

# The Self-Understanding of Jesus

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

## Jesus and the Scholars

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



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

contradict the deeply held Jewish conviction that there is only one God.

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

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

## Jesus and the Twelve

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

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

Many New Testament scholars view Jesus' choice of twelve disciples as symbolic of the promised restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel. The restoration of Israel is thus seen to be one of the goals or objectives of Jesus' ministry. As Richard Horsley observes, "One of the principal indications that Jesus intended the restoration of Israel was his appointment of the Twelve." [\[6\]](#) But if one of Jesus' consciously chosen aims was the restoration of Israel, then what does this imply about who he believed himself to be? After all, the Old Testament prophets attribute this restoration either to the Lord or to a Messianic figure possessing both divine and human attributes.

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

Jesus may indeed have thought of himself as Israel's Messiah and Lord!

## Jesus and the Law

What was Jesus' attitude toward the Law of Moses? Some scholars say that Jesus was a law-abiding Jew who "broke neither with the written Law nor with the traditions of the Pharisees."[\[8\]](#) Others say the issue is more complex. Ben Witherington observes that Jesus related to the Law in a variety of ways.[\[9\]](#) Sometimes he affirmed the validity of particular Mosaic commandments (e.g. Matt. 19:18-19). At other times he went beyond Moses and intensified some of the commandments. In the Sermon on the Mount he declared, "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27-28). We shouldn't skip too lightly over a statement like this. The prohibition against adultery is one of the Ten Commandments. By wording the statement as he did, Jesus apparently "equated his own authority with that of the divinely given Torah."[\[10\]](#) Indeed, it's because of sayings like this that one Jewish writer complained: "Israel cannot accept . . . the utterances of a man who speaks in his own name—not 'thus saith the Lord,' but '*I say unto you.*' This '*I*' is . . . sufficient to drive Judaism away from the Gentiles forever."[\[11\]](#)

But Jesus went further than this! In Mark 7 he declared all foods "clean" (vv. 14-19). That is, he set aside the dietary laws found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. To really grasp the radical nature of Jesus' declaration one must only remember that these dietary laws had been given to Israel by God Himself! But what sort of person believes he has the authority to set aside the commandments of God? Ben Witherington notes, "Jesus seems to assume an authority over Torah that no Pharisee or Old Testament prophet assumed—the authority to set

it aside.”{12} And Jacob Neusner, a Jewish scholar, seems to agree: “Jews believe in the Torah of Moses . . . and that belief requires faithful Jews to enter a dissent at the teachings of Jesus, on the grounds that those teachings at important points contradict the Torah.”{13}

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

## Jesus and the Demons

One of the amazing feats attributed to Jesus in the Gospels is the power of exorcism, the power to cast out demons from human beings. Although this may sound strange and unscientific to some modern readers, most critical scholars agree that both Jesus and his contemporaries at least *believed* that Jesus had such power. Of course, this doesn’t mean that the majority of critical scholars believe that demons *actually* exist, or that Jesus *actually* cast such spirits out of people. Many of them do not. But they do think there is persuasive historical evidence for affirming that both Jesus and his contemporaries *believed* such things.{14} In fact, Dr. Bart Ehrman notes that “Jesus’ exorcisms are among the best-attested deeds of the Gospel traditions.”{15} But why is this important? And what can it possibly tell us about Jesus’ self-understanding?

Most scholars are convinced that the historical Jesus declared, “But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt. 12:28). Prior to making this declaration, the Pharisees had accused Jesus of casting out demons “by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons” (12:24). Jesus responded by pointing out how absurd it

would be for Satan to fight against himself like that (v. 26). What's more, the charge was inconsistent. There were other Jewish exorcists in Jesus' day and it was widely believed that their power came from God. Wouldn't it be more reasonable, then, to conclude that Jesus' power also came from God?

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

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

## Jesus and the Father

In one of the most astonishing declarations of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel he states, "All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son, except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (11:27). Many scholars believe that this verse forms a unit with the two preceding verses. It's clear from the context that the "Father" referred to by Jesus is God, for Jesus begins this

section by saying, "I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth" (11:25). So in the verse we are considering, Jesus claims to be God's Son in an absolutely unique sense. He refers to God as "My Father," and declares that no one knows the Father, "except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him." Jesus not only claims to be God's unique Son, he also claims to have special knowledge of the Father that no one else can mediate to others!

Because of the radical nature of these claims, it's hardly surprising to learn that some critical scholars have denied that Jesus ever really said this. Nevertheless, other scholars have offered some very good reasons for embracing the saying's authenticity. Dr. William Lane Craig notes that this saying comes from the hypothetical *Q* source, a source that both Matthew and Luke may have used in writing their Gospels. If that's true, then the saying is quite early and thus has a greater likelihood of actually going back to Jesus. Additionally, "the idea of the mutual knowledge of Father and Son is a Jewish idea, indicating its origin in a Semitic-speaking milieu."[\[17\]](#) Finally, Dr. Ben Witherington notes that the eminent New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias showed "how this saying goes back to an Aramaic original" which "surely counts in favor of it going back to Jesus."[\[18\]](#) Aramaic was probably the language most often used by Jesus and his disciples. After discussing this saying in some detail, Witherington concludes, "In the end, all the traditional bases for judging this saying to be inauthentic no longer will bear close scrutiny."[\[19\]](#)

In this brief overview of the self-understanding of Jesus, I've attempted to show that even when we limit ourselves to Gospel traditions that are generally considered historically authentic by a majority of scholars, Jesus still makes impressive claims to deity. But as Dr. Craig observes, ". . . if Jesus was not who he claimed to be, then he was either a charlatan or a madman, neither of which is plausible.



Therefore, why not accept him as the divine Son of God, just as the earliest Christians did?"[\[20\]](#)

## Notes

1. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 242-43.
2. Ibid., 243.
3. Ibid., 252.
4. Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 186.
5. E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 98.
6. Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 199.
7. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 134.
8. Donald A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus: An Analysis and Critique of Modern Jewish Study of Jesus*, ed. Gerard Terpstra (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 109-10. This quotation does not represent Hagner's own position.
9. Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 65.
10. Craig, 246.
11. Ahad ha' Am, "Judaism and the Gospels," in *Nationalism and the Jewish Ethic*, ed. H. Khon (New York: Schocken, 1962), 298, cited in Hagner, 101-02.
12. Witherington, 65.
13. Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), xii, cited in Craig, 247.
14. Ehrman, 197.
15. Ibid.
16. Craig, 249.
17. Ibid., 246.
18. Witherington, 224.



19. Ibid., 225.

20. Craig, 252.

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# Gospel Truth or Fictitious Gossip?

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

## Forgetting What Lies Behind?

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

When I got back to my apartment, I immediately wrote down what had happened. I wanted to be sure that if I was contacted by the administration, I



would have an accurate report of the evening's events. Knowing how fallible human memory can be, I wanted to write everything down while it was still fresh in my mind. Most people would say this was a wise thing to do.

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

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

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

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

## Why the Wait?

Do the New Testament Gospels accurately preserve for us the things which Jesus said and did? Many liberal scholars don't think so. They maintain that the oral tradition upon which the Gospels are based became quickly corrupted by the early church. If they're right, then some of what we read about Jesus in the Gospels never really happened. As some of the fellows of the Jesus Seminar put it:

Scholars of the gospels are faced with a . . . problem: Much of the lore recorded in the gospels and elsewhere in the Bible is folklore, which means that it is wrapped in memories that have been edited, deleted, augmented, and combined many times over many years.[{3}](#)

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

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

accounts.

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

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

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

## To Tell the Old, Old Story

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

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

If the earliest proclamation about Jesus was altered in later years, then surely first-generation Christians would know about the changes and would object to them. It would not even take outsiders to object to the "new and improved

Christianity,” since those who were already believers would have serious problems with the differences in the content of their belief.{7}

Not only this, but New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg lists many other reasons for believing that this oral tradition was accurately transmitted by Jesus’ earliest followers.{8} First, Jesus’ followers believed that He “proclaimed God’s Word in a way which demanded careful retelling.” Second, over ninety percent of his teachings contained “poetic elements which would have made them easy to memorize.” Third, “the almost universal method of education in antiquity, and especially in Israel, was rote memorization, which enabled people accurately to recount quantities of material far greater than all of the Gospels put together.” And fourth, “written notes and a kind of shorthand were often privately kept by rabbis and their disciples.” Although we can’t be sure that any of Jesus’ disciples kept written notes of *His* teachings, it’s at least possible that they did.

Finally, we must bear in mind that the Gospels are not the product of merely *one* person’s memories of the events of Jesus’ life. Instead, the oral tradition which lies behind the Gospels is based on *numerous* eyewitness reports. This is extremely important, for as the authors of *Reinventing Jesus* remind us, the disciples’ “recollections were not individual memories but *collective* ones—confirmed by other eyewitnesses and burned into their minds by the constant retelling of the story. . . . *Memory in community* is a deathblow to the view that the disciples simply forgot the real Jesus.”{9}

## What About the Differences?

Thus, there are excellent reasons for believing that the first Christians accurately preserved and transmitted the stories about Jesus *before* they were recorded in the New Testament Gospels. But if this is so, then how do we explain the fact

that the sayings of Jesus and his disciples are sometimes worded differently in different Gospels?

To cite just one example, consider the different ways in which the Gospel writers record the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples on the occasion of Peter's famous confession at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus begins by asking his disciples a question, but Matthew, Mark, and Luke each word the question differently. Matthew records Jesus asking, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (Matt. 16:13).<sup>{10}</sup> But in Mark the question reads a bit differently, "Who do people say I am?" (Mark 8:27). And in Luke it's a bit different still, "Who do the crowds say I am?" (Luke 9:18).

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

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

On the one hand, the view which says such sayings are merely unhistorical "jive" just doesn't do justice to the evidence we've already considered regarding how carefully the oral tradition about the life of Jesus was transmitted by his earliest followers. Nor does this view adequately account for both the internal and external evidence for the historical

reliability of the Gospels.[{12}](#)

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

This leaves us with only one more option to consider.

## A “Live” Option

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

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

In other words, the Gospel writers are not always giving us Jesus’ exact *words*, but they are always giving us his genuine *voice*. This distinction is absolutely necessary. For one thing, it helps explain the observed differences among Jesus’ sayings in the Gospels. It also sits well with the fact that most of these sayings had already been translated by the time they were first recorded. You see, most of Jesus’ original teaching would have been done in Aramaic, the dominant language of first-century Palestine. The Gospels, however, were written in Greek. Since “most of Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels is already a translation,” we’re not reading his exact



words even when we're reading the Gospels in Greek.[<sup>{15}</sup>](#) Finally, Jesus' longest speeches can be read in a matter of minutes. Yet "we know that Jesus kept his audiences for hours at a time (e.g., Mark 6:34-36)." It seems evident, then, "that the writers gave us a . . . summarized presentation of what Jesus said and did."[<sup>{16}</sup>](#)

But if the "live" option is correct, and the Gospels don't always give us Jesus' exact words, does this mean that their reports of Jesus' teaching are untrustworthy? Not at all. The way in which the Gospel writers recorded the words and deeds of Jesus was totally consistent with the way in which responsible histories were written in the ancient world. As Dr. Bock observes, "the Greek standard of reporting speeches required a concern for accuracy in reporting the gist of what had been said, even if the exact words were not . . . recorded."[<sup>{17}</sup>](#)

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

## Notes

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

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

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

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

6. Ibid., 29.

7. Ibid., 30.

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

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

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

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

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

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

14. Ibid., 77.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 77-78.

17. Ibid., 79.

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# “Where Are the Rest of Jesus’ Teachings?”

I have been searching for text/documents/anything that Jesus taught. He had over three years of anointed ministry, and only a few lines in the Gospels are recorded. Where is the rest of His teachings? I doubt that He wrote them down to a great extent, but surely some of his followers wrote down His teachings.

It’s great to hear about your excitement for the teachings of Jesus! May the Lord increase your tribe!

There is, unfortunately, a lot of nonsense written about Jesus—both at the scholarly and popular level (though doubtless more at the popular level). The fact of the matter is that the earliest and best historical evidence concerning Jesus and his teachings is to be found in the New Testament. Nothing else even comes close.

Of course, Jesus is mentioned in some ancient non-Christian sources. I have written a brief article about it here: [probe.org/ancient-evidence-for-jesus-from-non-christian-sources-2/](http://probe.org/ancient-evidence-for-jesus-from-non-christian-sources-2/)

Additionally, the Gospel of Thomas appears to contain some of Jesus’ actual sayings. According to New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman, probably about 1/3 of this gospel contains actual sayings of Jesus (or something close), about 1/3 of the sayings are full-blown Gnosticism (espousing things that Jesus never taught), and the final 1/3 are somewhere in between these two.

But here’s the thing. The Gospel of Thomas is an early second century production. The other apocryphal and pseudepigraphical gospels are later still. By contrast, all of the New Testament documents (including the four gospels) are first century

productions. So bottom line: if you want to know what Jesus really taught, you need to read the New Testament (and the NT gospels in particular). Indeed, the reason scholars think that some of the sayings in the Gospel of Thomas are probably authentic sayings of Jesus is because they are consistent with sayings we find in the New Testament Gospels—the earliest and most historically trustworthy documents we have concerning the life and teachings of Jesus.

A few other books you might enjoy by good, solid, evangelical Jesus scholars:

1. *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels*, by Craig A. Evans:

[www.amazon.com/Fabricating-Jesus-Scholars-Distort-Gospels/dp/0830833188/](http://www.amazon.com/Fabricating-Jesus-Scholars-Distort-Gospels/dp/0830833188/)

2. *Reinventing Jesus: How Contemporary Skeptics Miss the Real Jesus and Mislead Popular Culture*, by Komoszewski, Sawyer, and Wallace:

[www.amazon.com/Reinventing-Jesus-J-Ed-Komoszewski/dp/082542982X/](http://www.amazon.com/Reinventing-Jesus-J-Ed-Komoszewski/dp/082542982X/)

3. *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ*, by Gary R. Habermas:

[www.amazon.com/Historical-Jesus-Ancient-Evidence-Christ/dp/0899007325/](http://www.amazon.com/Historical-Jesus-Ancient-Evidence-Christ/dp/0899007325/)

May the Lord greatly bless you in your studies!

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

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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 writing 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.<sup>{1}</sup> This, he wrote to Bruce, had caused him “great concern and some little upset in [his] spiritual life.”<sup>{2}</sup> He concludes his letter by asking, “Is such collateral proof available, and if not, are there reasons for the lack of it?”<sup>{3}</sup> The answer to this question is, “Yes, such collateral proof is available,” and we will be looking at some of it in this article.

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

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

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

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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# **A Trial in Athens – Apologetics in the New Testament**

*Acts 17 provides one of the best examples of Paul engaging in apologetics in the New Testament. Rick Wade shows how Paul finds a point of contact with people to get a hearing.*

## **The Apologist Paul**

When we think of a biblical basis for apologetics, we typically think of Peter's brief comments about defending the faith in 1 Pet. 3:15. We don't typically think of *Paul* as an apologist. But in his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul said that they were "partakers with [him] in the defense and confirmation of the faith" (1:7; see also v.16). Apologetics was a significant aspect of Paul's ministry.

An event that has received a great amount of attention in the study of Paul's ministry is his address to the Areopagus in Athens, recorded in Acts 17: 16-34. That address will be my

topic in this article. Maybe we can be encouraged by Paul's example to speak out for Christ the way he did.

Athens was still a significant city in Paul's day. Although not so much a major political power, it retained its prestige for its cultural and intellectual achievements.<sup>{1}</sup> What we see today as the art treasures of the ancient world, however, Paul saw as images of gods and places for their worship. And there were a lot of them.

Being provoked by this in his spirit, Paul began telling people about Jesus. He made his way to the synagogue as he had done in various cities before.<sup>{2}</sup> There he bore witness to Jews and to God-fearing Gentiles.

He also went to the Agora—the marketplace—to talk with the citizens of Athens.<sup>{3}</sup> Among them were Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. After hearing him for a bit, the philosophers started calling Paul a “babbler,” a term of derision that meant literally “seed picker.” F. F. Bruce wrote that “[this word] was used of one who picked up scraps of learning here and there and purveyed them where he could.”<sup>{4}</sup>

Peddlers of strange new religious beliefs were fairly common in those days. But this was a risky thing to do. It was unlawful to teach the worship of gods that hadn't been officially authorized.<sup>{5}</sup> Not long before this event, Paul was dragged into the marketplace in Philippi for “advocating customs unlawful for . . . Romans to accept or practice” (Acts 16:19-21). Eventually the people of Athens took Paul to the Areopagus, a powerful court which had authority in matters of religion and philosophy.<sup>{6}</sup> They wanted to know about these strange new ideas he was presenting.

Paul had the opportunity to tell the highest religious and philosophical body in Athens about the true God.

# Greek Religion

As Paul looked around the city of Athens, his spirit was provoked within him. The people of Athens had surrounded themselves with idols that obscured the reality of the one true God.

Other historical writings affirm the prominence of religion in Athens. For example, a second century writer named Pausanias claimed that “the Athenians are far more devoted to religion than other men.”[\[7\]](#) His description of Athens names statue after statue, temple after temple. There were statues of gods everywhere, even on the mountains. There were temples built to Athena, Poseidon, Hephaestus, Zeus, Artemis, Ares, and more.

Paul spoke of the altar to the unknown god (Acts 17:23). There were quite a few such altars in those days. The late New Testament scholar, Bertil Gärtner, wrote that these altars were erected “either because an unknown god was considered the author of tribulations or good fortune, or because men feared to pass over some deity.”[\[8\]](#)

Greco-Roman religion was mainly about myth and ritual. Myths were the religious explanations of life and the world, and rituals were reenactments of them. Religion was mostly about appeasing the gods with the proper sacrifices to gain their favor and avoid their wrath.

Although morality wasn't closely associated with religion, that isn't to say that the way one lived was irrelevant.[\[9\]](#) As described in Virgil's *Aeneid*, the souls of the dead were led by the god Hermes to the depths of the earth to await the decision about their eternal place. The guilty were sent to “dark Tartarus.” The pious went to the Elysian Fields.[\[10\]](#) In later years, the place of the blessed souls was said to be in the celestial realm. The afterlife, however, was still one of a shadowy existence.

There was no sacred/profane distinction in the Greco-Roman world; religion was not only a part of everyday life, it was integral to all the rest. Because of that, Christianity was not just a threat to religious belief; it threatened to upset all of culture. This is why Paul ran into such harsh opposition not only in Athens but also in Lystra and Philippi and Ephesus.

We live in a pluralistic society today. So did the apostles. But this did not stop the spread of the gospel. As we see at the end of Acts 17, some people did abandon their pluralism for faith in the one true God.

## **Epicureanism**

When Paul went to the Agora in Athens to tell people about Jesus, he encountered some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.

Epicureanism and Stoicism had “an influence that eclipsed that of all rival [philosophical] schools.”[\[11\]](#) The late British scholar Christopher Stead wrote that they “offered a practical policy for ordering one’s life which could appeal to the ordinary man. It has been argued that this was especially needed in the disorientation caused by the decline of the Greek city-states in the face of Alexander’s empire.”[\[12\]](#)

The school of Epicureanism was founded by Epicurus in the fourth century BC. His primary goal was to help people find happiness and peace of mind. He taught that a happy life is one in which pleasure predominates. These pleasures shouldn’t, however, cause any harm or discomfort. They aren’t found in a life of debauchery. Drinking and revelry just bring pain and confusion.[\[13\]](#) Pleasure was to be found in living a peaceful life in the company of like-minded friends. The intellectual pleasures of contemplation were the highest, because they could be experienced even if the body suffered.

There was more to Epicureanism than simply a lifestyle,

however. Epicureans held two basic beliefs which stand in stark contrast to the message Paul preached to the Areopagus. These beliefs were thought to provide the basis for a tranquil life.

First, although Epicureans believed in the existence of the gods, they believed the gods had no interest in the affairs of people. Epicurus taught that the gods were very much like the Epicureans; they were examples of the ideal tranquil life. Although Epicureans might participate in religious ceremonies and “honour the gods for their excellence,”[{14}](#) they didn’t seek the gods’ favor through sacrifice.

A second key belief was the denial of the afterlife. Epicurus taught that after death comes extinction. According to their cosmogony, the world was created when atoms, falling through space, began to collide and form bodies. Like the heavenly bodies, we also are merely material beings. When we die, our material bodies decay and we no longer exist.[{15}](#) Thus, there was no fear of judgment in an afterlife.

## **Stoicism**

As Paul mingled with the people in the Athenian Agora, he spoke not only with Epicureans, but with Stoics as well.

Stoicism was a school of philosophy founded by Zeno of Cyprus who lived from 335 to 263 BC. During a time of political instability, Stoicism “provided a means for maintaining tranquility amid the struggles of life.”[{16}](#) As with Epicurus, freedom from fear was a motivating force in Zeno’s thought.[{17}](#)

What did the Stoics believe that released them from fear? Stoicism changed over the centuries, but this is a good general description.

While the Epicureans believed the gods didn’t get involved in



the affairs of people on earth, Stoics denied the existence of personal gods altogether.

Stoics believed the—universe began with fire that differentiated itself into the other basic elements of water, air, and earth. The universe was composed purely of matter. The coarser matter made up the physical bodies we see. The finer matter was defused throughout everything and held everything together. This they called *logos* (reason) or sometimes breath or spirit or even fire. The idea of *logos* meant there was a rational principle operating in the universe.

Because the universe was thought to be ordered by an inbuilt *principle* and not by a *mind*, Stoics were deterministic. This raises a question, though. If everything was determined, what would that mean for ethics? Virtue was of supreme importance for Stoics. How could one choose the good if one's actions are determined? One answer given was this: while *people* had the freedom to choose, the universe would do what it was determined to do. But if one wanted to live well, one had to live rationally in keeping with the rational order of the universe. To do otherwise was to make oneself miserable.

Some Stoics believed that the universe would one day erupt in a great fire from which would come another universe. Others thought the universe was eternal. Some believed that in future universes, people would repeat their lives over and over. Others believed that death was the end of a person's existence. In either case, there was no immortality as we understand it.

Thus, Stoics sought peace in their troubled times by denying the existence of meddlesome gods and an afterlife that would bring judgment.

## Paul's Speech

When Paul was allowed to speak before the Areopagus, he made a strategic move. By pointing to the altar to the unknown god, and later referring to the comments of the Greeks' own poets, he averted the charge of introducing new gods. At least on the surface!

Having brought their admitted ignorance to light, Paul told them about the true God. His declaration that a personal God made the heavens and the earth was a direct challenge to the Epicureans and Stoics. His announcement that God didn't live in temples or need the service of people was a challenge to the practices of the religious Greeks.

Paul told them that God wasn't far off and unknown. The phrase "in him we live, and move, and have our being," which refers to Zeus, likely comes from Epimenides of Crete. The line, "we are his offspring," is found in a poem by Aratus.[\[18\]](#) Paul wasn't equating Zeus with God, but was telling them *which* God they were really near to.

Then Paul delivered a charge to the people. God was overlooking their time of ignorance and calling them to repent.[\[19\]](#) This was more than simply a call to a virtuous life as with the philosophers or a call to perform the required sacrifices to the gods. This repentance was necessary, Paul said, for God has set a time to judge the world through His appointed man, and that judgment is assured by the raising of that man from the dead. (2:26)

This was too much for the people of Athens for a few reasons. First, Paul presented an entirely different cosmology. History, he told them, was bound by the creation of God on one end and the judgment of God on the other. Second, there was no room for a historical resurrection in Greek thought. The dyings and risings of their gods didn't occur in space-time history.

By attacking the Greeks' religion, Paul attacked the foundations of their whole cultural structure. New Testament scholar Kavin Rowe writes that, because religion was so interwoven with the rest of life, Paul's visit to Athens –and to Lystra, Philippi, and Ephesus as well– “[displays] . . . the collision between two different ways of life.”<sup>{20}</sup>

The gospel we proclaim doesn't just lay claim to our religious beliefs. It affects our entire lives. Paul knew what was central to the Greeks, what was the core issue that had to be addressed. Likewise, we need to know the fundamental worldview beliefs of our neighbors and how to address them with an approach that will get us a hearing.

## Notes

1. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 349.
2. Acts 13 gives a good picture of how Paul presented the gospel to his fellow Jews.
3. The Web site Ancient Athens 3D gives an interesting visual representation of the Agora, the marketplace, as it looked in Paul's day. [ancientathens3d.com/romagoralEn.htm](http://ancientathens3d.com/romagoralEn.htm).
4. Bruce, *Acts*, 351, n. 20.
5. Charles Carter and Ralph Earle, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 256, and Richard N. Longenecker, “The Acts of the Apostle,” *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelein, gen. ed., J.D. Douglas, assoc. ed., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976-1992), CD.
6. See C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (New York: Oxford, 2009), 31.
7. Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, “Attica”, 1:24:1, written c. AD 160, [www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/pausanias-bk1.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/pausanias-bk1.html)
8. Bertil Edgar Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, Acta Seminarii Neotestamentici Upsaliensis, vol. 21 (Uppsala, 1955), 245, quoted in Everett Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 270. See also

the discussion in Carter and Earle, *Acts*, 259.

9. This may seem inconsistent. But one must keep in mind that religion wasn't one aspect of life that was clearly distinguishable from the rest. Life was all of a piece in the ancient world.

10. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 233.

11. Christopher Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge, 1998), 40.

12. Ibid.

13. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, quoted in Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, bk. 1, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1985), 407-08.

14. Copleston, *History*, 406.

15. Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity*, 42.

16. Kelly James Clark, Richard Lints, and James K.A. Smith, *101 Key Terms in Philosophy and Their Importance for Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), s.v. "Stoicism."

17. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 333.

18. Carter and Earle note that this line also appears in Cleanthes' Hymn to Zeus. I credited Aratus with the line because F. F. Bruce notes that Kirsopp Lake "points out that the immediately following lines of Aratus's poem have 'a strong general resemblance to v. 26 of the Areopagitica'" (Bruce, *Acts*, 360, n. 50). It could be that Aratus got it from Cleanthes (cf. Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 37-38).

19. Some Christians hold that the Greek word for "repent," *metanoēō*, means merely to change one's mind. This sometimes comes up in Lordship salvation debates. The basic meanings of the two parts of the word aren't sufficient for understanding its use. *Metanoēō*, in the New Testament, denotes conversion. "The predominantly intellectual understanding of *metanoēō* as change of mind plays very little part in the NT. Rather the decision by the whole man to turn round is stressed. It is clear that we are concerned neither with a purely outward turning nor with a merely intellectual change of ideas." Colin

Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1975), s.v., "Conversion, 358).

20. Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 50, 51.

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## **"Was Isaiah Written by Two Authors?"**

I was told in an Old Testament class that Isaiah was written by two authors. Is this true and if it is does that change the validity of the prophecies in the book?

Also, I have always believed that the gospels were found in different places but were in harmony. Is this true or what were the origins of the gospels?

I am a Christian but have been beating myself up trying to find answers to all of these questions I have.

Thanks for writing Probe Ministries. It is a very common view among moderate to liberal biblical scholars that Isaiah had two authors. Indeed, some even believe that there were three (or more) authors of this book. A disbelief in the validity of predictive prophecy may well be one of the reasons for adopting this view. However, I personally am persuaded that this view is incorrect. One conservative scholar makes the following points:

1. There is predictive prophecy in Isaiah 1-39 (often attributed to the "first" Isaiah who lived prior to the Babylonian Captivity). Thus, one does not escape predictive prophecy simply by asserting that chapters 40-66 were written

later in history by another author. For instance, Isaiah 7:16, 8:4 and others are prophecies which were fulfilled shortly after they were given, whereas 9:1-2 is a prophecy about the coming of Messiah (fulfilled hundreds of years after it was given). Such examples could be multiplied.

2. Although there are some differences in the literary style of chapters 1-39 and 40-66, this does not at all mean that the entire book could not have been written by one person. After all, if such standards were applied to the works of Shakespeare or Milton, we would have to deny that they wrote much of what is attributed to them. Clearly, the same author can make use of diverse literary forms.

3. There are also similarities between both sections of Isaiah. For instance, compare 11:6-9 (allegedly by first Isaiah) with 65:25 (allegedly by second Isaiah). Other passages could be mentioned. Such passages argue as persuasively for a single author as any differences might argue for two authors.

4. Most importantly (in my view) is the New Testament use of Isaiah. First, quotations from chapters 40-66 (allegedly from "second" Isaiah) are simply attributed to Isaiah (see Matthew 3:3 and Acts 8:28-33 for just two examples). Second, in John 12:37-41, there are quotations from Isaiah 53:1 and 6:10, and both are attributed to the same Isaiah who saw the glory of the Lord (John 12:41).

Thus, I think there are good reasons for believing that there was only one author of the book of Isaiah.

Concerning the Gospels, I will certainly admit that there are some difficulties in harmonizing them on all points. However, I do think it's possible to harmonize them in large part. Also, it's important to remember that sometimes problems are resolved with the discovery of new data from archaeology, history and the like. This has happened many times in the past

and will likely happen more in the future.

I take the traditional view on the origins of the Gospels. Namely, that Matthew and John were written by the apostles of those names, that Mark was written with eyewitness testimony supplied by the Apostle Peter, and that Luke was written by the physician, who thoroughly researched the subject before writing (see Luke 1:1-4). All of the Gospels were written in the first century, probably between the dates of the mid-50's to early 60's for Mark and the 90's for John.

Hope this information helps put your mind at ease a bit.

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn  
Probe Ministries

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## **Did Jesus Really Perform Miracles?**

*Former Probe intern Dr. Daniel Morais and Probe staffer Michael Gleghorn argue that Jesus' miracles have a solid foundation in history and should be regarded as historical fact.*

### **What Do Modern Historians Think?**

"I can believe Jesus was a great person, a great teacher. But I can't believe He performed miracles." Ever hear comments

like this? Maybe you've wondered this yourself. Did Jesus really perform miracles?

Marcus Borg, a prominent member of the Jesus Seminar<sup>[1]</sup>, has stated, "Despite the difficulty which miracles pose for the modern mind, on historical grounds it is virtually indisputable that Jesus was a healer and exorcist."<sup>[2]</sup> Commenting on Jesus' ability to heal the blind, deaf, and others, A. M. Hunter writes, "For these miracles the historical evidence is excellent."<sup>[3]</sup>

Critical historians once believed that the miracles attributed to Jesus in the Bible were purely the product of legendary embellishment. Such exaggerations about Jesus' life and deeds developed from oral traditions which became more and more fantastic with time until they were finally recorded in the New Testament. We all know how tall tales develop. One person tells a story. Then another tells much the same story, but exaggerates it a bit. Over time the story becomes so fantastic that it barely resembles the original. This is what many scholars once believed happened to Jesus' life, as it's recorded in the Gospels. Is this true? And do most New Testament historians believe this today?

The answer is no. In light of the evidence for the historicity of Jesus' miracles in the Gospels, few scholars today would attempt to explain these events as purely the result of legend or myth. In fact, most New Testament scholars now believe that Jesus did in fact perform healings and exorcisms.<sup>[4]</sup> Even many liberal scholars would say that Jesus drew large crowds of people primarily because of his ability to heal and "exorcise demons."<sup>[5]</sup> But because many of these liberal scholars don't believe in spiritual beings, they also don't believe that these healings should be attributed to the direct intervention of God in the world. Instead, they believe that Jesus' miracles and healings have a purely natural explanation. Many of them think that Jesus only healed psychosomatic maladies.<sup>[6]</sup> The term *psychosomatic* means mind-body, so



psychosomatic maladies are mind-body problems. The mind can have a powerful impact on the health of the body. Under extreme distress people can become blind, deaf or even suffer paralysis. Since psychosomatic problems typically go away on their own, many liberal scholars think that faith in Jesus' ability to heal might help to heal some people suffering from these conditions. But is there good reason to believe that Jesus could cure real sicknesses?

## Could These Miracles Be Legendary?

Often, historians who tried to explain away stories of Jesus' miracles as purely the result of legendary developments believed that the "real" Jesus was little more than a good man and a wise teacher. The major problem with this theory is that legends take time to develop. Multiple generations would be needed for the true oral tradition regarding Jesus' life to be replaced by an exaggerated, fictitious version. For example, many historians believe that Alexander the Great's biography stayed fairly accurate for about five hundred years. Legendary details didn't begin to develop until the following five hundred years.[\[7\]](#) A gross misrepresentation of Jesus' life occurring one or two generations after his death is highly unlikely. Jesus was a very public figure. When He entered a town, He drew large crowds of people. Jesus is represented as a miracle worker at every level of the New Testament tradition. This includes not only the four Gospels, but also the hypothetical sayings source, called Q, which may have been written just a few years after Jesus' death. Many eyewitnesses of Christ would still have been alive at the time these documents were composed. These eyewitnesses were the source of the oral tradition regarding Jesus' life, and in light of his very public ministry, a strong oral tradition would be present in Israel for many years after his death.

If Jesus had never actually performed any miracles, then the Gospel writers would have faced a nearly impossible task in

getting anyone to believe that He had. It would be like trying to change John F. Kennedy from a great president into an amazing miracle worker. Such a task would be virtually impossible since many of us have seen JFK on TV, read about him in the papers, or even seen him in person. Because he was a public figure, oral tradition about his life is very strong even today. Anyone trying to introduce this false idea would never be taken seriously.

During the second half of the first century, Christians faced intense persecution and even death. These people obviously took the disciples' teaching about Jesus' life seriously. They were willing to die for it. This only makes sense if the disciples and the authors of the Gospels represented Jesus' life accurately. You can't easily pass off made-up stories about public figures when eyewitnesses are still alive who remember them. Oral tradition tends to remain fairly accurate for many generations after their deaths.[\[8\]](#)

In light of this, it's hard to deny that Jesus did in fact work wonders.

## **Conversion from Legend to Conversion Disorder**

It might be surprising to hear that Jesus is believed by most New Testament historians to have been a successful healer and exorcist.[\[9\]](#) Since His miracles are the most conspicuous aspect of his ministry, the miracle tradition found in the Gospels could not be easily explained had their authors started with a Jesus who was simply a wise teacher. Prophets and teachers of the law were not traditionally made into miracle workers; there are almost no examples of this in the literature available to us.[\[10\]](#) It's especially unlikely that Jesus would be made into a miracle worker since many Jews didn't expect that the Messiah would perform miracles. The Gospel writers would not have felt the need to make this up

were it not actually the case.{11}

Of course, most liberal scholars today don't believe Jesus could heal any real illnesses. But such conclusions are reached, not because of any evidence, but because of prior prejudices against the supernatural. Secular historians deny that Jesus cured any real, organic illnesses or performed any nature miracles such as walking on water.{12} They believe He could only heal *conversion disorders* or the symptoms associated with real illnesses.{13} Conversion disorder is a rare condition that afflicts approximately fourteen to twenty-two of every 100,000 people.{14} Conversion disorders are psychosomatic problems in which intense emotional trauma results in blindness, paralysis, deafness, and other baffling impairments.

Many liberal scholars today would say that Jesus drew large crowds of people primarily because of his ability to heal. But if Jesus could only cure conversion disorders, then it's unlikely He would have drawn such large crowds. As a practicing optometrist, I've seen thousands of patients with real vision loss due either to refractive problems or pathology. But only one of them could be diagnosed with blindness due to conversion disorder. Conversion disorders are rare. In order for Jesus to draw large crowds of people He would have had to be a successful healer. But if He could only heal conversion disorders, thousands of sick people would have had to be present for him to heal just one person. But how could He draw such large crowds if He could only heal one person in 10,000? Sick people would have often needed to travel many miles to see Jesus. Such limited ability to heal could hardly have motivated thousands of people to walk many miles to see Jesus, especially if they were sick and feeble. If Jesus was drawing large crowds, He must have been able to heal more than simply conversion disorders.

## Did Jesus Raise the Dead?

“Did Jesus ever raise the dead? Is there any evidence to back this up?” Many secular historians, though agreeing that Jesus was a successful healer and exorcist, don’t believe that He could perform nature miracles. Due to prior prejudices against the supernatural, these historians don’t believe it’s possible for anyone to raise the dead, walk on water, or heal true organic diseases. These historians believe Jesus’ healings were primarily psychological in nature.[{15}](#) Is there any evidence that Jesus had the power to work actual miracles such as raising the dead?

Yes. It almost seems that the more fantastic the miracle, the more evidence is available to support it. In fact, the most incredible miracle recorded in the Gospels is actually the one which has the greatest evidential support. This miracle is Jesus’ resurrection.[{16}](#) Is there any reason to believe that Jesus may have raised others from the dead as well?

There is compelling evidence to believe that He did. In John 11 there’s the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.[{17}](#) A careful reading of this text reveals many details that would be easy for anyone in the first century to confirm or deny. John records that Lazarus was the brother of Mary and Martha. He also says that this miracle took place in Bethany where Lazarus, Mary, and Martha lived, and that Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem. John’s gospel is believed to have been written in AD 90, just sixty years after the events it records. It’s possible that a few people who witnessed this event, or at least had heard of it, would still be alive to confirm it. If someone wanted to check this out, it would be easy to do. John says this took place in Bethany, and then He tells us the town’s approximate location. All someone would have to do to check this out would be to go to Bethany and ask someone if Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, had ever been raised from the dead. Villages were

generally small in those days and people knew each other's business. Almost anyone in that town could easily confirm or deny whether they had ever heard of such an event. If John just made this story up, he probably wouldn't have included so much information that could be easily checked out by others to see if he was lying. Instead, he probably would have written a vague story about Jesus going to some unnamed town where He raised some unnamed person from the dead. This way no one could confirm or deny the event. John put these details in to show that he wasn't lying. He wanted people to investigate his story. He wanted people to go to Bethany, ask around, and see for themselves what really happened there.

## **What Did Jesus' Enemies Say?**

"Sure, Jesus' followers believed He could work miracles. But what about his enemies, what did they say?" If Jesus never worked any miracles, we would expect ancient, hostile Jewish literature to state this fact. But does such literature deny Jesus' ability to work miracles? There are several unsympathetic references to Jesus in ancient Jewish and pagan literature as early as the second century AD. But none of the ancient Jewish sources deny Jesus' ability to perform miracles.[\[18\]](#) Instead, they try to explain these powers away by referring to him as a sorcerer.[\[19\]](#) If the historical Jesus were merely a wise teacher who only later, through legendary embellishments, came to be regarded as a miracle worker, there should have been a prominent Jewish oral tradition affirming this fact. This tradition would likely have survived among the Jews for hundreds of years in order to counter the claims of Christians who might use Jesus' miraculous powers as evidence of his divine status. But there's no evidence that any such Jewish tradition portrayed Jesus as merely a wise teacher. Many of these Jewish accounts are thought to have arisen from a separate oral tradition apart from that held by Christians, and yet both traditions agree on this point.[\[20\]](#) If it were

known that Jesus had no special powers, these accounts would surely point that out rather than reluctantly affirm it. The Jews would likely have been uncomfortable with Jesus having miraculous powers since this could be used as evidence by his followers to support his self-proclaimed status as the unique Son of God (a position most Jews firmly denied). This is why Jesus' enemies tried to explain his powers away as sorcery.

Not only do these accounts affirm Jesus' supernatural abilities, they also seem to support the ability of his followers to heal in his name. In the Talmud, there's a story of a rabbi who is bitten by a venomous snake and calls on a Christian named Jacob to heal him. Unfortunately, before Jacob can get there, the rabbi dies.[{21}](#) Apparently, the rabbi believed this Christian could heal him. Not only did Jews seem to recognize the ability of Christians to heal in Christ's name, but pagans did as well. The name of Christ has been found in many ancient pagan spells.[{22}](#) If even many non-Christians recognized that there was power to heal in Christ's name, there must have been some reason for it.

So, a powerful case can be made for the historicity of Jesus' miracles. Christians needn't view these miracles as merely symbolic stories intended to teach lessons. These miracles have a solid foundation in history and should be regarded as historical fact.

## Notes

1. Gary R. Habermas, "Did Jesus Perform Miracles?," in *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, by eds. Michael J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 124.
2. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and The Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 61.
3. A.M. Hunter, *Jesus: Lord and Saviour* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 63.

4. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*, 124.
5. See Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision*, 60.
6. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*, 125.
7. Craig L. Blomberg, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 33.
8. Grant R Jeffrey, *The Signature of God* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998) 102, 103.
9. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*, 124, 125.
10. Smith, *Jesus the Magician: Charlatan or Son of God?* (Berkeley: Seastone, 1998), 21.
11. Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus, The Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 247.
12. Ibid.
13. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*, 125.
14. See the National Organization for Rare Diseases' official Web site at [www.rarediseases.org/nord/search/rdbdetail\\_fullreport\\_pf](http://www.rarediseases.org/nord/search/rdbdetail_fullreport_pf) (5/04/2006).
15. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*, 125.
16. William Lane Craig, "The Empty Tomb of Jesus," in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History*, by eds. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 247-261 and Gary R. Habermas, "The Resurrection Appearances of Jesus," Ibid., 261-275.
17. John. 11:1-44.
18. See Alan Humm, "Toledoth Yesu," at [ccat.sas.upenn.edu/humm/Topics/JewishJesus/toledoth.html](http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/humm/Topics/JewishJesus/toledoth.html) (2/17/1997).
19. Ibid.
20. Twelftree, *Jesus, The Miracle Worker*, 255.
21. Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 63.
22. Ibid., 83.



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# Redeeming the Da Vinci Code

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn critiques The Da Vinci Code's theories, demonstrating that most of these theories are simply false.*



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

## Introduction to *The Da Vinci Code*

Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*,<sup>{1}</sup> has generated a huge amount of interest from the reading public. About forty million copies have been sold worldwide.<sup>{2}</sup> And Ron Howard and Sony Pictures have brought the story to theatres.<sup>{3}</sup> To help answer some of the challenges which this novel poses to biblical Christianity, Probe has teamed up with EvanTell, an evangelism training ministry, to produce a DVD series called *Redeeming The Da Vinci Code*. The series aims to strengthen the faith of believers and equip them to share their faith with those who see the movie or have read the book.<sup>{4}</sup> I hope this article will also encourage you to use this event to witness to the truth to friends or family who have read the book or seen the movie.

Why so much fuss about a novel? The story begins with the murder of the Louvre's curator. But this curator isn't just interested in art; he's also the Grand Master of a secret society called the Priory of Sion. The Priory guards a secret that, if revealed, would discredit biblical Christianity. Before dying, the curator attempts to pass on the secret to his granddaughter Sophie, a cryptographer, and Harvard professor Robert Langdon, by leaving a number of clues that he hopes will guide them to the truth.

So what's the secret? The location and identity of the Holy



Grail. But in Brown's novel, the Grail is not the cup allegedly used by Christ at the Last Supper. It's rather Mary Magdalene, the wife of Jesus, who carried on the royal bloodline of Christ by giving birth to His child! The Priory guards the secret location of Mary's tomb and serves to protect the bloodline of Jesus that has continued to this day!

Does anyone take these ideas seriously? Yes; they do. This is partly due to the way the story is written. The first word one encounters in *The Da Vinci Code*, in bold uppercase letters, is the word "FACT." Shortly thereafter Brown writes, "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate."[\[5\]](#) And the average reader, with no special knowledge in these areas, will assume the statement is true. But it's not, and many have documented some of Brown's inaccuracies in these areas.[\[6\]](#)

Brown also has a way of making the novel's theories about Jesus and the early church seem credible. The theories are espoused by the novel's most educated characters: a British royal historian, Leigh Teabing, and a Harvard professor, Robert Langdon. When put in the mouths of these characters, one comes away with the impression that the theories are actually true. But are they?

In this article, I'll argue that most of what the novel says about Jesus, the Bible, and the history of the early church is simply false. I'll also say a bit about how this material can be used in evangelism.

## **Did Constantine Embellish Our Four Gospels?**

Were the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which were later to be officially recognized as part of the New Testament canon, intentionally embellished in the fourth century at the command of Emperor Constantine? This is what Leigh Teabing,

the fictional historian in *The Da Vinci Code*, suggests. At one point he states, "Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike" (234). Is this true?

In a letter to the church historian Eusebius, Constantine did indeed order the preparation of "fifty copies of the sacred Scriptures."[\[7\]](#) But nowhere in the letter does he command that any of the Gospels be embellished in order to make Jesus appear more godlike. And even if he had, it would have been virtually impossible to get faithful Christians to accept such accounts.

Before the reign of Constantine, the church suffered great persecution under Emperor Diocletian. It's hard to believe that the same church that had withstood this persecution would jettison their cherished Gospels and embrace embellished accounts of Jesus' life! It's also virtually certain that had Constantine tried such a thing, we'd have lots of evidence for it in the writings of the church fathers. But we have none. Not one of them mentions an attempt by Constantine to alter any of our Gospels. And finally, to claim that the leaders of the fourth century church, many of whom had suffered persecution for their faith in Christ, would agree to join Constantine in a conspiracy of this kind is completely unrealistic.

One last point. We have copies of the four Gospels that are significantly earlier than Constantine and the Council of Nicaea (or Nicea). Although none of the copies are complete, we do have nearly complete copies of both Luke and John in a codex dated between A.D. 175 and 225—at least a hundred years before Nicaea. Another manuscript, dating from about A.D. 200 or earlier, contains most of John's Gospel.[\[8\]](#) But why is this important?

First, we can compare these pre-Nicene manuscripts with those

that followed Nicaea to see if any embellishment occurred. None did. Second, the pre-Nicene versions of John's Gospel include some of the strongest declarations of Jesus' deity on record (e.g. 1:1-3; 8:58; 10:30-33). That is, the most explicit declarations of Jesus' deity in any of our Gospels are already found in manuscripts that pre-date Constantine by more than a hundred years!

If you have a non-Christian friend who believes these books were embellished, you might gently refer them to this evidence. Then, encourage them to read the Gospels for themselves and find out who Jesus really is.

But what if they think these sources can't be trusted?

## **Can We Trust the Gospels?**

Although there's no historical basis for the claim that Constantine embellished the New Testament Gospels to make Jesus appear more godlike, we must still ask whether the Gospels are reliable sources of information about Jesus. According to Teabing, the novel's fictional historian, "Almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false" (235). Is this true? The answer largely depends on the reliability of our earliest biographies of Jesus—the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Each of these Gospels was written in the first century A.D. Although they are technically anonymous, we have fairly strong evidence from second century writers such as Papias (c. A.D. 125) and Irenaeus (c. A.D. 180) for ascribing each Gospel to its traditional author. If their testimony is true (and we've little reason to doubt it), then Mark, the companion of Peter, wrote down the substance of Peter's preaching. And Luke, the companion of Paul, carefully researched the biography that bears his name. Finally, Matthew and John, two of Jesus' twelve disciples, wrote the books ascribed to them. If this is

correct, then the events recorded in these Gospels “are based on either direct or indirect eyewitness testimony.”[{9}](#)

But did the Gospel writers intend to reliably record the life and ministry of Jesus? Were they even interested in history, or did their theological agendas overshadow any desire they may have had to tell us what really happened? Craig Blomberg, a New Testament scholar, observes that the prologue to Luke’s Gospel “reads very much like prefaces to other generally trusted historical and biographical works of antiquity.” He further notes that since Matthew and Mark are similar to Luke in terms of genre, “it seems reasonable that Luke’s historical intent would closely mirror theirs.”[{10}](#) Finally, John tells us that he wrote his Gospel so that people might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing they might have life in His name (20:31). While this statement admittedly reveals a theological agenda, Blomberg points out that “if you’re going to be convinced enough to believe, the theology has to flow from accurate history.”[{11}](#)

Interestingly, the disciplines of history and archaeology are a great help in corroborating the general reliability of the Gospel writers. Where these authors mention people, places, and events that can be checked against other ancient sources, they are consistently shown to be quite reliable. We need to let our non-Christian friends know that we have good grounds for trusting the New Testament Gospels and believing what they say about Jesus.

But what if they ask about those Gospels that didn’t make it into the New Testament? Specifically, what if they ask about the Nag Hammadi documents?

## **The Nag Hammadi Documents**

Since their discovery in 1945, there’s been much interest in the Nag Hammadi texts. What are these documents? When were

they written, and by whom, and for what purpose? According to Teabing, the historian in *The Da Vinci Code*, the Nag Hammadi texts represent “the earliest Christian records” (245). These “unaltered gospels,” he claims, tell the real story about Jesus and early Christianity (248). The New Testament Gospels are allegedly a later, corrupted version of these events.

The only difficulty with Teabing’s theory is that it’s wrong. The Nag Hammadi documents are not “the earliest Christian records.” Every book in the New Testament is earlier. The New Testament documents were all written in the first century A.D. By contrast, the dates for the Nag Hammadi texts range from the second to the third century A.D. As Darrell Bock observes in *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, “The bulk of this material is a few generations removed from the foundations of the Christian faith, a vital point to remember when assessing the contents.”[\[12\]](#)

What do we know about the contents of these books? It is generally agreed that the Nag Hammadi texts are Gnostic documents. The key tenet of Gnosticism is that salvation comes through secret knowledge. As a result, the Gnostic Gospels, in striking contrast to their New Testament counterparts, place almost no value on the death and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, Gnostic Christology had a tendency to separate the human Jesus from the divine Christ, seeing them as two distinct beings. It was not the divine Christ who suffered and died; it was merely the human Jesus—or perhaps even Simon of Cyrene.[\[13\]](#) It didn’t matter much to the Gnostics because in their view the death of Jesus was irrelevant for attaining salvation. What was truly important was not the death of the man Jesus but the secret knowledge brought by the divine Christ. According to the Gnostics, salvation came through a correct understanding of this secret knowledge.[\[14\]](#)

Clearly these doctrines are incompatible with the New Testament teaching about Christ and salvation (e.g. Rom. 3:21-26; 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 15:3-11; Tit. 2:11-14). Ironically,

they're also incompatible with Teabing's view that the Nag Hammadi texts "speak of Christ's ministry in very human terms" (234). The Nag Hammadi texts actually present Christ as a divine being, though quite differently from the New Testament perspective.[\[15\]](#)

Thus, the Nag Hammadi texts are both later than the New Testament writings and characterized by a worldview that is entirely alien to their theology. We must explain to our non-Christian friends that the church fathers exercised great wisdom in rejecting these books from the New Testament.

But what if they ask us how it was decided what books to include?

## **The Formation of the New Testament Canon**

In the early centuries of Christianity, many books were written about the teachings of Jesus and His apostles. Most of these books never made it into the New Testament. They include such titles as The Gospel of Philip, The Acts of John, and The Apocalypse of Peter. How did the early church decide what books to include in the New Testament and what to reject? When were these decisions made, and by whom? According to the Teabing, "The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by . . . Constantine the Great" (231). Is this true?

The early church had definite criteria that had to be met for a book to be included in the New Testament. As Bart Ehrman observes, a book had to be ancient, written close to the time of Jesus. It had to be written either by an apostle or a companion of an apostle. It had to be consistent with the orthodox understanding of the faith. And it had to be widely recognized and accepted by the church.[\[16\]](#) Books that didn't meet these criteria weren't included in the New Testament.

When were these decisions made? And who made them? There wasn't an ecumenical council in the early church that

officially decreed that the twenty-seven books now in our New Testament were the right ones.[{17}](#) Rather, the canon gradually took shape as the church recognized and embraced those books that were inspired by God. The earliest collections of books “to circulate among the churches in the first half of the second century” were our four Gospels and the letters of Paul.[{18}](#) Not until the heretic Marcion published his expurgated version of the New Testament in about A.D. 144 did church leaders seek to define the canon more specifically.[{19}](#)

Toward the end of the second century there was a growing consensus that the canon should include the four Gospels, Acts, the thirteen Pauline epistles, “epistles by other ‘apostolic men’ and the Revelation of John.”[{20}](#) The Muratorian Canon, which dates toward the end of the second century, recognized every New Testament book except Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 3 John. Similar though not identical books were recognized by Irenaeus in the late second century and Origen in the early third century. So while the earliest listing of all the books in our New Testament comes from Athanasius in A.D. 367, there was widespread agreement on most of these books (including the four Gospels) by the end of the second century. By sharing this information “with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15), we can help our friends see that the New Testament canon did not result from a decision by Constantine.

## Who Was Mary Magdalene? (Part 1)

Mary Magdalene, of course, is a major figure in *The Da Vinci Code*. Let’s take a look at Mary, beginning by addressing the unfortunate misconception that she was a prostitute. Where did this notion come from? And why do so many people believe it?

According to Leigh Teabing, the popular understanding of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute “is the legacy of a smear campaign . . . by the early Church.” In Teabing’s view, “The Church

needed to defame Mary . . . to cover up her dangerous secret—her role as the Holy Grail” (244). Remember, in this novel the Holy Grail is not the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper. Instead it’s Mary Magdalene, who’s alleged to have been both Jesus’ wife and the one who carried His royal bloodline in her womb.

How should we respond to this? Did the early church really seek to slander Mary as a prostitute in order to cover up her intimate relationship with Jesus? The first recorded instance of Mary Magdalene being misidentified as a prostitute occurred in a sermon by Pope Gregory the Great in A.D. 591.[\[21\]](#) Most likely, this wasn’t a deliberate attempt to slander Mary’s character. Rather, Gregory probably misinterpreted some passages in the Gospels, resulting in his incorrectly identifying Mary as a prostitute.

For instance, he may have identified the unnamed sinful woman in Luke 7, who anointed Jesus’ feet, with Mary of Bethany in John 12, who also anointed Jesus’ feet shortly before His death. This would have been easy to do because, although there are differences, there are also many similarities between the two separate incidents. If Gregory thought the sinful woman of Luke 7 was the Mary of John 12, he may then have mistakenly linked this woman with Mary Magdalene. Interestingly, Luke mentions Mary Magdalene for the first time at the beginning of chapter 8, right after the story of Jesus’ anointing in Luke 7. Since the unnamed woman in Luke 7 was likely guilty of some kind of sexual sin, if Gregory thought this woman was Mary Magdalene, then it wouldn’t be too great a leap to infer she was a prostitute.

If you’re discussing the novel with someone who is hostile toward the church, don’t be afraid to admit that the church has sometimes made mistakes. We can agree that Gregory was mistaken when he misidentified Mary as a prostitute. But we must also observe that it’s quite unlikely that this was part of a smear campaign by the early church. We must remind our



friends that Christians make mistakes—and even sin—just like everyone else (Rom. 3:23). The difference is that we've recognized our need for a Savior from sin. And in this respect, we're actually following in the footsteps of Mary Magdalene (John 20:1-18)!

## Who Was Mary Magdalene? (Part 2)

What do our earliest written sources reveal about the real Mary Magdalene? According to Teabing, Mary was the wife of Jesus, the mother of His child, and the one whom He intended to establish the church after His death (244-48). In support of these theories, Teabing appeals to two of the Gnostic Gospels: The Gospel of Philip and The Gospel of Mary [Magdalene]. Let's look first at The Gospel of Mary.

The section of this Gospel quoted in the novel presents an incredulous apostle Peter who simply can't believe that the risen Christ has secretly revealed information to Mary that He didn't reveal to His male disciples. Levi rebukes Peter: "If the Saviour made her worthy, who are you . . . to reject her? Surely the Saviour knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us" (247).

What can we say about this passage? First, we must observe that nowhere in this Gospel are we told that Mary was Jesus' wife or the mother of His child. Second, many scholars think this text should probably be read symbolically, with Peter representing early Christian orthodoxy and Mary representing a form of Gnosticism. This Gospel is probably claiming that "Mary" (that is, the Gnostics) has received divine revelation, even if "Peter" (that is, the orthodox) can't believe it.[\[22\]](#) Finally, even if this text should be read literally, we have little reason to think it's historically reliable. It was likely composed sometime in the late second century, about a hundred years after the canonical Gospels.[\[23\]](#) So, contrary to what's implied in the novel, it certainly wasn't written by

Mary Magdalene—or any of Jesus’ other original followers.[{24}](#)

If we want reliable information about Mary, we must turn to our earliest sources—the New Testament Gospels. These sources tell us that Mary was a follower of Jesus from the town of Magdala. After Jesus cast seven demons out of her, she (along with other women) helped support His ministry (Luke 8:1-3). She witnessed Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection, and was the first to see the risen Christ (Matt. 27:55-61; John 20:11-18). Jesus even entrusted her with proclaiming His resurrection to His male disciples (John 20:17-18). In this sense, Mary was an “apostle” to the apostles.[{25}](#) This is all the Gospels tell us about Mary.[{26}](#) We can agree with our non-Christian friends that she was a very important woman. But we must also remind them that there’s nothing to suggest that she was Jesus’ wife, or that He intended her to lead the church.

All this aside, someone who’s read *The Da Vinci Code* might still have questions about The Gospel of Philip? Doesn’t this text indicate that Mary and Jesus were married?

## Was Jesus Married? (Part 1)

Undoubtedly, the strongest textual evidence that Jesus was married comes from The Gospel of Philip. So it’s not surprising that Leigh Teabing, should appeal to this text. The section of this Gospel quoted in the novel reads as follows:

*And the companion of the Saviour is Mary Magdalene. Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval. They said to him, “Why do you love her more than all of us?” (246).*

Now, notice that the first line refers to Mary as the

companion of the Savior. In the novel, Teabing clinches his argument that Jesus and Mary were married by stating, "As any Aramaic scholar will tell you, the word companion, in those days, literally meant spouse" (246). This sounds pretty convincing. Was Jesus married after all?

When discussing this issue with a non-Christian friend, point out that we must proceed carefully here. The Gospel of Philip was originally written in Greek.[{27}](#) Therefore, what the term "companion" meant in Aramaic is entirely irrelevant. Even in the Coptic translation found at Nag Hammadi, a Greek loan word (*koinonos*) lies behind the term translated "companion". Darrell Bock observes that this is "not the typical . . . term for 'wife'" in Greek.[{28}](#) Indeed, *koinonos* is most often used in the New Testament to refer to a "partner." Luke uses the term to describe James and John as Peter's business partners (Luke 5:10). So contrary to the claim of Teabing, the statement that Mary was Jesus' companion does not at all prove that she was His wife.

But what about the following statement: "Christ loved her . . . and used to kiss her often on her mouth"?

First, this portion of the manuscript is damaged. We don't actually know where Christ kissed Mary. There's a hole in the manuscript at that place. Some believe that "she was kissed on her cheek or forehead since either term fits in the break."[{29}](#) Second, even if the text said that Christ kissed Mary on her mouth, it wouldn't necessarily mean that something sexual is in view. Most scholars agree that Gnostic texts contain a lot of symbolism. To read such texts literally, therefore, is to misread them. Finally, regardless of the author's intention, this Gospel wasn't written until the second half of the third century, over two hundred years after the time of Jesus.[{30}](#) So the reference to Jesus kissing Mary is almost certainly not historically reliable.

We must show our non-Christian friends that The Gospel of

Philip offers insufficient evidence that Jesus was married. But what if they've bought into the novel's contention that it would have been odd for Jesus to be single?

## Was Jesus Married? (Part 2)

The two most educated characters in *The Da Vinci Code* claim that an unmarried Jesus is quite improbable. Leigh Teabing says, "Jesus as a married man makes infinitely more sense than our standard biblical view of Jesus as a bachelor" (245). Robert Langdon, Harvard professor of Religious Symbolology, concurs:

*Jesus was a Jew, and the social decorum during that time virtually forbid a Jewish man to be unmarried. According to Jewish custom, celibacy was condemned. . . . If Jesus were not married, at least one of the Bible's Gospels would have mentioned it and offered some explanation for His unnatural state of bachelorhood (245).*

Is this true? What if our non-Christian friends want a response to such claims?

In his excellent book *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, Darrell Bock persuasively argues that an unmarried Jesus is not at all improbable.[\[31\]](#) Of course, it's certainly true that most Jewish men of Jesus' day did marry. It's also true that marriage was often viewed as a fundamental human obligation, especially in light of God's command to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28). Nevertheless, by the first century there were recognized, and even lauded, exceptions to this general rule.

The first century Jewish writer, Philo of Alexandria, described the Essenes as those who "repudiate marriage . . .

for no one of the Essenes ever marries a wife.”[\[32\]](#) Interestingly, the Essenes not only escaped condemnation for their celibacy, they were often admired. Philo also wrote, “This now is the enviable system of life of these Essenes, so that not only private individuals but even mighty kings, admiring the men, venerate their sect, and increase . . . the honors which they confer on them.”[\[33\]](#) Such citations clearly reveal that not all Jews of Jesus’ day considered marriage obligatory. And those who sought to avoid marriage for religious reasons were often admired rather than condemned.

It may be helpful to remind your friend that the Bible nowhere condemns singleness. Indeed, it praises those who choose to remain single to devote themselves to the work of the Lord (e.g. 1 Cor. 7:25-38). Point your friend to Matthew 19:12, where Jesus explains that some people “have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven” (NIV). Notice His conclusion, “The one who can accept this should accept it.” It’s virtually certain that Jesus had accepted this. He had renounced marriage to fully devote Himself to the work of His heavenly Father. What’s more, since there was precedent in the first century for Jewish men to remain single for religious reasons, Jesus’ singleness would not have been condemned. Let your friend know that, contrary to the claims of *The Da Vinci Code*, it would have been completely acceptable for Jesus to be unmarried.

## **Did Jesus’ Earliest Followers Proclaim His Deity?**

We’ve considered *The Da Vinci Code*’s claim that Jesus was married and found it wanting. Mark Roberts observed “that most proponents of the marriage of Jesus thesis have an agenda. They are trying to strip Jesus of his uniqueness, and especially his deity.”[\[34\]](#) This is certainly true of *The Da Vinci Code*. Not only does it call into question Jesus’ deity

by alleging that He was married, it also maintains that His earliest followers never even believed He was divine! According to Teabing, the doctrine of Christ's deity originally resulted from a vote at the Council of Nicaea. He further asserts, "until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet . . . a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless" (233). Did Jesus' earliest followers really believe that He was just a man? If our non-Christian friends have questions about this, let's view it as a great opportunity to tell them who Jesus really is!

The Council of Nicaea met in A.D. 325. By then, Jesus' followers had been proclaiming His deity for nearly three centuries. Our earliest written sources about the life of Jesus are found in the New Testament. These first century documents repeatedly affirm the deity of Christ. For instance, in his letter to the Colossians, the apostle Paul declared, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (2:9; see also Rom. 9:5; Phil. 2:5-11; Tit. 2:13). And John wrote, "In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (1:1, 14).

There are also affirmations of Jesus' deity in the writings of the pre-Nicene church fathers. In the early second century, Ignatius of Antioch wrote of "our God, Jesus the Christ."[\[35\]](#) Similar affirmations can be found throughout these writings. There's even non-Christian testimony from the second century that Christians believed in Christ's divinity. Pliny the Younger wrote to Emperor Trajan, around A.D. 112, that the early Christians "were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day . . . when they sang . . . a hymn to Christ, as to a god."[\[36\]](#)

If we humbly share this information with our non-Christian friends, we can help them see that Christians believed in Christ's deity long before the Council of Nicaea. We might

even be able to explain why Christians were so convinced of His deity that they were willing to die rather than deny it. If so, we can invite our friends to believe in Jesus for themselves. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

## Notes

1. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).
2. See Dan Brown's official website at [www.danbrown.com/meet\\_dan/](http://www.danbrown.com/meet_dan/) (February 1, 2006).
3. See the Sony Pictures website at [www.sonypictures.com/movies/thedavincicode/](http://www.sonypictures.com/movies/thedavincicode/) (February 1, 2006).
4. More information is available about the series at [www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org).
5. Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 1.
6. For example, see Sandra Miesel, "Dismantling The Da Vinci Code," at [www.crisismagazine.com/september2003/feature1.htm](http://www.crisismagazine.com/september2003/feature1.htm) and James Patrick Holding, "Not InDavincible: A Review and Critique of The Da Vinci Code," at [www.answers.org/issues/davincicode.html](http://www.answers.org/issues/davincicode.html).
7. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Reprint. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1952), 1:549, cited in Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 282.
8. For more information see Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 390.
9. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 25.
10. Ibid., 39-40.
11. Ibid., 40.
12. Darrell Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code* (n.p.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), 52 (pre-publication manuscript copy).

13. Ibid., 62-63. See also *The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter and The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* in Bart Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It Into The New Testament*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 78-86.
14. For example, *The Coptic Gospel of Thomas* (saying 1), in Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 20.
15. Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, 63.
16. Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: Christian Scriptures and the Battles Over Authentication* (Chantilly, Virginia: The Teaching Company: Course Guidebook, part 2, 2002), 37.
17. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 341.
18. F.F. Bruce, "Canon," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 95.
19. Ibid., 95-96.
20. Ibid., 96.
21. Darrell Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code* (n.p. Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), 25-26 (pre-publication manuscript copy). I have relied heavily on Dr. Bock's analysis in this section.
22. Ibid., 116-17.
23. Bart Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 35.
24. Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*. On page 247 we read, "Sophie had not known a gospel existed in Magdalene's words."
25. An "apostle" can simply refer to "one sent" as an envoy or messenger. Mary was an "apostle" in this sense, since she was sent by Jesus to tell the disciples of His resurrection.
26. For more information see Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, 16-18.
27. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 19.
28. Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, 22.
29. Ibid., 21.
30. Ibid., 20.
31. In this section I have relied heavily on chapter 3 of Bock, *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, pp. 40-49 (pre-publication copy).
32. Philo, *Hypothetica*, 11.14-17, cited in Bock, *Breaking The*



*Da Vinci Code*, 43.

33. Ibid., 44.

34. Mark D. Roberts, "Was Jesus Married? A Careful Look at the Real Evidence," at [www.markdroberts.com/htmfiles/resources/jesusmarried.htm](http://www.markdroberts.com/htmfiles/resources/jesusmarried.htm), January, 2004.

35. Ignatius of Antioch, "Ephesians," 18:2, cited in Jack N. Sparks, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Robert M. Grant (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1978), 83.

36. 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.

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## **"Why Should We Trust the Bible?"**

Dear Mr. Zukeran,

I recently caught your article on "[The Authority of the Bible](#)" and I was wondering if you could answer a few questions for a long time follower of Christ who is now having trouble with the Bible. I'm not having trouble with the Bible as a whole, but what I'm having a problem with is the claim that it is inerrant. With your impressive list of merits, degrees, etc, I was wondering if you could tell me what you think about this. The name of God has been used to influence people to do some pretty awful things. How do we know that the Bible was immune from political influence during its translation?

**Is there a line that you drew in the sand and just said, “Even though I don’t understand it, I will claim this as truth”? In all your experience and learning, what is the one thing you hold to when everything else seems to falter?**

I did not grow up in a Christian home and throughout high school I attended a private Episcopal School. The priests were atheists or very liberal. Therefore, I grew up not believing in the Bible. Eventually I embraced Atheism. After hearing the gospel message at a small Baptist church, I began to investigate the claims of Christ. From the evidence of creation, I could not deny the evidence for God’s existence.

Then I studied the historical accuracy of the gospels and found them to be very accurate historical works written by first century eyewitnesses. (For more see the article [“Historical Reliability of the Gospels.”](#)) In the gospels, Jesus claimed to be the divine Son of God and confirmed his claims through his miraculous, sinless life, death, and resurrection. We have good historical evidence that Christ did live a miraculous life not only in the gospels, but in several works of non-Christian literature as well. (For more information read the article [“The Uniqueness of Christ”](#) and [“The Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?”](#))

Since Christ confirmed his claims to be the divine Son of God, what He taught was true. He taught the Bible was the inerrant word of God. [Note: theologian Dr. Wayne Grudem defines inerrancy as the belief that all the words in Scripture are completely true and without error. “The inerrancy of Scripture means that Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything which is contrary to fact.” *Bible Doctrine*, Zondervan 1999, p. 40, 42.] Inerrancy applies to the original documents, not the copies. However, we have thousands of ancient manuscripts to confirm that our Bible today is very accurate to the original texts.

Finally, I agree, there have been atrocities committed in

history in the name of Christ. However, we should not discount the Bible because of the misinterpretation and misapplication of men in history. To those who have misapplied the text, we can point to the Bible and show where they have deviated from the biblical teaching and the example of Christ. The reason we know they were in error is that we can point out the error in the biblical text. The truth of the Bible should not be judged on the misapplication of certain people or organizations. We do not discount the value of the medical practice because we have had bad doctors who have used their practice for evil ends. The example we should look at is Christ, the founder of our faith.

Thanks for your question; it's great to interact with someone who is really thinking through the issues.

Patrick Zukeran

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