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

Dr. Ray Bohlin summarizes the evidence found by Lee Strobel when researching the question: Is Jesus Christ really who the Bible says He is? He shows that we have strong evidence on every front that backs up our belief in Jesus as the Son of God. This important apologetic argument helps us understand the enduring value of Christianity.

Sometimes the Evidence Doesn't Stack Up

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

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

As Strobel himself says,

> As far as I was concerned, the case was closed. There was enough proof for me to rest easy with the conclusion that the divinity of Jesus was nothing more than the fanciful

invention of superstitious people. Or so I thought.{1}

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

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

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

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

Was Jesus Really Convinced that He Was

the Son of God?

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

These same skills can be applied to our question of whether Jesus actually thought He was God. We can learn a great deal about what Jesus thought of Himself, not just from what He said, but what He did and how He did it.

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

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

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

There are other clues to Jesus' self-identity as God. He chose twelve disciples, as God chose the twelve nations of Israel. He called John the Baptist the greatest man on earth; yet He went on to do even greater things in His miracles. He told the Pharisees, in contradiction to much of the Old Testament law, that what defiled a man was what came out of his mouth, not

what he put in it. “We have to ask, what kind of person thinks he has the authority to set aside the divinely inspired Jewish Scriptures and supplant them with his own teaching.”{2} Even the Romans labeled Him King of the Jews. Either Jesus actually said that or someone thought He did.

Since Jesus’ followers called Him Rabboni or Rabbi, it seems they just thought of Him as a teacher and nothing more. But Witherington reminds us that Jesus actually taught in a radical new way. In Judaism, the authority of two or more witnesses was required for the proclamation of truth. But Jesus frequently said, “Amen I say to you,” or in modern English, “I swear in advance to the truthfulness of what I am about to say.” Jesus attested to the truth of what He was saying on His own authority. This was truly revolutionary.

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

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

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

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

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

He does get angry, but this is clearly appropriate—in the temple, for instance, when He saw the misuse of the temple courtyard and that the moneychangers were taking advantage of the poor. He didn't just get ticked off because someone was annoying Him. In fact, Jesus seems at His most composed when being challenged. In a beautiful passage, Collins describes Jesus as he would an old friend:

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

OK, so maybe Jesus wasn't mentally disturbed, but maybe He used psychological tricks to perform His miracles. Many illnesses are psychosomatic, so maybe His healings were just by the power of suggestion. Collins readily admits that maybe some of Jesus' miracles were of this very type, but they were still healed. And some of His miracles just can't fit this description. Jesus healed leprosy and people blind since birth, both of which would be difficult to pull off as a psychological trick. His miracles over nature also can't be explained psychologically, and raising Lazarus from the dead after being in the tomb for a few days is not the stuff of

trickery. No, Jesus wasn't crazy.

Did Jesus Fulfill the Attributes of God?

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

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

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

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

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

attribute of deity.

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

Strobel concludes that the Bible declares several attributes for God and applies them to Jesus. John 16:30 records one of the disciples saying, "Now we can see that you know all things." Jesus says in Matthew 28:20, "Surely I am with you even unto the end of the age." And in Matthew 18:20 He says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with them." All authority was given Him (Matthew 28:18) and Hebrews tells us that He is the same yesterday and today. So Jesus is omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, and immutable. In John 14:7, Jesus says, "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well."

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

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

One of the important pieces of evidence that convinced Lapides that Jesus was the long-looked-for Messiah was the fulfillment of prophecy. There are over forty prophecies concerning the coming Messiah, and Jesus fulfilled every one. Some say this is just coincidence. But, the odds of just one person fulfilling even five of these prophesies is less than one

chance in one hundred million billion—a number millions of times greater than the number of all people who have ever lived on earth.{5}

But maybe this isn't all it seems. Objections to the correlation of Jesus' life to the prophecies of the Messiah fall into four categories. The first is the coincidence argument, which we just dispelled. Perhaps the most frequently heard argument is that the gospel writers fabricated the details to make it appear that Jesus was the Messiah. But the gospels were written close enough in time to the actual events that, if false, critics could have exposed the details. Certainly this is true of those in the Jewish community who had every reason to squash this new religion before it got started.

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

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

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

What I found most intriguing about the interviews was the combination of academic integrity on the part of these scholars alongside a very evident love for the One of whom

they were speaking. For these scholars, finding the historical Jesus was not just an academic exercise, but also a life-changing personal encounter with Jesus. Perhaps it can be for you too.

Notes

1. Lee Strobel, 1998, *The Case for Christ*, Grand Rapids Michigan/Zondervan Publishing House, p. 13.
2. Ben Witherington, quoted in *The Case for Christ*, p. 135.
3. Gary Collins, quoted in *The Case for Christ*, p. 147.
4. Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, p. 157-158.
5. Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, p. 183.
6. Louis Lapides, quoted in *The Case for Christ*, p. 185.

© 2001 Probe Ministries International

Ancient Evidence for Jesus from Non-Christian Sources

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

Evidence from Tacitus

Although there is overwhelming evidence that the New Testament is an accurate and trustworthy historical document, many people are still reluctant to believe what it says unless there is also some independent, non-biblical testimony that corroborates its statements. In the introduction to one of his books, F.F. Bruce tells about a Christian correspondent who

was told by an agnostic friend that "apart from obscure references in Josephus and the like," there was no historical evidence for the life of Jesus outside the Bible.{1} This, he wrote to Bruce, had caused him "great concern and some little upset in [his] spiritual life."{2} He concludes his letter by asking, "Is such collateral proof available, and if not, are there reasons for the lack of it?"{3} The answer to this question is, "Yes, such collateral proof is available," and we will be looking at some of it in this article.

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

> Nero fastened the guilt . . . on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of . . . Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome. . . .{5}

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

But what are we to make of Tacitus' rather enigmatic statement that Christ's death briefly checked "a most mischievous superstition," which subsequently arose not only in Judaea,

but also in Rome? One historian suggests that Tacitus is here "bearing indirect . . . testimony to the conviction of the early church that the Christ who had been crucified had risen from the grave."{6} While this interpretation is admittedly speculative, it does help explain the otherwise bizarre occurrence of a rapidly growing religion based on the worship of a man who had been crucified as a criminal.{7} How else might one explain *that*?

Evidence from Pliny the Younger

Another important source of evidence about Jesus and early Christianity can be found in the letters of Pliny the Younger to Emperor Trajan. Pliny was the Roman governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor. In one of his letters, dated around A.D. 112, he asks Trajan's advice about the appropriate way to conduct legal proceedings against those accused of being Christians.{8} Pliny says that he needed to consult the emperor about this issue because a great multitude of every age, class, and sex stood accused of Christianity.{9}

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

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

This passage provides us with a number of interesting insights into the beliefs and practices of early Christians. First, we see that Christians regularly met on a certain fixed day for worship. Second, their worship was directed to Christ,

demonstrating that they firmly believed in His divinity. Furthermore, one scholar interprets Pliny's statement that hymns were sung to Christ, *as to a god*, as a reference to the rather distinctive fact that, "unlike other gods who were worshipped, Christ was a person who had lived on earth."{11} If this interpretation is correct, Pliny understood that Christians were worshipping an actual historical person as God! Of course, this agrees perfectly with the New Testament doctrine that Jesus was both God and man.

Not only does Pliny's letter help us understand what early Christians believed about Jesus' *person*, it also reveals the high esteem to which they held His *teachings.* For instance, Pliny notes that Christians *bound themselves by a solemn oath* not to violate various moral standards, which find their source in the ethical teachings of Jesus. In addition, Pliny's reference to the Christian custom of sharing a common meal likely alludes to their observance of communion and the "love feast."{12} This interpretation helps explain the Christian claim that the meal was merely *food of an ordinary and innocent kind*. They were attempting to counter the charge, sometimes made by non-Christians, of practicing "ritual cannibalism."{13} The Christians of that day humbly repudiated such slanderous attacks on Jesus' teachings. We must sometimes do the same today.

Evidence from Josephus

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

that “few scholars have questioned” that Josephus actually penned this passage.{16}

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

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

Did Josephus really write this? Most scholars think the core of the passage originated with Josephus, but that it was later altered by a Christian editor, possibly between the third and fourth century A.D.{18} But why do they think it was altered? Josephus was not a Christian, and it is difficult to believe that anyone but a Christian would have made some of these statements.{19}

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

But even if we disregard the questionable parts of this passage, we are still left with a good deal of corroborating information about the biblical Jesus. We read that he was a

wise man who performed surprising feats. And although He was crucified under Pilate, His followers continued their discipleship and became known as Christians. When we combine these statements with Josephus' later reference to Jesus as "the so-called Christ," a rather detailed picture emerges which harmonizes quite well with the biblical record. It increasingly appears that the "biblical Jesus" and the "historical Jesus" are one and the same!

Evidence from the Babylonian Talmud

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

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

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

their plans![24]

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

Interestingly, both accusations have close parallels in the canonical gospels. For instance, the charge of sorcery is similar to the Pharisees' accusation that Jesus cast out demons "by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons."[25] But notice this: such a charge actually tends to confirm the New Testament claim that Jesus performed miraculous feats. Apparently Jesus' miracles were too well attested to deny. The only alternative was to ascribe them to sorcery! Likewise, the charge of enticing Israel to apostasy parallels Luke's account of the Jewish leaders who accused Jesus of misleading the nation with his teaching.[26] Such a charge tends to corroborate the New Testament record of Jesus' powerful teaching ministry. Thus, if read carefully, this passage from the Talmud confirms much of our knowledge about Jesus from the New Testament.

Evidence from Lucian

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Edwin Yamauchi, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 82.

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

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

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

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

9. Ibid., 27.

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

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

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

13. Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 28.

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

15. Ibid.

16. Yamauchi, “Jesus Outside the New Testament”, 212.

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

18. Ibid.

19. Although time would not permit me to mention it on the radio, another version of Josephus’ “Testimonium Flavianum” survives in a tenth-century Arabic version (Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 41). In 1971, Professor Schlomo Pines published a study on this passage. The passage is interesting because it lacks most of the questionable elements that many scholars believe to be Christian interpolations. Indeed, “as Schlomo Pines and David Flusser…stated, it is quite plausible that none of the arguments against Josephus writing the original words even applies to the Arabic text, especially since the latter would have had less chance of being censored by the church” (Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 194). The passage reads as follows: “At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. His conduct was good and (he) was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be

crucified and to die. But those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive; accordingly he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders." (Quoted in James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus Within Judaism*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1988), 95, cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 194).

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

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

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

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

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

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

26. Luke 23:2, 5.

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

©2001 Probe Ministries

Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?

Have you ever missed a great opportunity because you weren't listening carefully? Twenty centuries ago some clues to impending good news of monumental import eluded most folks. Fascinating prophecies of Jesus' birth and life bring revealing insights into your own life today.

Have you ever missed a great opportunity because you weren't listening carefully?

If Mark{1} hadn't been willing to listen, he might have missed some great news. He enjoyed an adequate income, fulfilling work, a comfortable home, and many close friends. Then his employer offered a promotion requiring a move to another state. At first resistant, he eventually decided to listen to the offer and make the move.



Mark's job responsibilities expanded, his growing reputation opened doors for wider influence, and he met and married Gail. Reflecting twenty-five years later, he was glad he had carefully listened to news of the offer.

At a business convention Joan heard a brief announcement of an advanced degree program. Distracted by current concerns, she dismissed it. When the announcement was repeated the next day, Joan caught something she had missed. The degree would be from one of the most prestigious universities in the world. Her company was encouraging managers to participate, promising them time to study, and offering to help pay for it. Joan investigated, enrolled, and her career was greatly enhanced. "To think that I almost missed the good news about this program because I was distracted," Joan reflected. "What a

tragedy that would have been."

Perhaps you, too, have encountered news that first seemed insignificant but later became momentous. Great news isn't always trumpeted by headlines or television broadcasts. Sometimes the best news could slip right by if you're not attuned to its importance.

Twenty centuries ago some clues to impending good news of monumental import eluded most folks. A baby born in relative obscurity in the Middle East was hailed by a few as a future king who would rescue people from their troubles. "Good news of great joy for everyone!" said one announcement of Jesus' birth.{2}

Relatively few contemporaries acknowledged His importance. His followers later showed numerous clues to His identity, prophecies written many years before His birth. You may not share the faith of those early believers, but perhaps you'll find it interesting to eavesdrop on some of the clues, the prophecies. Consider just a few.{3}

Prophecies Fulfilled in Jesus' Birth

The Hebrew writer Micah told around 700 B.C. of deliverance through a coming Messiah or "Anointed One." He indicated this deliverer would be from Bethlehem. He wrote, "But you . . . Bethlehem . . . are only a small village in Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past." {4}

Matthew, a first-century biographer, noted that ". . . Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. . . ."{5}

Isaiah, writing around 700 B.C., foretold an unusual aspect of the Messiah's birth, that He would be *born of a virgin*. He wrote, "The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."{6}

The name “Immanuel” means “God is with us.” The indication—to all who were listening—was that God Himself would be physically present with humans through this child. What a promise! What good news to people who often felt abandoned by God.

Matthew recorded this about Jesus’ birth:

> Now this is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. . . . Joseph . . . brought Mary home to be his wife, but she remained a virgin until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.{7}

Jewish prophets mentioned several clues about the Messiah’s lineage. He was to be a *descendant of Abraham*. Moses, a famous Jewish leader writing fourteen hundred years before Jesus’ birth, recorded a prophecy about the Jewish patriarch Abraham. He wrote, “Through your [Abraham’s] descendants, all the nations of the earth will be blessed.”{8}

The Messiah was also to be a *descendant of Isaac*. Moses recorded another promise. He said, “God told Abraham, ‘ . . . Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted’.”{9} In other words, something important was going to come through the descendants of Abraham and specifically through the line of Isaac, one of Abraham’s two sons.

The Messiah was also to be a *descendant of Jacob*. Abraham’s son Isaac himself had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Some ancient Jewish scholars{10} believed that another prophecy that Moses recorded prefigured the Messiah. Moses wrote, “A star will rise from Jacob; a scepter will emerge from Israel.”{11}

Luke, a first-century physician, traced Jesus’ lineage through these three Jewish leaders. He wrote of “Jesus . . . the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham. . . .”{12}

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, of a virgin, and from the line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The pieces of the prophetic puzzle were starting to become clearer. The details of His life would fulfill the prophecies further.

Prophecies Fulfilled in Jesus' Life and Death

Though Jesus was born in humble circumstances, learned leaders traveled great distances to hail the child as a king. In His youth, scholars marveled at His wisdom. In His thirties He began to publicly offer peace, freedom, purpose and hope to the masses. His message caught on.

His enemies plotted His demise and paid one of his followers to betray Him. His closest friends deserted Him. He was tried, convicted, sentenced and executed. In agony during His execution He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"{13}

Many hurting people feel forsaken by God. But Jesus' cry of desperation carried added significance because of its historical allusion. The words had appeared about a thousand years earlier in a song written by Israel's King David.{14} It said, "All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads."{15} "They have pierced my hands and my feet."{16} "They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing."{17} Historians record precisely this behavior during Jesus' execution.{18} It was as if a divine drama were unfolding as Jesus slipped into death.

Researchers have uncovered more than 300 prophecies that were literally fulfilled in Jesus' life and death. He would be preceded by a messenger who would prepare the way for His work.{19} He would enter the capital city as a king, but riding on a donkey's back.{20} He would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver,{21} pierced,{22} executed with thieves{23} and yet, though wounded,{24} would suffer no broken bones.{25}

In His dying cry from the cross, He reminded His hearers that His life and death were in precise fulfillment of a previously stated plan. According to a biblical perspective, at the moment of death He experienced the equivalent of eternal separation from God in our place. He suffered the divine penalty due all the shortcomings, injustice, evil, and sin of the world, including yours and mine. Then—again in fulfillment of prophecy{26} and contrary to natural law—He returned to life. As somewhat of a skeptic I investigated the evidence for Christ's resurrection and found it to be one of the best-attested facts in history.{27} To the seeker He offers true inner peace,{28} forgiveness,{29} purpose,{30} and strength for fulfilling living.{31}

Jesus' birth, life, and death fulfilled many prophecies. Many of these fulfillments involved details that were beyond His human control. But could this be coincidence? Could the prophecies have been fulfilled by chance?

Prophecies Fulfilled by Chance?

My good friend and mentor, Bob Prall, likes to make a distinction between prediction and prophecy{32} and uses a sports analogy to illustrate that distinction. I got to know Bob when I was a student at Duke University and he was the Campus Crusade for Christ director. Now, sports fans will know that Duke's men's basketball team often has contended for the national title. Alas, the Duke football team has suffered many losing seasons.

Bob notes that prediction can involve careful analysis of current events to make an educated guess about the future. Stock market analysts, political pollsters, social scientists, and CBS *Survivor* fans all seek to predict outcomes. But prophecy often involves events and situations hundreds of years apart or without apparent human connection. Bob explains that if someone were to study the Duke men's basketball team and announce they would win the national championship, and

then it happened, that would be successful prediction. But if someone evaluated the Duke *football* team and announced they would win the national championship, that would be prophecy!

Could the 300 prophecies Jesus fulfilled have been fulfilled merely by chance? Peter Stoner, a California mathematician, once calculated the probability of just eight of these 300 prophecies coming true in one person due to chance alone. Using estimates that both he and classes of college students considered reasonable and conservative, Stoner concluded there was one chance in 10^{17} that those eight were fulfilled by fluke.

He says 10^{17} silver dollars would cover the state of Texas two feet deep. Mark one coin with red fingernail polish. Stir the whole batch thoroughly. What chance would a blindfolded person have of picking the marked coin on the first try? One in 10^{17}, the same chance that just eight of the 300 prophecies "just happened" to come true in this man, Jesus.{33}

With all these signs, why wasn't more attention paid to Jesus' birth? No reporters with microphones and cameras waited outside the stable to interview the new mom. (Maybe if she'd had quints?)

Some back then were looking for a conquering king promised by Hebrew prophets and did not anticipate a lowly birth. Others were perhaps too entangled in their own self-importance or preoccupied with the details of life: working, families, relationships, emotions. Maybe they were a bit like us.

What does all this mean for us this Christmas?

Today's Good News

Jesus' "good news" offers a chance to hook into God's unchanging love, to be forgiven of all wrong and to live forever with Him. He can help you accept yourself, replace

anxiety with peace and provide the best friends you've ever had.

If His news is so good, why do people still miss it today? Some are enmeshed in careers or relationships that offer little time for reflection. Chasing dollars blinds some. Family strife can make life a blur: teens experimenting with sex or drugs, a spouse wanting out. Western life itself can be exhausting: media overload, the rush to taxi kids or complete shopping, cellphones, beepers, PTA, soccer practice, e-mail, laundry, Web surfing . . . Help! Maybe you could use some time to reflect.

I suspect you've had hints of God's good news. Maybe you've admired the majesty of the universe and wondered Who was behind it. Perhaps a friend told you their story of faith. Maybe a magazine article got you thinking.

For eighteen years I heard the story of Jesus but did not understand it. The summer before entering university, I wrestled with concern over my own afterlife but gave up because it seemed too complicated. That fall I met some vibrant Christians whose love, joy, and enthusiasm attracted me.

They told me I could not earn eternal life. Rather I needed to receive Christ's free gift of forgiveness accomplished by His death for my sins and His resurrection. They told me all this would be a "gift of God; not . . . a result of works, so that no one . . . [could] boast" about it.{34} That was good news to me. I accepted His gift of forgiveness and have found Him to be a wonderful friend.

Life hasn't been perfect. I've had my share of domestic strife, job conflicts, and minor health struggles. God never promised perfection, painlessness, or complete prosperity in this life. But He does offer unusual peace, pardon from guilt, ultimate purpose, and the inner power to cope with any

struggle. He promises to cause “all things to work together for good” to those who love Him.{35} He is a friend who will never leave.{36}

Might this Christmas season be a good time for you to ask God to forgive you and become your friend? It’s a decision that only you can make for yourself. You can simply talk to Him right now, ask Him to forgive you and become your friend forever. Then contact this station or visit the Web site Probe.org to learn more about a relationship with God.

Maybe there’s some good news for you in the story of Jesus. Do you hear what I hear? Are you listening?

*This article is adapted from Rusty Wright, “Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?” *Pursuit* VII: 3, 1998, pp.12-15. Copyright © 1998 Rusty Wright. Used By Permission.

Notes

1. Names and some details in certain stories in this article have been altered for privacy while preserving the points of the stories. Details of stories that name me personally have not been changed.

2. Luke 2:10 NLT.

3. Adapted from Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, Calif: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972) 147-157 ff.

4. Micah 5:2 NLT.

5. Matthew 2:1 NASB.

6. Isaiah 7:14 NIV.

7. Matthew 1:18, 24, 25 NLT.

8. Genesis 22:18 NLT.

9. Genesis 21:12 NLT.

10. McDowell, op. cit., 154.

11. Numbers 24:17 NLT.

12. Luke 3:23, 34 NASB.

13. Matthew 27:46 NIV.

14. Psalm 22.

15. Psalm 22:7 NIV.

16. Psalm 22:16 NIV.

17. Psalm 22:18 NIV.

18. Matthew 27:39-44, 35; John 20:25.

19. Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:1,2.

20. Zechariah 9:9; John 12:15; Matthew 21:1-9.

21. Zechariah 11:12; Matthew 26:15, 27:3.

22. Zechariah 12:10; John 19:34, 37.

23. Isaiah 53:12; Matthew 27:38.

24. Isaiah 53:5; Zechariah 13:6; Matthew 27:26.

25. Psalm 34:20; John 19:33, 36.

26. Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:31-32.

27. See McDowell, op. cit., 185-273.

28. John 14:27.

29. Colossians 1:14.

30. Matthew 28: 18-20.

31. Galatians 5:22-23.

32. Bob Prall, *The Master Plot of the Bible* (Houston: Emmaus Books Trust, 1997) 56; Bob Prall, *As You Are Going… Make Disciples* (Houston: Emmaus Books Trust, 2001) 108-109.

33. Peter W. Stoner, *Science Speaks* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969) 99-112.

34. Ephesians 2:8-9 NASB.

35. Romans 8:28 NASB.

36. Hebrews 13:5.

© 2004 Probe Ministries

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 a 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.{1} 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.{2} 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.{3} 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."{4}

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.{5} 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.{6} 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 Pausanius 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."{20}

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.
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. Pausanius, *Description of Greece*, "Attica", 1:24:1, written c. AD 160, 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," *metanoeō,* 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. *Metanoeō,* in the New Testament, denotes conversion. "The predominantly intellectual understanding of *metanoeō* 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.

© 2010 Probe Ministries

Advocacy Apologetics: Finding Common Ground as a Way to the Gospel

As you examine your life, can you think of any lessons you wish you had learned earlier than you did?

I'm really glad I learned *this* lesson very early in my career as a Christian communicator. It's made a world of difference.

God has graciously sent me presenting Christ and biblical truth on six continents before university students and professors, on mainstream TV and radio talk shows, with executives, diplomats and professional athletes.

He's put me speaking in university classrooms and auditoriums, in embassies, boardrooms, and locker rooms. He's had me writing for mainstream newspapers, magazines, and on the Internet about controversial subjects like sex, abortion, the afterlife, and reasons for faith.

As you might imagine, I've encountered many skeptics and objections to faith. I've learned much from my critics, the unpaid guardians of my soul.

But if I hadn't learned this crucial lesson at the outset,

would all those outreach doors have opened?

The Lesson

I learned it on an island in a river in Seoul, Korea. Over a million believers were gathered for Explo 74. One speaker that day was a prominent church leader from India who discussed how to best communicate the message of Jesus to the types of Buddhists in India. Here's my paraphrase of his advice.

We could use two methods, he said. One was to begin by stressing the differences between Buddhism and Christianity. But that often gets people mad and turns them off.

A second way involved agreeing with the Buddhist where we could. We could say something like this: "I know that you as a Buddhist believe in Four Noble Truths." (This is foundational to many strains of Buddhism.) "First you believe suffering is universal. As a follower of Jesus, I also believe suffering is everywhere. It needs a solution.

Second, you believe that suffering is caused by evil desire or craving. I believe something very similar; I call this evil desire sin."

Third, you believe that the way to eliminate suffering is to eliminate craving. I feel selfishness needs to be eliminated, too. And fourth, you feel we eliminate craving by following the Eightfold Path: right understanding, right aspiration, right behavior, etc.

Here's where I would suggest an alternative. For many years I, too, tried to eliminate my selfishness by seeking to think and do the right thing. But you know what happened? I became very frustrated because I lacked the power to do it. I realized that if I relied on God, He could give me the inner power I needed."

Do you see the contrast between those two methods of

approaching someone who differs with you? The first emphasizes differences and has the emotional effect of holding up your hands as if to say “Stop!” or “Go away!” The second begins by agreeing where you can. Your emotional hands are extended as if to welcome your listeners. If you were the listener, which approach would you prefer?

Start by Agreeing where You Can

In communicating with skeptics, start by agreeing where you can. You’ll get many more to listen.

I call this approach Advocacy Apologetics. You’re approaching the person as an advocate rather than an adversary. You believe in some of the same things they do. Expressing agreement can penetrate emotional barriers and communicate that you are *for* that person rather than *against* them. It can make them more willing to consider areas of disagreement.

Don’t compromise biblical truth; but agree at the start where you can.

Paul used this approach. He wrote (1 Corinthians. 9:19-23 NLT, emphasis mine):

> *I have become a servant of everyone so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with the Jews, I become one of them so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with the Gentiles who do not have the Jewish law, I fit in with them as much as I can.*

> *Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone so that I might bring them to Christ. I do all this to spread the Good News.*

Here’s an experiment: The next time you encounter someone who differs with you, take a deep breath. Pray. Ask God to help

you identify three areas of agreement. Can’t find three? How about one? Discuss that first. Become an advocate for them. Maybe you’ll oil some stuck emotional and intellectual gears and nudge someone in His direction.

“Couldn’t Jesus’ Disciples Have Just Fabricated Fulfilled Prophecy Claims?”

First of all I’d like to thank you for helping me so much. You have really cleared up a lot of questions I’ve had about my faith in Christ and have given me some great answers. I have another question for you that I have been struggling with. Couldn’t the disciples have made it look like Jesus fulfilled all those prophecies, and simply fabricated them?

This may seem possible in some instances, but in many others it becomes very difficult to believe. For example, consider those prophecies which were fulfilled during the last week of Jesus’ life (i.e. from the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem through His death by crucifixion). Quite frankly, these events were observed by too many people for the disciples to have fabricated them. Not only did Jesus’ loyal followers witness these events, but so did unbelieving Jews and Romans (the very people responsible for executing Jesus). These events are too well-established historically for anyone to seriously suggest that the disciples fabricated them. What the skeptic will typically do, therefore, is simply deny that such Old Testament texts are truly prophetic. They’ll argue that the disciples misinterpreted these texts when they applied them to Jesus. It would be unusual to seriously argue that the

disciples made up stories about how Jesus fulfilled these prophecies. In this sense, the debate really tends to be over how these Old Testament passages should be interpreted, and whether such texts can be fairly applied to Jesus' life and ministry. Although this is a technical and complicated debate, I'm convinced that these texts do accurately prophesy certain things about the birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Hope this helps.

Michael Gleghorn, Probe Ministries

© 2009 Probe Ministries

"How Do We Know Eyewitnesses to Jesus' Ministry Ever Existed?"

I came across your website and looking for first-hand eyewitness evidence of Jesus' ministry. I wish to quote a line you wrote:

> *In the early years of the church the story of Jesus was being told and retold by eyewitnesses of these events.*

My question is, where are the original source documents that cite (at least some of) these eyewitnesses? Many Christian apologetics claim that there were many eyewitnesses to the ministry of Jesus. The question is, what evidence do we have that such eyewitnesses even existed?

Thanks for your question; it's a good one. My first observation may sound a bit silly, although I don't intend it to be so. But when I think about it, if there were no eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry, if literally no one witnessed anything of his teachings, miracles, etc., then it seems that we would simply have no record of these events at all (for no one would have witnessed them). But in fact, conservative scholars agree that we have a great deal of eyewitness testimony recorded in the New Testament documents themselves. For instance, the gospels of Matthew and John were written by two of Jesus' original disciples. So both of these gospels are based on eyewitness testimony. Early church tradition claims that Mark's gospel was based on the preaching of the apostle Peter (another eyewitness of Jesus' life and ministry). And Luke's gospel begins by noting the importance of eyewitness testimony to the ministry of Jesus:

Luke 1:1-4 says,

> *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*

In addition, Peter (in his second epistle) wrote: "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty."

Similarly, the apostle John begins his first letter this way:

> *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of*

> *life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1-4).*

Finally, Paul writes of seeing Jesus after his resurrection: "Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord?" (1 Corinthians 9:1)

These are just a few examples. Others could be offered as well. But these are sufficient (I think) to show that the earliest records we have of the life and ministry of Jesus claim to be solidly grounded in eyewitness testimony.

I hope this is helpful.

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

Thank you for your reply, and I thank you for your efforts to answer my question. I appreciate that you took time out of your life to answer it.

However, what I am really after is a list of non-Biblical sources that back up the Biblical sources. If the events of Jesus really happened, it would be logical to assume that there would be plenty more writings of this event. Well, this would at least appear logical in my mind.

I know there were at least two historians, Josephus and Tacitus, and also the Jewish writings of the Talmud. Why did these historians and sources only write a small amount? If Jesus really did turn water into wine, or fed 5,000 with two fishes, then this would attracted an incredible amount of

attention.

It appears to me, and perhaps you can shed some light on this matter, that Christianity begun as a political movement whose ulterior motive was social control. It is only the fear of Hell that ultimately connects people to the Christian view, including mine.

Anyway, any correspondence would be appreciated. I'm not trying to debate you, but seek earnestly for answers.

Good questions! I've written a brief article which deals with some of the evidence you're asking for. You can find it here.

One of the best book-length treatments that I'm aware of is Gary Habermas's *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ.*.

Other helpful resources would be Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christ*, Craig Evans' *Fabricating Jesus*, and Robert Bowman and J. Komoszewski's *Putting Jesus in His Place*.

Finally, I would highly recommend the articles dealing with the Historical Jesus by William Lane Craig, which you can find here.

These recommendations are all of high quality (some popular, some scholarly).

It's important to understand that the New Testament documents are our earliest and best sources of information about Jesus. Many people don't realize this, but it's a fact that even liberal scholars don't dispute. The New Testament was not originally written as a single volume. Rather, each book is an independent source of information about Jesus and early Christianity. In other words, what we have in the New Testament is not one source, but rather twenty-seven sources. Granted, many of these sources are authored by one individual (the apostle Paul), but my point is that these documents were

originally separate, independent, sources of information. That's an important point to bear in mind.

After the New Testament documents (and assuming you don't include early Christian sources outside the Bible), the earliest non-Christian testimony about Jesus that survives is that of the Jewish historian, Josephus (near the end of the first century). After Josephus, there is Tacitus (a Roman historian) and so on. Three things must be borne in mind here:

1. Most of the written sources from the first and second centuries are simply lost to history. Only a fraction of what was written at this time survives to our own day. Thus, there could have been other sources of information about Jesus which are simply not available to us 2000 years later.

2. It's really not strange that more non-Christian sources don't record information about Jesus. After all, Jesus was a poor Jewish teacher who spent most of his time outside Jerusalem. Since most non-Christian historians of that time focused their writings on great political figures, military leaders, etc., it's really not surprising that they wouldn't mention someone like Jesus. Indeed, what's actually surprising is that he IS mentioned by Josephus, Tacitus, etc. My point is this: Although Jesus is a hugely significant figure today, he was little known in the first century. The church is a worldwide phenomenon in our day, but it began as a very small offshoot of the Jewish religion. We shouldn't think that Jesus' name was a household term in the ancient world like it is today. The spread of Christianity took place over many centuries and continues today.

3. The Gospels (and other New Testament documents) should not be immediately discounted as reliable historical sources of information about Jesus. As I said, these are our earliest and best sources about Jesus. What's more, we have good reason to consider these sources as reliable sources of information about Jesus. In addition to the resources recommended

previously, see also Craig Blomberg's *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*.

Finally, I can only give a very brief response by email. Please be sure to check out some of the resources I've recommended above.

Michael Gleghorn

© 2009 Probe Ministries

"Where Does the Bible Say Jesus is 100% Man and 100% God?"

Where in the bible can I find that Jesus is 100% man and 100% God?

Thanks for your question. If you're looking for an exact quote, then I'm afraid that the Bible doesn't say this anywhere.

Why do Christians believe that Jesus was fully divine and fully human, then? Well, we look at what the Bible does teach and we seem to be compelled to adopt this view.

For example, Jesus claimed, "before Abraham was born, I am " (John 8:58), clearly alluding to Exodus 3:14. He also claimed to be one with the Father (John 10:30-33). He acknowledged that he was the Christ, or Messiah (Mark 14:60-64; compare with Daniel 7:13-14). He also claimed that our eternal destinies hinged on our response to him (Luke 12:8-9).

In addition, Jesus is said to be the eternal word of God incarnate (John 1:1-3, 14). He is called the Creator and head of the church (Colossians 1:15-20). These are just a few of the passages which speak of Christ's deity or divinity.

Other passages speak of his humanity. For example, Jesus was conceived and born of a woman (Matthew 1:18-25). He thus had a human body. He experienced hunger, thirst and fatigue (Matt. 4:2; John 4:6; etc.). He suffered and died (John 19:34). He could be heard, seen and touched (1 John 1:1). He evidenced the emotional and intellectual qualities of a human being (see Matt. 26:37 and Mark 9:21).

Again, there are plenty of other passages concerning Jesus' humanity. When theologians try to put all of this together, they conclude that the Bible teaches that Jesus was both divine and human.

Hope this is helpful.

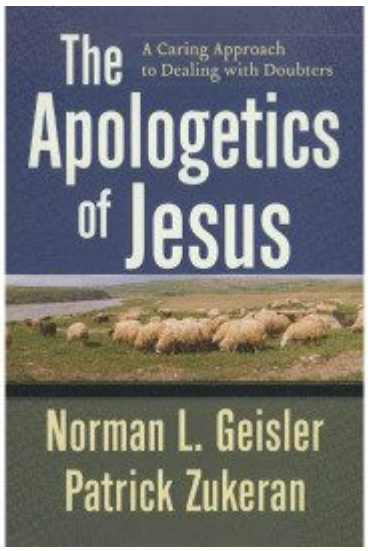
Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

© 2009 Probe Ministries

Apologetics of Jesus: Interview with Author Patrick Zukeran

Written by Probe Ministries Administrator



Question: This is a very interesting topic, *The Apologetics of Jesus*. What inspired this book?

Zukeran: While I was in a doctoral class with Dr. Norman Geisler, he stated one day in class, "You may be surprised to discover, the greatest apologist is Jesus Himself. Someone needs to write a book on the apologetics of Jesus. In 2000 years of Christian history, no one has written on this subject." The idea of studying the apologetic methods of Jesus and knowing that no one had written on the subject really stirred my interest. It thus became my doctoral project.

Question: You said that after you finished, you realized this would be an extremely important book for the body of Christ. Why do you feel this is a critically significant work?

Zukeran: There is a lot of confusion regarding the role and the need for apologetics in ministry. Many Christians believe our faith in Christ involves a blind leap of faith. In other words, our faith calls for acceptance of Christ without any reason or evidence. Therefore, in evangelism Christians should simply preach the gospel and the Holy Spirit will do the rest. When Christians are challenged by other worldviews or ideas of the culture, we often fail to offer well-reasoned and substantial answers. Often I hear Christians say, "You just need to believe" or "You simply need to have faith." That is not a good answer to an unbelieving world or even to

Christians who are questioning their faith because they have been confronted by a challenge to the credibility of Bible or the claims of Christ. Jesus commanded us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Answers like these simply do not exemplify what it means to love God with our minds. Apologetics is the defense of the Christian faith. Apologetics uses reason and presents compelling evidence to communicate the message of Christ, defend the message of Christ and challenge unbelief. Apologetics was an essential component in the ministry of Christ and if it was important in His ministry, it is crucial for Christians as we engage our world for Christ as He commanded and modeled.

Question: Many Christians do not realize Jesus was an apologist. Scores of books have been written on His teaching methods, leadership skills, prayer life, etc… Few realize apologetics was an important part of His ministry. Why is that?

Zukeran: Apologists defend the message of Christ but when it comes to Jesus, He *was* the message. Perhaps that is why this aspect of His ministry is overlooked. When you study the life of Christ, He made some astounding claims and He did not expect or want people to take a blind leap of faith. He presented reasons and compelling evidence to support His claims.

Question: People may be asking, since Jesus was God incarnate, why did He need to give a defense of His claims?

Zukeran: As our creator, Jesus understood that we are created in the image of God. God is a rational and morally perfect being and we reflect His nature. Jesus understood that we use reason and evidence to make our daily decisions. For example, when you see two fruit stands how do you decide which one to go to? If one looks clean, has bright looking fruit, and the owner is neatly dressed while the other one looks dirty, the fruit does not look as fresh and you spot a few flies buzzing

in the area, which stand will you choose? Here's another example. What if you enter a hotel lobby and see two elevator doors open. One elevator has lights, the music is playing and people flow in and out of it. Next to it the elevator has no lights on, there is no music playing and you do not see people entering it. Which elevator will you choose? We examine the evidence and use our reasoning ability to make daily decisions. We do the same when it comes to deciding what we will believe and who we will entrust our life and eternal destiny to. Jesus understood that when it comes to persuading people to believe in His message, He would need to provide good reasons and compelling evidence and He did.

Question: What are some of the apologetic methods of Jesus?

Zukeran: Jesus used several apologetic methods. He used reason and presented logical arguments to defend His claims and expose error. He used the evidence from the Scriptures, prophecy, His miracles, the resurrection and more. When you study His apologetics, you really appreciate the brilliance of our Lord. He truly was the greatest thinker as well as a powerful communicator.

Question: There are some passages that appear to teach against the use of reason and evidence such as Matthew 12:38-39. When Jesus was asked to perform a sign by the He rebukes them saying, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah" (12:39). Jesus refused to show them evidence. Isn't this a passage that speaks against the use of apologetics?

Zukeran: One of the chapters in the book addresses several alleged anti-apologetic passages. There are no passages that speak against the use of reason and evidence. Jesus and the apostles did not ask people to make a commitment to Christ without good reasons. For example, to understand Jesus' response, you must understand the context. Christ had already

performed numerous miracles (Matt. 4:23-25, 8:1-4, 5-13, 28-34, 9:1-7, 9:18-26, 11:20). In fact, this confrontation occurs closely after Jesus' healing of a man's withered hand (12:13), and the deliverance of a demon–possessed individual (12:22-23). Despite these miracles, the Pharisees demanded that Jesus perform another sign. Knowing they were not sincere in their demand, He refused to appease them. Misunderstanding passages like these confuse Christians and their understanding of apologetics.

Question: What was it like writing this work with Dr. Geisler?

Zukeran: I have read many of Dr. Geisler's works and he has had a great influence on my life. I consider him one of the premier defenders of the faith of our generation. It was a great privilege to work on this book with Him and Dr. Ron Rhodes. They would not let me get away with weak arguments and often pointed out areas and questions I needed to address. It is too bad some of those issues are left out of the book, but they really challenged me to write and think at a higher level. Perhaps you could compare it to football player receiving a chance to play under the great Tom Landry or a basketball player learning under John Wooden, or an investor working with Warren Buffett. I learned a lot but also realized I still have a lot more to learn. It was valuable to see the precision in their arguments, and their foresight in anticipating how opponents may respond. These were valuable examples for me to learn from.

Question: How do you hope this book will impact the body of Christ?

Zukeran: One of the concerns of Christian apologists is that the body of Christ is neglecting the mind. Since the Great Awakening and the preaching of men like Charles Finney, there has been a shift in evangelical Christianity. We have moved to a more emotional faith based on a moving experience. But, an emotional faith can only take you so far. Sooner or later, you

will need reasons upon which to base your faith when it is challenged whether through a tragedy or an intellectual challenge. The unbelieving world also needs to see that the Christian worldview offers the best answers to the issues we face in our culture. I hope when Christians read this book and see that Jesus modeled how to love God with our minds, they will be encouraged to engage their minds with their faith in Christ.

Question: Some may see this as an intellectual book. However, you state that there are a lot of practical lessons we can apply from the study of Jesus' apologetics. What are some examples of lessons we can learn and apply?

Zukeran: Since we use our reasoning capacity in daily life, apologetics is tremendously practical in our evangelism. If we are going to have ministries that will engage a lost world that is in rebellion to God, we will need compelling reasons but we will also need to know how to present our case to various audiences, often a hostile one. Jesus was the master at this. This does not mean He was always successful, but He did show us how to communicate a powerful message. Each chapter ends with practical applications we can apply when engaging our culture for Christ. Hopefully, we will all be more effective witnesses for Christ as a result of studying the model of Christ.

© 2009 Probe Ministries

"Why Did Jesus Have to be

Baptized?”

If Jesus is truly God, then why did he have to be baptized?

You ask a very good question. Indeed, John the Baptist also wondered about baptizing Jesus (Matthew 3:14). John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3). But Jesus had no need for repentance or forgiveness (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; 1 John 3:5). Why, then, did Jesus seek to be baptized by John?

There may be a clue in how Jesus responds in Matthew 3:15: “Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Baptism is a form of identification. Although Jesus had no sin to repent of, He seems to have wanted to be identified with John’s message of the need for repentance. This seems to be supported by Jesus’ own message (Matthew 4:17; Mark 2:15; etc.). Also, Jesus probably wanted to be identified with those receiving John’s baptism, namely, sinners. After all, Jesus came to be identified with us, and to die as a substitute for our sins (see 1 Corinthians 15:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Interestingly, Jesus’ death and resurrection, which is the basis for our forgiveness, is linked with baptism in passages like Romans 6:3-4.

At any rate, these are some of the reasons why I think Jesus sought to be baptized by John. I hope this information helps a bit.

The Lord bless you,

Michael Gleghorn

© 2008 Probe Ministries