I believe that the source of this hope has both the capability and the motivation to follow through on this offer.

How do we get this living hope? Our hope comes “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”! Jesus’ resurrection is the basis for our hope. If Jesus is not resurrected from the dead, we are of all men most to be pitied.{4} So, any defense of the hope that is within us begins with explaining why someone should believe in the resurrection. The empty tomb is the cornerstone to answering most other objections raised up against the gospel.

In the remainder of this article, we will look at evidence for the resurrection and how a defense of the resurrection is the foundation for answering many of the objections raised against Christianity.

**Evidence for Jesus’ Resurrection**

Giving an account for our belief in Jesus’ resurrection is the key to defending the hope within us. Several books have been written on this topic, and you can find a list of them in the transcript of this radio program on our Web site. The evidence for the resurrection as an historical event is so strong that even Dr. Antony Flew, until recently a noted proponent of atheism, had to admit, “The evidence for the resurrection is better than for claimed miracles in any other religion. It’s outstandingly different in quality and quantity, I think, from the evidence offered for the occurrence of most other supposedly miraculous events.”{5}

One help to remembering the overwhelming evidence is to think of the ten A’s attesting to Jesus’ resurrection:

1. **Accurate predictions.** Both the Old and New Testaments contain predictions of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Numerous times in the Gospels, Jesus told his
disciples and the Jewish authorities that He would rise to life after three days in the earth. In John 2, at the very beginning of His ministry, Jesus told this to the Jewish leaders. It made such an impression on the disciples, that verse 22 tells us, “So when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.”

2. **Attesting miracles.** Jesus’ resurrection was not a sudden miraculous cap to an otherwise unremarkable life. Jesus had consistently demonstrated His authority over the material universe from turning water into wine, to walking on the water, to healing the sick, to raising Lazarus from the dead. His resurrection is consistent with the power He demonstrated during His earthly ministry.

3. **Agonizing death.** Jesus had numerous opportunities to avoid a fatal confrontation with the Jewish leaders and Roman authorities. No one is going to go through a Roman scourging and crucifixion as a hoax. Jesus submitted to the cross because it was necessary to pay for our sins and He knew that He had the authority to conquer death.

4. **Angry authorities.** After word of Jesus’ resurrection began to spread, the Jewish authorities wanted to put a stop to people believing in Him. Producing the body of Jesus would have been the best way to do this. Even with support from the Roman authorities, they were never able to produce a body.

5. **Absent body.** The chief priests set a guard around Jesus’ tomb to make sure the body was not stolen by his disciples. Those guards knew their lives could be at stake if they failed in their duty, but on the third day Jesus was gone. Once they regained their senses, the guards “reported to the chief priests all that had happened.”[6] Why did they take this risk? Because they knew that there was no body to recover. No one has ever found any credible evidence that the body of Jesus was anywhere to be found on this earth.

6. **Amazed disciples.** After Jesus’ arrest, most of His disciples fled. It is clear from their reaction that they despised the cross and were not anticipating the resurrection. Two of his disciples did not recognize the risen Jesus even as He was teaching them the Scriptures related to Himself.[7] Their skepticism and
shock showed that they clearly were not part of some preplanned hoax.

7. **Agreeing eyewitnesses.** After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to over five hundred people. They testified to His resurrection. We do not have a record of anyone disputing their testimony, saying “I was there with them and it was a hoax.”

8. **Apostolic martyrs.** People don’t die for something they know to be a hoax. Yet, many of these eyewitnesses accepted death rather than deny the resurrection of Jesus.

9. **Agnostic historians.** Contemporary, non-Christian historians reported that Jesus was reputed to have risen from the dead and that his followers were willing to die rather than recant their belief in Jesus.

10. **Attesting Spirit.** Over the centuries, the Holy Spirit continues to convict unbelievers and assure believers that Jesus is the risen Son of God.

We don’t have to believe in the resurrection in *spite* of the facts. Instead, we believe in the resurrection in *light* of the facts. If you can defend your belief in the resurrection, then you are already positioned to respond to other questions people may have about your faith. In fact, you can respond to objections by asking, “Do you believe in the resurrection of Jesus?” If the answer is no, then you may want to focus on the evidence for the resurrection as a foundation for addressing their other concerns.

**Tearing Down Objections Through the Resurrection**

The evidence for Jesus’ resurrection is the key to making a defense for our living hope. Let’s consider some common objections to Christianity, and see how the resurrection can be the starting point for a reasoned response.

1. **Is there a God still active in this universe?**
Jesus’ resurrection shows there is a power that transcends the physical universe. A transcendent God is the only power that can override decay and death. As the apostle Peter wrote, “[God] raised [Jesus] from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.”{8}

Jesus’ resurrection declares God’s active involvement in this world. He planned it from the beginning and He performed it at the appointed time.{9}

2. What difference does God make to my life?

Jesus’ resurrection shows that He lives into eternity and that we have the prospect of life beyond this world.{10} Knowing we have a soul that continues beyond this world impacts our perspective on life. As Paul points out, “If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”{11}

But if the dead are raised, then we need to live with eternity in mind. It becomes a top priority to know the one who controls eternity, God.

3. Is the Bible really God’s revelation? Every religion has their holy books.

Jesus’ resurrection confirms that Jesus is the source of truth. He knows which holy book is actually a revelation from God. Jesus affirmed the inspiration of the Old Testament. He promised that the Holy Spirit would lead the apostles as they shared His teaching through the New Testament. The Gospel of John states, “So when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.”{12}

If Jesus’ resurrection caused His disciples to believe the Bible, it is certainly sufficient to cause me to believe.

4. I am too insignificant for God to love.

Jesus’ resurrection shows the depth of God’s love for you. Without the crucifixion there would be no resurrection. His crucifixion cries out “God loves you!” Romans tells us that “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”{13}
Being singled out for God’s love makes you very significant in His universe.

5. **How can anyone know the truth about life and death?**

*Jesus’ resurrection* gives Him firsthand knowledge. He has been beyond death and returned. His knowledge transcends this physical universe. Jesus gives us an eyewitness for eternal life. He told Pilate, “My Kingdom is not of this world. . . . For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth.”\(^{14}\)

Jesus testifies to the truth regarding eternal life. We can trust His testimony because of the resurrection.

6. Why should I believe that Jesus is God’s divine Son?

*Jesus’ resurrection* conquered the grave. No mortal can claim victory over decay and death.

He said that “I and the Father are one.” His victory over death confirms His claim, crying out through the ages “He is God!” As Paul proclaims in Romans, “[Jesus] was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead.”\(^{15}\)

7. Aren’t there many ways to God? Can Jesus be the only way?

*Jesus’ resurrection* puts Jesus in a class by Himself. His crucifixion and victory over death clearly show that He is the only way to God. If there were multiple ways, Jesus would not have gone to the cross. He allowed himself to be subjected to death because it was necessary for our redemption. In addition, Jesus clearly stated that no one comes to the Father except through Him.\(^{16}\)

8. **How can I possibly be forgiven for my sins?**

*Jesus’ resurrection* validates His claim to have victory over sin and death. The ultimate result of sin is death, and Jesus conquered death.\(^{17}\) In Romans chapter 10 we learn “that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”\(^{18}\)
Belief in Jesus’ resurrection is a central part of saving faith.

9. Why should I believe God is involved in His creation? I don’t see God making much difference in this world.

*Jesus’ resurrection* demonstrates God’s active involvement in this world. He predicted it, He planned it, He performed it. Peter writes, “[you are redeemed] with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you.”[19]

10. How can a loving God allow all of the evil in this world?

*Jesus’ resurrection* demonstrates a loving God redeeming a world degraded by evil. If there were no evil, Jesus would not have had to conquer death through the cross. If God was not loving, He would not have sent Jesus into the world to redeem us.[20] Looking at His death and resurrection, we know without a doubt that there is evil in this world, yet we are still loved by a God with power over death. Evil and love coexist because God valued us enough to create us in His image with a genuine capability to choose to turn our backs on Him. Making us unable to choose evil would have made us unable to love removing the greatest attribute of His image.

Once someone accepts the resurrection, many other barriers to accepting Christ are torn down. Whatever the question, the answer is the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.

May what John said of the disciples be true of us as well: “So when He was raised from the dead, . . . they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.”[21]

**Notes**

1. Scripture references are taken from the NASB95.
2. 1 Peter 1:1-2, 3:8.
3. 1 Peter 1:3-4.
4. 1 Corinthians 15:17-19
5. Gary Habermas, “My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew.” Available from the Web site of Biola University at www.biola.edu/antonyflew/.
8. 1 Peter 1:21.
9. 1 Peter 1:18-21.
10. 1 Cor. 15:54-57.
11. 1 Cor. 15:32.
15. Rom 1:4-5.
17. James 1:15; 1 Cor. 15:54-57.
19. 1 Peter 1:18-20.

**Resources on Evidence for Jesus’ Resurrection**


—. *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson,
1999.


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**In His H.A.N.D.S.: How We Can Know That Jesus is God**

Don Closson

*Don Closson explains the five lines of evidence that Jesus is God from the book Putting Jesus in His Place.*

**Jesus Shares the Honor Given to God**

Defending the deity of Christ can be a source of anxiety for some believers. Perhaps it is because our defense often consists only of a couple of proof texts which are quickly challenged by Jehovah’s Witnesses and others. Even worse, some Christians themselves are troubled by passages that seem to teach that Jesus is something less than God, that He is inferior to the Father in some significant way. They are fine with Jesus being the suffering servant, the Messiah who died for our sins, but
less sure of His role in creation or as a member of the triune everlasting “I Am” of
the Old Testament.

A recent book by Robert Bowman and Ed Komoszewski titled *Putting Jesus in His Place* is a great confidence builder for those wrestling with this key doctrine. The book offers five lines of evidence with deep roots in the biblical material. The book is organized around the acronym H.A.N.D.S. It argues that the New Testament teaches that Jesus deserves the honors only due to God, He shares the attributes that only God possesses, He is given names that can only be given to God, He performs deeds that only God can perform, and finally, He possesses a seat on the throne of God.

Let’s look at the first line of evidence for the deity of Christ, that Jesus deserves the honor that should only be given to God. To honor someone is to acknowledge “their place in the scheme of things—to speak about them and to behave toward them in a manner appropriate to their status and position.”\(^1\) As creator of the universe God deserves the highest level of honor and glory, since nothing can claim a higher degree of status or position. As a result, the Old Testament teaches that only God deserves the honor and glory that is part of human worship and He will not share this honor with anything else. In Isaiah 42 God declares that “I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols” (Isaiah 42:8).

So how does Jesus fit into this picture? In John 5 Jesus declares that the Father has entrusted judgment to the Son so that “all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father.” He adds that “He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father” (John 5:22, 23). Referring to his pre-existence with the Father before creation, Jesus says, “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (John 17:5). In these passages, Jesus is claiming the right to receive the same honor and glory due to the Father; in effect, He is claiming to be God in the same way that the Father is God.
Jesus Shares the Attributes of God

If Jesus is honored in the New Testament in a manner reserved only for God, it follows that one who is given the honor and glory reserved for God is also worthy of worship. So it’s not surprising that the book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is to be worshipped by the angels or that in Matthew’s Gospel the apostles worshipped him when he came to them walking on water (Hebrews 1:6; Matthew 14:33). Perhaps the most stirring image of Jesus being worshipped is in Revelation where every creature in heaven and on earth sing praises to the Father and to the Lamb, giving them both honor and glory and reporting that the four living creatures and the elders fell down and worshipped Him (Revelation 5:13-14).

The New Testament also teaches that Jesus shares divine attributes that only God possesses. When this claim is made, Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses and others protest by pointing out that Jesus exhibited the very human attributes of hunger, fatigue, and pain. This valid observation does not conflict with the traditional Christian teaching that Jesus possessed two essential natures—one divine and one human. There is no reason to assume that one set of attributes cancels out the other. It should be added that although Jesus shares a divine nature with the Father, He does not share the same properties within the Godhead or trinity. The Father sent Jesus into the world; Jesus died on the cross and assumed the role of our permanent high priest.

Jesus clearly states in John 14 that to see him is to see the Father; both are equally God (John 14:10). In Colossians, Paul goes to great lengths to argue that all of God’s divine attributes are present in Christ. He writes that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God” and that “. . .God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (Colossians 1:15, 19). He summarizes the same idea by adding that “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9). The writer of Hebrews concurs in the opening paragraph of that book, saying that “the Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Hebrews 1:3).

Jesus shares the Father’s attribute of pre-existing the created universe and His own physical incarnation. John’s Gospel tells us that Jesus was with the Father in
the beginning when the universe was created, and Paul adds that Jesus is before all things (John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:16-18). In other words, Jesus has always existed and is unchanging. He has been given all authority on heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18). He deserves the honor, praise, glory, and worship of all creation.

**Jesus Shares the Names Given to God**

Those who question the deity of Christ complain that the New Testament just doesn’t teach it, that it doesn’t come right out and say that Jesus is God. Is this really the case?

The New Testament uses two key words for God: *theos*, the general Greek word for deity, and *kurios*, usually translated as “lord.” *Theos* is the word most often used to designate God the Father and is also used a number of times in direct reference to Jesus, especially in the Gospel of John. John begins his book with the familiar proclamation that Jesus, the Word, was with God (*theos*) in the beginning, and that the Word (Jesus) was God (*theos*). Later in the chapter, John adds that “No one has ever seen God, but God (*theos*) the One and Only, who at the Father’s side, has made him known” (John 1:18). Jesus, the Word, is described by John as being with God in verse one, and at the Father’s side in verse eighteen, and in both cases is given the title *theos* or God.

The Gospel John also contains the confession by Thomas that Jesus is his Lord (*kurios*), and God (*theos*). John makes sure that we understand that Thomas was talking about Jesus by writing “Thomas said to Him,” that is, to Jesus, “‘My Lord and my God.’”

Paul uses *theos* in reference to Jesus a number of times. In Romans 9:5 he describes Jesus as “Christ, who is God (*theos*) over all.” And in Titus he writes that we are waiting for our “blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God (*theos*) and Savior, Jesus Christ (2:13).” Peter portrays himself as a servant of Christ who is writing to those through whom “the righteousness of our God (*theos*) and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours (2 Peter 1:1).”
All four gospels begin with John the Baptist’s ministry of “preparing the way of the Lord” as fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy in Isaiah 40:3. The prophet wrote, “In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.” The Hebrew word translated LORD in this verse is the unspoken special word for God used by the Jews consisting of four consonants called the tetragrammaton. The New Testament Gospels are applying the word Lord to Jesus in the same way that the Old Testament referred to Yahweh as LORD.

**Jesus Does the *Deeds* that Only God Can Do**

It was universally recognized by the Jews of Jesus’ day that “God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1; cf. Isaiah 37:16).” So it might be surprising to some that the New Testament also gives Jesus credit for creation. Paul teaches in Colossians that Jesus created “all things.” To make sure that no one misunderstands his point, he adds that “all things” includes “things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16-17). Paul wanted to be clear: Jesus is the creator God of the universe.

While Jesus’ role in creation is enough to establish his divine nature, He also exhibited supernatural divine power during His ministry on earth. Unlike the Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles, Jesus did not have to petition a higher power to heal or cast out demons. He had inherent divine power to accomplish his will. Other than giving thanks, Jesus did not pray before performing miracles. In fact, the apostles reported that some demons obeyed them only when they invoked Jesus’ name. There were a number of occasions when Jesus realized that power had gone out from Him even without His intention to heal (Luke 6:19; Mark 5:30; Luke 8:46).

Jesus not only healed and cast out demons, but also had direct power over nature. When the disciples were frightened on a boat, He “rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm” (Matthew 8:26). When thousands were
following him without food, He fed them miraculously (Matthew 14:20-21).

The New Testament teaching that salvation is possible through Jesus Christ alone would also have serious implications for Jewish readers. The Old Testament teaches that God is the only source of salvation. For instance, Psalm 62 teaches that “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from Him. He alone is my rock and my salvation.” How then does one explain the numerous references claiming Jesus to be the source of salvation? Matthew points out that Mary will call her son Jesus because he will save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). Jesus declares of himself that “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him (Jn. 3:17).” There are also instances where Jesus directly forgives the sins of individuals, thus attracting hostile attention from the Jews (Luke 7:47-49; Mark 2:5-7).

The Psalmist writes that it is the Lord God “who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities” and that “Salvation belongs to the Lord.” John summarizes nicely when he writes, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

**Jesus Has a Seat on God’s Throne**

Our last line of argument for the deity of Jesus Christ refers to his claim to have a place on the very throne of God. From this throne, Jesus rules over creation and will judge all of humanity. He literally possesses all authority to rule.

Jesus made this claim clear during His questioning by the high priest Caiaphas the night of his capture. Caiaphas asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” (Mark 14:61) If Jesus wasn’t God, this would have been a great opportunity for Him to clear up any misconceptions. But instead of denying His divinity, Jesus says “I am,” admitting to being God’s unique Son, and goes on to say, “you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62). The high priest’s response was dramatic; he tore his clothes and declared that those present had heard blasphemy from the lips of Jesus. They understood that Jesus was making a direct claim to being God, for only God could sit on the throne of the mighty one.
In His response to the high priest, Jesus draws from a number of Old Testament passages. The book of Daniel describes this “Son of Man” as having an everlasting dominion that will never be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14). The passage adds that the Son of Man has been given authority to rule over all people and nations, and that men of every language will worship him. He is also described as coming with the clouds of heaven, imagery that is used a number of times in the Old Testament to indicate divine presence. Exodus describes a pillar of cloud that designated God’s proximity to the Jews, while the book of Psalms and the prophet Isaiah both picture God riding on clouds in the heavens (Psalm 104:3; Isaiah 19:1). The point here is that Jesus is connecting Himself to this “Son of Man” who will sit at the right hand of the Father, have everlasting dominion and authority, and will be worshipped by all men. This kind of language can only be used to describe God.

The New Testament makes it clear that there is nothing not under the authority and power of Jesus. John writes that the Father put all things under His power (John 13:3). Paul adds that the Father seated Jesus at His right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named (Ephesians 1:20-21). Jesus sits on the judgment seat, He sent the Holy Spirit, He forgives sinners, and is our perfect eternal high priest (2 Corinthians 5:10; Acts 2:33; 7:59-60; Hebrews 7-10).

The New Testament provides multiple lines of evidence to make the case that Jesus is God. The only question remaining is whether or not we will worship him as a full member of the triune Godhead, the only eternal, self-existing, creator God of the universe.

Note


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Gospel Truth or Fictitious Gossip?

Dr. Michael Gleghorn provides good reasons to believe that the stories about Jesus were reliably preserved by his followers before being recorded in the Gospels.

Forgetting What Lies Behind?

It was late at night and the university library was about to close. I was feverishly working to complete a project for one of my classes. A bell sounded, indicating it was time to shut down and leave the building. As I and a few other students began shutting down our computers to go home for the night, a security guard suddenly began yelling at us to leave the building immediately! Apparently we weren’t moving quickly enough, and the guard, probably tired from a long day at work, was quite irritated. We told her we would leave as soon as we could, but it would take us a few minutes to pack up. Annoyed, she wrote down our names and threatened to report us to the administration. We, in turn, returned the favor, taking down her name and saying that we would report how rudely we were treated.

When I got back to my apartment, I immediately wrote down what had happened. I wanted to be sure that if I was contacted by the administration, I would have an accurate report of the evening’s events. Knowing how fallible human memory can be, I wanted to
write everything down while it was still fresh in my mind. Most people would say this was a wise thing to do.

But it raises an interesting question about the New Testament Gospels. Although liberal and conservative scholars differ a bit over when these documents were written, most would agree that the earliest Gospel (probably Mark) was written anywhere from twenty to forty years after Jesus’ death. And the latest, the Gospel of John, probably dates to around sixty years after Jesus’ death.

But why did they wait so long to write their accounts? Some scholars say this was plenty of time for Jesus’ followers to distort and embellish their Master’s original words and deeds. Consequently, they insist, by the time the ministry of Jesus was recorded in the Gospels, it had already reached a form that was partly fictional. In short, the oral tradition which lies behind the Gospels is alleged to have been corrupted before the Gospel writers ever “put pen to papyrus.” \[1\] In the words of the Jesus Seminar:

The Jesus of the gospels is an imaginative theological construct, into which has been woven traces of that enigmatic sage from Nazareth—traces that cry out for . . . liberation from . . . those whose faith overpowered their memories. The search for the authentic Jesus is a search for the forgotten Jesus.\[2\]

Is this true? Did the faith of Jesus’ earliest followers really overpower their memories of what Jesus said and did? Is our faith in the Gospels well-placed—or misplaced? In the remainder of this article we’ll see that there are good reasons to believe that the Gospel writers told us the “Gospel truth” about Jesus!

### Why the Wait?

Do the New Testament Gospels accurately preserve for us the things which Jesus said and did? Many liberal scholars don’t think so. They maintain that the oral tradition upon which the Gospels are based became quickly corrupted by the early church. If they’re right, then some of what we read about Jesus in the Gospels never really happened. As some of the fellows of the Jesus Seminar put it:
Scholars of the gospels are faced with a . . . problem: Much of the lore recorded in the gospels and elsewhere in the Bible is folklore, which means that it is wrapped in memories that have been edited, deleted, augmented, and combined many times over many years.{3}

This raises some important questions for us to consider. How carefully was the oral tradition about the words and deeds of Jesus transmitted in the early church? Does the evidence indicate whether or not it was corrupted before the Gospels were written? And why on earth did the Gospel writers wait so long to write their accounts?

Let’s begin with that last question. Why did the Gospel writers wait so long to record the ministry of Jesus? Let me offer two responses to this question. First, compared with other ancient biographies that are generally considered reliable, the Gospels were written relatively soon after the events they narrate. The Gospels were written anywhere from twenty to sixty years after the death of Jesus. Although this may initially seem like a long time, it’s still well within the lifetime of eyewitnesses who could either confirm or contradict these accounts of Jesus’ public ministry. By contrast, “The two earliest biographies of Alexander the Great were written . . . more than four hundred years after Alexander’s death . . . yet historians consider them to be generally trustworthy.”{4} Comparatively speaking, then, the Gospel writers really didn’t wait long at all to write their accounts.

Secondly, however, we may not even be looking at this issue correctly. As the authors of the recent book, Reinventing Jesus, point out:

It might be better to ask, Why were the Gospels written at all? If we think in categories of delay, then this presupposes that the writing of the Gospels was in the minds of these authors from the beginning. However, this is almost certainly not the case. What was paramount in the apostles’ earliest motives was oral proclamation of the gospel.{5}

In the early years of the church the story of Jesus was being told and retold by eyewitnesses of these events. But still, some might ask, might these “events” have
become gradually embellished with the story’s retelling, so that what’s recorded in the Gospels is no longer trustworthy?

To Tell the Old, Old Story

How accurately was the oral tradition about Jesus’ life and ministry preserved before being written down? Was it corrupted by his earliest followers prior to being recorded in the Gospels? Many liberal scholars think so. But there are good reasons to think otherwise.

In the first place, we must remember that “the interval between Jesus and the written Gospels was not dormant.”\(^6\) In fact, this period was filled with a tremendous amount of activity. The earliest followers of Jesus told and retold his story wherever they went. This is important, for as a recent book on Jesus observes:

> If the earliest proclamation about Jesus was altered in later years, then surely first-generation Christians would know about the changes and would object to them. It would not even take outsiders to object to the “new and improved Christianity,” since those who were already believers would have serious problems with the differences in the content of their belief.\(^7\)

Not only this, but New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg lists many other reasons for believing that this oral tradition was accurately transmitted by Jesus’ earliest followers.\(^8\) First, Jesus’ followers believed that He “proclaimed God’s Word in a way which demanded careful retelling.” Second, over ninety percent of his teachings contained “poetic elements which would have made them easy to memorize.” Third, “the almost universal method of education in antiquity, and especially in Israel, was rote memorization, which enabled people accurately to recount quantities of material far greater than all of the Gospels put together.” And fourth, “written notes and a kind of shorthand were often privately kept by rabbis and their disciples.” Although we can’t be sure that any of Jesus’ disciples kept written notes of His teachings, it’s at least possible that they did.
Finally, we must bear in mind that the Gospels are not the product of merely one person’s memories of the events of Jesus’ life. Instead, the oral tradition which lies behind the Gospels is based on numerous eyewitness reports. This is extremely important, for as the authors of *Reinventing Jesus* remind us, the disciples’ “recollections were not individual memories but collective ones—confirmed by other eyewitnesses and burned into their minds by the constant retelling of the story. . . . *Memory in community* is a deathblow to the view that the disciples simply forgot the real Jesus.” {9}

**What About the Differences?**

Thus, there are excellent reasons for believing that the first Christians accurately preserved and transmitted the stories about Jesus before they were recorded in the New Testament Gospels. But if this is so, then how do we explain the fact that the sayings of Jesus and his disciples are sometimes worded differently in different Gospels?

To cite just one example, consider the different ways in which the Gospel writers record the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples on the occasion of Peter’s famous confession at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus begins by asking his disciples a question, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke each word the question differently. Matthew records Jesus asking, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” (Matt. 16:13). But in Mark the question reads a bit differently, “Who do people say I am?” (Mark 8:27). And in Luke it’s a bit different still, “Who do the crowds say I am?” (Luke 9:18).

Not only is the precise wording of Jesus’ question different in each of these Gospels, but the wording of Peter’s response is as well. In Matthew, Peter answers, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (16:16). But in Mark he simply says, “You are the Christ” (8:29), and in Luke, “The Christ of God” (9:20).

Now clearly these are not major differences. In each case the gist of what’s said is the same. But we must also acknowledge that in each case the details are different. What’s going on here? If the stories about Jesus were accurately
preserved before being recorded in the Gospels, then why are there these subtle, yet real, differences in the words attributed to Jesus and Peter in each of these three accounts? Or to put this question in the words of Darrell Bock, how are we to understand such sayings in the Gospels—are they live, jive, or memorex?\(^\text{11}\)

On the one hand, the view which says such sayings are merely unhistorical “jive” just doesn’t do justice to the evidence we’ve already considered regarding how carefully the oral tradition about the life of Jesus was transmitted by his earliest followers. Nor does this view adequately account for both the internal and external evidence for the historical reliability of the Gospels.\(^\text{12}\)

On the other hand, the “memorex” view, which holds that the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ spoken words represent the exact words He spoke on the occasions reported, doesn’t seem to square with the actual evidence of the Gospels themselves. The Gospel writers do, as we saw above, report the words of Jesus and his disciples differently, and this is so even in cases where we can be quite confident that the incident occurred only once.

This leaves us with only one more option to consider.

A “Live” Option

Dr. Darrell Bock has persuasively argued for what he calls a “live” option in explaining the differences between the Gospel accounts.\(^\text{13}\) He describes this option this way:

> Each Evangelist retells the . . . words of Jesus in a fresh way . . . while . . . accurately presenting the “gist” of what Jesus said. . . . [T]his approach . . . recognizes the Jesus tradition as “live” in its dynamic and quality. We clearly hear Jesus . . . but . . . there is summary and emphasis in the complementary portraits that each Evangelist gives . . . .\(^\text{14}\)

In other words, the Gospel writers are not always giving us Jesus’ exact words, but they are always giving us his genuine voice. This distinction is absolutely necessary. For one thing, it helps explain the observed differences among Jesus’
sayings in the Gospels. It also sits well with the fact that most of these sayings had already been translated by the time they were first recorded. You see, most of Jesus’ original teaching would have been done in Aramaic, the dominant language of first-century Palestine. The Gospels, however, were written in Greek. Since “most of Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels is already a translation,” we’re not reading his exact words even when we’re reading the Gospels in Greek. Finally, Jesus’ longest speeches can be read in a matter of minutes. Yet “we know that Jesus kept his audiences for hours at a time (e.g., Mark 6:34-36).” It seems evident, then, “that the writers gave us a . . . summarized presentation of what Jesus said and did.”

But if the “live” option is correct, and the Gospels don’t always give us Jesus’ exact words, does this mean that their reports of Jesus’ teaching are untrustworthy? Not at all. The way in which the Gospel writers recorded the words and deeds of Jesus was totally consistent with the way in which responsible histories were written in the ancient world. As Dr. Bock observes, “the Greek standard of reporting speeches required a concern for accuracy in reporting the gist of what had been said, even if the exact words were not . . . recorded.”

This is exactly what a careful study of the Gospels reveals about the way in which their authors reported the words of Jesus. Although these writers lived before the invention of audio recorders, they nonetheless strove to honestly and reliably record the gist of Jesus’ teachings. We can therefore read these documents with confidence that they are telling us the “Gospel truth” about Jesus in a fresh and dynamic way.

Notes

The Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?
A Real Historical Event

Dr. Pat Zukeran presents strong evidence discounting the most common theories given against a historical resurrection. The biblical account and other evidence clearly discount these attempts to cast doubt on the resurrection. Any strong apologetic argument is anchored on the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ as an historical event.

Introduction

The most significant event in history is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the strongest evidence that Jesus is the Son of God. This event gives men and women the sure hope of eternal life a hope that not only gives us joy as we look to the future but also provides us with powerful reasons to live today.

Throughout the centuries, however, there have been scholars who have attempted to deny the account of the Resurrection. Our schools are filled with history books which give alternative explanations for the Resurrection or in some cases, fail even to mention this unique event.

In this essay we will take a look at the evidence for the Resurrection and see if this event is historical fact or fiction. But, first, we must establish the fact that Jesus Christ was a historical figure and not a legend. There are several highly accurate historical documents that attest to Jesus. First, let’s look at the four Gospels themselves. The authors Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John recorded very specific facts of the events surrounding the life of Jesus, and archaeology has verified the accuracy of the New Testament. Hundreds of facts such as the names of officials, geographical sites, financial currencies, and times of events have been confirmed. Sir William Ramsay, one of the greatest geographers of the 19th century, became firmly convinced of the accuracy of the New Testament as a result of the overwhelming evidence he discovered during his research. As a result, he completely reversed his antagonism against Christianity.
The textual evidence decisively shows that the Gospels were written and circulated during the lifetime of those who witnessed the events. Since there are so many specific names and places mentioned, eyewitnesses could have easily discredited the writings. The New Testament would have never survived had the facts been inaccurate. These facts indicate that the Gospels are historically reliable and show Jesus to be a historical figure. For more information on the accuracy of the Bible, see the essay from Probe entitled Authority of the Bible.

Another document that supports the historicity of Jesus is the work of Josephus, a potentially hostile Jewish historian. He recorded Antiquities, a history of the Jews, for the Romans during the lifetime of Jesus. He wrote, “Now there was about that time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man.”(1) Josephus goes on to relate other specific details about Jesus’ life and death that correspond with the New Testament. Roman historians such as Suetonius, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger also refer to Jesus as a historically real individual.

Skeptics often challenge Christians to prove the Resurrection scientifically. We must understand, the scientific method is based on showing that something is fact by repeated observations of the object or event. Therefore, the method is limited to repeatable events or observable objects. Historical events cannot be repeated. For example, can we repeatedly observe the creation of our solar system? The obvious answer is no, but that does not mean the creation of the solar system did not happen.

In proving a historical event like the Resurrection, we must look at the historical evidence. Thus far in our discussion we have shown that belief in the historical Jesus of the New Testament is certainly reasonable and that the scientific method cannot be applied to proving a historical event. For the reminder of this essay, we will examine the historical facts concerning the Resurrection and see what the evidence reveals.

**Examining the Evidence**

Three facts must be reckoned with when investigating the Resurrection: the empty tomb, the transformation of the Apostles, and the preaching of the
Resurrection originating in Jerusalem.

Let us first examine the case of the empty tomb. Jesus was a well-known figure in Israel. His burial site was known by many people. In fact Matthew records the exact location of Jesus’ tomb. He states, “And Joseph of Arimathea took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb” (Matt. 27:59). Mark asserts that Joseph was “a prominent member of the Council” (Mark 15:43).

It would have been destructive for the writers to invent a man of such prominence, name him specifically, and designate the tomb site, since eyewitnesses would have easily discredited the author’s fallacious claims.

Jewish and Roman sources both testify to an empty tomb. Matthew 28:12 13 specifically states that the chief priests invented the story that the disciples stole the body. There would be no need for this fabrication if the tomb had not been empty. Opponents of the Resurrection must account for this. If the tomb had not been empty, the preaching of the Apostles would not have lasted one day. All the Jewish authorities needed to do to put an end to Christianity was to produce the body of Jesus.

Along with the empty tomb is the fact that the corpse of Jesus was never found. Not one historical record from the first or second century is written attacking the factuality of the empty tomb or claiming discovery of the corpse. Tom Anderson, former president of the California Trial Lawyers Association states,

> Let’s assume that the written accounts of His appearances to hundreds of people are false. I want to pose a question. With an event so well publicized, don’t you think that it’s reasonable that one historian, one eye witness, one antagonist would record for all time that he had seen Christ’s body? . . . The silence of history is deafening when it comes to the testimony against the resurrection.(2)

Second, we have the changed lives of the Apostles. It is recorded in the Gospels that while Jesus was on trial, the Apostles deserted Him in fear. Yet 10 out of the
11 Apostles died as martyrs believing Christ rose from the dead. What accounts for their transformation into men willing to die for their message? It must have been a very compelling event to account for this.

Third, the Apostles began preaching the Resurrection in Jerusalem. This is significant since this is the very city in which Jesus was crucified. This was the most hostile city in which to preach. Furthermore, all the evidence was there for everyone to investigate. Legends take root in foreign lands or centuries after the event. Discrediting such legends is difficult since the facts are hard to verify. However, in this case the preaching occurs in the city of the event immediately after it occurred. Every possible fact could have been investigated thoroughly.

Anyone studying the Resurrection must somehow explain these three facts.

**Five Common Explanations**

Over the years five explanations have been used to argue against the Resurrection. We will examine these explanations to see whether they are valid.

*The Wrong Tomb Theory*

Proponents of this first argument state that according to the Gospel accounts, the women visited the grave early in the morning while it was dark. Due to their emotional condition and the darkness, they visited the wrong tomb. Overjoyed to see that it was empty, they rushed back to tell the disciples Jesus had risen. The disciples in turn ran into Jerusalem to proclaim the Resurrection.

There are several major flaws with this explanation. First, it is extremely doubtful that the Apostles would not have corrected the women’s error. The Gospel of John gives a very detailed account of them doing just that. Second, the tomb site was known not only by the followers of Christ but also by their opponents. The Gospels make it clear the body was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish council. If the body still remained in the tomb while the Apostles began preaching, the authorities simply would have to go to the right tomb, produce the body, and march it down the streets. This would have ended the
Christian faith once and for all. Remember, the preaching of the Resurrection began in Jerusalem, fifteen minutes away from the crucifixion site and the tomb. These factors make this theory extremely weak.

**The Hallucination Theory**

This second theory holds that the Resurrection of Christ just occurred in the minds’ of the disciples. Dr. William McNeil articulates this position in his book, *A World History*. He writes,

>The Roman authorities in Jerusalem arrested and crucified Jesus. . . . But soon afterwards the dispirited Apostles gathered in an upstairs room’ and suddenly felt again the heartwarming presence of their master. This seemed absolutely convincing evidence that Jesus’ death on the cross had not been the end but the beginning. . . . The Apostles bubbled over with excitement and tried to explain to all who would listen all that had happened.(3)

This position is unrealistic for several reasons. In order for hallucinations of this type to occur, psychiatrists agree that several conditions must exist. However, this situation was not conducive for hallucinations. Here are several reasons. Hallucinations generally occur to people who are imaginative and of a nervous make up. However, the appearances of Jesus occurred to a variety of people. Hallucinations are subjective and individual. No two people have the same experience. In this case, over five hundred people (Corinthians 15) have the same account. Hallucinations occur only at particular times and places and are associated with the events. The Resurrection appearances occur in many different environments and at different times. Finally, hallucinations of this nature occur to those who intensely want to believe. However, several such as Thomas and James, the half brother of Jesus were hostile to the news of the Resurrection.

If some continue to argue for this position, they still must account for the empty tomb. If the Apostles dreamed up the Resurrection at their preaching, all the authorities needed to do was produce the body and that would have ended the Apostles’ dream. These facts make these two theories extremely unlikely.
The Swoon Theory

A third theory espouses that Jesus never died on the cross but merely passed out and was mistakenly considered dead. After three days He revived, exited the tomb, and appeared to His disciples who believed He had risen from the dead. This theory was developed in the early nineteenth century, but today it has been completely given up for several reasons.

First, it is a physical impossibility that Jesus could have survived the tortures of the crucifixion. Second, the soldiers who crucified Jesus were experts in executing this type of death penalty. Furthermore, they took several precautions to make sure He was actually dead. They thrust a spear in His side. When blood and water come out separately, this indicates the blood cells had begun to separate from the plasma which will only happen when the blood stops circulating. Upon deciding to break the legs of the criminals (in order to speed up the process of dying), they carefully examined the body of Jesus and found that He was already dead.

After being taken down from the cross, Jesus was covered with eighty pounds of spices and embalmed. It is unreasonable to believe that after three days with no food or water, Jesus would revive. Even harder to believe is that Jesus could roll a two-ton stone up an incline, overpower the guards, and then walk several miles to Emmaeus. Even if Jesus had done this, His appearing to the disciples half-dead and desperately in need of medical attention would not have prompted their worship of Him as God.

In the 19th century, David F. Strauss, an opponent of Christianity, put an end to any hope in this theory. Although he did not believe in the Resurrection, he concluded this to be a very outlandish theory. He stated,

It is impossible that a being who had stolen half-dead out of the sepulchre, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening, and indulgence, and who still at last yielded to his sufferings, could have given the disciples the impression that he was a Conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of life, an impression that would lay at the bottom of their future ministry. (4)
**The Stolen Body Theory**

This fourth argument holds that Jewish and Roman authorities stole the body or moved it for safekeeping. It is inconceivable to think this a possibility. If they had the body, why did they need to accuse the disciples of stealing it? (Matt. 28:11 15). In Acts 4, the Jewish authorities were angered and did everything they could to prevent the spread of Christianity. Why would the disciples deceive their own people into believing in a false Messiah when they knew that this deception would mean the deaths of hundreds of their believing friends? If they really knew where the body was, they could have exposed it and ended the faith that caused them so much trouble and embarrassment. Throughout the preaching of the Apostles, the authorities never attempted to refute the Resurrection by producing a body. This theory has little merit.

**The Soldiers Fell Asleep Theory**

Thus far we have been studying the evidence for the Resurrection. We examined four theories used in attempts to invalidate this miracle. Careful analysis revealed the theories were inadequate to refute the Resurrection. The fifth and most popular theory has existed since the day of the Resurrection and is still believed by many opponents of Christianity. Matthew 28:12 13 articulates this position.

> When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money telling them, “You are to say, his disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.”

Many have wondered why Matthew records this and then does not refute it. Perhaps it is because this explanation was so preposterous, he did not see the need to do so.

This explanation remains an impossibility for several reasons. First, if the soldiers were sleeping, how did they know it was the disciples who stole the body? Second, it seems physically impossible for the disciples to sneak past the soldiers and then move a two-ton stone up an incline in absolute silence. Certainly the guards would have heard something.
Third, the tomb was secured with a Roman seal. Anyone who moved the stone would break the seal, an offense punishable by death. The depression and cowardice of the disciples makes it difficult to believe that they would suddenly become so brave as to face a detachment of soldiers, steal the body, and then lie about the Resurrection when the would ultimately face a life of suffering and death for their contrived message.

Fourth, Roman guards were not likely to fall asleep with such an important duty. There were penalties for doing so. The disciples would have needed to overpower them. A very unlikely scenario.

Finally, in the Gospel of John the grave clothes were found “lying there as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head. The cloth was folded up by itself separate from the linen” (20:6 7). There was not enough time for the disciples to sneak past the guards, roll away the stone, unwrap the body, rewrap it in their wrappings, and fold the head piece neatly next to the linen. In a robbery, the men would have flung the garments down in disorder and fled in fear of detection.

**Conclusion: Monumenetal Implications**

These five theories inadequately account for the empty tomb, the transformation of the Apostles, and the birth of Christianity in the city of the crucifixion. The conclusion we must seriously consider is that Jesus rose from the grave. The implications of this are monumental.

First, if Jesus rose from the dead, then what He said about Himself is true. He stated, “I am the Resurrection and the life; he who believes in me shall live even if he dies” (John 11:25). He also stated, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no man comes to the father, but through me” (John 14:6). Eternal life is found through Jesus Christ alone. Any religious belief that contradicts this must be false. Every religious leader has been buried in a grave. Their tombs have become places of worship. The location of Jesus’ tomb is unknown because it was empty; his body is not there. There was no need to enshrine an empty tomb.
Second, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:54, “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” Physical death is not the end; eternal life with our Lord awaits all who trust in Him because Jesus has conquered death.

Notes


For Further Reading


Rusty Wright presents a compelling case for the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection. Looking at four outcomes of the resurrection, he presents a brief case supporting a Christian worldview understanding that Jesus actually died and was resurrected from the tomb.

At Easter, some might wonder what all the fuss is about. Who cares? What difference does it make if Jesus rose from the dead?

It makes all the difference in the world. If Christ did not rise, then thousands of believers have died as martyrs for a hoax.

If he did rise, then he is still alive and can offer peace to troubled, hurting lives.

Countless scholars—among them the apostle Paul, Augustine, Sir Isaac Newton and C.S. Lewis—believed in the resurrection. We need not fear committing intellectual suicide by believing it also. Where do the facts lead?
Paul, a first-century skeptic-turned believer, wrote that “Christ died for our sins...he was buried...he was raised on the third day...he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve (Disciples). After that, he appeared to more than five hundred...at the same time, most of whom are still living.” Consider four pieces of evidence:

1. **The explosive growth of the Christian movement.** Within a few weeks after Jesus was crucified, a movement arose which, by the later admission of its enemies, “upset the world.” What happened to ignite this movement shortly after its leader had been executed?

2. **The Disciples’ changed lives.** After Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, most of the Disciples fled in fear. Peter denied three times that he was a follower of Jesus. (The women were braver and stayed to the end.) Yet ten out of the eleven Disciples (Judas committed suicide) were martyred for their faith. According to traditions, Peter was crucified upside down; Thomas was skewered; John was boiled in oil but survived. What turned these cowards into heroes? Each believed he had seen Jesus alive again.

3. **The empty tomb.** Jesus’ corpse was removed from the cross, wrapped like a mummy and placed in a solid-rock tomb. A one-and-a-half to two-ton stone was rolled into a slightly depressed groove to seal the tomb’s entrance.

A “Green Beret”-like unit of Roman soldiers guarded the grave. Sunday morning, the stone was found rolled away, the body was gone but the graveclothes were still in place. What happened?

Did Christ’s friends steal the body? Perhaps one of the women sweet-talked (karate-chopped?) the guards while the others moved the stone and tiptoed off with the body. Or maybe Peter (remember his bravery) or Thomas (Doubting Thomas) overpowered the guards, stole the body, then fabricated—and died for—a resurrection myth.

These theories hardly seem plausible. The guard was too powerful, the stone too heavy and the disciples too spineless to attempt such a feat.
Did Christ’s enemies steal the body? If Romans or Jewish religious leaders had the body, surely they would have exposed it publicly and Christianity would have died out. They didn’t, and it didn’t.

The “Swoon Theory” supposes that Jesus didn’t really die but was only unconscious. The expert Roman executioners merely thought he was dead. After a few days in the tomb without food or medicine, the cool air revived him.

He burst from the 100 pounds of graveclothes, rolled away the stone with his nail-pierced hands, scared the daylights out of the Roman soldiers, walked miles on wounded feet and convinced his Disciples he’d been raised from the dead. This one is harder to believe than the resurrection itself.

4. The appearances of the risen Christ. For 40 days after his death, many different people said they saw Jesus alive. Witnesses included a woman, a shrewd tax collector, several fishermen and over 500 people at once. These claims provide further eyewitness testimony for the resurrection.

As a skeptic, I realized that attempts to explain away the evidences run into a brick wall of facts that point to one conclusion: Christ is risen.

The above does not constitute an exhaustive proof, rather a reasoned examination of the evidence. Each interested person should evaluate the evidence and decide if it makes sense. Of course, the truth or falsity of the resurrection is a matter of historical fact and is not dependent on anyone’s belief. If the facts support the claim, one can conclude that he arose. In any case, mere intellectual assent to the facts does little for one’s life.

A major evidence comes experientially, in personally receiving Jesus’ free gift of forgiveness. He said, “I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him (or her).”

Worth considering?

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The Case for Christ - Reasons to Believe in the Reality of Christ

Dr. Ray Bohlin

Dr. Ray Bohlin summarizes the evidence found by Lee Strobel when researching the question: Is Jesus Christ really who the Bible says He is? He shows that we have strong evidence on every front that backs up our belief in Jesus as the Son of God. This important apologetic argument helps us understand the enduring value of Christianity.

Sometimes the Evidence Doesn’t Stack Up

Skeptics around the world claim that Jesus either never said He was God or He never exemplified the activities and mindset of God. Either way they rather triumphantly proclaim that Jesus was just a man. Some will go so far as to suggest that He was a very moral and special man, but a man nonetheless. Well, Lee Strobel was just such a skeptic. For Strobel, there was far too much evidence against the idea of God, let alone the possibility that God became a man. God was just mythology, superstition, or wishful thinking.

As a graduate of Yale Law School, an investigative reporter, and eventual legal affairs editor for the Chicago Tribune, Strobel was familiar with the weighing of evidence. He was familiar with plenty of university professors who knew Jesus as an iconoclastic Jew, a revolutionary, or a sage, but not God. He had read just enough philosophy and history to support his skepticism.

As Strobel himself says,

As far as I was concerned, the case was closed. There was enough proof for me to rest easy with the conclusion that the divinity of Jesus was nothing more than the fanciful invention of superstitious people. Or so I thought.\[1\]
That last hesitation came as a result of his wife’s conversion. After the predictable rolling of the eyes and fears of his wife being the victim of a bait and switch scam, he noticed some very positive changes he found attractive and intriguing. The reporter in him eventually wanted to get to the bottom of this and he launched his own personal investigation. Setting aside as best he could his own personal interest and prejudices, he began reading and studying, interviewing experts, examining archaeology and the Bible.

Over time the evidence began to point to the previously unthinkable. Strobel’s book *The Case for Christ* is a revisiting of his earlier quest. He interviews a host of experts along three lines of evidence. In the first section Strobel investigates what he calls the record. What did the eyewitnesses say they saw and heard? Can they be trusted? Can the gospel accounts be trusted? What about evidence from outside the Bible? Does archaeology help or hurt the case for Christ? Strobel puts tough questions to his experts and their answers will both surprise and exhilarate.

In the third section of the book, Strobel investigates the resurrection. He examines the medical evidence, explores the implications of the empty tomb, the reliability of the appearances after the resurrection, and the wide-ranging circumstantial evidence.

However, here we’ll focus on the middle section of the book, the analysis of Jesus Himself. Did Jesus really think He was God? Was He crazy? Did He act like He was God? And did He truly match the picture painted in the Old Testament of the Messiah?

**Was Jesus Really Convinced that He Was the Son of God?**

The psychological profiler is a new weapon in the arsenal of criminal investigators. They understand that behavior reflects personality. These highly trained professionals examine the actions and words of criminals and from these clues construct a psychological and sometimes historical profile of the likely perpetrator.
These same skills can be applied to our question of whether Jesus actually thought He was God. We can learn a great deal about what Jesus thought of Himself, not just from what He said, but what He did and how He did it.

Ben Witherington was educated at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (M. Div.) and the University of Durham in England (Th. D.). He has taught at several universities and seminaries and authored numerous books and articles about the person of Jesus.

Strobel began his interview by stating that Jesus wasn’t very forthcoming about His identity in public, even mysterious. He didn’t come right out and say He was the Son of God or the Messiah. Couldn’t it be that Jesus simply didn’t see Himself that way?

Witherington points out that Jesus needed to operate in the context of His day. To boldly state that He was God would have at first confused and then maddened the Jews of His day. Blasphemy was not treated lightly. Therefore He was very careful, especially at first, of what He said publicly.

There are other clues to Jesus’ self-identity as God. He chose twelve disciples, as God chose the twelve nations of Israel. He called John the Baptist the greatest man on earth; yet He went on to do even greater things in His miracles. He told the Pharisees, in contradiction to much of the Old Testament law, that what defiled a man was what came out of his mouth, not what he put in it. “We have to ask, what kind of person thinks he has the authority to set aside the divinely inspired Jewish Scriptures and supplant them with his own teaching.”{2} Even the Romans labeled Him King of the Jews. Either Jesus actually said that or someone thought He did.

Since Jesus’ followers called Him Rabboni or Rabbi, it seems they just thought of Him as a teacher and nothing more. But Witherington reminds us that Jesus actually taught in a radical new way. In Judaism, the authority of two or more witnesses was required for the proclamation of truth. But Jesus frequently said, “Amen I say to you,” or in modern English, “I swear in advance to the truthfulness of what I am about to say.” Jesus attested to the truth of what He was saying on
His own authority. This was truly revolutionary.

The evidence that Jesus believed that He stood in the very place of God is absolutely convincing. Maybe He was just crazy. We’ll explore that question next.

**Was Jesus Crazy When He Claimed to be the Son of God?**

There’s considerable doubt in the general public about the usefulness of psychological testimony in the courtroom. It seems that you can find some psychologist to testify to just about anything concerning someone’s state of mind at the time a crime was committed. But while abuses can occur, most people recognize that a trained and experienced psychologist can offer helpful insights into a person’s state of mind while examining his words and actions.

In our investigation of Jesus, if He really believed He was God, can we determine if He was crazy or insane? You can visit just about any mental health facility and be introduced to people who think they are Julius Caesar or Napoleon or even Jesus Christ. Could Jesus have been deluded?

Not so, according to Gary Collins, a psychologist with a doctorate in clinical psychology from Purdue and the author of numerous books and articles in popular magazines and professional journals. Disturbed individuals often show signs of depression or anxiety or explosive anger. But Jesus never displays inappropriate emotions.

He does get angry, but this is clearly appropriate—in the temple, for instance, when He saw the misuse of the temple courtyard and that the moneychangers were taking advantage of the poor. He didn’t just get ticked off because someone was annoying Him. In fact, Jesus seems at His most composed when being challenged. In a beautiful passage, Collins describes Jesus as he would an old friend:

He was loving but didn’t let his compassion immobilize him; he didn’t have a bloated ego, even though he was often surrounded by adoring crowds; he
maintained balance despite an often demanding lifestyle; he always knew what he was doing and where he was going; he cared deeply about people, including women and children, who weren’t seen as being important back then; he was able to accept people while not merely winking at their sin; he responded to individuals based on where they were at and what they uniquely needed. All in all I just don’t see signs that Jesus was suffering from any known mental illness.[3]

OK, so maybe Jesus wasn’t mentally disturbed, but maybe He used psychological tricks to perform His miracles. Many illnesses are psychosomatic, so maybe His healings were just by the power of suggestion. Collins readily admits that maybe some of Jesus’ miracles were of this very type, but they were still healed. And some of His miracles just can’t fit this description. Jesus healed leprosy and people blind since birth, both of which would be difficult to pull off as a psychological trick. His miracles over nature also can’t be explained psychologically, and raising Lazarus from the dead after being in the tomb for a few days is not the stuff of trickery. No, Jesus wasn’t crazy.

**Did Jesus Fulfill the Attributes of God?**

Modern forensics utilizes artists who are able to sketch the appearance of a criminal based on the recollections of the victims. This is an important tool to be able to alert the public as to the appearance of a usually violent offender. In Lee Strobel’s investigation of the evidence for Jesus, he uses the Old Testament as a sketch of what God is supposed to be like. If Jesus claims to be God, then what we see of Him in the Gospels should mirror the picture of God in the Old Testament.

For this purpose, Strobel interviewed Dr. D. A. Carson, research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. Carson can read a dozen languages and has authored or edited over forty books about Jesus and the New Testament.

At the start of the interview, Strobel asks Carson, “What did Jesus say or do that convinces you that Jesus is God?” The answer was a little surprising. Jesus forgave sins.
We all see ourselves as having the power and authority to forgive someone who has wronged us. Jesus forgave people for things they did that didn’t involve Jesus at all. This was startling for that time and even today. Only God can truly forgive sins, and Jesus specifically does so on a number of occasions.\(^4\)

In addition, Jesus considered himself to be without sin. Historically, we consider people to be holy who are fully conscious of their own failures and are fighting them honestly in the power of the Holy Spirit. But Jesus gave no such impression. In that wonderful chapter, John 8, Jesus asks if anyone can convict Him of sin (John 8:46). The question itself is startling, but no one answers. Sinlessness is another attribute of deity.

This chapter is a wonderful interview with Carson, covering other questions, such as: how could Jesus be God and actually be born; or say that the Father was greater than He; or not speak out strongly against the slavery of the Jewish and Roman culture; or believe in and send people to Hell? I’ll leave you to explore those fascinating questions on your own in the book.

Strobel concludes that the Bible declares several attributes for God and applies them to Jesus. John 16:30 records one of the disciples saying, “Now we can see that you know all things.” Jesus says in Matthew 28:20, “Surely I am with you even unto the end of the age.” And in Matthew 18:20 He says, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them.” All authority was given Him (Matthew 28:18) and Hebrews tells us that He is the same yesterday and today. So Jesus is omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, and immutable. In John 14:7, Jesus says, “If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well.”

**Did Jesus—and Jesus Alone—Match the Identity of the Messiah?**

So far in Strobel’s interviews with scholars we have affirmed that Jesus did claim to be God, He wasn’t insane or emotionally disturbed, and He did things that only God would do. Now we want to review Strobel’s interview with Louis Lapides, a Jewish believer as to whether Jesus actually fit the Old Testament picture of what
the Messiah would be like.

One of the important pieces of evidence that convinced Lapides that Jesus was the long-looked-for Messiah was the fulfillment of prophecy. There are over forty prophecies concerning the coming Messiah, and Jesus fulfilled every one. Some say this is just coincidence. But, the odds of just one person fulfilling even five of these prophecies is less than one chance in one hundred million billion—a number millions of times greater than the number of all people who have ever lived on earth.\(^5\)

But maybe this isn’t all it seems. Objections to the correlation of Jesus’ life to the prophecies of the Messiah fall into four categories. The first is the coincidence argument, which we just dispelled. Perhaps the most frequently heard argument is that the gospel writers fabricated the details to make it appear that Jesus was the Messiah. But the gospels were written close enough in time to the actual events that, if false, critics could have exposed the details. Certainly this is true of those in the Jewish community who had every reason to squash this new religion before it got started.

Third, there is the suggestion that Jesus intentionally fulfilled these many prophecies so as to make Himself appear as the Messiah. That’s conceivable for some of the prophecies, such as Jesus’ riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, but for others it’s impossible. How could Jesus arrange for his ancestry, or place of birth, or the method of execution, or that soldiers would gamble for his clothing? The list goes on.

Fourth, perhaps Christians have just ripped these so-called prophecies out of context and have misinterpreted them. When asked, Lapides sighed and replied:

> You know, I go through books that people write to try to tear down what we believe. That’s not fun to do, but I spend the time to look at each objection individually and then to research the context and the wording in the original language. And every single time, the prophecies have stood up and shown themselves to be true.\(^6\)
What I found most intriguing about the interviews was the combination of academic integrity on the part of these scholars alongside a very evident love for the One of whom they were speaking. For these scholars, finding the historical Jesus was not just an academic exercise, but also a life-changing personal encounter with Jesus. Perhaps it can be for you too.

Notes


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**Ancient Evidence for Jesus from Non-Christian Sources**

Dr. Michael Gleghorn

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn examines evidence from ancient non-Christian sources for the life of Jesus, demonstrating that such sources help confirm the historical*
reliability of the Gospels.

Evidence from Tacitus

Although there is overwhelming evidence that the New Testament is an accurate and trustworthy historical document, many people are still reluctant to believe what it says unless there is also some independent, non-biblical testimony that corroborates its statements. In the introduction to one of his books, F.F. Bruce tells about a Christian correspondent who was told by an agnostic friend that “apart from obscure references in Josephus and the like,” there was no historical evidence for the life of Jesus outside the Bible.¹ This, he wrote to Bruce, had caused him “great concern and some little upset in [his] spiritual life.”² He concludes his letter by asking, “Is such collateral proof available, and if not, are there reasons for the lack of it?”³ The answer to this question is, “Yes, such collateral proof is available,” and we will be looking at some of it in this article.

Let’s begin our inquiry with a passage that historian Edwin Yamauchi calls “probably the most important reference to Jesus outside the New Testament.”⁴ Reporting on Emperor Nero’s decision to blame the Christians for the fire that had destroyed Rome in A.D. 64, the Roman historian Tacitus wrote:

> Nero fastened the guilt . . . on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of . . . Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome. . . .⁵

What all can we learn from this ancient (and rather unsympathetic) reference to Jesus and the early Christians? Notice, first, that Tacitus reports Christians derived their name from a historical person called Christus (from the Latin), or Christ. He is said to have “suffered the extreme penalty,” obviously alluding to the Roman method of execution known as crucifixion. This is said to have occurred during the reign of Tiberius and by the sentence of Pontius Pilatus. This confirms
much of what the Gospels tell us about the death of Jesus.

But what are we to make of Tacitus’ rather enigmatic statement that Christ’s death briefly checked “a most mischievous superstition,” which subsequently arose not only in Judaea, but also in Rome? One historian suggests that Tacitus is here “bearing indirect . . . testimony to the conviction of the early church that the Christ who had been crucified had risen from the grave.”\(^\text{6}\) While this interpretation is admittedly speculative, it does help explain the otherwise bizarre occurrence of a rapidly growing religion based on the worship of a man who had been crucified as a criminal.\(^\text{7}\) How else might one explain that?

## Evidence from Pliny the Younger

Another important source of evidence about Jesus and early Christianity can be found in the letters of Pliny the Younger to Emperor Trajan. Pliny was the Roman governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor. In one of his letters, dated around A.D. 112, he asks Trajan’s advice about the appropriate way to conduct legal proceedings against those accused of being Christians.\(^\text{8}\) Pliny says that he needed to consult the emperor about this issue because a great multitude of every age, class, and sex stood accused of Christianity.\(^\text{9}\)

At one point in his letter, Pliny relates some of the information he has learned about these Christians:

> They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.\(^\text{10}\)

This passage provides us with a number of interesting insights into the beliefs and practices of early Christians. First, we see that Christians regularly met on a
certain fixed day for worship. Second, their worship was directed to Christ, demonstrating that they firmly believed in His divinity. Furthermore, one scholar interprets Pliny’s statement that hymns were sung to Christ, as to a god, as a reference to the rather distinctive fact that, “unlike other gods who were worshipped, Christ was a person who had lived on earth.”\(^{[11]}\) If this interpretation is correct, Pliny understood that Christians were worshipping an actual historical person as God! Of course, this agrees perfectly with the New Testament doctrine that Jesus was both God and man.

Not only does Pliny’s letter help us understand what early Christians believed about Jesus’ person, it also reveals the high esteem to which they held His teachings. For instance, Pliny notes that Christians bound themselves by a solemn oath not to violate various moral standards, which find their source in the ethical teachings of Jesus. In addition, Pliny’s reference to the Christian custom of sharing a common meal likely alludes to their observance of communion and the “love feast.”\(^{[12]}\) This interpretation helps explain the Christian claim that the meal was merely food of an ordinary and innocent kind. They were attempting to counter the charge, sometimes made by non-Christians, of practicing “ritual cannibalism.”\(^{[13]}\) The Christians of that day humbly repudiated such slanderous attacks on Jesus’ teachings. We must sometimes do the same today.

**Evidence from Josephus**

Perhaps the most remarkable reference to Jesus outside the Bible can be found in the writings of Josephus, a first century Jewish historian. On two occasions, in his *Jewish Antiquities*, he mentions Jesus. The second, less revealing, reference describes the condemnation of one “James” by the Jewish Sanhedrin. This James, says Josephus, was “the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ.”\(^{[14]}\) F.F. Bruce points out how this agrees with Paul’s description of James in Galatians 1:19 as “the Lord’s brother.”\(^{[15]}\) And Edwin Yamauchi informs us that “few scholars have questioned” that Josephus actually penned this passage.\(^{[16]}\)

As interesting as this brief reference is, there is an earlier one, which is truly astonishing. Called the “Testimonium Flavianum,” the relevant portion declares:
About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he . . . wrought surprising feats. . . . He was the Christ. When Pilate . . . condemned him to be crucified, those who had . . . come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared . . . restored to life. . . . And the tribe of Christians . . . has . . . not disappeared. \{17\}

Did Josephus really write this? Most scholars think the core of the passage originated with Josephus, but that it was later altered by a Christian editor, possibly between the third and fourth century A.D. \{18\} But why do they think it was altered? Josephus was not a Christian, and it is difficult to believe that anyone but a Christian would have made some of these statements. \{19\}

For instance, the claim that Jesus was a wise man seems authentic, but the qualifying phrase, “if indeed one ought to call him a man,” is suspect. It implies that Jesus was more than human, and it is quite unlikely that Josephus would have said that! It is also difficult to believe he would have flatly asserted that Jesus was the Christ, especially when he later refers to Jesus as “the so-called” Christ. Finally, the claim that on the third day Jesus appeared to His disciples restored to life, inasmuch as it affirms Jesus’ resurrection, is quite unlikely to come from a non-Christian!

But even if we disregard the questionable parts of this passage, we are still left with a good deal of corroborating information about the biblical Jesus. We read that he was a wise man who performed surprising feats. And although He was crucified under Pilate, His followers continued their discipleship and became known as Christians. When we combine these statements with Josephus’ later reference to Jesus as “the so-called Christ,” a rather detailed picture emerges which harmonizes quite well with the biblical record. It increasingly appears that the “biblical Jesus” and the “historical Jesus” are one and the same!

**Evidence from the Babylonian Talmud**

There are only a few clear references to Jesus in the Babylonian Talmud, a collection of Jewish rabbinical writings compiled between approximately A.D.
70-500. Given this time frame, it is naturally supposed that earlier references to Jesus are more likely to be historically reliable than later ones. In the case of the Talmud, the earliest period of compilation occurred between A.D. 70-200. The most significant reference to Jesus from this period states:

*On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald . . . cried, “He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy.”*

Let’s examine this passage. You may have noticed that it refers to someone named “Yeshu.” So why do we think this is Jesus? Actually, “Yeshu” (or “Yeshua”) is how Jesus’ name is pronounced in Hebrew. But what does the passage mean by saying that Jesus “was hanged”? Doesn’t the New Testament say he was crucified? Indeed it does. But the term “hanged” can function as a synonym for “crucified.” For instance, Galatians 3:13 declares that Christ was “hanged”, and Luke 23:39 applies this term to the criminals who were crucified with Jesus. So the Talmud declares that Jesus was crucified on the eve of Passover. But what of the cry of the herald that Jesus was to be stoned? This may simply indicate what the Jewish leaders were planning to do. If so, Roman involvement changed their plans!

The passage also tells us why Jesus was crucified. It claims He practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy! Since this accusation comes from a rather hostile source, we should not be too surprised if Jesus is described somewhat differently than in the New Testament. But if we make allowances for this, what might such charges imply about Jesus?

Interestingly, both accusations have close parallels in the canonical gospels. For instance, the charge of sorcery is similar to the Pharisees’ accusation that Jesus cast out demons “by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons.” But notice this: such a charge actually tends to confirm the New Testament claim that Jesus performed miraculous feats. Apparently Jesus’ miracles were too well attested to deny. The only alternative was to ascribe them to sorcery! Likewise, the charge of enticing Israel to apostasy parallels Luke’s account of the Jewish leaders who
accused Jesus of misleading the nation with his teaching.[26] Such a charge tends to corroborate the New Testament record of Jesus’ powerful teaching ministry. Thus, if read carefully, this passage from the Talmud confirms much of our knowledge about Jesus from the New Testament.

**Evidence from Lucian**

Lucian of Samosata was a second century Greek satirist. In one of his works, he wrote of the early Christians as follows:

*The Christians . . . worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account. . . . [It] was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws.*[27]

Although Lucian is jesting here at the early Christians, he does make some significant comments about their founder. For instance, he says the Christians worshipped a man, “who introduced their novel rites.” And though this man’s followers clearly thought quite highly of Him, He so angered many of His contemporaries with His teaching that He “was crucified on that account.”

Although Lucian does not mention his name, he is clearly referring to Jesus. But what did Jesus teach to arouse such wrath? According to Lucian, he taught that all men are brothers from the moment of their conversion. That’s harmless enough. But what did this conversion involve? It involved denying the Greek gods, worshipping Jesus, and living according to His teachings. It’s not too difficult to imagine someone being killed for teaching that. Though Lucian doesn’t say so explicitly, the Christian denial of other gods combined with their worship of Jesus implies the belief that Jesus was more than human. Since they denied other gods in order to worship Him, they apparently thought Jesus a greater God than any that Greece had to offer!

Let’s summarize what we’ve learned about Jesus from this examination of ancient
non-Christian sources. First, both Josephus and Lucian indicate that Jesus was regarded as wise. Second, Pliny, the Talmud, and Lucian imply He was a powerful and revered teacher. Third, both Josephus and the Talmud indicate He performed miraculous feats. Fourth, Tacitus, Josephus, the Talmud, and Lucian all mention that He was crucified. Tacitus and Josephus say this occurred under Pontius Pilate. And the Talmud declares it happened on the eve of Passover. Fifth, there are possible references to the Christian belief in Jesus’ resurrection in both Tacitus and Josephus. Sixth, Josephus records that Jesus’ followers believed He was the Christ, or Messiah. And finally, both Pliny and Lucian indicate that Christians worshipped Jesus as God!

I hope you see how this small selection of ancient non-Christian sources helps corroborate our knowledge of Jesus from the gospels. Of course, there are many ancient Christian sources of information about Jesus as well. But since the historical reliability of the canonical gospels is so well established, I invite you to read those for an authoritative “life of Jesus!”

**Notes**


2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.


9. Ibid., 27.


15. Ibid.


18. Ibid.

19. Although time would not permit me to mention it on the radio, another version of Josephus’ “Testimonium Flavianum” survives in a tenth-century Arabic version (Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 41). In 1971, Professor Schlomo Pines published a study on this passage. The passage is interesting because it lacks most of the questionable elements that many scholars believe to be Christian interpolations. Indeed, “as Schlomo Pines and David Flusser...stated, it is quite plausible that none of the arguments against Josephus writing the original words even applies to
the Arabic text, especially since the latter would have had less chance of being censored by the church” (Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 194). The passage reads as follows: “At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. His conduct was good and (he) was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive; accordingly he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.” (Quoted in James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus Within Judaism*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1988), 95, cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 194).


24. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 204. See also John 18:31-32.


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The Tomb of Jesus: A Titanic Discovery or Hype?

Dr. Patrick Zukeran

Written by Patrick Zukeran

On March 4, 2007, the Discovery Channel aired “The Lost Tomb of Jesus,” a special directed by James Cameron, the Oscar winning director of the movie Titanic. Cameron based his work on a book released that day, The Jesus Family Tomb, by Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino. This documentary was based on a discovery made in 1980 in Talpiot, a suburb of Jerusalem where a large tomb containing ten caskets was found. Although scholars and archaeologists at that time did not associate this finding with any New Testament characters, the claim has recently arisen that this is the tomb of the Jesus and several of His family members.

Is this a titanic discovery that could change history, or is this a lot of overblown hype? If this is indeed the tomb of Christ and His remains are in one of the ossuaries, this would be a devastating blow to the New Testament teaching regarding the resurrection of Christ. However, as in other attempts to recreate Jesus, we find ourselves dealing with a flawed theory built on unlikely scenarios, fishy facts, and Hollywood hype.

Scholars Speak

The tomb was discovered in 1980, so we have known about this site for nearly thirty years. Its lack of recognition by the scholarly community as a tomb of significance to New Testament characters is telling. Most scholars did not associate the crypt with Jesus. This includes Professor Amos Kloner who worked on the tomb and is one of Israel’s most prominent archeologists. Kloner states that this was a non-event and dismisses Cameron’s efforts as crass profit-seeking.
Likewise, Joe Zias, curator for anthropology and archeology at the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem from 1972 to 1997, and the one who personally numbered the Talpiot ossuaries, stated that Cameron is not an archaeologist and that “projects like these make a mockery of the archeological profession.”{1}

Finally, William Dever, an expert on near eastern archaeology and anthropology who has worked with Israeli archeologists for five decades, affirms that specialists have known about the ossuaries for years. According to Dever, “The fact that it’s been ignored tells you something…. It [the film] would be amusing if it didn’t mislead so many people.”{2}

Newsweek Magazine writes, “Good sense, and the Bible, still the best existing historical record of Jesus of Nazareth, argue against Jacobovici’s claims.”{3} Time Magazine states that Jacobovici’s book is “…too dependent on stretched scholarship and conjecture to make its title case.”{4} The fact that the top scholars and popular periodicals see no significance regarding the Talpiot tombs and Jesus’ life is extremely significant. The lack of endorsement should have us questioning the claims of Cameron and Jacobovici.

Highly Improbably Scenarios

Another reason Cameron’s theory should be questioned is that this theory is built on two highly improbable scenarios. The first improbable scenario is the secret marriage of Jesus to Mary Magdalene. This theory was introduced in the novel The Da Vinci Code; I have dealt more extensively in a separate article entitled “Decoding Fact From Fiction in The Da Vinci Code.”

Here is a brief overview of why this allegation of a secret marriage should be rejected. First, the New Testament says nothing of a secret marriage. In fact, all the evidence points against any marital relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. In the Gospels, women are identified with their male counterpart; however, Mary is never paired with Jesus. Rather, she is identified with her hometown of Migdal and is thus known as Mary Magdalene. Secondly, at the cross Mary Magdalene is present along with Jesus’ mother Mary. In his dying
moments, Jesus addresses His mother and cares for her needs but says nothing to Mary Magdalene. It is very strange that He would address His mother but say nothing to His “wife” standing next to her. Although I could continue with more examples, I will end with this: At the resurrection, Mary sees the risen Christ for the first time at the tomb, and she exclaims, “Rabboni!” or “My teacher!” This is a very odd way to address one’s “husband,” especially if He has just risen from the dead! This exclamation is more fitting as a disciple’s response to her Lord. For these reasons, one cannot build a case from the New Testament that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married.

A second important historical source comes from the writings of the Church Fathers. These early Church leaders, who were writing as early as the late first century, say nothing of a marriage between Jesus and Mary. In their writings they say very little of Mary Magdalene and what they do mention of Mary is consistent with the Gospels. This is strange if Mary had been the wife of Jesus. We would expect many essays written debating the nature of their child. How much of the divine nature was passed on to the offspring of Jesus would have been a very significant issue to the early church leaders.

Just as is done in *The Da Vinci Code*, Cameron and Jacobovici appeal to the Gnostic writings found at Nag Hammadi. (For a more extensive treatment, see my article “Decoding Fact From Fiction in *The Da Vinci Code*: Part 2”) Nearly three generations after the apostles, the Gnostics began to refashion Jesus into their image. In about the late second century AD, Gnostic Gospels and other alleged apostolic works began to appear, especially in Egypt. At Nag Hammadi, Egypt, a library of Gnostic works was found. These works were written in the late second to fourth century AD, so they could not have been written by the Apostles. They also contradicted major teachings of the New Testament and contained fanciful myths of Jesus. For these reasons, they were never considered as part of the inspired canon of scripture. Cameron appeals to these works, most specifically to the Acts of Philip and the Gospel of Mary Magdalene.

Even within these works, there are only two passages that are referenced, neither of which build a case for a marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. First, in
the Acts of Philip, dated from the third century AD, Peter and the other disciples are arguing with Mary regarding information she claims to have received from Jesus which the other apostles did not. It is strange that the disciples argue with the “wife” of Jesus over this. If she had been His wife, they should have expected her to have information they would not. Also, she never appeals to her “marriage” to Jesus as her defense even though that would have been her best argument to silence their complaints.

Second, in the Gospel of Mary, dated from the third century AD, it is alleged that Jesus often “kissed [Mary Magdalene] on the mouth.” This passage is also not compelling for several reasons. First, we do not know if the word “mouth” is the correct word since it is missing in the original text. He could have kissed her on the hand, head, or other area. The subsequent line of the passage states that this offended the disciples. Why would they have been offended if she had been the wife of Jesus? Third, since the physical realm is impure in Gnosticism, sex was thus regarded as impure. Jesus, the “Master Gnostic,” would not have engaged in marital and sexual behavior. Fourth, Mary is described as the “companion of the savior.” The term “companion” is the Greek word koinonos. This word can be used in reference to a wife, but it is used more often to designate a spiritual brother or sister in the faith. The common term for wife is gyne. Therefore, even these two passages from sources outside the inspired canon do not build a strong case for a secret marriage.

The second unlikely scenario is the case of the stolen body. New Testament scholars on all sides agree that the tomb site of Jesus was known. In the earliest writings, Mark and John identify Jesus being buried in the grave of Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Jewish council. Not only was the gravesite known, but it was also found empty on the third day. A few skeptics allege that Joseph of Arimathea was a fictional character. However, this would have been a disaster for the disciples to fictionally create such a high profile figure. The Gospels are written well within the first century AD and were circulated during the lifetime of the eyewitnesses, many of whom were looking to discredit the Gospels. (For more information, see the Probe article “Historical Reliability of the Gospels.”) If Joseph of Arimathea had been a fictional creation, it surely and
readily would have been found out.

Jesus’ body was buried in Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb on Friday evening. In order for Cameron’s theory to be complete, the disciples, or others, would have had to purchase this large gravesite, steal, and rebury Jesus’ body all within a day. Even if this had been accomplished, we must then accept the idea that the Apostles knew of the Talpiot site and lied about the resurrection. This would mean that the Apostles all suffered and led many, including themselves, to brutal deaths for a lie they themselves had perpetuated. This is highly unlikely scenario, for history shows that men will not die for that which they know and can confirm to be a lie.

Also, if they purchased the tomb site, people outside of the eleven disciples would have known about this site. The Jewish leaders, who were very eager to display the body of Jesus to dispel rumors of his resurrection, would have easily found a tomb with such clear markings. This theory suggesting a secret burial ground unknown to anyone but Jesus’ family is untenable given the mindset and influence of His many enemies.

**Fishy Facts**

Along with these unlikely scenarios are some fishy facts. First, Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus was from Bethlehem and lived in Nazareth. He apparently died years before Jesus’ ministry began and was likely buried in Bethlehem or Nazareth, not the Talpiot suburb of Jerusalem. It is not reasonable to conclude that Joseph’s body was exhumed and moved to the Talpiot grave within a very short period.

Second, Jesus’ earthly father Joseph could not have afforded such a costly tomb. He was a lower class carpenter, and he probably could not have bought such a large tomb and well adorned ossuaries. Some have alleged that the tomb was donated. However, this creates some problems because people outside the apostles would have then known the tomb site. A secret of this magnitude regarding such a high profile person as Jesus would not have remained hidden.
Third, the inscription on the ossuary reads, “Jesus, Son of Joseph.” However, early followers did not use that title when addressing Jesus; instead that title was used only by outsiders. Would family members and His loyal disciples have given him that title when they had called him by another title throughout his lifetime?

Fourth, James, the half brother of Jesus and leader of the early church, was buried alone near Jerusalem Temple. Eusebius records that James was buried in Jerusalem near the Temple mount. Burying James in Jerusalem would seem strange since Jesus had died thirty years earlier and the “family tomb” was supposedly in Talpiot, Jerusalem.

Fifth, other non-family members are also in the tomb. One tomb with the name Matthew is believed to be referring to the disciple Matthew, who was not a family member. We must ask why Matthew, a non-family member, is in the tomb with the rest of the family while James, the half brother of Jesus, was buried alone.

**Hollywood Hype**

Finally, we have what appears to be some Hollywood hype. It appears the statistics cited in the special are a bit exaggerated and misleading. The names on the crypt were very common in that day. The name Jesus was popular during that time. Jesus is found on 99 other tombs and 22 ossuaries during that time. The name Joseph was also found on 218 graves and 45 ossuaries. So it would not be unusual to find ossuaries with the names of Jesus and Joseph or even Jesus, son of Joseph.

Mary was also a common name. Among the graves and ossuaries, one-fourth of the women in Jerusalem during the first century were named Mary. Therefore, finding a tomb that has the name Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary should not be so surprising given the fact that these were common names.

The statistician Andrey Feuerverger, who arrived at the 600 to 1 probability figure that Talpiot was the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth and his family seems to have backed off that conclusion in an open letter to fellow statisticians. He says, “I now
believe that I should not assert any conclusions connecting this tomb with any hypothetical one of the NT family.”{5}

Feuerverger qualifies his conclusion stating that it was built on the assumptions given by Cameron and Jacobovici. One of their key assumptions is that one of the names on the ossuaries ought to be identified as Mary Magdalene. If the identification of Mary Magdalene with this ossuary is in doubt (which it is), then the statistical probability that this is Jesus’ family tomb is unimpressive.

Moreover, the Mary Magdalene connection to the tomb is unclear. The Greek inscription is Mariamne e Mara,{6} which the filmmaker incorrectly translates as “Mary Known as the Master.” This translation is possible if translated in Aramaic; however, the inscription is Greek. Most likely it is two names: Mary and Martha. Richard Bauckham, Professor of New Testament at the University of St Andrews, states that “‘Mara’ in this context does not mean Master. It is an abbreviated form of Martha, probably the ossuary contained two women called Mary and Martha (Mariamne and Mara).”{7}

Another detail that appears to be hyped is the DNA evidence. It is interesting to note that DNA testing was done on only two ossuaries. If DNA testing had been done on three or four individuals, and that testing did not match the DNA of Mariamne, the theory would be destroyed. As it stands, the so-called “DNA evidence” only proves that the bones of an entombed man and woman were from unrelated people. To extrapolate to the notion that they were married is indeed a stretch. Besides, no independent DNA control samples of Jesus or His family members exist with which to compare these DNA “findings.”

**Conclusion**

This theory that the bones of Jesus have been found rests on two highly unlikely scenarios, fishy facts, and some Hollywood hype. For these reasons, we should reject Cameron’s attempt to deny the resurrection of Christ and recreate a Jesus contrary both to the New Testament and to history. We should also realize that attempts to refashion Jesus are not new. Attempts to deny the resurrection and remake Jesus have occurred since the time of the Apostles. In fact, I believe that
we should be expecting more to come. There seem to be very aggressive attempts by some liberal scholars to fabricate a different kind of Jesus.

For this reason, Christians must be prepared to defend the true Jesus of the Gospels and history. The wrong Jesus leads to a wrong Gospel. The wrong savior and the wrong message cannot lead one to a relationship with God and eternal life. We must follow the example of the Apostles and Church Fathers to be diligent to defend the true teachings of Christ.

Finally, events like these offer great opportunities to share Christ if we are prepared. Christians must not retreat from these challenges but instead must research and examine their faith and the evidence being presented. When we are equipped, we can offer a sound and compelling case for Jesus Christ.

Notes

3. Miller and Chen.
5. Andrey Feuerverger, Letter to Statistical Colleagues, 8, March 2007, fisher.utstat.toronto.edu/andrey/OfficeHrs.txt

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