

# The Resurrection: Fact or Fiction? – A Real Historical Event

*Dr. 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 There are several highly accurate historical documents that attest to Jesus.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."<sup>(1)</sup> 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 Emmaus. 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 actually died and was resurrected from the tomb.*

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

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

If he did rise, then he is still alive and can offer peace to

troubled, hurting lives.

Countless scholars—among them the apostle Paul, Augustine, Sir Isaac Newton and C.S. Lewis—believed in the resurrection. We need not fear committing intellectual suicide by believing it also. Where do the facts lead?

Paul, a first-century skeptic-turned believer, wrote that “Christ died for our sins...he was buried...he was raised on the third day...he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve (Disciples). After that, he appeared to more than five hundred...at the same time, most of whom are still living.” Consider four pieces of evidence:

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

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

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

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

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

These theories hardly seem plausible. The guard was too powerful, the stone too heavy and the disciples too spineless to attempt such a feat.

Did Christ's enemies steal the body? If Romans or Jewish religious leaders had the body, surely they would have exposed it publicly and Christianity would have died out. They didn't, and it didn't.

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

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

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

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

The above does not constitute an exhaustive proof, rather a reasoned examination of the evidence. Each interested person

should evaluate the evidence and decide if it makes sense. Of course, the truth or falsity of the resurrection is a matter of historical fact and is not dependent on anyone's belief. If the facts support the claim, one can conclude that he arose. In any case, mere intellectual assent to the facts does little for one's life.

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

Worth considering?

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## Is Jesus the Only Way?

*Paul Rutherford explains why Jesus is the only way to know God.*



I was sitting in my car at a red light and I saw a bumper sticker on the car in front of me that said, "Coexist." Only, the letters on the bumper sticker are religious symbols. A crescent stands in place of the letter "c," a peace symbol in place of the letter "o," and some of

the other symbols included a cross, a Star of David, and a yin-yang, all used to create the word “coexist.”

Perhaps you’ve seen an image just like this bumper sticker, but on a t-shirt or tattoo. It represents a common sentiment in our culture that everyone should get along, or coexist peacefully. And I love that sentiment. We *should* get along. In fact, I’m grateful to God I live in a country in which an unprecedented number of people from all different religions, backgrounds, and ethnicities do, in fact, coexist every day, and for the most part without violent protest. The life we enjoy in the United States is historically unprecedented.



But the coexistence advocated in *this* bumper sticker is something more subtle. It’s a way of getting along that is more than meets the eye. It frequently calls for a peaceable lifestyle free of conflict between faiths. People hope that we can all unite in a single brotherhood and celebrate our differences, particularly religious ones. They don’t understand why we bicker over who’s right and who’s wrong.

The call to coexist is a reaction to the exclusive truth claims of religion, especially Christianity. In fact, its exclusivism is the most offensive aspect of Christianity today. “Repent. Believe. Come to Jesus. He’s the only way!” These are phrases easily associated with Christianity, especially street preaching. What should we do with Christianity’s exclusivism in a twenty-first century cosmopolitan society? Haven’t we progressed beyond such narrow-mindedness in these modern times? Isn’t claiming Jesus as the only way intolerant of other faiths? Don’t those Christians know all religions are equally valid paths to heaven? They shouldn’t force their beliefs on others!

Claiming Jesus is the only way to heaven *is* exclusive, I admit. It says there is no other way to God except by trust in Jesus Christ. Jesus most famously says this Himself in the Bible: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6).

Even though it’s offensive, I believe Jesus really is the only way to God. In this article we’re going to explore that question by discussing objections to it, and discover why He really *is* the only way.

## Tolerance

As believers, when we claim Jesus is the only way, you often hear people give some variation of, “That’s so intolerant!” In doing so, they reject the claim. Often implied, but not said straight out, is the demand that the Christian “tolerate” others’ beliefs, or take back what he just said.

It’s worth pointing out that claiming Christianity to be intolerant is itself an intolerant claim. But the notion of [tolerance](#) is complex and has a long history. And rather than elaborate that contradiction, let’s begin by exploring the complexity of tolerance.

What’s usually meant by tolerance these days is including beliefs that include all others. This position generally rejects Jesus as the only way because diversity and equality are now celebrated as the highest values. “Tolerance” celebrates differences of religions and equality of opportunity to practice them. To claim Jesus is the only way squelches both equality and diversity by claiming only one religion is right. Since squelching diversity and equality are socially unacceptable, the exclusivity of Jesus isn’t tolerated.

But this issue is complex. (That might be apparent already.) Truth and tolerance are actually linked. In fact, tolerance



relies on truth. In the book *The Truth about Tolerance*, David Couchman says, “If there is no real truth, there is no reason for me to be tolerant. Without some kind of beliefs which cause me to value you as a person, even though I disagree with you, why should I be tolerant towards you?”[\[1\]](#) For tolerance to exist at all, it relies upon a framework of truth. That resonates with an idea mentioned earlier, how intolerance contradicts itself.

But the rabbit hole goes even deeper. Truth also relies upon tolerance. “[I]t is also the case that truth as a reflective goal for individuals and communities. . .needs a context of right-minded toleration to flourish in.”[\[2\]](#) Without tolerance, truth likewise becomes the hammer of oppression. We find then that truth and tolerance go hand in hand.

Nevertheless, tolerance is the hammer of choice in culture today. Too often suppression of Christians sharing the truth that Jesus is the only way of salvation is justified in the name of tolerance. Don’t be taken captive by this distortion. Genuine tolerance acknowledges all positions, even those that are exclusive. A biblical worldview holds only one truth, Jesus is the only path to heaven, while maintaining respect and dignity for those who disagree. That’s genuine tolerance.

## **Absolutes Don’t Exist**

Here is another objection you might hear: Christians can’t claim Jesus is the only way because there are no [absolutes](#). What Christians claim is an absolute truth. And there simply *are* no absolute truths.

Their justification goes like this. We know from study, from reason, from the postmodern era, that society has moved beyond absolutes. There is no absolute truth. There is no overarching metanarrative (or idea of truth) which can transcend culture, nation, or time. Truth is a construct created by each man,

each culture, and bound by the strictures of the time in which it was created.

This objection shares a similar weakness to the tolerance objection. Denying absolutes is also self-defeating. It contradicts itself. If we were to ask this objector if she really believed what she was saying was true, we could ask her, "You believe no absolute truth exists, right? Are you absolutely sure of that?" This objector would have to agree. That's what the position holds, thus contradicting her own claim.

This objection often comes out of the postmodern school of thought, which says there is no such thing as objective truth, such as  $2 + 2$  always equals 4. Postmodern thought also denies the meaningfulness of history along with the ability to interpret literature in a unified and meaningful way. The unfortunate consequence is that we're left with a bleak reality stripped of purpose or meaning, which frankly, isn't very appealing. Without truth, meaning, history, or purpose, what's the point?

The great irony of it all is that postmodern thought arrives at its conclusions by way of reason, which it then concludes isn't true, and then holds it in contempt. It calls into question reason itself and the whole Enlightenment project along with it. So there's a healthy dose of despair that frequently accompanies adherents to postmodern thought, including our friends who don't believe Jesus can be the only way to God because there are no absolutes. But that's the lie to which I don't want you to be taken captive. Jesus really is the only way. He's the only way to find peace in a wrecked world. He is meaning for a confused life. And He leads us home to heaven out of a world where we don't belong. The remedy to that despair is Jesus.

Despair at the failure of reason to improve mankind is the sad but ultimate end of every god which usurps the rightful place

of the one true God: Jesus Christ. The truth is, all gods fail, disappoint, and leave us desperate. The only one who is faithful is Jesus. (cf. Deut. 7:9; 2 Thess. 3:3) But we won't find that satisfaction until we rest assured in the truth that Jesus really is the only way.

## Pluralism

There is another category of objectors to Christ's claim to exclusivity. A difficult but less in-your-face objection is pluralism. [Pluralism](#) is the belief that any variety of beliefs and values are all equally true and valid.

When I claim Jesus is the only way, some calmly object. Pluralists tend to be more laid-back. Typically they affirm my right to follow Christ, even celebrate it. These folks calmly share their belief that all religions are right: they all lead to god. Often they cite the Eastern proverb that there are many paths to the top of the mountain.

First, I'd like to point out that pluralism is intellectually lazy. It doesn't take seriously the law of non-contradiction. (This law says that two opposite things cannot both be true at the same time and in the same way.) When a Christian claims the path is exclusive, that Jesus is the only way, the pluralist might think, "That's nice, but actually, I know that all religions lead to heaven." He doesn't accept the Christian's position as true. He says he believes Christianity is true while at the same time denying its central tenet, which is that Jesus is the only way.

But this response is not unique to Christianity. A conservative Jew sincere about his faith won't say any path leads to heaven; neither will a Sunni Muslim. Pluralism attempts to make peace where there is none, and only succeeds in agreeing with no one.

Second, Christians who hold to exclusivism are sometimes

falsely accused of pushing their beliefs on others. In condemning the exclusivist claims of Christianity, the pluralist imposes *her* beliefs on the Christian. It contradicts the very intended principle.

We all have beliefs or actions we want others to take seriously. There's nothing wrong with that. From my experience, pluralism is usually based on fear, which is completely understandable. The other person disagrees but fears conflict. They fear the relationship might be at stake if they express their true belief. As believers we still accept and honor people even if they don't agree with us. This is how we alleviate fear, demonstrating acceptance for those with whom we disagree. (And that's the true meaning of tolerance, by the way.)

When someone throws up this smokescreen in conversation, it can feel scary—alarming. Suddenly, the person you're talking to gets defensive. We can wonder, "Where did this come from?" In that moment it's probably not wise to press. Ask them why they believe that way, or affirm them. Certainly no one has a right to force compliance on another unwillingly. Communicate that we don't have to agree to be accepted. Further, don't fall prey to this area where culture takes many believers captive. Jesus is the only way. Stand fast.

## **The Only Way**

Is Jesus the only way? Yes. Multiple scriptures teach this truth. Let's consider a few.

Matthew 11:27 says, "All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him." Jesus is claiming that God his Father has handed everything over to Him. This is an indirect claim to be God Himself. But Jesus also makes it clear He is

the only one, since no one knows the Father but the Son.

Let's also consider John's gospel. Before Jesus even began his ministry John the Baptist responds to Jesus' identity. "The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) In Hebrew culture at the time, calling someone the Lamb of God was a claim to the Messiah who was prophesied (Isaiah 53:7). Further, only God has the power to take away sin. This was an unmistakable claim to divinity. It's interesting also that Jesus doesn't correct him, or deny Godhood. On the contrary, a short time later, Jesus picks up his first two disciples and encourages them, saying, "Come and you will see" (John 1:39).

It's one thing to claim divinity and yet another to claim to be the *only* divinity. So, where does the Bible say Jesus is the only way? As we mentioned earlier, by Jesus' own admission He is the only way to God in John 14:6—"I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." Peter also explains the meaning of Jesus' exclusivity in Acts 4:12, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Believers, take heart. Jesus Christ is the one and only way. Questioning Jesus' exclusivity is a recent historical phenomenon. That question is commonly asked in the 20th century West, a culture increasingly influenced by postmodern thinking and multiculturalism. Take courage. We who accept the exclusivity of Christ are in a historical majority. Repudiation for Christians as being intolerant, exclusive, or uneducated is a recent occurrence. These are the current trends of our culture. Don't be taken captive. Jesus is the only way.

## Notes

1. David Couchman, quoted in *The Truth about Tolerance*, Brad

Stetson and Joseph G. Conti, (InterVarsity Press, 2005), 75.

2. Brad Stetson and Joseph G. Conti, *The Truth about Tolerance*, (InterVarsity Press, 2005), 75.

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# Christ and the Human Condition

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn looks at how God has acted in Christ to address those things which ail us most: sin, suffering, death, and our broken relationship with God.*



Early in the book of Job, Eliphaz the Temanite declares that “man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward” (5:7). Whether it’s the trouble that befalls us as we’re simply minding our own business or the trouble we bring upon others (or even ourselves), difficulties, sin, and suffering seem to plague us wherever we turn. Just think for a moment about some of the natural evils which afflict the human race. This class of evils includes both natural disasters like hurricanes, tsunamis, tornadoes, and earthquakes, and diseases like cancer, leukemia, Alzheimer’s and ALS. While natural evils are bad enough, they are only part of the problem. In addition to these, we must also consider all the moral evils which human beings commit against God, one another, and themselves. This second class of evils includes things like hatred, blasphemy, murder, rape, child abuse, terrorism, and

suicide. Taken together, the scope and magnitude of human sin and suffering in the world are truly mind-boggling. What does God have to say about issues such as these? Even better, what (if anything) has He done about them?

The Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga has written:

*As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, coolly observing the suffering of His creatures. He enters into and shares our suffering. He endures the anguish of seeing his son, the second person of the Trinity, consigned to the bitterly cruel and shameful death of the cross. Some theologians claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. Christ was prepared to endure the agonies of hell itself; and God, the Lord of the universe, was prepared to endure the suffering consequent upon his son's humiliation and death. He was prepared to accept this suffering in order to overcome sin, and death, and the evils that afflict our world, and to confer on us a life more glorious than we can imagine.*[\[1\]](#)

According to Plantinga, then, God *has acted*, and acted decisively through His Son, to address those things which ail us most—sin, suffering, death, and our broken relationship with God. In what follows, we will briefly examine each of these ailments. More importantly, however, we will also see how God has acted in Christ to heal our bleak condition, thereby giving us encouragement, strength and hope, both now and forevermore.

## **Moral Evil**

When Adam and Eve first sinned in the garden (Gen. 3:6), they could hardly have imagined all the tragic consequences that

would follow this single act of disobedience. Through this act, sin and death entered the world and the human condition was radically altered (Rom. 5:12-19). Human nature had become defiled with sin and this sinful nature was bequeathed to all mankind. The human race was now morally corrupt, alienated from God and one another, subject to physical death, and under the wrath of God. The entire creation, originally pronounced "very good" by God (Gen. 1:31), was negatively affected by this first act of rebellion. Like the ripples that radiate outward when a stone is thrown into a calm body of water, the consequences of that first sin have rippled through history, bringing evil, pain, and suffering in their wake. As the Christian philosopher William Lane Craig has noted, "The terrible human evils in the world are testimony to man's depravity in his state of spiritual alienation from God." [\[2\]](#) Indeed, we are so hopelessly entangled in this web of sin and disobedience that we cannot possibly extricate ourselves. This, according to the Bible, is the sorry plight in which all men naturally find themselves.

Fortunately for us, however, God has acted to free us from our enslavement to sin, to disentangle us from the web that holds us captive, and to reconcile us to Himself. He did this by sending His Son to so thoroughly identify with us in our painful predicament that He actually *became* one of us. By identifying Himself with sinners who were under the wrath of God, He was able to take our sins upon Himself and endure God's wrath in our place, so that we might be reconciled to God by placing our trust in Him. The apostle Paul put it this way: God made Christ "who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, we're told that anyone hanged on a tree because of their sins is "accursed of God" (21:23). In the New Testament, Paul picks up on this idea and says that through His substitutionary death on the cross,



Christ became “a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13). We should not lose sight of the significance of these words. By identifying Himself with the guilty human race, and becoming a curse for us, He has opened the way for us to be freed from our sins and reconciled to God as we are identified with *Him* through faith. This is just one of the ways in which Christ has met the desperate needs of the human condition.

## Natural Evil

Another reason why we suffer arises from what philosophers and theologians call *natural evil*. Natural evil refers to all the causes of human pain and suffering which are not brought about by morally-responsible agents. This would include the pain and suffering arising from natural disasters like earthquakes, famines, and storms, as well as diseases like cancer and ALS.

Now the question I want to pose is this: Is there a sense in which Christ is also a solution to the problem of natural evil? And if so, then how should we understand this? When we examine the life and ministry of Jesus as it's recorded in the Gospels, we can hardly help but be struck by the number of miracles He performs. He walks on water, calms raging storms, feeds thousands of people with a few loaves and fish, cleanses lepers, heals the sick, restores sight to the blind, and even raises the dead! Although some might demur at all these accounts of miracles, Craig has noted that “the miracle stories are so widely represented in all strata of the Gospel traditions that it would be fatuous to regard them as not rooted in the life of Jesus.”[{3}](#)

So what is the significance of Jesus' miracles? According to New Testament scholar Ben Witherington, Jesus' miracles show him to be God's special agent of blessing, healing, liberation, and salvation, as well as the “one who brings about the conditions associated with the final . . . dominion of God.”[{4}](#) Since the kingdom of God is portrayed in Scripture

as a reign of peace, prosperity, health, well-being and blessing, Jesus' miracles of healing, as well as his demonstrations of power over nature, indicate that He is indeed capable of ushering in such a wonderful kingdom.[{5}](#) And if Jesus has the power to bring in an era of health and well-being, both for our physical bodies and for the physical universe, and if he in fact will do so, then he clearly provides a solution to the problem of natural evil. Ultimately, in the new heaven and new earth, which God will give to those who love Him, we are promised that there "will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

## Physical Death

The apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, described death as an "enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26). People fear death for any number of reasons. Some fear that the process of dying will be painful. Others dread the thought of leaving behind the ones they love. Some may fear that death is simply the end, that whatever joys and pleasures this life holds, death takes them away forever. But others may fear that there *is* an afterlife and worry that things may not go well for them there. For many people, however, death is feared as the great unknown.[{6}](#) Friends and relatives die and we never see or hear from them again. For these people, death is like the ultimate black-hole, from which nothing and no one can ever escape.

But according to the Bible, Christ *did* escape the snares of death, and in doing so He dealt our mortal enemy a mortal blow of his own. I said that Paul describes death as an "enemy," but this is simply to inform us of the fact that our enemy has been conquered by Christ. "The last enemy that will be abolished," he writes, "is death" (1 Cor. 15:26). But how has Christ conquered this enemy? And how does *His* victory help *us*?

Christ conquered death through his resurrection from the dead

and all who put their trust in Him can share in his victory. Pastor Erwin Lutzer has written:

*Thus the resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Standing at the empty tomb, we are assured of the triumph of Jesus on the Cross; we are also assured that He has conquered our most fearsome enemy. Yes, death can still terrify us, but the more we know about Jesus, the more its power fades.*[{7}](#)

Consider the life and death of the great Reformation theologian Martin Luther. As a young Augustinian monk, Luther struggled with a very sensitive conscience and a terrible fear of death. But once he understood the gospel and placed his trust in Christ, his fear gradually began to fade. By the time he died, his fear was gone. It's reported that on his deathbed, he recited some promises from the Bible, commended his spirit to God, and quietly breathed his last.[{8}](#) Believing that Christ had conquered death and given him eternal life, he was able to die at peace and without any fear. And this is the hope of *all* who trust in Christ!

## **The Weight of Glory**

Christian theologians sometimes describe the knowledge of God as “an incommensurable good.”[{9}](#) By this they mean that knowing God in an intimate, personal way is quite literally the *greatest good* that any created being can experience. It is an “incommensurable” or “immeasurable” good—a good so great that it surpasses our ability even to comprehend. The apostle Paul once prayed that the Ephesians might “know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:19). He understood that “intimate relationship with God . . . is incommensurately good-for created persons.”[{10}](#)

Of course, this doesn't mean that one who is intimately related to God will never experience any of the trials and

difficulties of life. In fact, it's possible that such a person will actually experience *more* trials and difficulties than would have been the case had they *not* been intimately related to God! Knowing the love of Christ doesn't make one immune to suffering. It does, however, provide indescribable comfort while going through it (see 2 Cor. 1:3-5).

The apostle Paul understood this quite well. In his second letter to the Corinthians, he described himself as a servant of God who had suffered afflictions, hardships, beatings, imprisonments, labors, sleeplessness, and hunger (2 Cor. 6:4-5). In spite of this, however, he did not lose heart. He famously wrote that "momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

But how could Paul describe his sufferings as just a "momentary, light affliction"? Because, says Craig, he had an *eternal* perspective. "He understood that the length of this life, being finite, is literally infinitesimal in comparison with the eternal life we shall spend with God." [\[11\]](#)

The greatest hunger of the human heart is to know and experience the love and acceptance of God and to enjoy Him forever. In his magnificent sermon "The Weight of Glory," C.S. Lewis wrote, "In the end that Face which is the delight or . . . terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or . . . the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be . . . disguised." [\[12\]](#) Incredibly, just as Christ has dealt with the problems of sin, suffering, and death, He has also acted decisively to reconcile us to God. Through faith in him, anyone who wants can eventually experience "an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

## Notes

2. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 96-97.

3. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 324.
4. Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 43-44.
5. Some biblical passages that pertain to Christ's coming kingdom are Isaiah 11:1-9, Matthew 19:28, and Acts 3:19-21.
6. I was reminded of many of these examples while watching the round table discussion on suffering and death in Catherine Tatge, "The Question of God: Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis" (U.S.A.: PBS Home Video, 2004).
7. Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Vanishing Power of Death* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004), 13.
8. Mike Fearon, *Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1986), 157-58.
9. See, for example, Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 100.
10. Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 47.
11. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 99.
12. C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 13.

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## Prophecies of the Messiah

*Michael Gleghorn argues that the Bible contains genuine prophecies about a coming Messiah that were accurately fulfilled in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.*

# The Place of His Birth

Biblical prophecy is a fascinating subject. It not only includes predictions of events that are still in the future. It also includes predictions of events that were future at the time the prophecy was given, but which have now been fulfilled and are part of the past. This latter category includes all the prophecies about a coming Messiah that Christians believe were accurately fulfilled in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. If the Bible really does contain such prophecies, then we would seem to have evidence that's at least consistent with the divine inspiration of the Bible. One can see how an all-knowing God could accurately foretell the future, but it's not clear how a finite human being could do so. Thus, if there are accurately fulfilled prophecies in the Bible, then we have yet another reason to believe that the biblical worldview is true.



Let's begin with a prophecy about the Messiah's birthplace. "Messiah" is a Hebrew term that simply means "anointed one." When translated into Greek, the language of the New Testament, the term becomes "Christ." Christians believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scriptures (see Mark 14:61-62).

In Micah 5:2 we read, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." This prophecy was given in the eighth century B.C., more than seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus!

Notice, first, that it refers to a future ruler who will come from the town of Bethlehem. When King Herod, shortly after

Jesus' birth, asked the Jewish religious leaders where the Christ (or Messiah) was to be born, they told him that he was to be born in Bethlehem and cited this verse from Micah as support (Matt. 2:1-6). Both Matthew and Luke confirm that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1 and Luke 2:4-7). So He clearly meets this necessary qualification for being the promised Messiah.

But that's not all. Micah also says that the origins of this ruler are "from of old, from ancient times." How should we understand this? One commentator notes, "The terms 'old' . . . and 'ancient times' . . . may denote 'great antiquity' as well as 'eternity' in the strictest sense." [{1}](#) Dr. Allen Ross states, "At the least this means that Messiah was pre-existent; at the most it means He is eternal." [{2}](#) Micah's prophecy thus suggests that the Messiah will be a supernatural, perhaps even divine, person. And this astonishing conclusion is precisely what Jesus claimed for Himself! [{3}](#)

## **The Time of His Appearing**

Let's now consider a fascinating prophecy that, in the opinion of many scholars, tells us when the Messiah would make His appearance. It's found in Daniel 9.

Daniel was one of the Jewish captives who had been brought to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. The prophecy in Daniel 9 was given in the sixth century B.C. While much can be said about this passage, we must focus on a few important points.

To begin, verse 24 gives us the time parameters during which the prophecy will unfold. It reads, "Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin," and so on. Although we can't go into all the details, the 'seventy 'sevens'' concern seventy distinct seven-year periods of time, or a total of 490

years.

Next, verse 25 tells us that from the issuing of a decree to rebuild Jerusalem until the coming of the Messiah, there will be a total of sixty-nine “sevens,” or 483 years. There are two views we must consider. The first holds that this decree was issued by the Persian ruler Artaxerxes to Ezra the priest in 457 B.C. [{4}](#) Adding 483 years to this date brings us to A.D. 27, the year many scholars believe Jesus began His public ministry! The second view holds that the reference is to a later decree of Artaxerxes, issued on March 5, 444 B.C. [{5}](#) Adding 483 years to this date takes us to A.D. 38. But according to this view, the years in question should be calculated according to a lunar calendar, consisting of twelve thirty-day months. [{6}](#) If each of the 483 years consists of only 360 days, then we arrive at March 30, 33 A.D. Dr. Allen Ross says “that is the Monday of the Passion week, the day of the Triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.” [{7}](#) The views thus differ on the date of Jesus’ death, but each can comfortably fit the evidence. [{8}](#)

Finally, verse 26 says that after the period of sixty-nine “sevens” the Messiah will be “cut off” and have nothing. According to one scholar, “The word translated ‘cut off’ is used of executing . . . a criminal.” [{9}](#) All of this fits quite well with the crucifixion of Jesus. Indeed, the accuracy of this prophecy, written over five hundred years before Jesus’ birth, bears eloquent testimony to the divine inspiration and truth of the Bible.

## **The Nature of His Ministry**

In Deuteronomy 18:15 Moses told the Israelites, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.” This verse promised a succession of prophets who would speak God’s words to the people. Ultimately, however, it refers to Jesus Christ. One



commentator notes that the Messianic interpretation of this passage is mentioned not only in the New Testament, but also among the Essenes, Jews, Gnostics, and others.[{10}](#) Peter explicitly applied this passage to Jesus in one of his sermons (Acts 3:22-23).

But not only was the Messiah to be a great prophet, it was also foretold that he would be a priest and king as well. The prophet Zechariah was told to make a royal crown and symbolically set it on the head of Joshua, the high priest. The Lord then said, "Here is the man whose name is the Branch . . . he will . . . sit and rule on his throne. And . . . be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two" (Zechariah 6:12-13). "The title "Branch" is a messianic title."[{11}](#) So the scene symbolizes the future Messiah, here referred to as "the Branch," uniting the offices of king and priest in one person.

But why is it important that the Messiah be a priest? As a prophet he speaks God's word to the people. As a king he rules from his throne. But why must he also be a priest? "Because priests dealt with sin," says Michael Brown, a Christian scholar who is ethnically Jewish. "Priests bore the iniquities of the people on their shoulders."[{12}](#) And this, of course, is precisely what Jesus did for us: "He . . . bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24).

Dr. Brown points to a tradition in the Talmud that says that on the Day of Atonement there were three signs that the animal sacrifices offered by the high priest had been accepted by God. According to this tradition, in the forty years prior to the temple's destruction in A.D. 70, all three signs turned up negative every single time.[{13}](#) Dr. Brown comments, "Jesus probably was crucified in A.D. 30, and the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70."[{14}](#) So during this forty-year period God signaled that he no longer accepted these sacrifices. Why? Because final atonement had been made by Jesus![{15}](#)

## The Significance of His Death

Without any doubt, one of the most astonishing prophecies about the promised Messiah is found in Isaiah 52-53. The verses were written about seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus. They largely concern the death of the Lord's "Suffering Servant." According to many scholars, a careful comparison of this passage with the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus' suffering and death reveals too many similarities to be merely coincidental.

In some of the most-cited verses from this intriguing passage we read: "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:5-6). Here we have a vivid depiction of substitutionary atonement. The Lord lays upon His servant "the iniquity of us all" and punishes him "for our transgressions." In other words, God's servant dies as a substitute in our place. This is precisely what Jesus claimed for himself, saying, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

The parallels between Isaiah's "Suffering Servant" and Jesus are certainly impressive. But some scholars have suggested that Isaiah's "servant" is actually the nation of Israel and not the Messiah. Dr. Michael Brown dismisses this notion however, insisting that 'nowhere in the . . . foundational, authoritative Jewish writings do we find the interpretation that this passage refers to the nation of Israel. References to the servant as a people actually end with Isaiah 48:20.' [\[16\]](#) What's more, he says, "Many . . . Jewish interpreters . . . had no problem seeing this passage as referring to the Messiah . . . By the sixteenth century, Rabbi

Moshe Alshech said, 'Our rabbis with one voice accept and affirm . . . that the prophet is speaking of the Messiah, and we shall . . . also adhere to the same view.'" [{17}](#)

For his part, Dr. Brown is so convinced that this passage prophetically depicts the suffering and death of Jesus that he feels "as if God would have to apologize to the human race and to the Jewish people for putting this passage into the scriptures" if Jesus is not the one in view! [{18}](#) Although this is a strong statement, it's not unjustified. For Isaiah 53 not only foretells the death of God's servant for the sins of the people, it also implies his resurrection!

## **The Mystery of His Resurrection**

In the opinion of many scholars, Isaiah 53 not only foretells the death of God's servant; it also implies his resurrection from the dead!

It's important to notice that Isaiah 53 makes it absolutely clear that the Messiah is put to death. It says that "he was cut off from the land of the living" (v. 8), and that "he poured out his life unto death" (v. 12). On the other hand, however, it also says that "he will see his offspring and prolong his days" (v. 10), and that after his suffering "he will see the light of life and be satisfied" (v. 11). So the text teaches both that the Messiah will die and that he will live again. And although the passage doesn't explicitly teach the Messiah's resurrection, it's certainly consistent with it. This is really staggering in light of the compelling historical evidence for the death and resurrection of Jesus! [{19}](#)

Let's now pause to consider what we've learned in this brief article. Micah 5:2 teaches that the Messiah would come out of Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus. Also, by teaching the preexistence, or even eternality, of the Messiah, the prophecy

suggests that he'll be a supernatural, possibly even divine, figure. In Daniel 9:24-27 we saw that the Messiah would appear to Israel sometime around A.D. 27 – 33, precisely the time of Jesus' public ministry! Deuteronomy and Zechariah teach that the Messiah would minister as prophet, priest, and king. As a prophet, Jesus spoke God's word to the people. As a priest, he offered himself as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. And while he didn't reign as king during his first advent, he was called "the king of the Jews" (Matt. 27:11, 37). And Christians believe that he's in some sense reigning now from heaven and that he'll one day reign on earth as well (Luke 1:32-33). Finally, Isaiah 53 teaches that the Messiah would die for our sins—and then somehow live again. This is consistent with the New Testament's record of Jesus' substitutionary death and bodily resurrection.

Of course, we've not been able to consider all the prophecies. But hopefully enough has been said to conclude with Dr. Brown that if Jesus isn't the Messiah, "there will never be a Messiah. It's too late for anyone else. It's him or no one." [\[20\]](#) Well, you've now heard the evidence; the verdict is up to you.

## Notes

1. Thomas E. McComiskey, "Micah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 427.
2. Allen Ross, "Messianic Prophecies," at [www.bible.org/page.php?page\\_id=2764](http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=2764). Accessed on September 6, 2007.
3. See, for example, Matthew 11:27; John 8:58 and 10:30.
4. Gleason L. Archer, Jr., "Daniel," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 114. See also Ezra 7:11-26.
5. J. Dwight Pentecost, "Daniel," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1985), 1362. See

also Nehemiah 2:1-8.

6. See, for example, the discussion in Ross, "Messianic Prophecies," at [www.bible.org/page.php?page\\_id=2764](http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=2764). Accessed on September 6, 2007.

7. Ibid.

8. The first holds that He was crucified in A.D. 30, the second in A.D. 33.

9. Pentecost, "Daniel," 1364.

10. Earl S. Kalland, "Deuteronomy," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 122.

11. F. Duane Lindsey, "Zechariah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1985), 1558. See also Zechariah 3:8.

12. Michael Brown, interviewed in Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Advance Reader Copy) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 199.

13. See Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 39a.

14. Brown, interviewed in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 201.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 213.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., 212.

19. For a defense of this important claim, please see some of the excellent articles by William Lane Craig at [www.reasonablefaith.org/site/PageServer?pagename=scholarly\\_articles\\_historical\\_Jesus](http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/PageServer?pagename=scholarly_articles_historical_Jesus). For more scriptural support, please compare Peter's sermon in Acts 2:22-36 with Psalm 16:8-11.

20. Brown, interviewed in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 203.

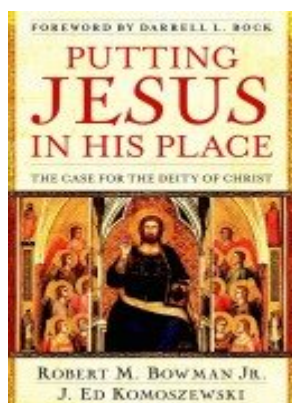
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# In His H.A.N.D.S.: How We Can Know That Jesus is God

*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."<sup>{1}</sup> 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" (Is. 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" (Jn. 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" (Jn. 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 (Heb. 1:6; Matt. 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 (Rev. 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 (Jn. 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 (Col. 1:15, 19). He summarizes the same idea by adding that "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Col. 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" (Heb. 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 (Jn. 1:1-3; Col. 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" (Jn. 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 Pet. 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 (Gen. 1:1; cf. Isa. 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” (Col. 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 (Lk. 6:19; Mk. 5:30; Lk. 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” (Matt. 8:26). When thousands were following him without food, He fed them miraculously (Matt. 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 (Matt. 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 (Lk. 7:47-49; Mk. 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?” (Mk. 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" (Mk. 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 (Dan. 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 (Ps. 104:3; Is. 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 (Jn. 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 (Eph. 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 Cor. 5:10; Acts 2:33; 7:59-60; Heb. 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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# **The Case for Christ – Reasons to Believe in the Reality of Christ**

*Dr. 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, Lapedes 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 Lapidés, quoted in *The Case for Christ*, p. 185.

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

*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.<sup>{1}</sup> This, he wrote to Bruce, had caused him “great concern and some little upset in [his] spiritual life.”<sup>{2}</sup> He concludes his letter by asking, “Is such collateral proof available, and if not, are there reasons for the lack of it?”<sup>{3}</sup> 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.”<sup>{4}</sup> 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. . . .*<sup>{5}</sup>

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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# The Self-Understanding of Jesus

*Michael Gleghorn examines some sayings and deeds of Jesus, accepted by many critical scholars as historically authentic to see what they imply about Jesus' self-understanding.*

## Jesus and the Scholars

You might be surprised to learn that today many New Testament scholars don't believe that the historical Jesus ever claimed to be the Son of God, the Lord, or even the Messiah.[\[1\]](#) But if that's the case, how do they explain the presence of such claims in the Gospels? They believe the Gospel writers put them there! The actual Jesus of history never made such exalted claims for *himself*. It was the early church that started all that business.





Is this true? What are we to make of all this? Let's begin with a deceptively simple question: How did the early church come to believe in—and even worship—Jesus as both Lord and Messiah, if he never actually claimed such titles for himself? Just think for a moment about how strange this would be. Jesus' earliest followers were Jews. They firmly believed that there is only one God. And yet, shortly after his crucifixion, they began worshiping *Jesus* as God! As Dr. William Lane Craig asks, "How does one explain this worship by monotheistic Jews of one of their countrymen as God incarnate, apart from the claims of Jesus himself?"<sup>{2}</sup> In other words, if Jesus never made such exalted claims for *himself*, then why would his earliest followers do so? After all, on the surface such claims not only seem blasphemous, they also appear to contradict the deeply held Jewish conviction that there is only one God.

But there's another issue that needs to be considered. Although many critical scholars don't believe that Jesus ever made such radical personal claims, nevertheless, they *do* believe that he said and did things that seem to imply that he had a very high view of himself. In other words, while they might deny that Jesus ever *explicitly* claimed to be Israel's Messiah, or Lord, they acknowledge that he said and did things which, when you get right down to it, seem to imply that that's precisely who he *believed* himself to be! If this is correct, if Jesus really believed himself to be both Israel's Messiah and Lord, then notice that we are brought back once again to that old dilemma of traditional apologetics.<sup>{3}</sup> Jesus was either deceived in this belief, suffering from something akin to delusions of grandeur. Or he was a fraud, willfully trying to deceive others. Or he really was who he believed himself to be—Messiah, Lord, and Son of God.

In the remainder of this article, we'll examine some of the sayings and deeds of Jesus that even many critical scholars accept as historically authentic to see what they might tell us about Jesus' self-understanding.

## Jesus and the Twelve

Today, even most critical scholars agree that Jesus probably chose a core group of twelve disciples just as the Gospels say he did. In fact, Dr. Bart Ehrman refers to this event as "one of the best-attested traditions of our surviving sources . . ."[{4}](#) Now you might be thinking that this sounds like a rather insignificant detail. What can this possibly tell us about the self-understanding of Jesus? Does his choice of twelve disciples give us any insight into what he believed about himself?

Let's begin with a little background information. E. P. Sanders, in his highly acclaimed book, *Jesus and Judaism*, observes that ". . . in the first century Jewish hopes for the future would have included the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel."[{5}](#) Now this hope was based on nothing less than God's prophetic revelation in the Hebrew Bible. Sometimes the primary agent effecting this restoration is said to be the Lord (e.g. Isa. 11:11-12; Mic. 2:12). At other times it's a Messianic figure who is clearly a human being (e.g. Isa. 49:5-6). Interestingly, however, still other passages describe this Messianic figure as having divine attributes, or as being closely associated with the Lord in some way (e.g. cp. Mic. 2:13 with 5:2-4). But why is this important? And what does it have to do with Jesus' choice of twelve disciples?

Many New Testament scholars view Jesus' choice of twelve disciples as symbolic of the promised restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel. The restoration of Israel is thus seen to be one of the goals or objectives of Jesus' ministry. As Richard Horsley observes, "One of the principal indications

that Jesus intended the restoration of Israel was his appointment of the Twelve.”{6} But if one of Jesus’ consciously chosen aims was the restoration of Israel, then what does this imply about who he believed himself to be? After all, the Old Testament prophets attribute this restoration either to the Lord or to a Messianic figure possessing both divine and human attributes.

Might Jesus have viewed himself in such exalted terms? Some scholars believe that he did. Dr. Ben Witherington poses an interesting question: “If the Twelve represent a renewed Israel, where does Jesus fit in?” He’s *not* one of the Twelve. “He’s not just part of Israel, not merely part of the redeemed group, he’s forming the group—just as God in the Old Testament formed his people and set up the twelve tribes of Israel.”{7} Witherington argues that this is an important clue in uncovering what Jesus thought of himself. If he’s right, then Jesus may indeed have thought of himself as Israel’s Messiah and Lord!

## Jesus and the Law

What was Jesus’ attitude toward the Law of Moses? Some scholars say that Jesus was a law-abiding Jew who “broke neither with the written Law nor with the traditions of the Pharisees.”{8} Others say the issue is more complex. Ben Witherington observes that Jesus related to the Law in a variety of ways.{9} Sometimes he affirmed the validity of particular Mosaic commandments (e.g. Matt. 19:18-19). At other times he went beyond Moses and intensified some of the commandments. In the Sermon on the Mount he declared, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:27-28). We shouldn’t skip too lightly over a statement like this. The prohibition against adultery is one of the Ten Commandments. By wording the statement as he did, Jesus

apparently “equated his own authority with that of the divinely given Torah.”[{10}](#) Indeed, it’s because of sayings like this that one Jewish writer complained: “Israel cannot accept . . . the utterances of a man who speaks in his own name—not ‘thus saith the Lord,’ but ‘I say unto you.’ This ‘I’ is . . . sufficient to drive Judaism away from the Gentiles forever.”[{11}](#)

But Jesus went further than this! In Mark 7 he declared all foods “clean” (vv. 14-19). That is, he set aside the dietary laws found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. To really grasp the radical nature of Jesus’ declaration one must only remember that these dietary laws had been given to Israel by God Himself! But what sort of person believes he has the authority to set aside the commandments of God? Ben Witherington notes, “Jesus seems to assume an authority over Torah that no Pharisee or Old Testament prophet assumed—the authority to set it aside.”[{12}](#) And Jacob Neusner, a Jewish scholar, seems to agree: “Jews believe in the Torah of Moses . . . and that belief requires faithful Jews to enter a dissent at the teachings of Jesus, on the grounds that those teachings at important points contradict the Torah.”[{13}](#)

How does this relate to the self-understanding of Jesus? Think about it this way. What would Jesus have to believe about himself to seriously think he had the authority to set aside God’s commandments? Although it may trouble some critical scholars, the evidence seems to favor the view that Jesus believed that in some sense he possessed the authority of God Himself!

## **Jesus and the Demons**

One of the amazing feats attributed to Jesus in the Gospels is the power of exorcism, the power to cast out demons from human beings. Although this may sound strange and unscientific to some modern readers, most critical scholars agree that both

Jesus and his contemporaries at least *believed* that Jesus had such power. Of course, this doesn't mean that the majority of critical scholars believe that demons *actually* exist, or that Jesus *actually* cast such spirits out of people. Many of them do not. But they do think there is persuasive historical evidence for affirming that both Jesus and his contemporaries *believed* such things.[{14}](#) In fact, Dr. Bart Ehrman notes that "Jesus' exorcisms are among the best-attested deeds of the Gospel traditions."[{15}](#) But why is this important? And what can it possibly tell us about Jesus' self-understanding?

Most scholars are convinced that the historical Jesus declared, "But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28). Prior to making this declaration, the Pharisees had accused Jesus of casting out demons "by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons" (12:24). Jesus responded by pointing out how absurd it would be for Satan to fight against himself like that (v. 26). What's more, the charge was inconsistent. There were other Jewish exorcists in Jesus' day and it was widely believed that their power came from God. Wouldn't it be more reasonable, then, to conclude that Jesus' power also came from God?

If so, then notice the startling implications of Jesus' claim: "*If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.*" At the very least, Jesus appears to be claiming that in himself the kingdom of God is in some sense a present reality. But his claim may actually be even more radical. Some scholars have observed that in ancient Jewish literature the phrase, 'kingdom of God,' is sometimes used as a roundabout way for speaking of God Himself. If Jesus intended this meaning in the statement we are considering, then William Lane Craig's conclusion is fully warranted: "In claiming that in himself the kingdom of God had already arrived, as visibly demonstrated by his exorcisms, Jesus was, in effect, saying that in himself God had drawn near, thus putting himself in God's place."[{16}](#)

It increasingly appears that Jesus thought of himself as much more than just another teacher or prophet. Even when we limit ourselves to material accepted as authentic by the majority of critical scholars, Jesus still seems to unquestionably communicate his divinity!

## Jesus and the Father

In one of the most astonishing declarations of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel he states, "All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son, except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (11:27). Many scholars believe that this verse forms a unit with the two preceding verses. It's clear from the context that the "Father" referred to by Jesus is God, for Jesus begins this section by saying, "I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth" (11:25). So in the verse we are considering, Jesus claims to be God's Son in an absolutely unique sense. He refers to God as "My Father," and declares that no one knows the Father, "except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him." Jesus not only claims to be God's unique Son, he also claims to have special knowledge of the Father that no one else can mediate to others!

Because of the radical nature of these claims, it's hardly surprising to learn that some critical scholars have denied that Jesus ever really said this. Nevertheless, other scholars have offered some very good reasons for embracing the saying's authenticity. Dr. William Lane Craig notes that this saying comes from the hypothetical *Q* source, a source that both Matthew and Luke may have used in writing their Gospels. If that's true, then the saying is quite early and thus has a greater likelihood of actually going back to Jesus. Additionally, "the idea of the mutual knowledge of Father and Son is a Jewish idea, indicating its origin in a Semitic-speaking milieu."[\[17\]](#) Finally, Dr. Ben Witherington notes that

the eminent New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias showed “how this saying goes back to an Aramaic original” which “surely counts in favor of it going back to Jesus.”[\[18\]](#) Aramaic was probably the language most often used by Jesus and his disciples. After discussing this saying in some detail, Witherington concludes, “In the end, all the traditional bases for judging this saying to be inauthentic no longer will bear close scrutiny.”[\[19\]](#)

In this brief overview of the self-understanding of Jesus, I’ve attempted to show that even when we limit ourselves to Gospel traditions that are generally considered historically authentic by a majority of scholars, Jesus still makes impressive claims to deity. But as Dr. Craig observes, “. . . if Jesus was not who he claimed to be, then he was either a charlatan or a madman, neither of which is plausible. Therefore, why not accept him as the divine Son of God, just as the earliest Christians did?”[\[20\]](#)

## Notes

1. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 242-43.
2. *Ibid.*, 243.
3. *Ibid.*, 252.
4. Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 186.
5. E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 98.
6. Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 199.
7. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 134.
8. Donald A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus: An Analysis and Critique of Modern Jewish Study of Jesus*, ed.

Gerard Terpstra (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 109-10. This quotation does not represent Hagner's own position.

9. Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 65.

10. Craig, 246.

11. Ahad ha' Am, "Judaism and the Gospels," in *Nationalism and the Jewish Ethic*, ed. H. Khon (New York: Schocken, 1962), 298, cited in Hagner, 101-02.

12. Witherington, 65.

13. Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (New York: Doubleday,

1993), xii, cited in Craig, 247.

14. Ehrman, 197.

15. Ibid.

16. Craig, 249.

17. Ibid., 246.

18. Witherington, 224.

19. Ibid., 225.

20. Craig, 252.

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# Jesus Christ Superstar

## Kanye West vs. John Lennon

"Who do men say that I am?" (Matt 16:16)

In 1966, rock star John Lennon said the Beatles were "more popular than Jesus." Lennon made the statement in the context of his predication about the demise of Christianity; "Christianity will go," he said. "It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I'm right and I will be proved



right. We're more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first, rock 'n' roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right but his disciples were thick and ordinary." Lennon's failed predication about the demise of Christianity, like so many since the eighteenth century, grossly underestimated the enormous appeal of Jesus.

Jesus Christ is the most popular figure in history and everyone wants a piece of him. Recent music artists tend to disagree with Lennon. The pop diva Kesha sings, "Got Jesus on my necklace." Lady Gaga sings, "The three men I'm a serve my whole life is my Daddy and Nebraska and Jesus Christ." In his acclaimed single, "Jesus Walks," a sort of Hip Hop gospel song, Kanye West raps and preaches:

*I ain't here to argue about his facial features  
Or here to convert atheists into believers  
I'm just trying to say the way school need teachers  
The way Kathie Lee needed Regis that's the way I need Jesus.*

It is very reassuring to have Jesus on your team. There is a principle in marketing called "borrowed authority" where a spokesman such as an athlete or movie star endorses a product. Jesus represents the ultimate superstar whose intrinsic authority is borrowed to support every kind of religious and social movement. Even the apparent enemies of faith such as Secular Humanists claim to accept Jesus' social ethics of peace and equality. Today cults and religions, Christian and non-Christian alike, all claim Jesus as their own or as a great teacher or prophet. Islam claims Jesus as a prophet and teacher of Islam who preceded Mohammad and predicted his coming.

The various images of Jesus may error in one of two ways, either in denying his full deity or neglecting his complete humanity. The biblical presentation shows Jesus Christ as the Word of God who became flesh (John 1). He is both Son of God

and Son of Man. Traditional theology calls this the God/man union. This means Jesus is both fully God and fully man. This unity must be retained if we are to follow the Jesus of the Bible and not another Jesus invented by the spirit of the age to lend credibility to a given cause or religious movement.

Jesus once asked the apostle Peter, "Who do men say that I am?" Peter offered a very pluralistic answer: "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." The idea that Jesus was a prophet is not wrong, just incomplete. When Christ asked Peter again, "Who do you say that I am?" he replied that Jesus was not just another great religious leader, but the incarnate savior when he said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:13-16).

## **The Humanist Tradition: Jesus as the Greatest Man**

The emphasis since the Renaissance in Western thought has been on humanism. This means a stress in the arts and sciences on human dignity, freedom, and beauty as well as a renewed interest in the natural world as opposed to a transcendent emphasis on divinity or the authority of the church and the Bible as in the Middle Ages. Every age tends to portray Christ in its own image. In the Middle Ages, Christ is painted as King, divine and regal such as Pantocrator, ruler of all, from the sixth century. Today our view of Jesus reflects the humanist trend from Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (1498) all the way to the *Head of Christ* by Warner Sallman (1940), which is by far the most popular portrait of Christ in history.

The famous German poet Goethe noted the sensual power of *The Last Supper*, which represents "the boldest attempt to adhere to nature, while, at the same time, the object is supernatural," with the result that 'the majesty, the uncontrolled will, the power and might of the Deity' were not

expressed.”{1}

This represents the modern liberal Jesus, which has been popular since the nineteenth century. This view shows Jesus as a great man and moral teacher, a faith healer who preached social reform, the Son of Man, but not the Son of God. Modern culture tends to think about Jesus as the greatest man who ever lived rather than the Son of God.

This is also true of “The Quest of the Historical Jesus” of the nineteenth century debunked by Albert Schweitzer as modern people portraying Jesus in their own image as a good ethical man, who did good deeds.{2} Despite the fact that the search for the Historical Jesus was shown to be biased towards modern views, it continues in movements like the Jesus Seminar and in the famous Baur-Ehrman thesis. Both argue for a historical Jesus who is not in the Gospels but is thought to be the earliest Jesus. They baptize Christ in contemporary culture by arguing that alternative views of Jesus preceded orthodoxy in the earliest Christian community. This presents another attempt to understand Jesus from a pluralistic perspective. The latest quest seeks greater diversity in our social ethics by presenting various views of Jesus.

A very human Jesus is not necessarily a false view, except if we say this is all that he was. So Jesus is the greatest man that ever lived, but he was more than that as well. He was also the incarnate God.

## **The Gnostic Jesus: The Great Spirit with a Message**

There is no difference between the ancient world and the modern one concerning Jesus’ star power. Yesterday’s Gnostics, like today’s, wanted the credibility of having Jesus attached to their movement without really accepting him as their Lord and Savior, once again tapping into his borrowed authority.

Gnosticism was a second century heretical belief that has experienced a considerable revival since the discovery of some of their lost documents in 1945. Gnostics believed that the material world is basically evil, created by a demiurge [Ed. Note: "A supernatural being imagined as creating or fashioning the world in subordination to the Supreme Being, and sometimes regarded as the originator of evil," Dictionary.com] that departed from the Pleroma (the Gnostic view of God). The divine spark, or a piece of God, however, remains trapped in our physical bodies that can only be released through secret knowledge of divine messengers like Jesus.

A problem arises theologically when Gnostics reject the belief that Jesus had no physical body because the material world is evil. He only appeared as a man, like a phantom or hologram, but was really a divine spirit. Jesus was not a savior, but a teacher. Gnostics did not believe in salvation, meaning one is saved from sin by grace through faith. Instead, Gnostics taught enlightenment or the impartation of knowledge. People are not sinners, only ignorant of the divine spark within them.

Who was Jesus to the Gnostics? He was not the divine Son of God made flesh, but an elevated spirit being, an emanation sent to give special knowledge of how to ascend back to God. One of the greatest artistic expressions of Gnosticism comes from the modern Surrealist painter Salvador Dali in his depiction of Jesus in *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* (1955), which shows a transparent effeminate Jesus as a sort of exalted spirit god administering the communion table. Here Jesus is divine, but not human.

Modern Gnostics like Dan Brown, some Feminists theologians and Neo-Gnostic churches are attracted to the apparent androgyny, diversity, and collusion of opposites in the Gnostic concept of God, which depicted the emanations in the Pleroma as both masculine and feminine. This leads to the notion that Gnosticism was more tolerant of differences and

individualistic and offered a prominent role for women because its theological nomenclature spoke of “God the Father” and “God the Mother.”[\[3\]](#)

Yet the Gnostic belief system is antithetical to the entire tenor of the modern materialistic worldview. Most Neo-Gnostics adopt the psychological aspects of Gnosticism that appeal to the individual’s sense of superiority to the world. It is the world that is fallen in Gnosticism, not the individual. It is the creator who is at fault, not people. The unacceptable metaphysical aspect of Gnosticism to a modern materialist worldview makes it obvious that Neo-Gnostics are grasping at straws. They are looking for anything to validate their belief in diversity, androgyny, and individual superiority. What better person to turn to than the leading cultural figure of all time, Jesus Christ?

## **Arianism: Jesus the Creator Angel**

Another major error in the history of Christian thought is named for its major proponent Arius (250-336). Arianism believes that Jesus was not equal with the Father but was a created being like an angel. In fact he is the chief of all the angels. Arius’ famous line states “there was a time when he was not.”[\[4\]](#) This means Jesus was a created being. All orthodox theology and teaching roundly rejects this view because it compromises the deity of Christ. In an effort to preserve the radical oneness of God, Arianism accomplishes the opposite by falling into polytheism. There is not one God, but two. The Father made the Son and the Son in turn made the rest of the world. It is similar to the modern view that says Jesus is the greatest man who ever lived with the added dimension of being like God but not equal to God. He is a god. This is one of the most common mistakes people make in their understanding of Jesus, even thinking that the term “Son of God” suggests an inferior station to the Father. The term “Son of God” means Jesus is equal to the Father (John 5:18). The Arian heresy was

revived by some Unitarians in the modern Age, Isaac Newton being the most famous, but has been especially embraced by the cult of the Jehovah's Witnesses who argue vigorously for the idea that Jesus is not God but a created being.

The famous theologian Athanasius (298-373) argued that our view of Jesus must be tied to our salvation. If we get our view of Jesus wrong we will also misunderstand salvation by grace. Only God creates and only God saves, but it is humanity that must suffer the penalty of sin. But because people are unable to offer the sacrifice for sin God must offer it himself in human form to save us. The dual nature of Christ solves this problem by making Christ the perfect sacrifice as the God/man. An angel is not capable of offering a sacrifice for sin. This is essentially what the book of Hebrews says: "He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs" (Heb. 1:3, 4 cf. Heb. 2:14-18).

## **New Age Jesus: The Ascended Master**

The New Age Jesus is very popular today. This is the belief that Jesus is one of the greatest religious leaders of all time, an "ascended master" much like Buddha or Krishna. Jesus is not the unique Son of God but one of many divine incarnations. He does not come to deliver us from sin but to enlighten us. He came to show us how we can achieve God-consciousness or to help us realize we are God within. This is similar to Gnostic idea of a divine spark left in humanity after the creation of the world.

Because of this the New Age is often confused with Gnosticism. There are correlations, but there are also substantial differences between the two. New Age thinking is pantheistic.

This means God equals the all pervasive force of the universe, which makes it more happy and world-friendly as expressed in the modern ecology movements that find God in nature. Gnosticism is not pantheistic, but radically dualistic; the world is evil and the individual is good but trapped in the material world. Gnosticism tends to be dark and foreboding with other worldly hopes of escape and ascension. New Age tends to have hope in the current historical continuum of change. There is a New Age of Aquarius dawning right around the corner. We don't find that optimism in Gnosticism.

The New Age version of Jesus expresses another aspect of Jesus' popularity among non-Christian religions as well as spiritual but not traditionally religious Americans. Like Gnosticism, it absorbs Jesus into its belief system, but it also acquires greater credibility for itself by adopting Jesus. Most of the popular views of Jesus are a way of accepting a semblance of spirituality without really committing oneself to the message of Christ as the only way to the Father. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6). The great offense today in Christianity is given by our belief in the exclusivity of Christ as the only way to God. Every alternative view of Jesus compromises this central idea, making Jesus one of many ways to God. The enormous popularity of Jesus need not create confusion. The Bible is very clear that Jesus is the Son of God and the only way to the Father. John Lennon and the Beatles have been relegated to the oldies station, but Jesus is still here and more popular than ever. We need to help refocus the culture's acceptance of Jesus as the greatest man and religious leader with the biblical message of salvation that says Jesus is the incarnate Word sent to save us from sin and restore us to the Father.

## **Notes**

1. Quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in History of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row,

1985), 146-147.

2. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: MacMillian, 1964).

3. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1979); Bernard Simon, *The Essence of the Gnostics* (Edison, NJ: Chartwell Books, 2004), 203-220.

4. Quoted in Tony Lane, *Harper's Concise Book of Christian Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 28.

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