Does God Exist? A Christian Argument from Non-biblical Sources

Probe founder, Jimmy Williams, looks at evidence for the existence of God from multiple, non-biblical sources. He demonstrates that God's creation speaks to his creator. The important apologetic discussion forms the foundation for a complete biblical understanding of God and His purposes.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

Metaphysical Options

Most will agree that the most basic, fundamental question concerning existence is not that *nothing* is here, but rather that *something* is here. I am a part of some kind of *reality.* I possess a consciousness, an awareness that something is transpiring, unfolding, happening. And you and I are part of it. The reality borne out of our personal observation and experience is that we are participants in a space-time universe which is characterized by a *series of events.* The mind naturally asks the question, "What is it?" Where did it come from?" Did the *cosmos,* what we see, simply come into being from nothing, or has this material universe of which we are a part always been here? Or is something or someone which transcends this material universe responsible for bringing it into existence and us with it?

All of these questions relate to the philosophical concept of *metaphysics.* Webster defines it thusly: *"That division of philosophy which includes ontology, or the science of being and cosmology, or the science of fundamental causes and processes in things."*{1} When we seek to answer these basic questions, then, we are thinking *"metaphysically"* about the

origin and the causes of the present reality. And at this basic, fundamental level of consideration we really are left with few options, or possible answers, to account for or explain the universe. The three potential candidates are:

(1) Something came from nothing. Most reject this view, since the very idea defies rationality. This explanation to account for the universe is not widely held. Kenny remarks: *"According to the big bang theory, the whole matter of the universe began to exist at a particular time in the remote past. A proponent of such a theory, . . . if he is an atheist, must believe that the matter of the universe came from nothing and by nothing."*{2} Since nothing cannot produce something by rules of logic (observation, causality), something is *eternal* and *necessary*. Since any series of events is not eternal (thus a contradiction), there is, therefore, an eternal, necessary *something not identical* to the space-time universe.

(2) Matter is eternal and capable of producing the present reality through blind chance. Carl Sagan stated this view clearly when he said, "All that ever was, all that is, and all that ever shall be is the Cosmos."{3} This second view has spawned two basic worldviews-*Materialism* (or Naturalism) and *Pantheism.* Both hold the premise that nothing exists beyond matter. Materialism therefore is atheistic by definition. Pantheism is similar but insists that since God does not exist, nature is imbued with "god" in all its parts.

(3) God created the universe. This view, *Theism*, holds forth the assertion that *Someone* both transcends, and did create the material universe of which we are a part. There are *no* other logical alternatives to explain the *cosmos*. Christians, of course, embrace this third view, along with all other theists, as the most reasonable explanation for what we find to be true of ourselves and of the world. Holding this view is not simply a statement of blind faith. There are sound and rational reasons for preferring this view over the other two. Theism is therefore a reasonable idea. In fact it is more reasonable to

believe that God exists than not to believe He exists. Theologians have posed several lines of "proof" to argue for God's existence. These arguments, while not *proving* the existence of God, do nevertheless provide insights that may be used to show *evidence* of His existence.

The Cosmological Argument

This argument centers around the concept of *causality.* Every event has a *cause,* and that includes the universe. It had a beginning. There was a time when it was not, and a time when it was:

> An **infinite** number of real parts of time, passing in succession and exhausted one after another, appears so evident a contradiction that no man, one should think, whose judgment is not corrupted, instead of being improved, by the sciences, would ever be able to admit it." (emphasis mine){4}

Hume is here arguing that time and space are *not* infinite, not eternal. If this is true, the universe, which is an "effect," had a *cause.* Robert Jastrow comments,

> "The most complete study made thus far has been carried out . . .by Allan Sandage. He compiled information on 42 galaxies, ranging out in space as far as six billion light years from us. His measurements indicate that the universe was expanding more rapidly in the past than it is today. This result lends further support to the belief that the universe exploded into being."{5}

He goes on to say:

> "No explanation other than the big bang has been found for the fireball radiation. The clincher, which has convinced almost the last doubting Thomas, is that the radiation discovered by Penzias and Wilson has exactly the pattern of wavelengths expected for the light and heat produces in a

> great explosion."{6}

Jastrow also concludes the universe is dying:

> "Once hydrogen has been burned within that star and converted to heavier elements, it can never be restored to its original state. Minute by minute and year by year, as hydrogen is used up in stars, the supply of this element in the universe grows smaller."{7} "Astronomers now find they have painted themselves into a corner because they have proven, by their own methods, that the world began abruptly in an act of creation to which you can trace the seeds of every star, every planet, every thing in this cosmos and on the earth. And they have found that all this happened as a product of forces they cannot hope to discover."{8}

Some have argued that an *infinite regress* of causes may not be logically possible. They say the universe is not a "whole" that *needs* a single cause, but rather that it is "mutually dependent" upon itself! Mutual dependence misses the point. The real issue is why there is an *existing* universe rather than a *non-existing* one. Reality and rationality suggest that every event has a cause. Whole series of events must have a cause as well (since the whole is the sum of the parts). If all the parts were taken away, would there be anything left? If we say *yes*, then God exists (i.e. an eternal necessary being that is *more* than the world. If we say *no*, then the whole is *contingent* too, and needs a cause *beyond* it (God).

We will conclude this section with an examination of perhaps the most often-asked question concerning the cosmological argument, "*Where did God come from*?" While it is both reasonable and legitimate to ask this question of the universe which we have just examined, it is irrational and nonsensical to ask that same question of God, since it implies to Him characteristics found only in the finite universe: *space* and *time*. By definition, something eternal must exist *outside* this space/time continuum. The very question posed reveals the

inquirer's fallacy of reasoning from within his *own* space/time context! By definition, something *eternal* must exist *outside* both time and space. God has no beginning; He ***IS****!* (Exodus 3:14).

The Teleological Argument

This second argument for the existence of God addresses the order, complexity, and diversity of the cosmos. "Teleological" comes from the Greek word *"telos,"* which means "end" or "goal." The idea behind the argument is that the observable *order* in the universe demonstrates that it functions according to an *intelligent design*, something undeniable to an open-minded, intelligent being. The classic expression of this argument is William Paley's analogy of the watchmaker in his book *Evidences.* If we were walking on the beach and found a watch in the sand, we would not assume that it washed up on the shore having been formed through the natural processes and motions of the sea. We would rather naturally assume that it had been lost by its owner and that somewhere there was a watchmaker who originally designed and built it with a specific purpose in mind. Intelligence cannot be produced by non-intelligence any more than nothing can produce something. There is, therefore, an eternal, necessary intelligence present and reflected in the space-time universe.

Until about five hundred years ago, humanity had no difficulty in acknowledging God as the Creator of the natural order. The best explanation saw Him as the divine Designer who created it with a purpose and maintained all things by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:17). But the rise of modern science initiated a process we could call the "demythologizing of nature," the material world. Superstition and ignorance had ascribed spirit life even to forest, brook, and mountain. Things not understood scientifically were routinely accepted to be unexplained, supernatural forces at work. Slowly, the mysterious, spiritual factor was drained away as scholars and

scientists replaced it with natural explanations and theories of how and why things actually worked. After Copernicus, human significance diminished in the vastness of the cosmos, and it was felt only time and research, not God, would be needed to finally explain with accuracy the totality of the natural order. The idea of a transcendent One came to be deemed unnecessary, having been invalidated by the new theory of natural selection.

Ironically, the same science which took God away then, is bringing back the possibility of His existence today. Physics and quantum mechanics have now brought us to the edge of physicality, to a place where sub-atomic particle structures are described by some as spirit, ghost-like in quality. Neuro-physiologists grapple with enigmatic observations suggesting that the mind *transcends* the brain! Psychology has developed an entirely new branch of study (parapsychology) which asserts that psycho-spiritual forces (ESP, biofeedback, etc.) actually function *beyond* the physical realm. Molecular biologists and geneticists, faced with the highly-ordered and complex structures of DNA, ascribe a word implying "intelligence" to the chaining sequences: the genetic *"code."* And we have already concluded that astrophysicists have settled on the "big bang" which seems to contradict the idea that matter is eternal, and, huge as it is, the universe appears to be finite. Whether we look through the microscope or the telescope it becomes more difficult in the light of experimental science to hold to the old premise that such order and complexity are the products of blind chance. The old naturalistic assumptions are being critically reexamined, challenged, and found to be unconvincing by many of today's scientists. Dr. Walter Bradley, Professor Emeritus of Mechanical Engineering at Texas A & M University states the case:

> "Discoveries of the last half of the 20th century have brought the scientific community to the realization that our

> universe and our planet in the universe are so remarkably unique that it is almost impossible to imagine how this could have happened accidentally, causing may agnostic scientists to concede that indeed some intelligent creative force may be required to account for it."{9}

Areas of reconsideration include cosmology and the origin of life, essential elements of design and their recognition, the minimal requirements for a universe to support both life of any type and specifically complex human life, why these requirements are met in our universe, and requirements for a place in that universe uniquely met by planet earth. All of these remarkable features of our world are being reevaluated and point toward intelligent design.

The Moral Argument

This argument for God's existence is based on the recognition of humankind's universal and inherent sense of *right* and *wrong.* (cf. Romans 2:14,15). No culture is without standards of behavior. All groups recognize honesty as a virtue along with wisdom, courage, and justice. And even in the most remote jungle tribes, murder, rape, lying, and theft are recognized as being wrong, in all places and at all times. The question arises, "Where does this sense of morality come from?" C. S. Lewis speaks of this early on in his classic work *Mere Christianity.* He calls this moral law "The Rule of Right and Wrong"—"a thing that is *really there*, not made up by ourselves."{10} For years Lewis struggled against God because the universe to him seemed unjust and cruel. But he began to analyze his outrage. Where did *he* get the very ideas of *just* and *unjust*? He said, "A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line."{11}

He goes on to suggest that there are three parts to morality. Using the analogy of a fleet of ships on a voyage, he points out that three things can go wrong. The *first* is that ships may either drift apart or collide with and do damage to one

another (alienation, isolation: people abusing, cheating, bullying one another). The *second* is that individual ships must be seaworthy and avoid internal, mechanical breakdown (moral deterioration within an individual). Lewis goes on to point out that if the ships keep having collisions they will not remain seaworthy very long, and of course, it their steering parts are out of order, they will not be able to avoid collisions! But there is a *third* factor not yet taken into account, and that is, "Where is the fleet of ships headed?" The voyage would be a failure if it were meant to reach New York but actually arrived in Buenos Aires (the general purpose of human life as a whole, what man was made for)![{12}]

The human conscience to which Paul refers in Romans 2 is not found in any other animal—only man. The utter uniqueness of this moral compass within humans, along with other exclusively human qualities (rationality, language, worship and aesthetic inclinations) strongly suggest that man not only has a relationship *downward* to animals, plants and earth, but also a relationship *upward* to the God in Whose image he is. As we saw God's great power and intelligence expressed in the first two arguments, we also see here that this sense of morality, not known in the world of nature, comes from the Great Law Giver Who is Himself in *character* the "straight line" (righteous, just, holy) against which all human actions are measured.

A Word about Atheism and Agnosticism

An *atheist* is a person who makes a bold assertion, "There is no God." It is bold because it claims in an *absolute* manner what we have stated above what is not possible: i.e., the existence or non-existence of God cannot be *proven* absolutely. It is also bold because, in order to make such an assertion, an atheist would literally have to be God himself! He would need to possess the qualities and capabilities to travel the entire universe and examine every nook and cranny of it before

he would ever qualify to hold such a dogmatic conclusion!

The most brilliant, highly-educated, widely-traveled human on earth today, having maximized his/her brain cells to optimum learning levels for a lifetime could not possibly *"know"* 1/1000th of all that *could* be known. And knowledge is now doubling by the years rather than by the decades or centuries of the past! Is it *possible* that God could *still* exist outside the very limited, personal knowledge/experience of one highly intelligent human being? Furthermore, before an atheist can identify himself *as* one, he must first acknowledge the very idea, or concept, or possibility of God so he can then deny His existence!

The Bible says that "he who comes to God must believe that He is. . ." (Hebrews 11:6). In other words, there is a "faith" factor relative to a belief in God's existence. But the dogmatic and bold assertion above is itself an expression of faith. It takes faith to believe God *is,* and it takes faith to say God *is not.* In my judgment, it takes even *more* faith for the atheist to believe in his position because he holds to his faith against overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Christians also affirm God's existence on the basis of faith, but it is a *reasonable* faith based on the true nature of the *cosmos*, not a *blind* faith.

Turning to agnosticism, Webster defines it as a position which states that "neither the existence nor the nature of God, nor the ultimate origin of the universe is known or knowable."{13} Here again is a bold statement: When the agnostic says, *"I don't know,"* what is really implied is "I can't know, *you* can't know, and *nobody* can know." Leith Samuel in his little book *Impossibility of Agnosticism,* mentions three kinds of agnostics: {14}

Dogmatic: "I don't know, you don't know, and no one can know." Here is a person who already has his mind made up. He has the same problems as the atheist above—he must know *everything* in

order to hold this position honestly.

Indifferent: “I don’t know and I don’t care.” It is not likely that God would reveal Himself to someone who does not care to know: “He who has ears, let him hear.” (Luke 14:35).

Dissatisfied: “I don’t know, but I would like to know.” Here is a person who demonstrates an *openness* to truth and a willingness to change his position should he have sufficient reasons. If such were the case, he would also be demonstrating what is true of agnosticism, namely, that it is meant to be a *temporary* path in search of truth which gives way to a more reasonable and less skeptical view of life and all reality.

“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so they are without excuse.” (Saint Paul, Romans 1:20).

“Only the fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ ” (King David, Psalm 14:1).

Notes

1. *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Co., Publishers, 1953), s.v. “metaphysics”, 528.
2. Anthony Kenny, *Five Ways* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1969), 66.
3. Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 4.
4. David Hume, *An Enquiry: Concerning Human Understanding,* Great Books of the Western World, vol. 35 (Chicago: William Benton, 1952), 506.
5. Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers* (New York: W.W. Norton,, 1978), 94-95.
6. Ibid., p. 15.
7. Ibid., 15-16.
8. Robert Jastrow, “A Scientist Caught Betwen Two Faiths,” interviewed by Bill Durbin, *Christianity Today*, 26 (6 August 1982):14-18.

9. Walter L. Bradley, *"Is There Scientific Evidence for an Intelligent Creator of the Universe?"* (lecture given at High Ground Men's Conference, Beaver Creek, Colo., Lecture given at High Ground Men's Conference, 2 March, 2001).
10. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1943), 18.
11. Ibid., 45.
12. Ibid., 70-71.
13. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary,* s.v. "agnosticism."
14. Leith Samuel, *Impossibility of Agnosticism* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, n.d.).

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Evidence for God's Existence

Romans chapter 1 says that God has planted evidence of Himself throughout His creation so we are without excuse. Sue Bohlin looks at different types of evidence indicating that God really does exist.

A "Just Right" Universe

There's so much about the universe, and our world in particular, that we take for granted because it works so well. But Christian astronomer Dr. Hugh Ross has cited twenty-six different characteristics about the universe that enable it to sustain life. And there are thirty-three characteristics about our galaxy, our solar system, and the planet Earth that are finely-tuned to allow life to exist.{1} I do well to make the meat, potatoes, vegetables, and bread all come out at the same time for dinner; we're talking about fifty-nine different aspects all being kept in perfect balance so the universe hangs together and we can live in it!

Our Earth, for instance, is perfectly designed for life. It's the "just right" size for the atmosphere we need. Its size and corresponding gravity hold a thin, but not too thin, layer of gases to protect us and allow us to breathe. When astronaut John Glenn returned to space, one of the things that struck him was how thin and fragile our atmosphere is (only 50 miles above the Earth). If our planet were smaller it couldn't support an atmosphere, like on Mercury. If it were larger, like Jupiter, the atmosphere would contain free hydrogen, which is poison for us.{2} Earth is the only planet we know of that contains an atmosphere that can support human, animal, and plant life.

The Earth is also placed at a "just right" distance from the sun and the other planets in our solar system. If we were closer to the sun, we'd burn up. If we were farther away, we'd freeze. Because Earth's orbit is nearly circular, this slightly elliptical shape means that we enjoy a quite narrow range of temperatures, which is important to life. The speed of Earth's rotation on its axis, completing one turn every 24 hours, means that the sun warms the planet evenly. Compare our world to the moon, where there are incredible temperature variations because it lacks sufficient atmosphere or water to retain or deflect the sun's energy.

Speaking of the moon, its important that there is only one moon, not two or three or none, and it's the "just right" size and distance from us. The moon's gravity impacts the movement of ocean currents, keeping the water from becoming stagnant.{3}

Water itself is an important part of a "just right" world. Plants, animals and human beings are mostly made of water, and we need it to live. One of the things that makes Earth unique is the abundance of water in a liquid state.

Water has surface tension. This means that water can move upward, against gravity, to bring liquid nutrients to the tops

of the tallest plants.

Everything else in the world freezes from the bottom up, but water freezes from the top down. Everything else contracts when it freezes, but water expands. This means that in winter, ponds and rivers and lakes can freeze at the surface, but allow fish and other marine creatures to live down below.

The fact that we live on a “just right” planet in a “just right” universe is evidence that it all was created by a loving God.

The Nagging Itch of “Ought”

As a mother, I was convinced of the existence of a moral God when my children, without being taught, would complain that something wasn’t “fair.” Fair? Who taught them about fair? Why is it that no one ever has to teach children about fairness, but all parents hear the universal wail of “That’s not fa-a-a-a-a-air!” The concept of fairness is about an internal awareness that there’s a certain way that things ought to be. It’s not limited to three-year-olds who are unhappy that their older siblings get to stay up later. We see the same thing on “Save the Whales” bumper stickers. Why should we save the whales? Because we ought to take care of the world. Why should we take care of the world? Because we just should, that’s why. It’s the right thing to do. There’s that sense of “ought” again.

Certain values can be found in all human cultures, a belief that we act certain ways because they’re the right thing to do. Murdering one’s own people is wrong, for example. Lying and cheating is wrong. So is stealing. Where did this universal sense of right and wrong come from? If we just evolved from the apes, and there is nothing except space, time, and matter, then from where did this moral sense of right and wrong arise?

A moral sense of right and wrong isn't connected to our muscles or bones or blood. Some scientists argue that it comes from our genes – that belief in morality selects us for survival and reproduction. But if pressed, those same scientists would assure you that ultimate right and wrong don't exist in a measurable way, and it's only the illusion of morality that helps us survive. But if one researcher stole another's data and published results under his own name, all the theories about morality as illusion would go right out the window. I don't know of any scientist who wouldn't cry, "That's not fair!" Living in the real world is a true antidote for sophisticated arguments against right and wrong.

Apologist Greg Koukl points out that guilt is another indicator of ultimate right and wrong. "It's tied into our understanding of things that are right and things that are wrong. We feel guilty when we think we've violated a moral rule, an "ought." And that feeling hurts. It doesn't hurt our body; it hurts our souls. An ethical violation is not a physical thing, like a punch in the nose, producing physical pain. It's a soulish injury producing a soulish pain. That's why I call it ethical pain. That's what guilt is – ethical pain."{4}

The reason all human beings start out with an awareness of right and wrong, the reason we all yearn for justice and fairness, is that we are made in the image of God, who is just and right. The reason we feel violated when someone does us wrong is that a moral law has been broken – and you can't have a moral law without a moral law giver. Every time we feel that old feeling of, "It's not fa-a-a-a-a-air!" rising up within us, it's a signpost pointing us to the existence of God. He has left signposts pointing to Himself all over creation. That's why we are without excuse.

Evidence of Design Implies a Designer



If you've ever visited or seen pictures of Mount Rushmore (South Dakota USA), you cannot help but look at the gigantic sculpture of four presidents' faces and wonder at the skill of the sculptor. You know, without having to be told, that the natural forces of wind and rain did not erode the rock into those shapes. It took the skilled hands of an artist.

William Paley made a compelling argument years ago that the intricacies of a watch are so clearly engineered that it cannot be the product of nature: a watch demands a watchmaker. In the same way, the more we discover about our world and ourselves, the more we see that like an expertly-fashioned watch, our world and we ourselves have been finely crafted with intentional design. And design implies a designer.

Since we live in our bodies and take so much of our abilities for granted, it's understandable that we might miss the evidence of design within ourselves – much like a fish might be oblivious to what it means to be wet. Dr. Phillip Bishop at the University of Alabama, challenges us to consider what would happen if we commissioned a team of mechanical engineers to develop a robot that could lift 500 pounds. And let's say we also commissioned them to design a robot that could play Chopin. They could probably do that. But what if we asked them to come up with a robot that could do both, and limit the robot's weight to 250 pounds, and require that it be able to do a variety of similar tasks? They'd laugh in our faces, no matter how much time or money we gave them to do it. But you know, all we'd be asking them to do is to come up with a very crude replication of former football player Mike Reid.{5}

Probably the greatest evidence of design in creation is DNA,

the material of which our genes are made, as well as the genetic material for every living thing on the planet. One of the startling discoveries about DNA is that it is a highly complex informational code, so complex that scientists struggle hard to decipher even the tiniest portions of the various genes in every organism. DNA conveys intelligent information; in fact, molecular biologists use language terms – code, translation, transcription – to describe what it does and how it acts. Communication engineers and information scientists tell us that you can't have a code without a code-maker, so it would seem that DNA is probably the strongest indicator in our world that there is an intelligent Designer behind its existence.

Dr. Richard Dawkins, a professor of biology who writes books and articles praising evolution, said in his book *The Blind Watchmaker,* "Biology is the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose."{6} Even those who desperately fear the implications of design keep running into it.

Those who deny the evidence of a designer are a lot like the foolish fisherman. If he fails to catch a fish, he says, "Aha! This proves there are no fish!" He doesn't want to consider the possibility that it might be he is an inept fisherman. Since science cannot measure the intangible or the supernatural, there are many people who say, "Aha! There is no Creator."{7} Foolish fishermen deny the evidence that God exists and has left His fingerprints all over creation.

The Reliability of the Bible

Every religion has its own holy book, but the Bible is different from all the others. It claims to be the very Word of God, not dropped out of the sky but God-breathed, infused with God's power as He communicated His thoughts and intent through human writers.

The Bible was written over a period of 1500 years, by about forty different writers, on three different continents. They addressed a wide variety of subjects, and yet the individual books of the Bible show a remarkable consistency within themselves. There is a great deal of diversity within the Bible, at the same time displaying an amazing unity. It presents an internally consistent message with one great theme: God's love for man and the great lengths to which He went to demonstrate that love.

If you pick up any city newspaper, you won't find the kind of agreement and harmony in it that is the hallmark of the biblical books. A collection of documents that spans so much time and distance could not be marked by this unity unless it was superintended by one Author who was behind it all. The unity of the Bible is evidence of God's existence.

One other aspect of the Bible is probably the greatest evidence that God exists and that He has spoken to us in His holy book: fulfilled prophecy. The Bible contains hundreds of details of history which were written in advance before any of them came to pass. Only a sovereign God, who knows the future and can make it happen, can write prophecy that is accurately and always – eventually – fulfilled.

For example, God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel against the bustling seaport and trade center of Tyre. In Ezekiel 26:3-6, He said He would bring nations against her: "They shall destroy the walls of Tyre and break down her towers; and I will scrape her soil from her, and make her a bare rock." Ezekiel 26-28 has many details of this prophecy against Tyre, which would be like Billy Graham announcing that God was going to wipe New York off the map.

Tyre consisted of two parts, a mainland city and an island a half- mile offshore. The first attack came from the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, who laid siege to Tyre for thirteen years. Finally, his battering rams broke through the walls,

and he tore down the city's towers. But the island part of the city wasn't yet destroyed, because this prophecy was fulfilled in stages. For 250 years it flourished, until Alexander the Great set his sights on Tyre. Even without a navy, he was able to conquer this island city in what some consider his greatest military exploit. He turned the ruined walls and towers of Old Tyre into rubble, which he used to build a causeway from the mainland to the island. When he ran out of material, he scraped the soil from the land to finish the land- bridge, leaving only barren rocks where the old city used to be. He fulfilled the prophecy, "They will break down your walls and destroy your pleasant houses; your stones and timber and soil they will cast into the midst of the waters"(Ez. 26:12).

Fulfilled prophecy is just one example of how God shows He is there and He is not silent. How else do we explain the existence of history written in advance?

Jesus: The Ultimate Evidence

The most astounding thing God has ever done to show His existence to us is when He passed through the veil between heaven and earth and came to live among us as a man.

Jesus Christ was far more than just a great moral teacher. He said things that would be outrageous if they weren't true, but He backed them up with even more outrageous signs to prove they were. Jesus claimed not to speak for God as a prophet, but to be God in human flesh. He said, "If you've seen Me, you've seen the Father" (John 14:9), and, "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30). When asked if He was the Messiah, the promised Savior, He said yes.{8} He told his contemporaries, "Before Abraham was, I am"(John 8:58). The fact that His unbelieving listeners decided then to kill Him shows that they realized He was claiming to be Yahweh, God Almighty.

When Jesus told His followers that He was the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-18), they would immediately be reminded of a

passage in the book of Ezekiel where Yahweh God pronounced Himself shepherd over Israel (Ez. 34:1-16). Jesus equated Himself with God.

But words are cheap, so Jesus backed up His words with miracles and signs to validate His truth-claims. He healed all sorts of diseases in people: the blind, the deaf, the crippled, lepers, epileptics, and even a woman with a twelve-year hemorrhage. He took authority over the demons that terrorized and possessed people. He even raised the dead.

Jesus showed His authority over nature, as well. He calmed a terrible storm with just a word. He created food out of thin air, with bread and fish left over! He turned water into wine. He walked on water.

He showed us what God the Father is like; Jesus was God with skin on. He was loving and sensitive, at the same time strong and determined. Children and troubled people were drawn to Him like a magnet, but the arrogant and self-sufficient were threatened by Him. He drenched people with grace and mercy while never compromising His holiness and righteousness.

And after living a perfect life, He showed His love to us by dying in our place on a Roman cross, promising to come back to life. Who else but God Himself could make a promise like thatand then fulfill it? The literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is the final, greatest proof that there is a God, that Jesus is God Himself, and that God has entered our world and showed us the way to heaven so we can be with Him forever. He said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by Me” (John 14:6).

God exists, and He has spoken. He made a “just right” universe that is stamped with clues of its Maker. He placed eternity in our hearts, as Ecclesiastes tells us, and all people have a strong moral streak because we are made in the image of a moral God. The evidence of design in our bodies, our world and

the universe is a signpost pointing to a loving, intelligent Designer behind it all. The unity of the Bible and the hundreds of fulfilled prophecies in it show the mind of God behind its creation. And we've looked at the way Jesus punched through the space-time continuum to show us what God looks like, and opened the doorway to heaven. Jesus is the clearest evidence of all that God does exist.

Notes

1. Hugh Ross, *Creator and the Cosmos*. (Colorado Springs, CO.: Navpress, 1995), 111-145.
2. R.E.D. Clark, *Creation* (London: Tyndale Press, 1946), 20.
3. The Wonders of God's Creation, Moody Institute of Science (Chicago, IL).
4. Gregory Koukl, "Guilt and God," Stand to Reason Commentary. http://www.str.org/free/commentaries/theology/gultngod.htm.
5. Phillip Bishop, "Evidence of God in Human Physiology." http://www.leaderu.com/science/bishop.html
6. Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986), 1.
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8. Mark 14:61-62; Matthew 26: 63-65; Luke 22:67-70

The author gratefully acknowledges the insights of Marilyn Adamson, whose article "Is There a God?" on LeaderU.com formed the basis for much of this essay.

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How I Know Christianity Is

True – A Defense of the Gospel

Dr. Zukeran presents five major reasons to believe Christianity is the truth. He begins with the Christian worldview and goes on to the authority of the Bible, Jesus' confirmation of His claims to be God, the resurrection of Jesus, and Pat's personal experience as a follower of Jesus Christ.

Because Christianity Teaches the Correct Worldview

Among all the religions and philosophies, how do we know Christianity is true? While there are many ways to address the question, let's begin by saying that Christianity makes sense of the world around us. In other words, it presents the most correct worldview based on the world in which we live. There are three worldviews that lie at the foundation of all religions and philosophies: theism, naturalism, and pantheism. Theism teaches there is a personal God who created the universe. Naturalism teaches there is no divine being and that the universe is the result of time and chance. Pantheism teaches that the universe is eternal and that the divine is an impersonal force made up of all things. All three worldviews cannot be true at the same time and if one of them is true, the other two must be false.

The evidence from our study of the universe points to theism. Unfortunately, time will allow me to go over only three lines of evidence.

The first is the argument from first cause or the cosmological argument, which states if something exists, it must have either come from something else, come from nothing, or have always existed. What is the most reasonable conclusion of the

three for the existence of the universe? Scientists confirm that the universe has a beginning. Many call this the “big bang.” Since the universe assuredly has a beginning, the worldview of pantheism bears the burden of proof. Second, to say the universe comes from nothing goes against responsible scientific inquiry and human logic. For example, any invention in human history is not brought about from nothing. It comes from materials and ingenuity that existed before its inception. Therefore, the naturalist worldview has no logical ground to stand on. The best conclusion is that the universe is the result of a cause greater than itself. That cause is God.

Second, we have the proof of design or the teleological argument. Complexity and design point to a designer. For example, although all the parts of a watch are found on the earth, no one would assume it evolved as the result of natural, unguided actions of chance. Why would we conclude otherwise when we look at the human brain or the human anatomy, which is much more complex? The more we discover about the universe and nature, the more we realize how unlikely it is that this could have all happened by accident. Therefore, the burden of proof is on the worldviews of naturalism and pantheism, which hold to a position of evolution.

Finally we have the moral argument. All people have a sense of right and wrong. In every culture, adultery, murder, and stealing are wrong. Where does that universal sense of right and wrong come from? A moral law code requires a moral Lawgiver who is personal and reflects the moral law in His character. Since we are made in God’s image, we reflect His moral law. C.S. Lewis stated, “As an atheist my argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it

unjust?”{1} Naturalists and pantheists have difficulty accounting for the human conscience.

For these reasons, theism is the only possible worldview that can remain true to scientific and philosophical scrutiny.{2}

Because the Bible is God’s Word

Among all the books written by man, none have the credentials that equal the Bible. The second evidence for Christianity is the Bible, which proves itself to be true and divinely inspired.

The Bible proves itself to be true because it is a historically accurate document. Thousands of archaeological discoveries confirm its historical accuracy. Numerous civilizations, rulers, and events once thought legendary by the skeptics have been confirmed by archaeology. Even miraculous geographic events in Sodom and Gomorrah, Jericho, and Sennachareb’s defeat in the 7th century B.C. have passed the test of archaeological scrutiny.

Another proof of the Bible’s truth is in historical records outside the Bible. Numerous historical records from ancient civilizations confirm the historicity of the biblical accounts. Dr. William Albright, who is still respected as probably the foremost authority in Middle Eastern archaeology, said this about the Bible: “There can be no doubt that archaeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of the Old Testament.”{3} The historical evidence upholds the premise that if an ancient historical work proves to be accurate again and again in its detail, we can be confident that it is accurate on the material we cannot confirm externally.

The Bible’s divine inspiration is attested to in its unity. Although the Bible is written over a 1500 year period, written by over forty different authors from different backgrounds, and covers a host of controversial subjects, it maintains a

unified theme and it does not contradict itself in principle from beginning to end. This indicates that a divine author supervised the entire process and guided each writer.

Second, we have the remarkable record of prophecy. Hundreds of detailed prophecies are written years before the event takes place. For example the prophet Ezekiel in chapter 26 describes accurately how the city of Tyre will be destroyed years before it occurs. Daniel predicts the empires of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. Prophecy shows the divine hand of God because only an eternal being could have inspired the writers to leave such a legacy.

Finally, the Bible answers the major questions all belief systems must answer. Where did we come from? What is the nature of the divine? What is our relationship to the divine? What is the nature of man? How do we explain the human predicament? What is the answer to the human predicament? What happens after death? And how do we explain evil? Any system that does not answer these questions is an incomplete system. The Bible gives the most complete and accurate answers to the truly important questions of human existence.

No other book ever written has these credentials. A book written by God would have the fingerprints of God all over it. The Bible alone has His fingerprints.{4}

Because Jesus Confirmed His Claims

How do I know Christianity is true? Another source of confirmation comes from the person of Jesus Christ. Among all men who ever lived, Jesus stands apart from each one. Throughout the gospels, Jesus claimed Himself to be God. He claimed to have authority over the law, creation, sin, and death. John 10:30-33 states,

> "'I and the Father are one.' Again the Jews picked up stones to stone Him but Jesus said to them, 'I have shown you many

> great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?' The leaders replied, 'We are not stoning you for any of these but for blasphemy because you a mere man, claim to be God.'"

The Jewish enemies of Christ clearly understood His claims and it is for this reason they killed Him. His disciples also understood His claim and presented it in their message. Not only did He make an extraordinary claim; Jesus confirmed it. There are numerous ways in which Christ proved His claims. I will cover only four.

The first confirmation of Jesus' claims is His sinless life. Jesus' most intimate companions stated He committed no sin that He needed to repent of. Paul writes of Christ, "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21) It would have been hypocritical of Jesus if He had indeed sinned and never repented, for He taught all men this principle. Even His enemies could find no sin in Him. Pontius Pilate, after examining Jesus, stated to the angry mob, "I find no basis for a charge against him." The Bible declares God is holy and Jesus showed Himself to be holy as well.

The second confirmation is the impact of Christ on mankind. More schools and colleges have been built in the name of Christ than any other man. More hospitals and orphanages are built in the name of Christ than any other person. More literature and music are written about Christ than any other person. More laws and ethical codes are built on His teachings than any other man. He has had a tremendous impact on every area of culture like no one else.

The third confirmation is the miracles He performed. God's existence makes it reasonable to assume He would use miracles to confirm His message and messenger. Miracles are a powerful confirmation because it authenticates the creator's authority over His creation. Christ's miracles over nature, sickness,

spiritual forces, sin, and death displayed this authority over every realm of creation.

The fourth confirmation is the fulfilled prophecies. Before He set foot on the earth, there were over seventy specific prophecies made by the Old Testament writers about the Messiah. The prophecies included the city of birth, His method of execution, His betrayal, the date of His death, etc. Jesus fulfilled each of these. The probability of His fulfilling just eight of these by chance is very close to a mathematical zero.

No one has both made the claims of Christ and confirmed them, as He did. His life is another proof Christianity is true.{5}

Because of the Resurrection

Jesus further confirmed His claims to be God by rising from the dead. Jesus openly proclaimed that as God He had authority over life and death. He states in John 11:25, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and he who believes in me will never die." The resurrection is proof that His claim is true.

Many skeptics have presented alternative theories to the resurrection. Some of the most famous include: the theory that the disciples stole the body, the disciples went to the wrong tomb, the disciples hallucinated the resurrection, Jesus did not die but went unconscious on the cross, and the most recent theory is that wild dogs ate the body of Jesus.

However, these arguments have been shown to be severely flawed and could not account for all the facts surrounding the events of the resurrection. Many have done detailed analysis of the evidence and have concluded that the resurrection must be a historical event. The late Simon Greenleaf, the former Royal Professor of Law at Harvard, performed one of the most famous of these studies. In his book, *The Testimony of the*

Evangelists, the Gospels Examined by the Rules of Evidence, he concluded,

They had every possible motive to review carefully the grounds of their faith and the evidences of the great facts and truths which they asserted; . . . It was therefore impossible that they could have persisted in affirming the truths they have narrated had not Jesus actually risen from the dead, and had they not known this fact as certainly as they knew any other fact.

As an atheist, lawyer and journalist Lee Strobel did a two-year investigation on the resurrection interviewing some of the great scholars on both sides. He finally concluded in his book *The Case for Christ*,

> In light of the convincing facts I had learned during my investigation, in the face of this overwhelming avalanche of evidence in the case for Christ, the great irony was this, it would require much more faith for me to maintain my atheism that to trust in Jesus of Nazareth.{6}

No one has been able to conquer death by raising himself or herself from the dead. Jesus by His resurrection proves He is God. For only God, the giver of life has the authority over life and death. Since Jesus substantiates His claims, we conclude He is divine and what He teaches is true and authoritative.

Jesus also taught the Bible to be God's Word. Therefore, the Bible is the foundation for all truth to all of mankind in every culture and for all time. Any teaching that is contrary to those of Jesus and the Bible are false.{7}

Because I Have Experienced It

Jesus Christ and the truths of the Bible are not simply facts to be stored in our minds, they are truths that we are invited to experience in a personal way. God invites us to a personal

relationship with Him. The evidence points convincingly toward Jesus Christ. After reviewing the evidence, we each must make the decision to move in the direction the evidence is pointing. It is then that we experience the reality of God in our lives. Although an individual's experience is a subjective thing, it is part of the proofs that authenticate faith.

When I first heard that the God of the universe loved me and desperately wanted a relationship with me, I thought it was the greatest news I ever heard. As I began to share my newfound discovery, I met scholars who seemed to have convincing proof that this was all a religious fantasy.

As I searched for answers I came across several Christian scholars who were able to defend the authority of the Bible and the claims of Christ. As I weighed the arguments and questioned men and women on both sides, I could not deny the overwhelming evidence that supported the Bible and the claims of Christ. Eventually I came to the conclusion that Jesus Christ is Lord.

I then realized it was time for a decision. Often we do not have all the answers, but we move in the direction in which the evidence is pointing. For example, many of us do not really know for sure if the person we are marrying is the right one. However, we make our decision based on the evidence we see at the time. If I find that I can communicate with my fiancée, our personalities are compatible, and that we share the same values, we move in the direction in which the evidence is pointing. When we make the commitment to marry, then our decision is confirmed definitively. Till we make the commitment, we base our decision on the evidence at hand. The same is true with becoming a Christian. Although we do not have all the answers, we can have enough faith to make a decision. When we commit our lives to Christ, we then experience the fullness of a relationship with the risen Savior.

It was then that I made the conscious decision to believe in Jesus Christ. I asked Christ to forgive my sin and invited Him to be the Lord of my life. Although nothing dramatic happened, I knew I had changed. I experienced the peace that comes from knowing your sins are forgiven. I experienced the joy of knowing I was placed here with a purpose and that there is meaning to my existence. Although I still had some questions, sins that I struggled with, and difficult trials, I had an ever-abiding peace and joy I had never had before.

The more I studied the Bible, the more the world around me began to make sense. I gained a new understanding in all my academic studies. The complexity of life on earth, biological organisms, and planets reflected the character and intelligence of a loving Creator who wants us to enjoy His creation.

My struggles in relationships were the results of selfishness, and a sinful attitude in my heart. Once I began to follow the principles of Christ's love, my friendships became much more meaningful and joyous, not competitive. I experienced freedom from living up to others' expectations because the God of the universe loved me just for who I was.

I experienced the reality of the Bible promises as I applied them to my life. My faith continues to grow each time I see that God's truth works in every day life. The more time I spend with God in prayer, in study, and in worship, the stronger my faith becomes.

How do I know Christianity is true? The facts behind it along with my experience of God's promises confirm it.

Notes

1. Lewis, C.S. Mere Christianity. (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing, 1960), 45.
2. For more extensive discussion read the Probe article, "Evidence for God's Existence" by Sue Bohlin.

3. Albright, William. Archaeology and the Religion of Israel. (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins, 1953), 176.
4. For more extensive discussion read the Probe article, "The Authority of the Bible."
5. For more extensive discussion read the Probe article, "The Uniqueness of Jesus."
6. Strobel, Lee. The Case for Christ. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1998), 265.
7.For more extensive discussion on the resurrection read the Probe article, "Resurrection, Fact or Fiction."

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Note: Material on the subjects below can also be found under

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

Dr. Ray Bohlin summarizes the evidence found by Lee Strobel when researching the question: Is Jesus Christ really who the Bible says He is? He shows that we have strong evidence on

every front that backs up our belief in Jesus as the Son of God. This important apologetic argument helps us understand the enduring value of Christianity.

Sometimes the Evidence Doesn't Stack Up

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

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

As Strobel himself says,

> As far as I was concerned, the case was closed. There was enough proof for me to rest easy with the conclusion that the divinity of Jesus was nothing more than the fanciful invention of superstitious people. Or so I thought.{1}

That last hesitation came as a result of his wife's conversion. After the predictable rolling of the eyes and fears of his wife being the victim of a bait and switch scam, he noticed some very positive changes he found attractive and intriguing. The reporter in him eventually wanted to get to the bottom of this and he launched his own personal investigation. Setting aside as best he could his own personal

interest and prejudices, he began reading and studying, interviewing experts, examining archaeology and the Bible.

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

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

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

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

The psychological profiler is a new weapon in the arsenal of criminal investigators. They understand that behavior reflects personality. These highly trained professionals examine the actions and words of criminals and from these clues construct a psychological and sometimes historical profile of the likely perpetrator.

These same skills can be applied to our question of whether Jesus actually thought He was God. We can learn a great deal

about what Jesus thought of Himself, not just from what He said, but what He did and how He did it.

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

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

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

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

Since Jesus' followers called Him Rabboni or Rabbi, it seems they just thought of Him as a teacher and nothing more. But Witherington reminds us that Jesus actually taught in a radical new way. In Judaism, the authority of two or more witnesses was required for the proclamation of truth. But

Jesus frequently said, “Amen I say to you,” or in modern English, “I swear in advance to the truthfulness of what I am about to say.” Jesus attested to the truth of what He was saying on His own authority. This was truly revolutionary.

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

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

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

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

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

He does get angry, but this is clearly appropriate—in the temple, for instance, when He saw the misuse of the temple courtyard and that the moneychangers were taking advantage of the poor. He didn’t just get ticked off because someone was

annoying Him. In fact, Jesus seems at His most composed when being challenged. In a beautiful passage, Collins describes Jesus as he would an old friend:

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

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

Did Jesus Fulfill the Attributes of God?

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

the Gospels should mirror the picture of God in the Old Testament.

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

At the start of the interview, Strobel asks Carson, "What did Jesus say or do that convinces you that Jesus is God?" The answer was a little surprising. Jesus forgave sins.

We all see ourselves as having the power and authority to forgive someone who has wronged us. Jesus forgave people for things they did that didn't involve Jesus at all. This was startling for that time and even today. Only God can truly forgive sins, and Jesus specifically does so on a number of occasions.{4}

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

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

Strobel concludes that the Bible declares several attributes for God and applies them to Jesus. John 16:30 records one of

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

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

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

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

But maybe this isn’t all it seems. Objections to the correlation of Jesus’ life to the prophecies of the Messiah fall into four categories. The first is the coincidence argument, which we just dispelled. Perhaps the most frequently heard argument is that the gospel writers fabricated the details to make it appear that Jesus was the Messiah. But the gospels were written close enough in time to the actual events

that, if false, critics could have exposed the details. Certainly this is true of those in the Jewish community who had every reason to squash this new religion before it got started.

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

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

> You know, I go through books that people write to try to tear down what we believe. That's not fun to do, but I spend the time to look at each objection individually and then to research the context and the wording in the original language. And every single time, the prophecies have stood up and shown themselves to be true.{6}

What I found most intriguing about the interviews was the combination of academic integrity on the part of these scholars alongside a very evident love for the One of whom they were speaking. For these scholars, finding the historical Jesus was not just an academic exercise, but also a life-changing personal encounter with Jesus. Perhaps it can be for you too.

Notes

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 Lapides, quoted in *The Case for Christ*, p. 185.

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The Historical Reliability of the Gospels – An Important Apologetic for Christianity

Dr. Pat Zukeran provides a succinct argument for the reliability of our current copies of the four gospels. This data is an important part of any apologetic argument, i.e. defense of the veracity of the Christian faith.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

Differences Between the Four Gospels

Skeptics have criticized the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament, as being legendary in nature rather than historical. They point to alleged contradictions between Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They also maintain the Gospels were written centuries after the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses. The late date of the writings allowed legends and exaggerations to proliferate, they say.

Are the Gospels historical or mythological?

The first challenge to address is how to account for the differences among the four Gospels. They are each different in nature, content, and the facts they include or exclude. The reason for the variations is that each author wrote to a different audience and from his own unique perspective.

Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience to prove to them that Jesus is indeed their Messiah. That's why Matthew includes many of the teachings of Christ and makes numerous references to Old Testament prophecies. Mark wrote to a Greek or Gentile audience to prove that Jesus is the Son of God. Therefore, he makes his case by focusing on the events of Christ's life. His gospel moves very quickly from one event to another, demonstrating Christ's lordship over all creation. Luke wrote to give an accurate historical account of Jesus' life. John wrote after reflecting on his encounter with Christ for many years. With that insight, near the end of his life John sat down and wrote the most theological of all the Gospels.

We should expect some differences between four independent accounts. If they were identical, we would suspect the writers of collaboration with one another. Because of their differences, the four Gospels actually give us a fuller and richer picture of Jesus.

Let me give you an example. Imagine if four people wrote a biography on your life: your son, your father, a co-worker, and a good friend. They would each focus on different aspects of your life and write from a unique perspective. One would be writing about you as a parent, another as a child growing up, one as a professional, and one as a peer. Each may include different stories or see the same event from a different angle, but their differences would not mean they are in error. When we put all four accounts together, we would get a richer picture of your life and character. That is what is taking place in the Gospels.

So we acknowledge that differences do not necessarily mean errors. Skeptics have made allegations of errors for centuries, yet the vast majority of charges have been answered. New Testament scholar, Dr. Craig Blomberg, writes, "Despite two centuries of skeptical onslaught, it is fair to say that all the alleged inconsistencies among the Gospels have received at least plausible resolutions."{1} Another

scholar, Murray Harris, emphasizes, “Even then the presence of discrepancies in circumstantial detail is no proof that the central fact is unhistorical.”{2} The four Gospels give us a complementary, not a contradictory, account.

The Date of the New Testament Writings: Internal Evidence

Critics claim that the Gospels were written centuries after the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses. This would allow for myths about Jesus’ life to proliferate. Were the Gospels written by eyewitnesses as they claim, or were they written centuries later? The historical facts appear to make a strong case for a first century date.

Jesus’ ministry was from A.D. 27-30. Noted New Testament scholar, F.F. Bruce, gives strong evidence that the New Testament was completed by A.D. 100.{3} Most writings of the New Testament works were completed twenty to forty years before this. The Gospels are dated traditionally as follows: Mark is believed to be the first gospel written around A.D. 60. Matthew and Luke follow and are written between A.D. 60-70; John is the final gospel, written between A.D. 90-100.

The internal evidence supports these early dates for several reasons. The first three Gospels prophesied the fall of the Jerusalem Temple which occurred in A.D. 70. However, the fulfillment is not mentioned. It is strange that these three Gospels predict this major event but do not record it happening. Why do they not mention such an important prophetic milestone? The most plausible explanation is that it had not yet occurred at the time Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written.

In the book of Acts, the Temple plays a central role in the nation of Israel. Luke writes as if the Temple is an important part of Jewish life. He also ends Acts on a strange note: Paul living under house arrest. It is strange that Luke does not record the death of his two chief characters, Peter and Paul.

The most plausible reason for this is that Luke finished writing Acts before Peter and Paul's martyrdom in A.D. 64. A significant point to highlight is that the Gospel of Luke precedes Acts, further supporting the traditional dating of A.D. 60. Furthermore, most scholars agree Mark precedes Luke, making Mark's Gospel even earlier.

Finally, the majority of New Testament scholars believe that Paul's epistles are written from A.D. 48-60. Paul's outline of the life of Jesus matches that of the Gospels. 1 Corinthians is one of the least disputed books regarding its dating and Pauline authorship. In chapter 15, Paul summarizes the gospel and reinforces the premise that this is the same gospel preached by the apostles. Even more compelling is that Paul quotes from Luke's Gospel in 1 Timothy 5:18, showing us that Luke's Gospel was indeed completed in Paul's lifetime. This would move up the time of the completion of Luke's Gospel along with Mark and Matthew.

The internal evidence presents a strong case for the early dating of the Gospels.

The Date of the Gospels: External Evidence

Were the Gospels written by eyewitnesses of the events, or were they not recorded until centuries later? As with the internal evidence, the external evidence also supports a first century date.

Fortunately, New Testament scholars have an enormous amount of ancient manuscript evidence. The documentary evidence for the New Testament far surpasses any other work of its time. We have over 5000 manuscripts, and many are dated within a few years of their authors' lives.

Here are some key documents. An important manuscript is the Chester Beatty Papyri. It contains most of the N.T. writings,

and is dated around A.D. 250.

The Bodmer Papyri contains most of John, and dates to A.D. 200. Another is the Rylands Papyri that was found in Egypt that contains a fragment of John, and dates to A.D. 130. From this fragment we can conclude that John was completed well before A.D. 130 because, not only did the gospel have to be written, it had to be hand copied and make its way down from Greece to Egypt. Since the vast majority of scholars agree that John is the last gospel written, we can affirm its first century date along with the other three with greater assurance.

A final piece of evidence comes from the Dead Sea Scrolls Cave 7. Jose Callahan discovered a fragment of the Gospel of Mark and dated it to have been written in A.D. 50. He also discovered fragments of Acts and other epistles and dated them to have been written slightly after A.D. 50.{4}

Another line of evidence is the writings of the church fathers. Clement of Rome sent a letter to the Corinthian church in A.D. 95. in which he quoted from the Gospels and other portions of the N.T. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, wrote a letter before his martyrdom in Rome in A.D. 115, quoting all the Gospels and other N.T. letters. Polycarp wrote to the Philippians in A.D. 120 and quoted from the Gospels and N.T. letters. Justin Martyr (A.D. 150) quotes John 3. Church fathers of the early second century were familiar with the apostle's writings and quoted them as inspired Scripture.

Early dating is important for two reasons. The closer a historical record is to the date of the event, the more likely the record is accurate. Early dating allows for eyewitnesses to still be alive when the Gospels were circulating to attest to their accuracy. The apostles often appeal to the witness of the hostile crowd, pointing to their knowledge of the facts as well (Acts 2:22, 26:26). Also, the time is too short for legends to develop. Historians agree it takes about two

generations, or eighty years, for legendary accounts to establish themselves.

From the evidence, we can conclude the Gospels were indeed written by the authors they are attributed to.

How Reliable was the Oral Tradition?

Previously, I defended the early dating of the Gospels. Despite this early dating, there is a time gap of several years between the ascension of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels. There is a period during which the gospel accounts were committed to memory by the disciples and transmitted orally. The question we must answer is, Was the oral tradition memorized and passed on accurately? Skeptics assert that memory and oral tradition cannot accurately preserve accounts from person to person for many years.

The evidence shows that in oral cultures where memory has been trained for generations, oral memory can accurately preserve and pass on large amounts of information. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 reveals to us how important oral instruction and memory of divine teaching was stressed in Jewish culture. It is a well-known fact that the rabbis had the O.T. and much of the oral law committed to memory. The Jews placed a high value on memorizing whatever wri ting reflected inspired Scripture and the wisdom of God. I studied under a Greek professor who had the Gospels memorized word perfect. In a culture where this was practiced, memorization skills were far advanced compared to ours today. New Testament scholar Darrell Bock states that the Jewish culture was "a culture of memory."{5}

Rainer Reisner presents six key reasons why oral tradition accurately preserved Jesus' teachings.{6} First, Jesus used the Old Testament prophets' practice of proclaiming the word of God which demanded accurate preservation of inspired teaching. Second, Jesus' presentations of Himself as Messiah would reinforce among His followers the need to preserve His

words accurately. Third, ninety percent of Jesus' teachings and sayings use mnemonic methods similar to those used in Hebrew poetry. Fourth, Jesus trained His disciples to teach His lessons even while He was on earth. Fifth, Jewish boys were educated until they were twelve, so the disciples likely knew how to read and write. Finally, just as Jewish and Greek teachers gathered disciples, Jesus gathered and trained His to carry on after His death.

When one studies the teachings of Jesus, one realizes that His teachings and illustrations are easy to memorize. People throughout the world recognize immediately the story of the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, and the Lord's Prayer.

We also know that the church preserved the teachings of Christ in the form of hymns which were likewise easy to memorize. Paul's summary of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 is a good example of this.

We can have confidence then that the oral tradition accurately preserved the teachings and the events of Jesus' life till they were written down just a few years later.

The Transmission of the Gospel Texts

When I am speaking with Muslims or Mormons, we often come to a point in the discussion where it is clear the Bible contradicts their position. It is then they claim, as many skeptics, do that the Bible has not been accurately transmitted and has been corrupted by the church. In regards to the Gospels, do we have an accurate copy of the original texts or have they been corrupted?

Previously, we showed that the Gospels were written in the first century, within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses. These eyewitnesses, both friendly and hostile, scrutinized the accounts for accuracy.

So the original writings were accurate. However, we do not

have the original manuscripts. What we have are copies of copies of copies. Are these accurate, or have they been tampered with? As shown earlier, we have 5000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. When you include the quotes from the church fathers, manuscripts from other early translations like the Latin Vulgate, the Ethiopic text, and others, the total comes out to over 24,000 ancient texts. With so many ancient texts, significant alterations should be easy to spot. However, those who accuse the New Testament of being corrupted have not produced such evidence. This is significant because it should be easy to do with so many manuscripts available. The truth is, the large number of manuscripts confirm the accurate preservation and transmission of the New Testament writings.

Although we can be confident in an accurate copy, we do have textual discrepancies. There are some passages with variant readings that we are not sure of. However, the differences are minor and do not affect any major theological doctrine. Most have to do with sentence structure, vocabulary, and grammar. These in no way affect any major doctrine.

Here is one example. In our Bibles, Mark 16:9-20 is debated as to whether it was part of the original writings. Although I personally do not believe this passage was part of the original text, its inclusion does not affect any major teaching of Christianity. It states that Christ was resurrected, appeared to the disciples, and commissioned them to preach the gospel. This is taught elsewhere.

The other discrepancies are similar in nature. Greek scholars agree we have a copy very accurate to the original. Westcott and Hort state that we have a copy 98.33% accurate to the original.{7} A.T. Robertson gave a figure of 99% accuracy to the original.{8} As historian Sir Fredric Kenyon assures us, "…the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and general integrity of

the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established."{9}

Do Miracles Discredit the Gospels?

Skeptics question the accuracy of the Gospels because of the miracles. However, this is an issue of worldviews. Those who hold to a naturalistic worldview do not believe an omnipotent creator exists. All that exists is energy and matter. Therefore, miracles are impossible. Their conclusion, then, is that the miracle accounts in the Gospels are exaggerations or myths.

Those who hold to a theistic worldview can accept miracles in light of our understanding of God and Christ. God can intervene in time and space and alter the natural regularities of nature much like finite humans can in smaller limited ways. If Jesus is the Son of God, we can expect Him to perform miracles to affirm His claims to be divine. But worldviews are not where this ends. We also need to take a good look at the historical facts.

As shown previously, the Gospels were written by eyewitnesses to the events of the life of Christ. Early dating shows eyewitnesses were alive when Gospels were circulating and could attest to their accuracy. Apostles often appeal to the witness of the hostile crowd, pointing out their knowledge of the facts as well (Acts 2:22, Acts 26:26). Therefore, if there were any exaggerations or stories being told about Christ that were not true, the eyewitnesses could have easily discredited the apostles accounts. Remember, they began preaching in Israel in the very cities and during the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses. The Jews were careful to record accurate historical accounts. Many enemies of the early church were looking for ways to discredit the apostles' teaching. If what the apostles were saying was not true, the enemies would have cried foul, and the Gospels would not have earned much credibility.

There are also non-Christian sources that attest to the miracles of Christ. Josephus writes, “Now there was about that time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew to him both many of the Jews and many of the gentiles.” The Jewish Talmud, written in the fifth century A.D., attributes Jesus’ miracles to sorcery. Opponents of the Gospels do not deny He did miracles, they just present alternative explanations for them.

Finally, Christ’s power over creation is supremely revealed in the resurrection. The resurrection is one of the best attested to events in history. For a full treatment, look up the article *Resurrection: Fact or Fiction* here at Probe.org.

Notes

1. Craig Blomberg, The *Historical Reliability of the Gospels,* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 10.

2. Ibid., 9.

3. F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 5th ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 14.

4. Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics,* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2002), 530.
5. Michael Wilkins and J.P. Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire,* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1995), 80.

6. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels,* 27-28.

7. Geisler, 474.

8. Ibid.

9. Quoted by Norman Geisler, *General Introduction to the Bible,* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 405.

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Ancient Evidence for Jesus from Non-Christian Sources

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

Evidence from Tacitus

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

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

> Nero fastened the guilt . . . on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus,

> from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of . . . Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome. . . .{5}

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

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

Evidence from Pliny the Younger

Another important source of evidence about Jesus and early Christianity can be found in the letters of Pliny the Younger to Emperor Trajan. Pliny was the Roman governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor. In one of his letters, dated around A.D. 112, he asks Trajan's advice about the appropriate way to conduct legal proceedings against those accused of being Christians.{8} Pliny says that he needed to consult the

emperor about this issue because a great multitude of every age, class, and sex stood accused of Christianity.{9}

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

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

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

Not only does Pliny's letter help us understand what early Christians believed about Jesus' *person*, it also reveals the high esteem to which they held His *teachings.* For instance, Pliny notes that Christians *bound themselves by a solemn oath* not to violate various moral standards, which find their source in the ethical teachings of Jesus. In addition, Pliny's reference to the Christian custom of sharing a common meal likely alludes to their observance of communion and the "love

feast."{12} This interpretation helps explain the Christian claim that the meal was merely *food of an ordinary and innocent kind*. They were attempting to counter the charge, sometimes made by non-Christians, of practicing "ritual cannibalism."{13} The Christians of that day humbly repudiated such slanderous attacks on Jesus' teachings. We must sometimes do the same today.

Evidence from Josephus

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

As interesting as this brief reference is, there is an earlier one, which is truly astonishing. Called the "Testimonium Flavianum," the relevant portion declares:

> About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he . . . wrought surprising feats. . . . He was the Christ. When Pilate . . .condemned him to be crucified, those who had . . . come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared . . . restored to life. . . . And the tribe of Christians . . . has . . . not disappeared.{17}

Did Josephus really write this? Most scholars think the core of the passage originated with Josephus, but that it was later altered by a Christian editor, possibly between the third and fourth century A.D.{18} But why do they think it was altered?

Josephus was not a Christian, and it is difficult to believe that anyone but a Christian would have made some of these statements.{19}

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

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

Evidence from the Babylonian Talmud

There are only a few clear references to Jesus in the Babylonian Talmud, a collection of Jewish rabbinical writings compiled between approximately A.D. 70-500. Given this time frame, it is naturally supposed that earlier references to Jesus are more likely to be historically reliable than later ones. In the case of the Talmud, the earliest period of compilation occurred between A.D. 70-200.{20} The most significant reference to Jesus from this period states:

> On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald . . . cried, "He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy."{21}

Let's examine this passage. You may have noticed that it refers to someone named "Yeshu." So why do we think this is Jesus? Actually, "Yeshu" (or "Yeshua") is how Jesus' name is pronounced in Hebrew. But what does the passage mean by saying that Jesus "was hanged"? Doesn't the New Testament say he was crucified? Indeed it does. But the term "hanged" can function as a synonym for "crucified." For instance, Galatians 3:13 declares that Christ was "hanged", and Luke 23:39 applies this term to the criminals who were crucified with Jesus.{22} So the Talmud declares that Jesus was crucified on the eve of Passover. But what of the cry of the herald that Jesus was to be stoned? This may simply indicate what the Jewish leaders were *planning* to do.{23} If so, Roman involvement changed their plans!{24}

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

Interestingly, both accusations have close parallels in the canonical gospels. For instance, the charge of sorcery is similar to the Pharisees' accusation that Jesus cast out demons "by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons."{25} But notice this: such a charge actually tends to confirm the New Testament claim that Jesus performed miraculous feats. Apparently Jesus' miracles were too well attested to deny. The only alternative was to ascribe them to sorcery! Likewise, the charge of enticing Israel to apostasy parallels Luke's account of the Jewish leaders who accused Jesus of misleading the

nation with his teaching.{26} Such a charge tends to corroborate the New Testament record of Jesus' powerful teaching ministry. Thus, if read carefully, this passage from the Talmud confirms much of our knowledge about Jesus from the New Testament.

Evidence from Lucian

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

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

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

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

worship Him, they apparently thought Jesus a greater God than any that Greece had to offer!

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

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

Notes

1. F. F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 13.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

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

82.

5. Tacitus, Annals 15.44, cited in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 82.

6. N.D. Anderson, *Christianity: The Witness of History* (London: Tyndale, 1969), 19, cited in Gary R. Habermas, The Historical Jesus (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Company, 1996), 189-190.

7. Edwin Yamauchi, cited in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 82.

8. Pliny, Epistles x. 96, cited in Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 25; Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 198.

9. Ibid., 27.

10. Pliny, Letters, transl. by William Melmoth, rev. by W.M.L. Hutchinson (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1935), vol. II, X:96, cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 199.

11. M. Harris, "References to Jesus in Early Classical Authors," in *Gospel Perspectives V*, 354-55, cited in E. Yamauchi, "Jesus Outside the New Testament: What is the Evidence?", in *Jesus Under Fire*, ed. by Michael J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), p. 227, note 66.

12. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 199.

13. Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 28.

14. Josephus, *Antiquities xx. 200*, cited in Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 36.

15. Ibid.

16. Yamauchi, "Jesus Outside the New Testament", 212.

17. Josephus, *Antiquities 18.63-64*, cited in Yamauchi, "Jesus Outside the New Testament", 212.

18. Ibid.

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

20. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 202-03.

21. *The Babylonian Talmud*, transl. by I. Epstein (London: Soncino, 1935), vol. III, Sanhedrin 43a, 281, cited in Habermas, The Historical Jesus, 203.

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

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

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

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

26. Luke 23:2, 5.

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

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Converting Christians

February 27, 2014

Jim Denison recently found a "15-step strategy for converting Christians to atheism" and wrote about it in the Denison Forum on Truth and Culture. Although the article is supposed to help atheists convert Christians, I think that Christians can learn some valuable lessons about how to approach and dialogue with non-Christians.

The article tells atheists to think about building relationships before trying to convert them to atheism. That is certainly good advice for Christians. Jim Denison reminds us that we should earn the right to share the love of Jesus.

The article also encourages atheists to learn the common arguments leveled by theists and the best rebuttals. Again, Christians should always be ready to make a defense (1 Peter 3:15) for the hope that is in us. I have noticed that in many of the debates between Christians and atheists that it is the atheist argument that is often inadequate.

The article also encourages atheists to understand their holy book cover to cover. This would be good advice for Christians interacting with people of other religions or people who say they have no religion. What is their standard of authority? Do they believe in truth? Do they believe in revelation?

Atheists are also encouraged to study basic physics and biology because "believers may form arguments using a flawed interpretation of physics and biology." Actually, Christians can benefit from the great work done by leading scientists, theologians, and apologists who use a proper understanding of science to show the reasonableness of biblical faith.

The article also encourages atheists to get Christians "in the habit of questioning their own faith." Once again, that is a great suggestion for Christians. Jesus often used questions to teach biblical truths. I have found that getting people to question what they believe and why they believe it to be a very effective witnessing tool.

The article is a reminder that Christians aren't the only ones in the world working to convert others. Atheists and apologists for other religions are also working to convert the hearts and minds of Christians. We should be prepared, but also learn some lessons from others about how to win people to Jesus Christ.

First Dallas Series "How Can I Know?": Links to

Apologetics Articles



We are pleased and honored to suggest these articles and answers to email as helpful additions to Dr. Robert Jeffress' 2012 apologetics series at First Baptist Church Dallas (Texas).	
Aug. 26	**How Can I Know How To Start Over When I've Blown It?**
	Grappling with Guilt "Will God Punish Me Forever for My Mistakes?" "Will Jesus Still Forgive Me?" The Sinfulness of Humanity
Sept. 2	**How Can I Know How To Forgive Someone Who Has Hurt Me?**
	Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and You The Keys to Emotional Healing – Part 2 "How Do I Overcome My Hurts and Disappointments From My Church?"
Sept. 9 & 16	**How Can I Know There Is a God?**
	Evidence for God's Existence There is a God Does God Exist? Answering the New Atheists No Reason to Fear: Examining the Logic of a Critic
Sept. 23 & 30	**How Can I Know The Bible Is True?**

	Are the Biblical Documents Reliable? The Historical Reliability of the Gospels Authority of the Bible Bart Ehrman's Complaint The Christian Canon
Oct. 7	**How Can I Know God Is Good With All The Suffering in the World?**
	The Problem of Evil "I Doubt the Existence of a Good God Who Allows a Baby to Suffer and Die" Where Was God on Sept. 11? The Problem of Evil Hope For a World Gone Bad The Value of Suffering
Oct. 14 & 21	**How Can I Know Christianity Is The Right Religion?**
	Do All Roads Lead to God? The Christian Attitude Toward Non-Christian Religions Is Jesus the Only Savior? Christianity and Religious Pluralism "How Can I Teach Pluralism Wisely?" Will Everyone Be Saved? A Look at Universalism
Oct. 28 & Nov. 4	**How Can I Know I'm Going To Heaven When I Die?**
	"How Can I Know I'm Going to Heaven?" Dealing with Doubt "Can a Christian Lose His Salvation?" "Can a True Believer Commit the Unforgiveable Sin?"

“Can You Recommend Apologetics Resources on Different Levels?”

As a Christian, I find it to be of invaluable importance to remain current and educated in fields of history, science, logic and philosophy, etc. At age 20, I’m confronting more and more difficulty sharing Christ with a generation in a secularized society that will less and less have Him. Any books you might recommend? Thank you!

There are many good books and websites which address the concerns you have in one way or another. However, let me recommend two books and three websites that have personally been very helpful to me over the years.

1. An excellent popular-level book on apologetics and evangelism is *I’m Glad You Asked* by Ken Boa and Larry Moody – available here.

2. A superb intermediate-level apologetics book is *Reasonable Faith* (3rd edition) by William Lane Craig – available here.

3. An excellent popular-level website on apologetics is the Probe Ministries website here: Probe.org.

4. An excellent scholarly-level site (with some popular-level material) is the Reasonable Faith site here: www.reasonablefaith.org.

5. Finally, a really great site for biblical and theological issues is bible.org.

I hope these resources prove helpful as you continue to

prepare yourself to give an account to all who ask about the hope that you have in Christ!

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

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"Can You Recommend Resources for Sharing Christ in a Secular Society?"

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