

# The Tomb of Jesus: A Titanic Discovery or Hype?



Written by Patrick Zukeran

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

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

## Scholars Speak

The tomb was discovered in 1980, so we have known about this site for nearly thirty years. Its lack of recognition by the scholarly community as a tomb of significance to New Testament characters is telling. Most scholars did not associate the crypt with Jesus. This includes Professor Amos Kloner who worked on the tomb and is one of Israel's most prominent archeologists. Kloner states that this was a non-event and dismisses Cameron's efforts as crass profit-seeking.

Likewise, Joe Zias, curator for anthropology and archeology at the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem from 1972 to 1997, and the one who personally numbered the Talpiot ossuaries, stated that Cameron is not an archaeologist and that “projects like these make a mockery of the archeological profession.”[{1}](#)

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

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

## Highly Improbably Scenarios

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

Here is a brief overview of why this allegation of a secret marriage should be rejected. First, the New Testament says nothing of a secret marriage. In fact, all the evidence points against any marital relationship between Jesus and Mary

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

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

Just as is done in *The Da Vinci Code*, Cameron and Jacobovici appeal to the Gnostic writings found at Nag Hammadi. (For a more extensive treatment, see my article "[Decoding Fact From Fiction in The Da Vinci Code: Part 2](#)") Nearly three generations after the apostles, the Gnostics began to refashion Jesus into their image. In about the late second century AD, Gnostic Gospels and other alleged apostolic works began to appear, especially in Egypt. At Nag Hammadi, Egypt, a

library of Gnostic works was found. These works were written in the late second to fourth century AD, so they could not have been written by the Apostles. They also contradicted major teachings of the New Testament and contained fanciful myths of Jesus. For these reasons, they were never considered as part of the inspired canon of scripture. Cameron appeals to these works, most specifically to the Acts of Philip and the Gospel of Mary Magdalene.

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

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

The common term for wife is *gyne*. Therefore, even these two passages from sources outside the inspired canon do not build a strong case for a secret marriage.

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

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

Also, if they purchased the tomb site, people outside of the eleven disciples would have known about this site. The Jewish leaders, who were very eager to display the body of Jesus to dispel rumors of his resurrection, would have easily found a tomb with such clear markings. This theory suggesting a secret

burial ground unknown to anyone but Jesus' family is untenable given the mindset and influence of His many enemies.

## **Fishy Facts**

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

Second, Jesus' earthly father Joseph could not have afforded such a costly tomb. He was a lower class carpenter, and he probably could not have bought such a large tomb and well adorned ossuaries. Some have alleged that the tomb was donated. However, this creates some problems because people outside the apostles would have then known the tomb site. A secret of this magnitude regarding such a high profile person as Jesus would not have remained hidden.

Third, the inscription on the ossuary reads, "*Jesus, Son of Joseph.*" However, early followers did not use that title when addressing Jesus; instead that title was used only by outsiders. Would family members and His loyal disciples have given him that title when they had called him by another title throughout his lifetime?

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

Fifth, other non-family members are also in the tomb. One tomb with the name *Matthew* is believed to be referring to the

disciple Matthew, who was not a family member. We must ask why Matthew, a non-family member, is in the tomb with the rest of the family while James, the half brother of Jesus, was buried alone.

## Hollywood Hype

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Conclusion

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

For this reason, Christians must be prepared to defend the



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

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

## Notes

1. Lisa Miller and Joanna Chen, "Have Researchers Found Jesus Christ's Tomb?" Newsweek Magazine, 5 March 2007. Accessed at [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17328478/site/newsweek/from/ET/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17328478/site/newsweek/from/ET/).
2. Karen Matthews, "Documentary Shows Possible Jesus Tomb," AP News, 26 February 2007. Accessed at <http://tinyurl.com/you7pbq>.
3. Miller and Chen.
4. David Van Biema, "Rewriting the Gospels," *Time Magazine*, 14 March 2007, 56.
5. Andrey Feuerverger, Letter to Statistical Colleagues, 8, March 2007, [fisher.utstat.toronto.edu/andrey/OfficeHrs.txt](http://fisher.utstat.toronto.edu/andrey/OfficeHrs.txt)
6. L.Y. Rahmani, "A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries: In the Collections of the State of Israel, 1994" Accessed at <http://tinyurl.com/yufzzm>.
7. Darrell Bock, "Hollywood Hype: The Oscars and Jesus' Family Tomb, What Do They Share?" February, 26, 2007. Accessed at [dev.bible.org/bock/](http://dev.bible.org/bock/).

# Jesus Must Have Risen: Disciples' Lives Changed

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 500 at the same time, most of whom are still living” (I Corinthians 15: 3-6). 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 10 out of the 11 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 1 1/2 to 2-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 grave clothes 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 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 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 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 attempts to explain away the evidence run into a brick wall of facts that point to one conclusion: Christ is risen.

The above does not constitute 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.

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" (Revelation 3:20).

Worth considering?

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## Who's Got the Body?

*Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright provide a short documented examination of evidences for Jesus' resurrection.*



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

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 Christians have lived and died for a hoax.

If, however, He did rise, then He is still alive and can act now to straighten out our chaotic world. Facts always speak louder than opinions. Let's take a look at some of the historical evidence for the resurrection and see where the facts lead.

One preliminary consideration: countless scholars—among them, the apostle Paul, St. Augustine, Sir Isaac Newton and C. S. Lewis—believed in the resurrection. We need not fear committing intellectual suicide by accepting it also.

Paul wrote that “Christ died for our sins, He was buried, He was raised on the third day. He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that, He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now. [{1}](#)

Consider also these four pieces of evidence:

## **1. The Explosive Growth of the Christian Church**

Within a few weeks after the crucifixion a movement arose which, by the later admission of its enemies, “upset the world.” [{2}](#) Something happened to ignite this movement a very short time after its leader had been executed. What was it?

## **2. The Changed Lives of the Disciples**

After Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, most of the disciples were frightened. Peter, for instance, denied Christ three times (twice to two servant girls!) Yet 10 out of the 11 disciples were martyred for their faith. Peter was crucified upside down; Thomas was skewered; John was boiled in oil but

survived. Something had happened to revolutionize these men's lives. Each believed he had seen the risen Christ.

### 3. The Empty Tomb

Jesus' dead body was removed from the cross, wrapped in graveclothes like a mummy, covered with 100 pounds of aromatic spices and placed in a tomb.<sup>{3}</sup> The tomb had been hewn out of rock<sup>{4}</sup> and apparently contained only one cavern.<sup>{5}</sup> An extremely large stone<sup>{6}</sup> was rolled into a slightly depressed groove at the tomb's entrance.<sup>{7}</sup> Some have conservatively estimated the weight of the stone at one-and-a-half to two tons.

A crack "Green Beret" unit of Roman soldiers was placed out front to guard the grave.<sup>{8}</sup> The military discipline of the Romans was so strict that severe corporal and often capital punishment awaited the soldier who left his post or failed in his duty.<sup>{9}</sup> Sunday morning, the stone was found rolled away, the body was gone, but the graveclothes were still in place.<sup>{10}</sup> What happened?

Some say that Christ's friends stole the body. This means that either one of the women sweet-talked the guards while the other two moved the stone and tip-toed off with the body, or else guys like Peter (remember how brave he was) and Thomas (how easily convinced he was) overpowered the guards, stole the body, and fabricated a myth.

These theories hardly seem plausible. The guard was too powerful, the stone too heavy, and the disciples, not yet experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit were too spineless to attempt such a feat.

Others say that Christ's enemies stole the body. Yet if the Romans or Jews had the body, they would have exposed it publicly and Christianity would have died out. They didn't and it didn't.

Then there is the “swoon theory,” that Christ 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. Then, according to this theory, 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 that He’d been raised from the dead. This one is harder to believe than the resurrection itself.

In other words, if Jesus was put to death, who’s got the body? All that we do have is an empty tomb.

## **4. The Appearances of the Risen Christ**

For 40 days after His death, Christ was reported to be seen alive on earth. Some say these were hallucinations, but do the accounts show that?

Only certain high-strung and imaginative types of people usually have such psychic experiences. Yet a woman, a stubborn tax collector, several fisherman and more than 500 people at one time claimed they saw Him. Hallucinations are very individualistic—contrasting with the fact that over 500 people saw the same thing at the same time and place.

Two other facts undermine the hallucination idea. Such imaginations are usually of expected events, yet the disciples had lost hope after the crucifixion. Also, psychic phenomena usually occur in cycles, but the appearances came in no set pattern. [\[11\]](#)

Attempts to explain away the appearances run into a brick wall of facts. The facts point to one conclusion: Christ is risen.

The above does not constitute an exhaustive proof, but rather a reasoned examination of the evidence. We must each consider and evaluate the evidence ourselves to determine the truth of

the resurrection claim. (Of course, the truth or falsity of the resurrection is a matter of historical fact and is not dependent on any individual's belief.)

If the facts support the claim, then we can conclude that He arose. In any case, a mere intellectual assent to the facts does nothing for one's life.

A major evidence comes experientially, in personally receiving Christ as Savior and Lord. Jesus said, "Behold I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him."[\[12\]](#)

Care to give Him a try?

## Notes

1. 1 Corinthians 15:3-6.
2. Acts 17:6.
3. John 19:38-40.
4. Eusebius of Caesarea. *Theophania*; quoted in Latham, Henry. *The Risen Master*. (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell, and Co., 1904). pp. 87,88; quoted in McDowell, Josh. *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA.: Campus Crusade for Christ, Inc., 1972), p. 209.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Mark 16:4.
7. Holloman, Henry W. "An Exposition of the Post Resurrection Appearances of Our Lord" (Unpublished Th.M. Thesis: Dallas Theological Seminary, May, 1967). p. 38, quoted in McDowell, *op. cit.* p. 216.
8. Matthew 27: 65,66.
9. McDowell, *op. cit.* pp. 218-224.



10. Matthew 28:1-6; Mark 16:1-6; Luke 24:1-3; John 20:1-11.

11. Anderson, J. N. D. The Evidence for the Resurrection. (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968). pp. 20-23.

12. Revelation 3:20.

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### **A Short Story**

There was once a rich man, who dressed in purple and the finest linen, and feasted in great magnificence every day. At his gate, covered with sores, lay a poor man named Lazarus, who would have been glad to satisfy his hunger with the scraps from the rich man's table. Even the dogs used to come and lick his sores.

One day the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, where he was in torment; he looked up, and there, far away, was Abraham with Lazarus close beside him.

"Abraham, my father," he called out, "take pity on me! Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water, to cool my tongue, for I am in agony in this fire." But Abraham said, "Remember, my child, that all the good things fell to you while you were alive, and all the bad to Lazarus; now he has his consolation here and it is you who are in agony. But that is not all: there is a great chasm fixed between us; no one from our side who wants to reach you can cross it, and none may pass from your side to us."

"Then, father," he replied, "will you send him to my father's house, where I have five brothers, to warn them, so that they too may not come to this place of torment?" But Abraham said, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them listen to them." "No, father Abraham," he replied, "but if someone from the dead visits them, they will repent." Abraham answered, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets they will pay no heed even if someone should rise from the dead." (Luke

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# Jesus: The Divine Xerox – Reasons to Believe

*Probe's founder Jimmy Williams provides a compelling set of reasons to believe that Jesus is in fact the Son of God. By asking questions one would expect of God on this earth, we see that Jesus is the only one who fulfills them all. Jesus' characteristics are His own apologetic.*

You know, today when you walk across the campus and begin to talk about the New Testament, the claims of Christ, and how He is relevant to high school or college life, often you get this expression of amazement, as if you have committed intellectual suicide, because you actually believe His claims. Some tell us that becoming a Christian involves a blind leap with little or no evidence to support it. In fact, the blinder the leap and the more lacking the evidence, the more noble the faith. It is certainly true that any philosophy or belief cannot be proved; I would not try and insult anyone's intellect by saying I could *prove* to him that Jesus Christ is God. However, I think when we look into the history of this unique person, we see some things that have to grasp the mind of any thinking man and impress upon him the strong consideration that Jesus may be who He claimed to be...namely, God incarnate in human flesh.

Now whatever we may say about Jesus Christ, most everyone would agree that in the person of Christ we view one of the

most unique personalities of all the centuries—whether He is God or not. The unbeliever, atheist, Moslem, Hindu and Buddhist alike all generally agree on this one central fact, that Jesus Christ is indeed a unique personality.

“Here was a man born of a peasant woman in an obscure village. He grew up in another obscure military camp town where He worked as a carpenter’s son. He never wrote a book; He possessed neither wealth nor influence. He never ran for political office; He never went more than 200 miles from His home town; He never even entered a big city. In infancy He startled a king; in childhood He puzzled doctors; in manhood He ruled the course of nature and hushed the sea to sleep. During the last three years of His life He became an itinerant preacher, roaming the land of His birth, healing the sick and comforting the poor. At the end of this three years of ministry the tide of public opinion began to turn against Him. He was betrayed by one of His closest friends and arrested for disturbing the status quo. All of His followers deserted Him; one denied Him three times. He went through six trials, each of which was a mockery of jurisprudence. Prior to one of the trials He was beaten to the point of death with leather strips imbedded with studs of iron. A crown of thorns was then rammed down upon His head, tearing the flesh so that blood poured down the side of His face. The Roman procurator officiating at His trial was nervous. The uniqueness of this man made Pilate want to wash his hands of the whole affair. But the crowds cried for His death.

“As the Roman procurator brought this insignificant, now mutilated and beaten carpenter’s son before the crowds, he hurled a challenge to them which has resounded across twenty centuries: he said, “Behold the man.” Pilate was impressed. He had never before seen such quiet dignity, intrepid courage, noble majesty. Never had any other who had stood before his bar carried himself as this One. The Roman was

deeply impressed, and avowed his captor's uniqueness. But the mob shouted, 'Crucify Him.' So He was taken outside the gates of the city and nailed to a cross to die the death of a common criminal.

"Yet the story doesn't end here. For something happened after that strange, dark day that has changed the entire course of human history. He came forth from the tomb in resurrection power. His greatness has never been paralleled. He never wrote a book, yet all the libraries of the country could not hold the books that have been written about Him. He never wrote a song, and yet He has furnished the theme for more songs than all the songwriters combined. He never founded a college, but all the schools put together cannot boast of having as many students. Every seventh day the wheels of commerce cease their turning and multitudes wind their way to worshiping assemblies to pay homage and respect to Him. The names of the past proud statesmen of Greece and Rome have come and gone. The names of the past scientists, philosophers, and theologians have come and gone, but the name of this man abounds more and more. Though over 1900 years lie between the people of this generation and the time of His crucifixion, He still lives. Herod could not destroy Him, and the grave could not hold Him. He stands forth upon the highest pinnacle of heavenly glory.

"Never had any other who had stood before his bar carried himself as this One. The Roman was deeply impressed, and avowed his captor's uniqueness. But the mob shouted, 'Crucify Him.' So He was taken outside the gates of the city and nailed to a cross to die the death of a common criminal. Still today He is the cornerstone of history, the center of human progress. I would be well within the mark when I say that all the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that have ever sailed, all the parliaments that have ever sat, and all of the kings that have ever reigned, put together, have not influenced the course of man's life on

this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life, Jesus of Nazareth. History has been called His story. He split time: B.C., before Christ; A.D., *Anno Domini*, in the year of our Lord.{1}

When, some 20 centuries ago, Pontius Pilate said, "Behold the man," I doubt that he had any idea of who it was that stood before him. He certainly wouldn't have dreamed that this humble peasant would launch a movement (indeed, already had) that would change the course of Western civilization. In view of the claims that He made and the impact He had upon history, it behooves us to "Behold the man." Who was He? Those who knew Him best were convinced that He was God. What do you say? I am convinced that the only reasonable conclusion that can be drawn from a fair examination of the evidence is that He was and is, indeed, God, the Saviour of the world. Let's consider some of these evidences together.

I would like to consider several lines of historical evidence that suggest that Jesus Christ is God. The first line of evidence is:

## **Because the Hypothesis Fits the Facts.**

Now what I would like to do in terms of presenting the first line of evidence for His claim that He is God is to ask the question, "What would God be like, if God became a man?" If the facts about Jesus Christ fit the answers to the above question—pre-eminently so, uniquely so, we will have offered evidence, that He may be who He claimed to be. So I would like to suggest four things that I think we would all agree would characterize God if God became a man.

**If God were a man, we would expect His words to be the greatest words ever spoken.**

What is great literature or great oratory? The masterpieces of one generation often appear stilted and artificial to another.

The words which endure are the words which have something to say about that which is universal in human experience, that which doesn't change with time.

Statistically speaking, the Gospels are the greatest literature ever written. They are read by more people, quoted by more authors, translated into more tongues, represented in more art, set to more music, than any other book or books written by any man in any century in any land. But the words of Christ are not great on the grounds that they have such a statistical edge over anybody else's words. They are read more, quoted more, loved more, believed more, and translated more because they are the greatest words ever spoken. And where is their greatness? Their greatness lies in the pure, lucid spirituality in dealing clearly, definitively, and authoritatively with the greatest problems that throb in the human breast; namely, Who is God? Does history have meaning? Does He love me? Does He care for me? What should I do to please Him? How does He look at my sin? How can I be forgiven? Where will I go when I die? How must I treat others?

This amazing purity of the words of Christ became more real to me in a forceful way while I was studying the Greek language in graduate school. The New Testament is written in Greek. I was taking a course called Rapid Greek Reading in which we did nothing but read the Greek New Testament and recite in class. We read about eight pages of Greek a week or about the equivalent timewise of 600 pages of English. We struggled night and day while reading the Gospels in order to be able to read them out loud in class directly from the Greek text to our professor. It was sometimes humorous to hear one another struggle with the text of Matthew or Luke. The interesting thing was that when reading one of the Gospels aloud, we would stumble and toil with the sections where Matthew was simply recounting narrative, but as soon as Matthew began to quote the words of Christ the struggle ceased. His words were the easiest to translate. They were so simple and yet profound. To

labor with the narrative portions and then come to the words of Christ was like moving from the intensity of the hurricane to the calm serenity of the eye of the storm. It was the difference between sailing on rough tempestuous seas and on a glassy lake at eventide.

Certainly, no mere man could impregnate such simple words with such sublime thoughts. Consider the volumes of truth stored up in the phrase, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"<sup>{2}</sup>, and "Whosoever would find his life, must lose it"<sup>{3}</sup>. Libraries could be filled with works which simply develop those concepts.

No other man's words have the appeal of Jesus' words. They are the kind of words we would expect God to utter if God were a man.

The second line of evidence is:

**If God were a man, we would expect Him to exert a profound power over human personality.**

One of the greatest impacts among human beings is the impact of personality upon personality. Most human beings are rather ordinary in their impact upon other human beings. I can't think of anyone in my life whose personality has made an impact upon me; strong influence, yes, but impact, no. Periodically in history a Churchill, Hitler, or a Caesar comes along and impact is made. Certainly, if God were a man, His personality would be so dynamic it would have unprecedented impact on His contemporaries. Is this the case with Jesus of Nazareth? We find most emphatically that it is. Whether Jesus be man or God, whether the Gospels be mainly fiction or fancy, certainly a historic person named Jesus made such an impact on a small band of men as to be unequalled by far in the entire annals of the human race. Consider for a moment the historic nucleus from which Christianity sprang: Peter, a weak-willed fisherman; John, a gentle dreamer; Thomas, who had a question

mark for a brain; Matthew, a tax collector; a few peasants and a small cluster of emotional women. Now I don't want to minimize the character of these men, but seriously, does this rather heterogeneous group of simple folk look like the driving force that could turn the Roman Empire upside down, so that by 312 A.D., Christianity was the official religion of the Empire? Frankly they do not. The impact of the personality of Christ upon these people turned them into flaming revolutionaries who launched a movement that has changed the history of Western Civilization.

The amazing thing is that these men were the very ones who ate with Him, slept with Him, and lived with Him for over three years and still concluded that He was God. How could a person live with someone for that period of time and come to that conclusion unless it were a valid conclusion? You could spend less than an hour with the greatest saint mankind has ever produced and be thoroughly convinced that he was not God. How could you spend three years with a mere man and become absolutely convinced that He was God, in fact, be so convinced that you would be willing to die a martyr's death to punctuate your belief? Listen for a moment to the traditional deaths of the apostles: Matthew, martyred by the sword in Ethiopia; Mark, dragged through the streets of Alexandria until dead; Luke, hanged on an olive tree in Greece; John, put in a caldron of boiling oil but escaped death and died in exile on the island of Patmos; Peter, crucified upside down (he said he wasn't worthy to be crucified in the same manner as His Lord); James, beheaded in Jerusalem; Philip, hanged against a pillar in Phrygia; James the Less, thrown from the pinnacle of the temple and beaten to death down below; Bartholomew, flayed alive; Andrew, bound to a cross where he preached to his persecutors till he died; Thomas, run through by a spear in India; Jude, shot to death with arrows; Barnabas, stoned to death by Jews in Salonica; and Paul, beheaded at Rome by Nero. Even more incredible is the fact that James and Jude, our Lord's own brothers, believed that He was God. You may for a



time, be able to pull the wool over the eyes of those outside your own family, but certainly your own brothers would not swallow such an unbelievable claim unless there were unimpeachable reasons to do so.

Christ's personality had a tremendous impact upon these men. And after nearly two thousand years the impact is not at all spent. Daily there are people who have tremendous revolutionary experiences which they attribute to personal encounters with Jesus Christ.

The personality of Jesus, then, is without parallel. It is unique and incomparable. Wherever He is, He is the Master. When surrounded by hungry multitudes or by hating Pharisees, when questioned by clever theologians or besought by stricken sinners, whether examined by stupid disciples or by a Roman governor, He is the Master.

If God were robed in human flesh, then He would possess a personality that would have revolutionary impact, indeed, unique impact, upon His contemporaries. Like no other man in history, Jesus made that kind of unique and revolutionary impact.

### **If God were a man, we would expect supernatural acts.**

If God were a man, not only would we expect His words to be the greatest ever spoken, and the impact of His personality to be unique, but we would also expect that His life would be characterized by wonderful deeds. We would expect Him to do the things that only God could do. Now obviously the very act of God becoming a man involves something supernatural. But if God became a man, it makes sense that He was going to convince men that He was indeed who He claimed to be, that men deserved to see Him do things that only God could do—namely miracles, suspensions of natural law. Everything about the life of Jesus Christ confronts us with the miraculous. At the outset of His ministry He appeared at a wedding feast and turned water into

wine. He demonstrated His power over disease by healing the nobleman's son and the lame man at the pool of Bethesda and many more. He fed 5000 people and said, "I am the bread of life." He walked on the water. He claimed to be the light of the world; then He healed a man who had been blind since birth. One of His most startling claims was made to the despondent sister of Lazarus (Lazarus had been dead for four days) when He said, "I am the resurrection and the life." Then He said, "Lazarus, come forth," and the dead man came out of the tomb. Someone has noted it was a good thing Jesus called Lazarus by name or all the dead since the dawn of time would have come forth. When Christ made these astounding claims, more than ordinary means were necessary to impress men with their truthfulness.

Now there's a funny kind of thinking going on today concerning miracles. It all started with a fellow by the name of Hume. Paradoxically, this may surprise you, Hume was an orthodox Christian. But, Hume said some things about miracles that have been used as an attack on miracles. Hume argued that miracles are the most improbable of all events. Ever since Hume's essay, it has been believed that historical statements about miracles are the most intrinsically improbable of all historical statements. Now, what then is the basis of probability? What makes a miracle a more probable or a less probable event? Hume says, and so do other secular critics today, that *probability rests upon what may be called the majority vote of our past experiences*. The more often a thing is known to happen, the more probable it is that it should happen again; and the less often, the less probable. He goes on to say, the majority vote of our past experience is firmly against miracles. There is in fact, "uniform experience" against miracles. A miracle is, therefore, the most improbable of all events. It is always more probable that the witnesses were lying or mistaken than that a miracle occurred.

Now here is the foolishness in Hume's whole argument. We must

agree with Hume that if there is absolutely “uniform experience” against miracles, if they have *never* occurred, then there is no such thing as a miracle. But, that is exactly the point in question. Is there absolute uniform experience against miracles? We only know that the majority vote of past experience is against miracles if we know that all reports of miracles are false. And, we can know all the reports to be false *only* if we know already that miracles have never occurred. This is a circular argument. Let me repeat it again. The critic of miracles today says with Hume, “We know that all historical reports of miracles are false because miracles never happen, and we know that miracles never happen because all historical reports of them are false.” Get that? We know that miracles have never happened, because all reported instances of them are false, and we know that all reported instances of them are false (such as the Bible) because we know that miracles never happen.

Very frequently today we hear or get the impression that brilliant scholars, after examining all the evidence, have scientifically proven that miracles never happen. This is totally untrue. The rejection of the miraculous is not their conclusion; it is their starting point, their presupposition. It’s interesting to note that as you study the literature of the first and second century, even some of the literature of the critics of Christianity grant the miracles. In fact, it was not until the 19th century that the major attacks against the miracles began when the omniscient modern critics got on the scene and began to look back 2,000 years and say miracles never happened. But, the attackers of the first century generally grant them. In *Jesus and His Story* by Ethelbert Stauffer, a professor of New Testament at the University of Erlangen—and not an evangelical scholar—cites the following: “In 95 A.D. Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus of Lydda speaks of Jesus’ magic arts.”{4} “In 100 A.D.—Jewish ritual denunciation—‘Jesus practiced magic and led Israel astray.’”{5}

In the second century (according to F. F. Bruce) Celsus, a philosophic critic of Christianity, acknowledged his miracles but attributed them to sorcery.{6}

Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, also acknowledges the fact that Jesus performed miracles in his *Antiquities of the Jews*. A basic principle of evaluation of evidence states that when enemies agree on a common point, it may be regarded as certain that the point is commonly accepted. Stauffer states this with clarity in *Jesus and His Story*:

The sharper the clash, the wider the gulf, the more vital does this alteration of testimony and counter-testimony become to the historical investigator. For if a confrontation of witnesses yields statements that agree on some points, then these points must represent facts accepted by both sides.{7}

In addition to the testimony of the secular historians, we have in the four gospel documents themselves, the personal testimony of hundreds of eyewitnesses that the miracles of Christ are true events. All of the evidence we have indicates that He is indeed God manifest in the flesh.

**If God were a man, we would expect Him to be sinless and incomparably holy and divine.**

Here lies, perhaps, one of the most convincing evidences for the deity of Christ. No man has ever lived such a noble, pure, and sinless life. Those who knew Him for three years, said "He was without sin." {8} The Roman centurion commented as Christ hung on the cross, "Surely, this was the Son of God." {9} Paul, the brilliant intellect of the first century, perceived, "He knew no sin." {10} Pilate called Him, "that just man," and said, "I find no fault in Him." {11} He Himself claimed to be sinless and challenged the religious leaders of His day to find fault in Him. {12}

There is no comparison between the person of Christ and the

most saintly of the saints of the human race. To them confession of sin and painfully laborious efforts toward saintliness were daily fare. In fact, the closer they came to God, the more vivid became their consciousness of their sinfulness.

But Jesus never appears to us as One who struggled to obtain saintliness. He never felt the need to confess a sin, and yet He pointed out the sin in others and urged them to confess. Christ never admitted a need of repentance. We can't even imagine Him dying the death of saintly Augustine of daily confession and repentance. Jesus possessed perfect sinlessness and purity, not by struggle, privation, asceticism, or pilgrimage. It was by His birth and nature.

The greatest saints of other religions are not even in the same category as Christ. Mohammed, for instance, was apparently a neurotic. Gandhi, whom many have acclaimed as the most saintly man of the century, does not even compare with Jesus Christ. Gandhi himself claimed that he didn't even know God and that the reason for it was his own sinfulness. He said, "It is a constant source of sorrow to me that I am so far separated from the one whom I know to be my very life and being; and it is my own wretchedness and sin that separates me from him." {13} How different this is from the words of Jesus, "I and the Father are one," {14} or "He who has seen me has seen the Father," {15} or even more direct, "All men should honour me, even as they honour the Father. He that does not honour me does not honour the Father which sent me." {16} Can you even imagine Calvin, Luther, Paul, or any other great saint making a claim such as this? Frankly, I cannot.

Jesus Christ is not a great man among great men. He is uniquely the greatest man of all history. His divine quality of life can be verified from the mouth of the atheist, infidel, and unbeliever, not to mention the enormous testimony from the Christian Church. Thinking men the world over who have examined the evidence will all agree that Jesus of

Nazareth is the greatest personality of the centuries. He is the greatest teacher, leader, and influence for good in the history of the human race.

Rousseau, the French Deist said of him,

If the life and death of Socrates were those of a sage, the life and death of Jesus were those of a God. Shall we say the Gospel history is mere invention. My friend, it is not such that men invent. And the facts concerning Socrates, of which no one entertains any doubt, are less attested than those concerning Jesus Christ.{17}

He goes on to say a little later that "the facts concerning Jesus of Nazareth are so striking, so amazing, so utterly inimitable, that the invention of them would be more astonishing than the hero."{18}

Byron, the profligate poet, whose philosophy of life was eat, drink, and be merry said, "If ever a man were God, or God were man, Jesus was both."{19}

Renan, the skeptic, who wrote a classic life of Christ in which he tried to prove the myth of the Gospels, nevertheless concluded with this last line: "Whatever surprises the future may bring, one thing is certain, Jesus will never be surpassed."{20}

When exiled on the lonely isle of St. Helena, the emperor Napoleon was once discussing Christ with General Bertrand, a faithful officer who had followed him into banishment and who did not believe in the deity of Jesus. Napoleon said,

I know men, and I tell you that Jesus Christ is not a man. Superficial minds see a resemblance between Christ and the founders of empires and the gods of other religions. That resemblance does not exist. There is between Christianity and whatever other religions, the distance of infinity. Everything in Christ astonishes me. His spirit overawes me,

and His will confounds me. Between Him and whoever else in the world, there is no possible term of comparison. He is truly a being by Himself.{21}

If God were a man, we would expect Him to be sinless and incomparably Holy and Divine. We see that the hypothesis fits the facts of the life of Jesus Christ. Should we now conclude something other than Jesus is God? The Apostle John said, "No man has ever seen God, but the only begotten Son, who is at the Father's side, has made Him known." {22} Jesus is the Divine Xerox of the invisible God. The Original is invisible, but His earthly Reproduction is visible for all to behold in the unprecedented life of Jesus of Nazareth.

## Notes

1. Author unknown, although a portion of this essay is attributed to Dr. James Allan Francis.
2. Matt. 7:12.
3. Luke 9:24.
4. Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story* (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, 1959), p. 9.
5. Ibid., p. 10.
6. F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents; Are They Reliable?* (5th ed. rev.; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), p. 68.
7. Stauffer, p.x.
8. 1 Pet. 2:22.
9. Matt. 27:54.
10. 2 Cor. 5:21.
11. Luke 23:14.
12. John 8:45-47; 10:37-39.
13. Fritz Ridenour, *So What's the Difference?* (Glendale, California: G.L. Publications, 1967).
14. John 10:30.
15. John 14:9.
16. John 5:23.
17. John Ballard, *The Miracles of Unbelief* (Edinburgh: T & T

Clark, 1908), p. 251.

18. Ibid.

19. Lord Byron.

20. Renan, *The Life of Jesus* (New York: Carolton Publishers, 1863).

21. Frank Mead, *Encyclopedia of Religious Quotations* (Westwood: Fleming H. Revelle, 1965), p. 56.

22. John 1:18.

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