

The Answer Is the Resurrection

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/.
6. Matt 28:11.
7. Luke 24:13-32
8. 1 Peter 1:21.
9. 1 Peter 1:18-21.
10. 1 Cor. 15:54-57.
11. 1 Cor. 15:32.
12. John 2:22.
13. Rom 5:8-11.
14. John 18:37-38.
15. Rom 1:4-5.
16. John 14:7.

17. James 1:15; 1 Cor. 15:54-57.
18. Rom 10:9-10.
19. 1 Peter 1:18-20.
20. John 3:16.
21. John 2:22.

Resources on Evidence for Jesus' Resurrection

Copan, Paul, and Ronald Tacelli, eds. *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment? A Debate Between William Lane Craig & Gerd Ludemann*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000.

Habermas, Gary, and Michael Licona. *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 2004.

McDowell, Josh. *More Than a Carpenter*, Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale/Living Books, 1977.

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

Strobel, Lee. *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998.

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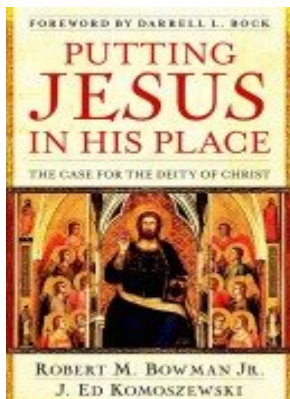
In His H.A.N.D.S.: How We Can

Know That Jesus is God

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

1. Robert M. Bowman and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus In His Place* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 31.

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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).^{10} 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?^{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.[{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.[{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[{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.[{15}](#) 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."[{16}](#)

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."[{17}](#)

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

1. J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: What The Da Vinci Code and Other Novel Speculations Don't Tell You* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 2006), 21.
2. Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 4, cited in Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 21.
3. Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (San Francisco:

HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 6, cited in Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 29.

4. Craig Blomberg, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 33.

5. Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 26.

6. *Ibid.*, 29.

7. *Ibid.*, 30.

8. The following points are taken from Craig L. Blomberg, "Gospels (Historical Reliability)," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 294.

9. Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus*, 33-34.

10. All biblical citations are from the New International Version (NIV).

11. Darrell L. Bock, "The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?" in *Jesus Under Fire*, eds. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 73-99.

12. See Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1987).

13. The discussion which follows is largely dependent on the essay by Darrell Bock, "The Words of Jesus in the Gospels," 73-99.

14. *Ibid.*, 77.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 77-78.

17. *Ibid.*, 79.

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The Historical Jesus Matters

Tom Davis provides several lines of evidence that Jesus was a real, physical person of history.

Introduction

Does the historical Jesus matter?

Can Christians get by with purely theological Jesus? Some early Christians asked if faith needed philosophy to function. They used Athens to represent philosophy and Jerusalem to represent faith. In a similar way New Testament scholar Dale Allison asks, “What can the historical Jesus of Athens have to do with the biblical Christ of Jerusalem? Where two or three historians are gathered together, can the biblical Christ be in their midst?”^{1} Allison thinks that by using historical methodology we cannot connect the historical Jesus to the Biblical Jesus. Faith and historical knowledge cannot be completely reconciled. Is this the case?

While there are many biblical scholars that agree with Allison’s view, there are other scholars that believe that the historical Jesus and the biblical Jesus must be the same Jesus in order for Christianity to be true. N. T Wright states, “The Bible, after all, purports to offer not just ‘spiritual’ or ‘theological’ teachings but to describe events within the ‘natural’ world, not least the public career of Jesus of Nazareth, a first-century Jew who lived and died within the ‘natural’ course of world history.”^{2} New Testament scholar Ben Witherington also calls out Allison’s way of thinking:

“The problem with this bifurcation is that despite numerous attempts in this century to turn Christianity into a philosophy of life, it is and has always been a historical religion—one that depends on certain foundational events, particularly the death and resurrection of Jesus, as having

happened in space and time. A faith that does not ground the Christ of personal experience in the Jesus of history is a form of docetic heresy, for it implies that what actually happened in and during Jesus' life is inconsequential to Christian faith."[3](#)

Wright and Witherington think that a methodology that does not allow for the possibility of miracles is flawed. The Old Testament and the New Testament claim that certain events happened. Either these events happened in the real world, or they did not. If these events happened in the real world, then we can know about them using the same methods that historians use to investigate any other historical event. Dale Allison cannot have it both ways.

Craig Blomberg argues:

“An understanding of any religion depends heavily on the historical circumstances surrounding its birth. This is particularly true of Judaism and Christianity because of the uniquely historical nature of these religions. Centered on Scriptures that tell the sacred stories of God's involvement in space and time with communities called to be his people, the Judeo-Christian claims rise or fall with the truthfulness of those stories. For Christianity, the central story is about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—the story that forms the topic of the four New Testament Gospels.”[4](#)

Blomberg proposes that all religions should have to deal with historical scrutiny. Among the world's religions only Islam, Judaism and Christianity claim to be built on a foundation on historical events. This historical foundation makes historical Jesus studies useful for apologetics and theology.[5](#) The usefulness of this field of study is important for Christian discipleship. N. T. Wright states, “I see the historical task, rather, as part of the appropriate activity of knowledge and love, to get to know even better the one whom we claim to know

and follow.”[{6}](#) Christians are representatives and disciples of Jesus. This means we should know who Jesus is and what He did. Studying the life of Jesus is a part of necessary discipleship.

In this article I argue that we have evidence outside the Bible that shows that Jesus existed. Then I argue that the Gospels are ancient biographies, and therefore count as historical evidence for examining the life and teachings of Jesus. Next, I demonstrate that the narratives of the virgin birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke do not contradict each other. After that I show that the central theme of the teachings and actions of Jesus show that the kingdom of God was coming through his ministry. Finally, I provide evidence that Jesus rose physically from the dead.

Evidence Outside the Bible

One of the complaints that Christianity’s critics have is that Jesus is not mentioned much outside the Bible. These critics claim that if Jesus were as prominent as the Gospels portray Him to be, there would be more evidence to corroborate the claims of the Gospels. Luke Timothy Johnson explains the issue:

“There are a handful of authentic but very brief references to John the Baptist, Jesus, and James in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus: but from the great ocean of Jewish literature, there are otherwise fragmentary, coded, and oblique references to Jesus and his followers. From the Greco-Roman side we have the cryptic and not completely comprehending observations of the Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus: the precious firsthand observation reported to the emperor Trajan by his governor in Bithynia, Pliny the Younger: and possible allusions by the philosopher Epictetus.”[{7}](#)

For some people, this simply is not enough evidence to believe

that Jesus existed. We will examine four sources outside the Bible: Josephus, Suetonius, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger.

Josephus

Josephus is the most important historical source for Jesus outside the New Testament. He was a Jewish officer that fought in the war against Rome from A.D. 66-70. After surrendering to the Romans, he wrote several important histories. In his "Jewish Antiquities" he mentions Jesus:

"At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus, if indeed one should call him a man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who received the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among the Jews and among many of Greek origin. He was the messiah. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. For he appeared to them on the third day, living again, just as the divine prophets had spoken of these and countless other wonderful things about him. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out." [\[8\]](#)

Most scholars think that this passage was changed by early Christians to add credibility to their claim that Jesus was the Messiah. Several scholars tried to reconstruct the original passage by removing the most flattering sections out of this passage. [\[9\]](#) In 1972 Professor Schlomo Pines released a study of a manuscript written in Arabic. The Arabic manuscript was similar to the reconstructed passage that previous scholars had come to. [\[10\]](#) The original wording is 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, because of an accusation made by the

leading men among us, 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.

Most scholars agree that the reconstruction of the text and the corresponding text from the Arabic manuscript show that this is an authentic reference to Jesus by Josephus.[{11}](#) Josephus was aware that Jesus had a reputation to be a moral person, and that he had Jewish and Gentile followers. He knows that some Jewish leaders brought Jesus to Pilate, and the result was that Pilate executed Jesus by crucifixion. Josephus also tells us the Jesus' disciples claimed that they saw Jesus alive three days after his crucifixion.

Suetonius

Suetonius was a Roman historian who wrote about the lives of the Caesars and other important men of the first century. Writing early in the second century, he makes one mention of Christus. The context is that during the reign of Claudius the Jews were causing a public disturbance over Christ. This fits with known tensions between Jews and Christians at the time. Most historians are convinced that Christus is a variant spelling or misspelling of Christ. Suetonius writes, "As the Jews were making constant disturbance at the instigation of Christus, he expelled them from Rome."[{12}](#) Suetonius also tells us about Nero persecuting Christians after a fire burned much of Rome. "Punishment was meted out to the Christians, a group of individuals given over to a new and harmful set of superstitions."[{13}](#) While this does not tell us much, it does tell us that Christians in Rome were worshiping Jesus, and that the people of Rome noticed that they had different religious practices concerning Christ.[{14}](#)

Tacitus

Tacitus was a Roman historian who lived from A.D. 55-120. He mentions Christ in his *Annals*, which covers Roman history from the death of Augustus to the death of Nero (A.D. 14-68). Below is his mention of Christ (Christus):

“Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition broke out.”[{15}](#)

While Tacitus does not give us much information to work with, there are a few observations that we can make. First, Jesus was crucified by Pontius Pilate. Second, Second, Jesus' followers were called Christians by the people. Third, the Christian movement spread to Rome quickly.[{16}](#)

Pliny the Younger

Pliny the Younger was the governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor. As governor he interrogated Christians that lived in the area. He wrote a letter to Trajan, the Emperor at the time, to get advice on how to handle the Christians in his province. The relevant part of the letter follows:

“They affirmed, however, that the whole of their guilt, or their error, was that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verse a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves to a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, adultery, never to falsify their word, not to 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.”[{17}](#)

From this letter we find that Christians in Bithynia held themselves to a certain moral code, sang hymns to Christ as if he was a God, and gathered to partake of food. It does not tell us much, but it does tell us that Christians early on worshiped Jesus as God. [{18}](#)

What conclusions can be reached from these sources? First, Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate. Second, Some of Jesus' disciples claimed to see Jesus alive after his crucifixion. Finally, the followers of Jesus worshiped him as if he were a god. [{19}](#)

The Gospels

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the primary sources for the life of Jesus. Many New Testament scholars claim that these Gospels were written anonymously, but there is good reason to think that the traditional authors wrote these gospels. Nonetheless, skeptical scholars do not trust the Gospels as reliable sources.

Skeptical scholars argue that the traditional authors could not have written these Gospels because they were wrong about geographical details, and that they were illiterate. Concerning the geographical details, while there are several good scholarly responses addressing the asserted errors, this simply does not lead to the conclusion that the Gospels were not authored by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The worst-case scenario only shows that they made an error in describing the geography. (I don't think they made an error, I simply do not have to show that they didn't make an error to show who the authors were.)

Matthew was a tax collector, so he would have known how to write, probably in both Aramaic and Greek. Mark was from a wealthy family and easily could have learned to write in Greek. Luke was an educated Gentile that would have been able to write in Greek. Even if John couldn't read or write, he

could have had a literate Christian record what John dictated to him as a scribe.

In claiming that we do not know who the authors of the Gospels were, the skeptics also ignore the traditions and the manuscript evidence. The earliest attestation of authorship for the Gospels is a Christian named Papias, a student of John. Papias claims that John wrote a gospel. He tells us that Mark wrote a gospel based on Peter's teachings. He also tells us that Matthew wrote a sayings gospel in Hebrew. From Papias we can conclude that John and Mark wrote gospels, and that Matthew wrote a sayings gospel that we do not have. [{20}](#)

The next person of importance is Irenaeus, a student of Polycarp, who was a student of John. Irenaeus tells us that the gospels were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The most reasonable explanation as to how Irenaeus came across this information is that it is what Polycarp taught him. [{21}](#) There are two early sources that the gospels were written by the traditional authors. This means that the tradition is early, and no one challenged it until the Enlightenment.

Most scholars believe that Mark was the first gospels to be written. The majority of scholars think Mark wrote his gospel around A.D. 70, although it could have been earlier. Most scholars believe that John was the last gospel to be written, around A.D. 90. Jesus' death occurred in either A.D. 30 or 33. This means that these gospels were written within living memory of the earthly life of Jesus. The gospels being written within living memory of Jesus means that people who were eyewitnesses to the events were alive and could have provided corrections if they thought that the gospels were in error. This combined with the unanimous traditions and manuscript evidence of who the authors were gives us good reason to say that the information in these gospels is reliable, and that they are good historical sources for examining the life of Jesus. [{22}](#)

The Virgin Birth

In studying the life of Jesus, the first event we come to is his birth. This is a fantastic claim, and it is understandable why people would be skeptical of a claim like this. The question is, where does the evidence lead?

The narratives of the virgin birth are found in Matthew chapter 1 and Luke chapters 1 and 2. When examining these narratives, skeptical scholars like Bart Ehrman point out perceived contradictions in Matthew and Luke.^{23} They see that in Matthew, Joseph and Mary live in Bethlehem; in Luke they lived in Nazareth and moved to Bethlehem. In Matthew the angel appears to Joseph, but in Luke the angel appears to Mary. In Matthew the baby Jesus is visited by magi, in Luke Jesus is visited by shepherds. In Luke Jesus is presented in the temple, in Matthew he is not. In Matthew Joseph takes Mary and Jesus to Egypt to protect them from Herod, in Luke they move to Bethlehem. They conclude that these differences mean that both stories are made up. Is that the right conclusion?

When examined closely the perceived contradictions disappear and the narratives fit together like a puzzle to form one consistent narrative. The following narrative solves all the issues listed above.

Zechariah was burning incense in the temple when an angel appeared and told him that his wife Elizabeth would become pregnant. An angel visits Mary in Nazareth and tells her that she will become pregnant with Jesus. When Elizabeth was six months along, Mary came to visit her. When Mary returns to Nazareth, Joseph sees that she is pregnant and was going to divorce her. An angel appears to Joseph and tells him that Mary's pregnancy is from God and he is to care for Mary and the Child. Due to a Roman census Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem. When Jesus was born angels appeared to shepherds and told them that the Messiah was born and that they could find him in Bethlehem. The shepherds go to Bethlehem and visit

Jesus. Joseph and Mary take Jesus to be presented at the temple according to Jewish law. The magi from the east come to visit Jesus. After the magi leave, Joseph is told by an angel to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt because Herod wants to kill Jesus. After living in Egypt, an angel appears to Joseph and tells him to move back to Israel.

This shows that while the narratives in Matthew and Luke are different, they do not contradict each other. This also shows that the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke are not borrowing from each other. These two sources are independent historical sources.

Jesus Proclaimed the Kingdom

The central theme of the preaching of Jesus is the coming of the kingdom of God, also called the kingdom of heaven. These two phrases appear eighty-three times in the gospels. The kingdom was the central message of Jesus' preaching.

In Luke, when the angel visited Mary, the angel told her that Jesus would “. . . be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”[{24}](#) Mark states that Jesus first preached, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel.”[{25}](#) John records a conversation Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisee, who wanted to learn about what Jesus was doing. Jesus' first statement to Nicodemus was, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”[{26}](#) Matthew described the beginning of Jesus ministry: “And he went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.”[{27}](#) These quotes, and all the teachings of Jesus, show that proclaiming the kingdom of God was the central theme of His preaching.[{28}](#)

Jesus also demonstrated that He was bringing the kingdom of God with his ministry by casting out demons. After one particular instance of casting out a demon the Pharisees said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons."[{29}](#) Jesus' response was, "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."[{30}](#)

We can see that the instances of Jesus casting out demons is proclaiming the kingdom of God and the end of the reign of the ruler of this age through His actions. Orthodox priest Andrew Stephan Damik describes the meaning of Jesus' exorcisms: "Therefore, the exorcisms Jesus performed in His time on earth were not a mere sideshow to demonstrate his power or an *ad hoc* fix for people's bodily ailments. Driving out demons was core to His mission. He had come to claim the world for God's kingdom, so it makes sense that He would spend time driving out the oppressors and false rulers."[{31}](#)

Through His proclamations of the coming kingdom, and by casting out demons, Jesus demonstrated that God was bringing His kingdom to earth. Jesus, and later his apostles, called people to come to God and join His kingdom. The kingdom of God is God's kingly rule over His people and His creation.[{32}](#) The coming of God's kingdom means that through Jesus, God has begun the work of setting things right.[{33}](#)

The Resurrection of Jesus

The resurrection is the most foundational claim made by the earliest Christians. Jesus is the central person in the New Testament. The central event in the life of Jesus that confirms all His claims about who He is and what He said about the kingdom is the resurrection. Paul states the importance of the resurrection clearly:

"But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised,

then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”[\[34\]](#)

In Paul’s view there is no other event in history that is more important than the resurrection. William Lane Craig, a Christian philosopher, summarizes the importance of the resurrection, “The Christian faith stands or falls on the event of the resurrection. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then Christianity is a myth, and we may as well forget it.”[\[35\]](#) In theology and history, nothing is more important than the resurrection.

What kind of evidence could we have for such an event? Our evidence is the New Testament documents. These sources were written by real people in real time and places. We have already seen that the Gospels are ancient biographies of Jesus that are reliable historical sources. Paul’s letter 1 Corinthians is also an important source of information about the resurrection of Jesus.

How does the evidence for Jesus’ life compare with the evidence we have for other significant historical figures? Alexander the Great died in 323 B.C. The first existing biography we have of Alexander was written by Diodorus of Sicily sometime in the first century B.C. This means there is roughly a 200-year gap between the death of Alexander and the first existing historical literature about his life. While some historians may be skeptical about accuracy on some points of the life of Alexander, no historian says that we cannot learn about Alexander from Diodorus. Muhammad died in A.D. 632. Ibn Shaq wrote the earliest biography of Muhammad 150 years after Muhammad died. What we have of that biography is found in the work of Ibn Hisham. No one doubts that we can

learn about the life of Muhammad from these writings. When it comes to Jesus, we have four biographies written about him within 70 years of his death. That means that all four biographies were written while people who were alive when Jesus was crucified were still living. As I argued earlier, two of these biographies were written by people who knew Jesus. This implies that the Gospels are good sources to take seriously.

What can we learn from the Gospels? First, Jesus died by crucifixion. All the Gospels have a crucifixion narrative in them.[{36}](#) While the Gospels give different minor details, they agree that Jesus was prosecuted by the Sanhedrin in an unjust trial. The Gospels also show that Jesus died of crucifixion under the rule of Pilate. This is supported by evidence from the works of Josephus and Tacitus that were discussed earlier. New Testament Scholar Michael Licona writes, “We have looked carefully at the data pertaining to Jesus’ death by crucifixion and have observed very strong reasons for granting the historicity of this event, and we have observed that it is granted by the overwhelming majority of scholars.”[{37}](#) Given the evidence from the Gospels, Josephus, and Tacitus, we can confidently say that Jesus died of crucifixion.

Second, all the Gospels state that Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.[{38}](#) Joseph was part of the Sanhedrin, the governing body that just convinced Pilate to execute Jesus. It is unlikely that Jesus’ disciples would invent a story where a member of the Sanhedrin would give him an honorable burial after having him executed as a criminal. Given the early consistent testimony from the Gospels, and that it is unlikely that Jesus’ disciples would invent the story, it is reasonable to believe that Joseph took Jesus’ body and buried Him in the tomb. All the evidence shows that Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.[{39}](#)

Third, the tomb of Jesus was found empty by a group of Jesus’ women disciples. Once again, this is found in every

Gospel. [{40}](#) There are differences in the lists of women who showed up at the grave of Jesus, but there are no contradictions. A variation of details such as who was in the room vary when examining eyewitness testimony. It is unlikely that men would invent a story where they were hiding, and the women were going to Jesus' grave. N. T. Wright wrote, "If they could have invented stories of fine, upstanding reliable male witnesses being first at the tomb, they would have done it. That they did not tells us either that everyone in the early church knew that the women, led by Mary Magdalene, were in fact first on the scene, or that the church was not so inventive as critics have routinely imagined, or both." [{41}](#) The evidence shows that it is reasonable that Jesus' grave was found empty by a group of His women disciples.

Fourth, Jesus appeared to multiple people in multiple settings. Mark does not record a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus. The earliest manuscripts of Mark end at verse 16:8, He records the appearance of an angel to the women who found the tomb empty. Matthew, Luke, and John record Jesus appearing to the women, then several appearances to several people in different settings and even to groups of people. While harmonizing these appearances is difficult, there is enough evidence here to conclude that the apostles believed that they saw the risen Jesus.

While the Gospels are early evidence of the death and resurrection of Jesus, there is earlier evidence. This evidence is a creed found in one of Paul's letters, 1 Corinthians 15:3-8:

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to

James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.”

This creed was designed to be memorized easily and is not Paul’s normal style of writing. The differences and the creedal pattern indicate that this was not originally composed by Paul. So where did Paul get it?

In his letter to the Galatians Paul provides a clue to where he got this creed. In chapters 1 and 2 Paul gives his “resume” to the church at Galatia. Paul says that after his conversion he went to Arabia, then returned to Damascus. Three years later he visited Peter and James for 15 days. 14 years later Paul met with Peter, James and

John. Both times Paul says that they approved of his ministry.[{42}](#) Most scholars are convinced that Paul got this creed from Peter and James. N. T. Wright states, “It was probably formulated within the first two or three years after Easter itself, since it was already in formulaic form when Paul ‘received’ it. We are here in touch with the earliest Christian tradition, with something that was being said two decades or more before Paul wrote this letter.”[{43}](#)

What information does this creed give us? It tells us that Christ died, that he was buried, that Jesus was raised, and that Jesus appeared to multiple people. This evidence is consistent with the evidence from the Gospels. All the evidence indicates that Jesus rose physically from the dead. William Lane Craig’s conclusion is, “Each of these three great facts—the empty tomb, the appearances, the origin of the Christian faith—is independently established. Together they point with unwavering conviction to the same unavoidable and marvelous conclusion: Jesus actually rose from the dead.”[{44}](#) There are good reasons to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. If Jesus did rise from the dead, his claims about the kingdom of God/Heaven are true.

Conclusion

Skeptics often say that there is no evidence that Christianity is true. They say that faith is blind, and that Christians only believe because they were raised by Christians. It is true that many Christians were raised by Christians, but this does not show that Christianity has no evidence to support its claims. These critics say that the Bible, in this case the Gospels, are not allowed as evidence because they are religious books. The academic discipline of natural theology generally excludes the examination as well. They say if we allow the Bible to be examined this way then we have to allow all religious books to be examined this way. I welcome the challenge. N. T. Wright responds to the exclusion of the Bible in natural theology, "But Jesus was a figure of the real world. The Gospels are real documents from the real world. To refuse to treat them as 'natural' evidence because the Christian tradition has seen them as 'revelation,' and to dismiss Jesus similarly because the Christian tradition has confessed him to be God incarnate, looks like the skeptic bribing the judges before the trial."[\[45\]](#) The best and most important evidence for the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the Gospels. If my arguments are true, then Jesus is who He claimed to be, the Messiah, the world's sovereign King. Studying Jesus is not useful only for apologetics, it is a necessary part of Christian discipleship. When we know what the Gospels teach about Jesus, then we will be better followers of Jesus, we will love Him more, and we will be better at representing Him to those around us.

Notes

1. Allison Jr., Dale, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2009) 8.
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3. Witherington III, Ben. *The Jesus Quest; The Third Search*

- for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995) 10-11.
4. Blomberg, Craig. *Jesus and the Gospels* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishing, 1997) 5.
 5. Craig S. Keener. *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series: Matthew* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997) 19. "The historical questions are important for apologetics, for defending the faith in a society that doubts Jesus' claims: the literary questions are important for preaching, because we want to communicate the same inspired message we find in the text."
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 8. Josephus, Antiquities 18.3.3
 9. Ehrman, Bart. *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012) 60-61.
 10. Habermas, Gary R. *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin: College Press, 1996) 193-194.
 11. Bock, Darrell L. *Studying the Historical Jesus: A Guide to Sources and Methods* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002) 55-58.
 12. Claudius 25.4
 13. Nero 16
 14. Habermas, 190-191. Edwin Yamauchi, "Jesus Outside the New Testament: What is the Evidence," in *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, ed. Michael J. Wilkins, J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 215-216; Bock, 47-49; Ehrman, 53-54.
 15. Tacitus, Annals 15.44
 16. Williams, Peter J. *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018) 23. "We may therefore conclude from Tacitus that Christianity spread far and fast and that being a Christian could be very difficult." Yamauchi, " 216. "Note that Tacitus, who despised Christians even more than he

despised Jews, knew that they were called after Christ, who had been crucified ("suffered the extreme Penalty") and Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius."

17. Pliny, Epistles 10.96-97.

18. Ehrman, 199-200.

19. Yamauchi, 217. "That Christ was crucified under Pilate under the reign of Tiberius, that despite his ignominious death his followers worshiped him as a god..."

20. Craig Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2019), 405-407.

21. Bock, 164-167.

22. Bock, 14-22.

23. Ehrman, Bart. *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 36-39.

24. Matthew 1:32-33

25. Mark 1:14

26. John 3:3

27. Matthew 4:23

28. Edersheim, Alfred. *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah Vol. 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1969) 270. "In fact, an analysis of 119 passages in the New Testament where the expression 'Kingdom' occurs, shows that it means the rule of God; which is manifested in and through Christ; is apparent in the Church: gradually develops amidst hindrance; is triumphant in the second coming of Christ, (the end); and, finally, perfected in the world to come." Ratzinger, Joseph (Pope Benedict XVI). *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007) Translated by Adrian J. Walker, 62. "The 'Kingdom of God' is a theme that runs through the whole of Jesus preaching."

29. Matthew 12:24

30. Matthew 12:28

31. Damek, Andrew Stephan. *Arise O God: The Gospel of Christ's Defeat of Demons, Sin, and Death* (Chesterton: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2021) 91.

32. Morris, Leon, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The*

Gospel According to St. Luke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1974) 73. "Jesus is thus brought into relation with this kingdom of God, a kingdom that is not to be understood as a temporal kingdom, an earthly realm; rather it is God's kingly rule, as Jesus would in due time make clear."

33. Witherington, 72. "Jesus, as part of his program of reform, confronts supernatural evil, nature gone haywire and human nature that is sick. This means that his mission is about more than just the salvation of individuals, for the coming of the kingdom means a world set right, in the fuller sense of the term world."

34. 1 Corinthians 15:13-17

35. Craig, William Lane, *The Son Rises: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1981), 7.

36. Matthew 27:32-56; Mark 15:21-41; Luke 23:26-49; John 19:16-37

37. Licona, Michael. *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010) 318.

38. Matthew 27:57-61; Mark 15:24-42; Luke 50-56; John 19:38-42

39. Craig, 53-57.

40. Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1:10-18

41. Wright, N. T. *Christians Origins and the Question of God: The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 608.

42. Galatians 1:11-2:9

43. Wright, N. T. *Christians Origins and the Question of God*, 319.

44. Craig, 134.

45. Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 74.

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.^{2} But Jesus, on the other hand, experienced something unique, declaring Him God above all others.

I speak, of course, of resurrection.^{3} 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.[{4}](#) 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
4. [Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Fiction? – A Clear Christian](#)

[Perspective;](#)

[What Difference Does the Resurrection Make?;](#)

[The Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?](#)

[– A Real Historical Event;](#)

[The Answer Is the Resurrection](#)

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The Apologetics of Jesus: A Defense of His Deity

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

1. Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1971), 311.
2. Philip Payne, “Interpreting Jesus’ Parables,” (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 1980), 263.
3. Ibid., 313-17.
4. Dallas Willard, “Jesus the Logician,” *Christian Scholars Review* (Summer 1999): 610.
5. Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don’t Have Enough Faith To Be An Atheist* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 201-2.

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 remainder 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 they 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: Monumental 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

1. Josephus, *Antiquities* xviii. 33. (Early second Century).
2. Josh McDowell, *The Resurrection Factor* (San Bernadino, Calif.: Here's Life Publishers, 1981), p. 66.
3. William McNeil, *A World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 163.
4. David Strauss, *The Life of Jesus for the People* , vol. 1, 2nd edition (London: Williams and Norgate, 1879), p. 412.

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Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Fiction? – A Clear Christian Perspective

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 acutallly 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 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 Lapedes, 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 Lapedes 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, Lapidés 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

1. Lee Strobel, 1998, *The Case for Christ*, Grand Rapids

Michigan/Zondervan Publishing House, p. 13.

2. Ben Witherington, quoted in *The Case for Christ*, p. 135.

3. Gary Collins, quoted in *The Case for Christ*, p. 147.

4. Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, p. 157-158.

5. Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, p. 183.

6. Louis Lapidès, quoted in *The Case for Christ*, p. 185.

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Ancient Evidence for Jesus from Non-Christian Sources

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."[{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.[{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.[{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.[{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.[{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.[{20}](#) 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."[{21}](#)

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.[{22}](#) 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.[{23}](#) If so, Roman involvement changed their plans![{24}](#)

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."[{25}](#) 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

1. F. F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 13.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Edwin Yamauchi, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 82.
5. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, cited in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 82.
6. N.D. Anderson, *Christianity: The Witness of History* (London: Tyndale, 1969), 19, cited in Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Company, 1996), 189-190.
7. Edwin Yamauchi, cited in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 82.
8. Pliny, *Epistles* x. 96, cited in Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 25; Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 198.
9. Ibid., 27.
10. Pliny, *Letters*, transl. by William Melmoth, rev. by W.M.L. Hutchinson (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1935), vol. II, X:96, cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 199.
11. M. Harris, "References to Jesus in Early Classical Authors," in *Gospel Perspectives V*, 354-55, cited in E. Yamauchi, "Jesus Outside the New Testament: What is the Evidence?," in *Jesus Under Fire*, ed. by Michael J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), p. 227, note 66.
12. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 199.
13. Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 28.

14. Josephus, *Antiquities* xx. 200, cited in Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 36.
15. Ibid.
16. Yamauchi, "Jesus Outside the New Testament", 212.
17. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.63-64, cited in Yamauchi, "Jesus Outside the New Testament", 212.
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).
20. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 202-03.
21. *The Babylonian Talmud*, transl. by I. Epstein (London:

Soncino, 1935), vol. III, Sanhedrin 43a, 281, cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 203.

22. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 203.

23. See John 8:58-59 and 10:31-33.

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

25. Matt. 12:24. I gleaned this observation from Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 56.

26. Luke 23:2, 5.

27. Lucian, *The Death of Peregrine*, 11-13, in *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, transl. by H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949), vol. 4., cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 206.

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