

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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Reasonable Faith – Why Biblical Christianity Rings True

Dr. Michael Gleghorn briefly examines some of the reasons why noted Christian philosopher William Lane Craig believes that Christianity is an eminently reasonable faith.

Reasonable Faith

One of the finest Christian philosophers of our day is William Lane Craig. Although he has become very well known for his debates with atheists and skeptics, he's also a prolific writer. To date, he has authored or edited over thirty books and more than a hundred scholarly articles.^{1} His published work explores such fascinating topics as the evidence for the existence of God, the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, divine foreknowledge and human freedom, and God's relationship to time. In 2007 he started a web-based apologetics ministry called Reasonable Faith (www.reasonablefaith.org). The site features both scholarly and popular articles written by Craig, audio and video recordings of some of his debates, lectures, and interviews, answers to questions from his readers, and much more.

But before he launched the Reasonable Faith Web site, Craig had also authored a book by the same title. One of the best apologetics books on the market, a revised and updated third edition was recently released. His friend and colleague, the philosopher J. P. Moreland, endorsed Craig's ministry with these words:



It is hard to overstate the impact that William Lane Craig has had for the cause of Christ. He is simply the finest Christian apologist of the last half century, and his academic work justifies ranking him among the top one percent of practicing philosophers in the Western world. Besides that, he is a winsome ambassador for Christ, an exceptional debater, and a man with the heart of an evangelist. . . . I do not know of a single thinker who has done more to raise the bar of Christian scholarship in our generation than Craig. He is one of a kind, and I thank God for his life and work.[\[2\]](#)

Although the book has been described as “an admirable defense of basic Christian faith,”[\[3\]](#) many readers will find the content quite advanced. According to Craig, “*Reasonable Faith* is intended primarily to serve as a textbook for seminary level courses on Christian apologetics.”[\[4\]](#) For those without much prior training in philosophy, theology, and apologetics, this book will make for some very demanding reading in places. But for those who want to seriously grapple with an informed and compelling case for the truth of Christianity, this book will richly repay one's careful and patient study.

Although we cannot possibly do it justice, in the remainder of this article we will briefly consider at least some of the reasons why Craig believes that biblical Christianity is an eminently reasonable faith.

The Absurdity of Life Without God

Imagine for a moment that there is no God. What implications would this have for human life? Science tells us that the universe is not eternal, but that it rather had a beginning. But if there is no God, then the universe must have come into being, uncaused, out of nothing! What's more, the origin of life is nothing more than an unintended by-product of matter, plus time, plus chance.^{5} No one planned or purposed for life to arise, for if there is no God, there was no one to plan or purpose it. And human beings? We are just the unpredictable result of a long evolutionary process that never had us in mind. In fact, if one were to rewind the history of life to its beginning, and allow the evolutionary process to start anew, it's virtually certain that none of us would be here to think about it! After all, without an intelligent Agent guiding this long and complicated process, the chances that our species would accidentally emerge a second time is practically zero.^{6}

Depressing as it is, this little thought experiment provides the appropriate backdrop for Craig's discussion of the absurdity of life without God. In his view, if God does not exist, then human life is ultimately without meaning, value, or purpose. After all, if human beings are merely the accidental by-products of the unintended forces of nature, then what possible meaning *could* human life have? If there is no God, then we were not created for a *purpose*; we were merely "coughed" into existence by mindless material processes.

Of course, some might wonder why we couldn't just create some meaning for our lives, or give the universe a meaning of our own. But as Craig observes, "the universe does not really acquire meaning just because *I* happen to give it one for suppose I give the universe one meaning, and you give it another. Who is right? The answer, of course, is neither one. For the universe without God remains objectively meaningless,

no matter how we regard it.”{7}

Like it or not, if God does not exist, then the universe—and our very lives—are ultimately meaningless and absurd. The difficulty is, however, that no one can really live consistently and happily with such a view.{8} Although merely recognizing this fact does absolutely nothing to show that God actually exists, it should at least motivate us to sincerely investigate the matter with an open heart and an open mind. So let’s now briefly consider some of the *reasons* for believing that there really is a God.

The Existence of God

In the latest edition of *Reasonable Faith*, Craig offers a number of persuasive arguments for believing that God does, in fact, exist. Unfortunately, we can only skim the surface of these arguments here. But if you want to go deeper, his book is a great place to start.

After a brief historical survey of some of the major kinds of arguments that scholars have offered for believing that God exists, Craig offers his own defense for each of them. He begins with a defense of what is often called the *cosmological* argument. This argument takes its name from the Greek word *kosmos*, which means “world.” It essentially argues from the existence of the cosmos, or world, to the existence of a First Cause or Sufficient Reason for the world’s existence.{9} Next he defends a *teleological*, or design, argument. The name for this argument comes from the Greek word *telos*, which means “end.” According to Craig, this argument attempts to infer “an intelligent designer of the universe, just as we infer an intelligent designer for any product in which we discern evidence of purposeful adaptation of means to some end (*telos*).”{10} After the design argument, he offers a defense of the *moral* argument. This argument “implies the existence of a Being that is the embodiment of the ultimate Good,” as well

as “the source of the objective moral values we experience in the world.”[{11}](#) Finally, he defends what is known as the *ontological* argument. Ontology is the study of being, and this much-debated argument “attempts to prove from the very concept of God that God exists.”[{12}](#)

Taken together, these arguments provide a powerful case for the existence of God. As Craig presents them, the cosmological argument implies the existence of an eternal, immaterial, unimaginably powerful, personal Creator of the universe. The design argument reveals an intelligent designer of the cosmos. The moral argument reveals a Being who is the transcendent source and standard of moral goodness. And the ontological argument shows that if God’s existence is even possible, then He must exist!

But suppose we grant that all of these arguments are sound. Why think that *Christianity* is true? Many *non-Christian* religions believe in God. Why think that Christianity is the one that got it right? In order to answer this question we must now confront the central figure of Christianity: Jesus of Nazareth.

The Son of Man

When the previous edition of *Reasonable Faith* was published in 1994, most New Testament scholars thought that Jesus had never really claimed to be the Messiah, or Lord, or Son of God. But a lot has happened in the intervening fourteen years, and “the balance of scholarly opinion on Jesus’ use of Christological titles may have actually tipped in the opposite direction.”[{13}](#)

For example, we have excellent grounds for believing that Jesus often referred to himself as “the Son of Man.”[{14}](#) Although some believe that in using this title Jesus was merely referring to himself as a human being, the evidence

suggests that he actually meant much more than that. Note, for example, that “Jesus did not refer to himself as ‘a son of man,’ but as ‘*the* Son of Man.’”[\[15\]](#) His use of the definite article is a crucially important observation, especially in light of Daniel 7:13-14.

In this passage Daniel describes a vision in which “one like a son of man” comes before God with the clouds of heaven. God gives this person an everlasting kingdom and we are told that “all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him” (Dan. 7:14). It’s clear that Daniel’s “son of man” is much more than a human being, for he’s viewed as an appropriate object of worship. Since no one is worthy of worship but God alone (see Luke 4:8), the “son of man” must actually be divine, as well as human.

According to Mark, at Jesus’ trial the high priest pointedly asked him if he was the Christ (or Messiah), “the Son of the Blessed One.” Jesus’ response is astonishing. “I am,” he said, “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:61-62). Here Jesus not only affirms that he is the Messiah and Son of God, he also explicitly identifies himself with the coming Son of Man prophesied by Daniel.[\[16\]](#) Since we have excellent reasons for believing that Jesus actually made this radical claim at his trial, we’re once again confronted with that old trilemma: if Jesus really claimed to be divine, then he must have been either a lunatic, a liar, or the divine Son of Man!

Now most people would probably agree that Jesus was not a liar or a lunatic, but they might still find it difficult to accept his claim to divinity. They might wonder if we have any good reasons, independent of Jesus’ claims, for believing his claims to be true. As a matter of fact we do!

The Resurrection of Jesus

Shortly after Jesus' crucifixion, on the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter stood before a large crowd of people gathered in Jerusalem and made a truly astonishing claim: God had raised Jesus from the dead, thereby vindicating his radical personal claims to be both Lord and Messiah (see Acts 2:32-36). The reason this claim was so incredible was that the "Jews had no conception of a Messiah who, instead of triumphing over Israel's enemies, would be shamefully executed by them as a criminal."[\[17\]](#) Indeed, according to the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (21:22-23). So how could a man who had been crucified as a criminal possibly be the promised Messiah? If we reject the explanation of the New Testament, that God raised Jesus from the dead, it's very difficult to see how early Christianity could have ever gotten started. So are there good reasons to believe that Jesus really was raised from the dead?

According to Craig, the case for Jesus' resurrection rests "upon the evidence for three great, independently established facts: the empty tomb, the resurrection appearances, and the origin of the Christian faith."[\[18\]](#) He marshals an extensive array of arguments and evidence in support of each fact, as well as critiquing the various naturalistic theories which have been proposed to avoid the resurrection. He concludes by noting that since God exists, miracles are possible. And once one acknowledges this, "it's hard to deny that the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation of the facts."[\[19\]](#)

This brings us to the significance of this event. According to the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg:

The resurrection of Jesus acquires such decisive meaning, not merely because someone
. . . has been raised from the dead, but because it is Jesus of Nazareth, whose execution was instigated by the Jews

because he had blasphemed against God. If this man was raised from the dead, then . . . God . . . has committed himself to him. . . . The resurrection can only be understood as the divine vindication of the man whom the Jews had rejected as a blasphemer.{20}

In other words, by raising Jesus from the dead, God has put His seal of approval (as it were) on Jesus' radical personal claims to be the Messiah, the Son of God, and the divine Son of Man! This forces each of us to answer the same haunting question Jesus once asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" (Matt. 16:15).

Notes

1. See "About William Lane Craig" at www.reasonablefaith.org/william-lane-craig/, accessed 20 May 2018.
2. J. P. Moreland, cited in William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 1.
3. C. Behan McCullagh, cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 1.
4. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 12.
5. Ibid., 76.
6. In the minds of some people, this is a rather controversial claim. But it's been convincingly defended by naturalist authors like Stephen J. Gould and Michael Shermer. For a brief defense by Shermer, please see the articles on "Glorious Contingency" at www.metanexus.net/Magazine/ArticleDetail/tabid/68/tabid/72/Default.aspx?aid=27, accessed 4 September 2008.
7. Ibid., 79.
8. Ibid., 78.
9. Ibid., 98.
10. Ibid., 99-100.
11. Ibid., 104.
12. Ibid., 95.
13. Ibid., 301.

14. See Craig's discussion on pp. 315-318.
15. Ibid., 315.
16. Ibid., 317.
17. Ibid., 388.
18. Ibid., 360-61.
18. Ibid., 399.
20. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Jesu Geschichte und unsere Geschichte," in *Glaube und Wirklichkeit* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1975), 92-94; cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 399.

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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 quintts?)

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.

Reasonable Faith

Reasonable Faith

One of the finest Christian philosophers of our day is William Lane Craig. Although he's become very well known for his debates with atheists and skeptics, he's also a prolific writer. To date, he has authored or edited over thirty books and more than a hundred scholarly articles.^[1] His published work explores such fascinating topics as the evidence for the existence of God, the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, divine foreknowledge and human freedom, and God's relationship to time. In 2007 he started a web-based apologetics ministry called Reasonable Faith (www.reasonablefaith.org). The site features both scholarly and popular articles written by Craig, audio and video recordings of some of his debates, lectures, and interviews, answers to questions from his readers, and much more.

✖ But before he launched the Reasonable Faith Web site, Craig had also authored a book by the same title. One of the best apologetics books on the market, a revised and updated third edition was recently released. His friend and colleague, the philosopher J. P. Moreland, endorsed Craig's ministry with these words:

It is hard to overstate the impact that William Lane Craig has had for the cause of Christ. He is simply the finest Christian apologist of the last half century, and his academic work justifies ranking him among the top one percent of practicing philosophers in the Western world. Besides that, he is a winsome ambassador for Christ, an exceptional debater, and a man with the heart of an evangelist. . . . I do not know of a single thinker who has done more to raise the bar of Christian scholarship in our generation than Craig. He is one of a kind, and I thank God for his life and

work.{2}

Although the book has been described as “an admirable defense of basic Christian faith,”{3} many readers will find the content quite advanced. According to Craig, “*Reasonable Faith* is intended primarily to serve as a textbook for seminary level courses on Christian apologetics.”{4} For those without much prior training in philosophy, theology, and apologetics, this book will make for some very demanding reading in places. But for those who want to seriously grapple with an informed and compelling case for the truth of Christianity, this book will richly repay one’s careful and patient study.

Although we cannot possibly do it justice, in the remainder of this article we will briefly consider at least some of the reasons why Craig believes that biblical Christianity is an eminently reasonable faith.

The Absurdity of Life Without God

Imagine for a moment that there is no God. What implications would this have for human life? Science tells us that the universe is not eternal, but that it rather had a beginning. But if there is no God, then the universe must have come into being, uncaused, out of nothing! What’s more, the origin of life is nothing more than an unintended by-product of matter, plus time, plus chance.{5} No one planned or purposed for life to arise, for if there is no God, there was no one to plan or purpose it. And human beings? We are just the unpredictable result of a long evolutionary process that never had us in mind. In fact, if one were to rewind the history of life to its beginning, and allow the evolutionary process to start anew, it’s virtually certain that none of us would be here to think about it! After all, without an intelligent Agent guiding this long and complicated process, the chances that our species would accidentally emerge a second time is

practically zero.{6}

Depressing as it is, this little thought experiment provides the appropriate backdrop for Craig's discussion of the absurdity of life without God. In his view, if God does not exist, then human life is ultimately without meaning, value, or purpose. After all, if human beings are merely the accidental by-products of the unintended forces of nature, then what possible meaning *could* human life have? If there is no God, then we were not created for a *purpose*; we were merely "coughed" into existence by mindless material processes.

Of course, some might wonder why we couldn't just create some meaning for our lives, or give the universe a meaning of our own. But as Craig observes, "the universe does not really acquire meaning just because *I* happen to give it one for suppose I give the universe one meaning, and you give it another. Who is right? The answer, of course, is neither one. For the universe without God remains objectively meaningless, no matter how we regard it."{7}

Like it or not, if God does not exist, then the universe—and our very lives—are ultimately meaningless and absurd. The difficulty is, however, that no one can really live consistently and happily with such a view.{8} Although merely recognizing this fact does absolutely nothing to show that God actually exists, it should at least motivate us to sincerely investigate the matter with an open heart and an open mind. So let's now briefly consider some of the *reasons* for believing that there really is a God.

The Existence of God

In the latest edition of *Reasonable Faith*, Craig offers a number of persuasive arguments for believing that God does, in fact, exist. Unfortunately, we can only skim the surface of these arguments here. But if you want to go deeper, his book

is a great place to start.

After a brief historical survey of some of the major kinds of arguments that scholars have offered for believing that God exists, Craig offers his own defense for each of them. He begins with a defense of what is often called the *cosmological* argument. This argument takes its name from the Greek word *kosmos*, which means “world.” It essentially argues from the existence of the cosmos, or world, to the existence of a First Cause or Sufficient Reason for the world’s existence.[{9}](#) Next he defends a *teleological*, or design, argument. The name for this argument comes from the Greek word *telos*, which means “end.” According to Craig, this argument attempts to infer “an intelligent designer of the universe, just as we infer an intelligent designer for any product in which we discern evidence of purposeful adaptation of means to some end (*telos*).”[{10}](#) After the design argument, he offers a defense of the *moral* argument. This argument “implies the existence of a Being that is the embodiment of the ultimate Good,” as well as “the source of the objective moral values we experience in the world.”[{11}](#) Finally, he defends what is known as the *ontological* argument. Ontology is the study of being, and this much-debated argument “attempts to prove from the very concept of God that God exists.”[{12}](#)

Taken together, these arguments provide a powerful case for the existence of God. As Craig presents them, the cosmological argument implies the existence of an eternal, immaterial, unimaginably powerful, personal Creator of the universe. The design argument reveals an intelligent designer of the cosmos. The moral argument reveals a Being who is the transcendent source and standard of moral goodness. And the ontological argument shows that if God’s existence is even possible, then He must exist!

But suppose we grant that all of these arguments are sound. Why think that *Christianity* is true? Many *non-Christian* religions believe in God. Why think that Christianity is the

one that got it right? In order to answer this question we must now confront the central figure of Christianity: Jesus of Nazareth.

The Son of Man

When the previous edition of *Reasonable Faith* was published in 1994, most New Testament scholars thought that Jesus had never really claimed to be the Messiah, or Lord, or Son of God. But a lot has happened in the intervening fourteen years, and “the balance of scholarly opinion on Jesus’ use of Christological titles may have actually tipped in the opposite direction.”[{13}](#)

For example, we have excellent grounds for believing that Jesus often referred to himself as “the Son of Man.”[{14}](#) Although some believe that in using this title Jesus was merely referring to himself as a human being, the evidence suggests that he actually meant much more than that. Note, for example, that “Jesus did not refer to himself as ‘a son of man,’ but as ‘the Son of Man.’”[{15}](#) His use of the definite article is a crucially important observation, especially in light of Daniel 7:13-14.

In this passage Daniel describes a vision in which “one like a son of man” comes before God with the clouds of heaven. God gives this person an everlasting kingdom and we are told that “all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him” (Dan. 7:14). It’s clear that Daniel’s “son of man” is much more than a human being, for he’s viewed as an appropriate object of worship. Since no one is worthy of worship but God alone (see Luke 4:8), the “son of man” must actually be divine, as well as human.

According to Mark, at Jesus’ trial the high priest pointedly asked him if he was the Christ (or Messiah), “the Son of the Blessed One.” Jesus’ response is astonishing. “I am,” he said,

“And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:61-62). Here Jesus not only affirms that he is the Messiah and Son of God, he also explicitly identifies himself with the coming Son of Man prophesied by Daniel.[{16}](#) Since we have excellent reasons for believing that Jesus actually made this radical claim at his trial, we’re once again confronted with that old trilemma: if Jesus really claimed to be divine, then he must have been either a lunatic, a liar, or the divine Son of Man!

Now most people would probably agree that Jesus was not a liar or a lunatic, but they might still find it difficult to accept his claim to divinity. They might wonder if we have any good reasons, independent of Jesus’ claims, for believing his claims to be true. As a matter of fact we do!

The Resurrection of Jesus

Shortly after Jesus’ crucifixion, on the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter stood before a large crowd of people gathered in Jerusalem and made a truly astonishing claim: God had raised Jesus from the dead, thereby vindicating his radical personal claims to be both Lord and Messiah (see Acts 2:32-36). The reason this claim was so incredible was that the “Jews had no conception of a Messiah who, instead of triumphing over Israel’s enemies, would be shamefully executed by them as a criminal.”[{17}](#) Indeed, according to the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, “anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse” (21:22-23). So how could a man who had been crucified as a criminal possibly be the promised Messiah? If we reject the explanation of the New Testament, that God raised Jesus from the dead, it’s very difficult to see how early Christianity could have ever gotten started. So are there good reasons to believe that Jesus really was raised from the dead?

According to Craig, the case for Jesus’ resurrection rests

“upon the evidence for three great, independently established facts: the empty tomb, the resurrection appearances, and the origin of the Christian faith.”[\[18\]](#) He marshals an extensive array of arguments and evidence in support of each fact, as well as critiquing the various naturalistic theories which have been proposed to avoid the resurrection. He concludes by noting that since God exists, miracles are possible. And once one acknowledges this, “it’s hard to deny that the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation of the facts.”[\[19\]](#)

This brings us to the significance of this event. According to the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg:

The resurrection of Jesus acquires such decisive meaning, not merely because someone

. . . has been raised from the dead, but because it is Jesus of Nazareth, whose execution was instigated by the Jews because he had blasphemed against God. If this man was raised from the dead, then . . . God . . . has committed himself to him. . . . The resurrection can only be understood as the divine vindication of the man whom the Jews had rejected as a blasphemer.[\[20\]](#)

In other words, by raising Jesus from the dead, God has put His seal of approval (as it were) on Jesus’ radical personal claims to be the Messiah, the Son of God, and the divine Son of Man! This forces each of us to answer the same haunting question Jesus once asked his disciples, “Who do you say I am?” (Matt. 16:15).

Notes

1. See “About William Lane Craig” at www.reasonablefaith.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about_william_lane_craig, accessed 22 August 2008.
2. J. P. Moreland, cited in William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton:

Crossway Books, 2008), 1.

3. C. Behan McCullagh, cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 1.

4. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 12.

5. Ibid., 76.

6. In the minds of some people, this is a rather controversial claim. But it's been convincingly defended by naturalist authors like Stephen J. Gould and Michael Shermer. For a brief defense by Shermer, please see the articles on "Glorious Contingency" at

www.metanexus.net/Magazine/ArticleDetail/tabid/68/tabid/72/Default.aspx?aid=27, accessed 4 September 2008.

7. Ibid., 79.

8. Ibid., 78.

9. Ibid., 98.

10. Ibid., 99-100.

11. Ibid., 104.

12. Ibid., 95.

13. Ibid., 301.

14. See Craig's discussion on pp. 315-318.

15. Ibid., 315.

16. Ibid., 317.

17. Ibid., 388.

18. Ibid., 360-61.

18. Ibid., 399.

20. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Jesu Geschichte und unsere Geschichte," in *Glaube und Wirklichkeit* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1975), 92-94; cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 399.

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The Dead Sea Scrolls Shed Light on the Accuracy of our Bible

Dr. Patrick Zukeran reviews the discovery of and important historical findings from the Dead Sea Scrolls. The texts discovered provide clear evidence as to the accuracy of our version of the Old Testament and the care with which it was preserved.

The Story of the Scrolls

Worship at the sacred Jerusalem Temple had become corrupt, with seemingly little hope for reform. A group of devoted Jews removed themselves from the mainstream and began a monastic life in the Judean desert. Their studies of the Old Testament Scriptures led them to believe that God's judgment upon Jerusalem was imminent and that the anointed one would return to restore the nation of Israel and purify their worship. Anticipating this moment, the Essenes retreated into the Qumran desert to await the return of their Messiah. This community, which began in the third century B.C., devoted their days to the study and copying of sacred Scripture as well as theological and sectarian works.

As tensions between the Jews and Romans increased, the community hid their valuable scrolls in caves along the Dead Sea to protect them from the invading armies. Their hope was that one day the scrolls would be retrieved and restored to the nation of Israel. In A.D. 70, the Roman general Titus invaded Israel and destroyed the city of Jerusalem along with its treasured Temple. It is at this time that the Qumran community was overrun and occupied by the Roman army. The scrolls remained hidden for the next two thousand years.

In 1947, a Bedouin shepherd named Muhammad (Ahmed el-Dhib) was searching for his lost goat and came upon a small opening of a cave. Thinking that his goat may have fallen into the cave, he threw rocks into the opening. Instead of hearing a startled goat, he heard the shattering of clay pottery. Lowering himself into the cave, he discovered several sealed jars. He opened them hoping to find treasure. To his disappointment, he found them to contain leather scrolls. He collected seven of the best scrolls and left the other fragments scattered on the ground.

Muhammad eventually brought some of the scrolls to a cobbler and antiquities dealer in Bethlehem named Khando. Khando, thinking the scrolls were written in Syriac, brought them to a Syrian Orthodox Archbishop named Mar (Athanasius) Samuel. Mar Samuel recognized that the scrolls were written in Hebrew and suspected they may be very ancient and valuable. He eventually had the scrolls examined by John Trevor at the American School of Oriental Research (ASOR). Trevor contacted the world's foremost Middle East archaeologist, Dr. William Albright, and together these men confirmed the antiquity of the scrolls and dated them to sometime between the first and second century B.C.

After the initial discovery, archaeologists searched other nearby caves between 1952 and 1956. They found ten other caves that contained thousands of ancient documents as well. One of the greatest treasures of ancient manuscripts had been discovered: the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Date and Contents of the Scrolls

Scholars were anxious to confirm that these Dead Sea Scrolls were the most ancient of all Old Testament manuscripts in the Hebrew language. Three types of dating tools were used: tools from archaeology, from the study of ancient languages, called paleography and orthography, and the carbon-14 dating method. Each can derive accurate results. When all the methods arrive

at the same conclusion, there is an increased reliability in the dating.

Archaeologists studied the pottery, coins, graves, and garments at Khirbet Qumran, where the Essenes lived. They arrived at a date ranging from the second century B.C. to the first century A.D. Paleographers studied the style of writing and arrived at dates ranging from the third century B.C. to the first century A.D. Scientists, using the radiocarbon dating method, dated the scrolls to range from the fourth century B.C. to the first century A.D. Since all the methods came to a similar conclusion, scholars are very confident in their assigned date for the texts. The scrolls date as early as the third century B.C. to the first century A.D.{1}

Eleven caves were discovered containing nearly 1,100 ancient documents which included several scrolls and more than 100,000 fragments.{2} Fragments from every Old Testament book except for the book of Esther were discovered. Other works included apocryphal books, commentaries, manuals of discipline for the Qumran community, and theological texts. The majority of the texts were written in the Hebrew language, but there were also manuscripts written in Aramaic and Greek.{3}

Among the eleven caves, Cave 1, which was excavated in 1949, and Cave 4, excavated in 1952, proved to be the most productive caves. One of the most significant discoveries was a well-preserved scroll of the entire book of Isaiah.

The famous Copper Scrolls were discovered in Cave 3 in 1952. Unlike most of the scrolls that were written on leather or parchment, these were written on copper and provided directions to sixty-four sites around Jerusalem that were said to contain hidden treasure. So far, no treasure has been found at the sites that have been investigated.

The oldest known piece of biblical Hebrew is a fragment from the book of Samuel discovered in Cave 4, and is dated from the

third century B.C.{4} The War Scroll found in Caves 1 and 4 is an eschatological text describing a forty-year war between the Sons of Light and the evil Sons of Darkness. The Temple Scroll discovered in Cave 11 is the largest and describes a future Temple in Jerusalem that will be built at the end of the age.

Indeed, these were the most ancient Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament ever found, and their contents would yield valuable insights to our understanding of Judaism and early Christianity.

The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Masoretic Text

The Dead Sea Scrolls play a crucial role in assessing the accurate preservation of the Old Testament. With its hundreds of manuscripts from every book except Esther, detailed comparisons can be made with more recent texts.

The Old Testament that we use today is translated from what is called the Masoretic Text. The Masoretes were Jewish scholars who between A.D. 500 and 950 gave the Old Testament the form that we use today. Until the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in 1947, the oldest Hebrew text of the Old Testament was the Masoretic Aleppo Codex which dates to A.D. 935.{5}

With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we now had manuscripts that predated the Masoretic Text by about one thousand years. Scholars were anxious to see how the Dead Sea documents would match up with the Masoretic Text. If a significant amount of differences were found, we could conclude that our Old Testament Text had not been well preserved. Critics, along with religious groups such as Muslims and Mormons, often make the claim that the present day Old Testament has been corrupted and is not well preserved. According to these religious groups, this would explain the contradictions between the Old Testament and their religious teachings.

After years of careful study, it has been concluded that the Dead Sea Scrolls give substantial confirmation that our Old Testament has been accurately preserved. The scrolls were found to be almost identical with the Masoretic text. Hebrew Scholar Millar Burrows writes, "It is a matter of wonder that through something like one thousand years the text underwent so little alteration. As I said in my first article on the scroll, 'Herein lies its chief importance, supporting the fidelity of the Masoretic tradition.'" [\[6\]](#)

A significant comparison study was conducted with the Isaiah Scroll written around 100 B.C. that was found among the Dead Sea documents and the book of Isaiah found in the Masoretic text. After much research, scholars found that the two texts were practically identical. Most variants were minor spelling differences, and none affected the meaning of the text.

One of the most respected Old Testament scholars, the late Gleason Archer, examined the two Isaiah scrolls found in Cave 1 and wrote, "Even though the two copies of Isaiah discovered in Qumran Cave 1 near the Dead Sea in 1947 were a thousand years earlier than the oldest dated manuscript previously known (A.D. 980), they proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 percent of the text. The five percent of variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling." [\[7\]](#)

Despite the thousand year gap, scholars found the Masoretic Text and Dead Sea Scrolls to be nearly identical. The Dead Sea Scrolls provide valuable evidence that the Old Testament had been accurately and carefully preserved.

The Messianic Prophecies and the Scrolls

One of the evidences used in defending the deity of the Christ is the testimony of prophecy. There are over one hundred prophecies regarding Christ in the Old Testament. [\[8\]](#) These prophecies were made centuries before the birth of Christ and

were quite specific in their detail. Skeptics questioned the date of the prophecies and some even charged that they were not recorded until after or at the time of Jesus, and therefore discounted their prophetic nature.

There is strong evidence that the Old Testament canon was completed by 450 B.C. The Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, is dated about two hundred fifty years before Christ. The translation process occurred during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus who ruled from 285 to 246 B.C.[\[9\]](#) It can be argued that a complete Hebrew text from which this Greek translation would be derived must have existed prior to the third century B.C.

The Dead Sea Scrolls provided further proof that the Old Testament canon existed prior to the third century B.C. Thousands of manuscript fragments from all the Old Testament books except Esther were found predating Christ's birth, and some date as early as the third century B.C. For example, portions from the book of Samuel date that early, and fragments from Daniel date to the second century B.C.[\[10\]](#) Portions from the twelve Minor Prophets date from 150 B.C to 25 B.C.[\[11\]](#) Since the documents were found to be identical with our Masoretic Text, we can be reasonably sure that our Old Testament is the same one that the Essenes were studying and working from.

One of the most important Dead Sea documents is the Isaiah Scroll. This twenty-four foot long scroll is well preserved and contains the complete book of Isaiah. The scroll is dated 100 B.C. and contains one of the clearest and most detailed prophecies of the Messiah in chapter fifty-three, called the "Suffering Servant." Although some Jewish scholars teach that this refers to Israel, a careful reading shows that this prophecy can only refer to Christ.

Here are just a few reasons. The suffering servant is called sinless (53:9), he dies and rises from the dead (53:8-10), and

he suffers and dies for the sins of the people (53:4-6). These characteristics are not true of the nation of Israel. The Isaiah Scroll gives us a manuscript that predates the birth of Christ by a century and contains many of the most important messianic prophecies about Jesus. Skeptics could no longer contend that portions of the book were written after Christ or that first century insertions were added to the text.

Thus, the Dead Sea Scrolls provide further proof that the Old Testament canon was completed by the third century B.C., and that the prophecies foretold of Christ in the Old Testament predated the birth of Christ.

The Messiah and the Scrolls

What kind of Messiah was expected by first century Jews? Critical scholars allege that the idea of a personal Messiah was a later interpretation made by Christians. Instead, they believe that the Messiah was to be the nation of Israel and represented Jewish nationalism.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, written by Old Testament Jews, reveal the messianic expectations of Jews during the time of Christ. Studies have uncovered several parallels to the messianic hope revealed in the New Testament as well as some significant differences. First, they were expecting a personal Messiah rather than a nation or a sense of nationalism. Second, the Messiah would be a descendant of King David. Third, the Messiah would confirm His claims by performing miracles including the resurrection of the dead. Finally, He would be human and yet possess divine attributes.

A manuscript found in Cave 4 entitled the *Messianic Apocalypse*, copied in the first century B.C., describes the anticipated ministry of the Messiah:

For He will honor the pious upon the throne of His eternal kingdom, release the captives, open the eyes of the blind,

lifting up those who are oppressed... For He shall heal the critically wounded, He shall raise the dead, He shall bring good news to the poor.

This passage sounds very similar to the ministry of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. In Luke chapter 7:21-22, John the Baptist's disciples come to Jesus and ask him if He is the Messiah. Jesus responds, "Go tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news brought to them."

But, with the similarities there are also differences. Christians have always taught that there is one Messiah while the Essene community believed in two, one an Aaronic or priestly Messiah and the other a Davidic or royal Messiah who leads a war to end the evil age.[\[12\]](#)

The Essenes were also strict on matters of ceremonial purity while Jesus criticized these laws. He socialized with tax collectors and lepers which was considered defiling by the Jews. Jesus taught us to love one's enemies while the Essenes taught hatred towards theirs. They were strict Sabbatarians, and Jesus often violated this important aspect of the law. The Qumran community rejected the inclusion of women, Gentiles, and sinners, while Christ reached out to these very groups.

The many differences show that the Essenes were not the source of early Christianity as some scholars propose. Rather, Christianity derived its teachings from the Old Testament and the ministry of Jesus.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have proven to be a significant discovery, confirming the accurate preservation of our Old Testament text, the messianic prophecies of Christ, and valuable insight into first century Judaism.

Two Major Prophets and the Dead Sea Scrolls

The Dead Sea Scrolls have been an asset in the debate regarding two major and well disputed books of the Old Testament, Daniel and Isaiah. Conservative scholars maintained that Daniel was written in the sixth century B.C. as the author declares in the first chapter. The New Testament writers treated Daniel as a prophetic book with predictive prophecies. Liberal scholars began teaching in the eighteenth century that it was written in the Maccabean Period or the second century B.C. If they are correct, Daniel would not be a prophetic book that predicted the rise of Persia, Greece, and Rome.

Before the discovery of the scrolls, critical scholars argued that the Aramaic language used in Daniel was from a time no earlier than 167 B.C. during the Maccabean period. Other scholars, such as well-respected archaeologist Kenneth Kitchen, studied Daniel and found that ninety percent of Daniel's Aramaic vocabulary was used in documents from the fifth century B.C. or earlier.[\[13\]](#) The Dead Sea Scrolls revealed that Kitchen's conclusion was well founded. The Aramaic language used in the Dead Sea Scrolls proved to be very different from that found in the book of Daniel. Old Testament scholars have concluded that the Aramaic in Daniel is closer to the form used in the fourth and fifth century B.C. than to the second century B.C.

Critical scholars challenged the view that Isaiah was written by a single author. Many contended that the first thirty-nine chapters were written by one author in the eighth century B.C., and the final twenty-six chapters were written in the post-Exilic period. The reason for this is that there are some significant differences in the style and content between the two sections. If this were true, Isaiah's prophecies of Babylon in the later chapters would not have been predictive

prophecies but written after the events occurred.

With the discovery of the Isaiah Scroll at Qumran, scholars on both sides were eager to see if the evidence would favor their position. The Isaiah Scroll revealed no break or demarcation between the two major sections of Isaiah. The scribe was not aware of any change in authorship or division of the book.[\[14\]](#) Ben Sira (second century B.C.), Josephus, and the New Testament writers regarded Isaiah as written by a single author and containing predictive prophecy.[\[15\]](#) The Dead Sea Scrolls added to the case for the unity and prophetic character of Isaiah.

Inventory of the Scrolls

The following is a brief inventory provided by Dr. Gleason Archer of the discoveries made in each of the Dead Sea caves.[\[16\]](#)

Cave 1 was the first cave discovered and excavated in 1949. Among the discoveries was found the Isaiah Scroll containing a well-preserved scroll of the entire book of Isaiah. Fragments were found from the other Old Testament books which included Genesis, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Judges, Samuel, Ezekiel, and Psalms. Non-biblical books included the Book of Enoch, Sayings of Moses, Book of Jubilee, Book of Noah, Testament of Levi and the Wisdom of Solomon. Fragments from commentaries on Psalms, Micah, and Zephaniah were also discovered.

Cave 2 was excavated in 1952. Hundreds of fragments were discovered, including remains from the Old Testament books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, Job, Psalms and Ruth.

Cave 3 was excavated in 1952. Here archaeologists found the famous Copper Scrolls. These scrolls contained directions to sixty-four sites containing hidden treasures located around Jerusalem. So far, no treasure has been found at the sites

investigated.

Cave 4, excavated in 1952, proved to be one of the most productive. Thousands of fragments were recovered from nearly four hundred manuscripts. Hundreds of fragments from every Old Testament book were discovered with the exception of the Book of Esther. The fragment from Samuel labeled 4Qsam^[17] is believed to be the oldest known piece of biblical Hebrew, dating from the third century B.C. Also found were fragments of commentaries on the Psalms, Isaiah, and Nahum. The entire collection of Cave 4 is believed to represent the scope of the Essene library.

Cave 5 was excavated in 1952 and fragments from some Old Testament books along with the book of Tobit were found.

Cave 6 excavated in 1952 uncovered papyrus fragments of Daniel, 1 and 2 Kings and some other Essene literature.

Caves 7-10 yielded finds of interest for archaeologists but had little relevance for biblical studies.

Cave 11 was excavated in 1956. It exposed well-preserved copies from some of the Psalms, including the apocryphal Psalm 151. In addition, a well-preserved scroll of part of Leviticus was found, and fragments of an Apocalypse of the New Jerusalem, an Aramaic Targum or paraphrase of Job, was also discovered.

Indeed these were the most ancient Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament ever found, and their contents would soon reveal insights that would impact Judaism and Christianity.

Notes

1. James Vanderkam and Peter Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (San Francisco, CA.: Harper Collins Publishers, 2002), 20-32.
2. Randall Price, *The Stones Cry Out* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest

House Publishers, 1997), 278.

3. Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago, IL.: Moody Press, 1985), 513-517.

4. Vanderkam and Flint, 115.

5. Price, 280.

6. Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Viking Press, 1955), 304, quoted in Norman Geisler and William Nix, *General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 367.

7. Archer, 25.

8. J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1984), 665-670.

9. Geisler and Nix, 503-504.

10. Ibid., 137.

11. Ibid., 138-139.

12. Vanderkam and Flint, 265-266.

13. Randall Price, *Secrets of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House, 1996), 162.

14. Ibid., 154-155.

15. Ibid., 156-157.

16. Archer, 513-517.

17. Price, 162.

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The Christmas Story: Does It Still Matter?

Christmas often means time with family, hectic shopping, parties, cards and gifts. But what about the first Christmas? Why is the original story—the baby in a manger, shepherds, wise men, angels—important, if at all? The answer may surprise you.

What does Christmas mean to you? Times with family and friends? Perhaps carols, cards, television specials. Maybe hectic shopping, parties, and eating too much.

All these and more are part of North American Christmas. But what about the first Christmas? Why is the original story—the baby in a manger, shepherds, wise men, angels—important, if at all?

May I invite you to consider eight reasons why the original Christmas story matters, even to you? You may not agree with all of them, but perhaps they will stimulate your thinking and maybe even kindle some feelings that resonate with that famous story.

First, the Christmas story is important because it is. . .

A Story that Has *Endured*

For two millennia, people have told of the child in a Bethlehem manger; of angels who announced his birth to shepherds; of learned men who traveled a great distance to view him.[{1}](#)

That a story persists for many years does not prove its truthfulness. Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the tooth fairy survive in the popular imagination. But a twenty-century tenure at least merits our consideration. What deep human longings does the Christmas story portray? Why has it connected so profoundly with millions of people? Is the story factual? Curiosity prompts further investigation.

Second, the Christmas story is also . . .

A Story of *Hope and Survival*

Jesus' society knew great pain and oppression. Rome ruled. Corrupt tax collectors burdened the people. Some religious leaders even sanctioned physical beating of Jewish citizens participating in compulsory religious duties.[{2}](#)

Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary traveled a long distance to Bethlehem to register for a census but could not obtain proper lodging. Mary bore her baby and laid him in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. Eventually, King Herod sought to kill the baby. Warned of impending risk, Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt, then returned home after Herod's death.

Imagine how Mary felt. Traveling while pregnant would be challenging. Fleeing to another nation lest some king slay your son would not be pleasant. Yet she, Joseph, and Jesus survived the ordeal.

In the midst of social and cultural challenges, the Christmas story offers hope and encouragement toward survival, hope of new life linked to something—someone—greater than oneself. One

of Jesus' followers said Jesus' "name . . . [would] be the hope of all the world."[\[3\]](#)

So, the Christmas story is important because it has endured and because it speaks of hope and survival.

Reason number three: the Christmas story is . . .

A Story of *Peace* and *Goodwill*

Christmas carolers sing of "peace on earth." Greeting cards extol peace, families desire it, and the news reminds us of its fleeting nature.

I encountered ten-year-old Matt from Nebraska in a southern California restaurant men's room one afternoon. Alone and forlorn looking, he stood outside the lone stall.

"Could I ask a favor?" inquired the sandy haired youth. "The door to this stall has no lock. Would you watch and be sure that no one comes in on me?" "Sure," I replied, happy to guard his privacy. Matt noted, "In a lot of nice restaurants the stall doors don't have locks." "I know," I agreed. "You'd think they would."

After a pause, his high-pitched voice said, "You know what I wish? I wish there could be peace in all the earth and no more arguments or fighting so no one would have to die except by heart attacks." "That would be great," I agreed. "How do you think that could happen?" Matt didn't know.

"It seems that the Prince of Peace could help," I suggested. "Do you know who that is?" He didn't. "Well, at Christmas, we talk a lot about Jesus as the Prince of Peace," I explained.

"Oh, I see," conceded Matt. "I don't know about those things because I don't go to church. Do you know what it's like to be the only boy in your town who doesn't go to church? I do."

“Well, I’m a church member,” I replied, “but really the most important thing is knowing Jesus Christ as your personal friend. When I was eighteen, some friends explained to me that He died and rose again for me and that I could begin a relationship with Him. It made a big difference and gave me a real peace inside. He can also bring peace between people.”

By now, Matt was out washing his hands as his father stuck his head in the door to hurry him along. I gave him a small booklet that explained more. “Thanks,” smiled Matt as he walked out to join his family for lunch.

Psychologist Daniel Goleman in his bestselling book *Emotional Intelligence* tells of boarding a New York City bus to find a driver whose friendly greeting and positive disposition spread contagious warmth among the initially cold and indifferent passengers. Goleman envisioned a “virus of good feeling” spreading through the city from this “urban peacemaker” whose good will had softened hearts.[{4}](#)

The Christmas angel announced to some shepherds, “‘Don’t be afraid! . . . I bring you good news of great joy for everyone! The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem, the city of David!”[{5}](#) A crowd of angels then appeared praising God and proclaiming peace among people of good will.[{6}](#)

The Christmas story brings a message of peace that can soothe anxious hearts and calm interpersonal strife.

Reason number four: the Christmas story is . . .

A Story of *Family*

Christmas is a time for family gatherings. This interaction can bring great joy or great stress. Estrangement or ill will from past conflicts can explode.

Joseph and Mary had their share of family challenges. Consider their circumstances. The historical accounts indicate that Joseph's fiancée became pregnant though she was a virgin. Mary believed an angel told her she was pregnant by God. Now, how would you feel if your fiancé/fiancée exhibited apparent evidence of sexual activity with someone else during your engagement? Suppose your intended said that God had sanctioned the whole thing. Would your trust and self-esteem take a nosedive? Would you cancel the wedding?

Joseph, described as "a just man, decided to break the engagement quietly, so as not to disgrace . . . [Mary] publicly."[\[7\]](#) But an angel appeared to him in a dream, explaining that the child was conceived in her by God, and told him to "name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."[\[8\]](#) Joseph followed instructions and cared for his family. His continuing commitment to Mary and Jesus played a significant part in the boy's birth and early childhood. With God's help, the family overcame major obstacles. And so can your family.

Fifth, the story is Christmas is also . . .

A story of *Humility*

When kings, presidents, and other rulers appear in public, great pomp often ensues. From a biblical perspective, God came first not as a ruling king but as a servant, a baby born in humble circumstances. His becoming human helps humans identify with Him.

Imagine that you and your child are walking in a field and encounter an ant pile with hundreds of ants scurrying about. In the distance, you see a construction bulldozer approaching. Suppose your child asks how to warn the ants of impending danger. You discuss various possibilities: shouting, holding up signs, etc. But the best solution would be if somehow your child could become an ant and warn them personally. Some ants

might not believe the danger. But some might believe and take steps to ensure their safety.

Paul, an early follower of Jesus, wrote of the humility Jesus displayed by becoming human:

Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross. Because of this, God raised him up to the heights of heaven.[{9}](#)

The Christmas story speaks of family and humility. But is it true?[{10}](#)

Reason number six why the Christmas story matters: it is . . .

A Story that Was *Foretold*

Jesus' followers noted numerous clues to his identity, prophecies written many years before His birth.[{11}](#)

The Hebrew writer Micah told around 700 BC of deliverance through a coming Messiah or "Anointed One" from Bethlehem.[{12}](#) We know that ". . . Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. . . ."[{13}](#)

Isaiah, writing around 700 BC, foretold that the Messiah 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."[{14}](#) The name "Immanuel" means "God is with us." Biblical accounts claim Jesus' mother was a virgin when she bore Him.[{15}](#)

Additional prophecies concern the Messiah's lineage, betrayal, suffering, execution, and resurrection. Peter Stoner, a California mathematician, once calculated the probability of

just eight of the 300 prophecies Jesus fulfilled 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.[{16}](#)

In a similar vein, consider reason number seven why the original Christmas story matters. It is . . .

A Story that Has *Substantial* Support

Can we trust the biblical accounts of the Christmas story? Three important points:

- *Eyewitness Testimony*. The Gospels—presentations of Jesus’ life—claim to be, or bear evidence of containing, eyewitness accounts. In a courtroom, eyewitness testimony is among the most reliable evidence.
- *Early Date*. Dr. William F. Albright, one of the world’s leading archaeologists, dated every book of the New Testament (NT) before about AD 80.[{17}](#) There is no known record of NT factual authenticity ever being successfully challenged by a contemporary.
- *Manuscript Evidence*. Over 24,000 early manuscript copies of portions of the NT exist today. Concerning manuscript attestation, Sir Frederic Kenyon, director and principle librarian of the British Museum, concluded, “Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.”[{18}](#)

The Christmas story is notable for its enduring messages of hope, peace, goodwill, family and humility. It was foretold by prophets and has substantial manuscript support. But there is another reason for considering the story of Jesus' birth, perhaps the most important.

Reason number eight: the Christmas story is . . .

A Story of *Love*

Jesus' followers taught that His conception and birth were part of a divine plan to bring us genuine peace, inner freedom, and self-respect. They believed the biblical God wants us to enjoy friendship with Him, and meaning and purpose. Alas, our own self-centeredness separates us from Him. Left to our own, we would spend both time and eternity in this spiritually unplugged state.

Jesus came to help plug us into God. Mary's baby was born to die, paying the penalty for our self-centeredness, which the biblical documents call "sin." If I had a traffic fine I could not pay, you could offer to pay it for me. When the adult Jesus died on the cross, He carried the penalty due all our sins then rose from the dead to give new life.

Jesus explained, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."[\[19\]](#) God can become your friend if you believe in Him, that is, if you trust Him to forgive you. He will never let you down.

Perhaps you are becoming aware of the importance of the Christmas story in your own life. Might you like to receive Jesus' free gift of forgiveness and place your faith in Him? You can celebrate this Christmas knowing that you are a member of His family. Perhaps you'd like to talk to Him right now. You might want to tell Him something like this:

Jesus Christ, thanks for loving me, for dying for my sins and rising again. Please apply your death as the means of my forgiveness. I accept your pardon. Come and live in me and help me to become your close friend.

If you made that decision to place your trust in Jesus, He has entered your life, forgiven you and given you eternal life. I encourage you to tell another of His followers about your decision and ask them to help you grow in faith. Call this radio station or visit the Web site probe.org to learn more. Read the Bible to discover more about God. Begin with the Gospel of John, the fourth book in the New Testament, which is one of the easier ones to understand. Tell God what is on your heart, and tell others about the discovery you've made so they can know Him too.

Christmas is meant to celebrate peace and joy. Amidst the busyness of shopping, parties, presents, and fun, remember that the Prince of Peace came to spread peace and joy to all who believe in Him.

Notes

1. Details of the Christmas story are in Luke 1-2 and Matthew 1:18-2:23.
2. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973 printing of the 1883 original), i:372.
3. Matthew 12:21 NLT.
4. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), ix-x.
5. Luke 2:10-11 NLT.
6. Luke 2:13-14 NASB.
7. Matthew 1:19 NLT.
8. Matthew 1:21 NLT.
9. Philippians 2:6-9 NLT.
10. For more on evidence for Jesus, see

www.WhoIsJesus-Really.com and www.probe.org.

11. For a summary of prophecies Jesus fulfilled, see Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1979), 141-177.

12. Micah 5:2.

13. Matthew 2:1 NASB.

14. Isaiah 7:14 NIV.

15. Matthew 1:18, 22-25; Luke 1:27, 34.

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

17. McDowell, op. cit., 62-63.

18. Frederic G. Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1940), 288; in McDowell, op. cit., 41. McDowell develops these points in pp. 39-41 ff.

19. John 3:16 NLT.

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"Why Don't Jews Believe in Jesus as Messiah?"

Do Jews still observe Old Testament practices like burnt offerings? If Jews believe in a coming savior, why does Christ not meet all of their criteria?

I am not aware of any Jews who currently practice the Old Testament sacrificial rituals. This is at least partly due to the fact that the temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70

A.D. and has never been rebuilt to this day. If, at some point in the future, the temple IS rebuilt, then we may indeed see some of the orthodox Jews begin practicing the various Old Testament sacrificial rituals once again. But I seriously doubt we would see anything of this kind prior to a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem.

Most Jews no longer believe in a coming Messiah. Of the three main branches within Judaism, only orthodox Jews tend to hold to this hope and they do not conceive of Messiah as divine; he is merely a human being. As for why Jesus does not meet their criteria, there could be many possible reasons offered. However, much of it is probably due both to (what I would consider) a misunderstanding of the Old Testament conception of Messiah, as well as simply to ignorance and misinformation about Jesus' credentials as the promised Messiah. As Louis Lapides, a Messianic Jew and Christian pastor, points out in Lee Strobel's book *The Case for Christ*, most Jews have never bothered to actually investigate the evidence supporting Jesus' claims to be Messiah.

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

“Did the OT Jews Expect a Divine Messiah?”

Did the Jews, prior to Jesus, expect the Messiah to be divine, i.e. God Himself? Everything I can find seems to indicate that they expected him to be divinely appointed, divinely empowered, with divine authority, with kingly authority and

priestly authority but I don't see that necessarily the same as God Himself. Two passages could result in that expectation perhaps: Psalm 110:1 and Isa 7:14.

I was wondering this because of the people's response to Jesus, especially as He started to make clear His divine association with God the Father.

You ask a great question. It does not appear that the Jewish people anticipated a truly divine Messiah. Messiah means "anointed one" – and the Jewish people did see such people as being closely connected with God in some way (e.g. as a representative of God, empowered by His Spirit, etc.).

Over time, the Jewish concept of Messiah evolved to include a royal, prophetic, and priestly function. In the intertestamental period, particularly in the Psalms of Solomon, Messiah is regarded as a warrior-prince who would throw off the yoke of Rome and establish a Jewish kingdom. This is probably why Jesus is sometimes reluctant to identify himself as the Messiah in the Gospels.

However, when one reads the OT Messianic texts (like Ps. 110; etc.) in light of NT teachings, it becomes clear that it is quite possible to understand the OT conception of Messiah as being both human and divine. It may not have been clear to the OT Jewish people, but it does become clear in light of NT revelation. Indeed, I think Jesus makes this very point about Ps. 110 in Matt. 22:41-46.

Hope this helps a bit.

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn

Probe Ministries

The Uniqueness of Jesus

Liar, Lunatic, or Lord?

A serious study of the Gospels leads a person to one of three conclusions about Jesus: He was (1) an evil lying villain, (2) a preposterously deluded madman, or (3) the Messiah, the Son of God. It is ludicrous for anyone who has studied His life to take the position that He was simply a good teacher. Only one of the three conclusions is a logical possibility.

Jesus made some outrageous claims no ordinary person would dare to make. First, He claimed to be God. His statements of equality with God meant He believed that He possessed the authority, attributes, and adoration belonging to God. He proclaimed authority over creation, forgiveness of sins, and life and death. He declared to possess the attributes of God. He emphatically stated that He was the source of truth and the only way to eternal life. Only Jesus among the significant leaders of history made such claims.

Here are a few of His outrageous claims. When "Philip said, Lord, show us the Father.' Jesus answered. . . .Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father'" (John 14:8-9). Once, when the Pharisees were disparaging Jesus and challenging Him, Jesus responded, " I and the Father are one.' Again the Jews picked up stones to stone Him, but Jesus said to them, I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?' We are not stoning you for any of these,' replied the Jews, but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God'" (John 10:30-33). It is clear in these two statements, Jesus claimed to be God. His opponents clearly understood His declaration of equality with God.

When challenged by the scholars on His authority over Abraham, the father of the Jews, Jesus replied, "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.' The Jews said to Him, You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham!' I tell you the truth,' Jesus answered, before Abraham was born, I am!'" (John 8:56-58). Jesus clearly believed He had existed two thousand years earlier and knew Abraham.

On the issue of life and death Jesus stated, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies" (John 11:25). Here He believed He had authority over life and death.

Finally, Jesus accepted and encouraged others to worship Him. Throughout the Gospels the disciples worshiped Jesus as seen in Matthew 14:33 and John 9:38. Jesus states in John 5:22-23, "Moreover, the Father judges no one but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent Him." Jesus knew the Old Testament command "Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only" (Matt. 4:10). Despite this, Jesus encouraged others to worship Him. Either He was mad (insane), or He was who He claimed to be and deserves our worship as God incarnate.

After reading such claims, it is impossible for anyone to say He was merely a good teacher. A man making claims like these must either be a diabolical liar, insane, or God incarnate. For the remainder of this essay we will be discussing which of these conclusions is most plausible.

A Villain, A Madman, or God Incarnate?

We have established at this point that Jesus made some astounding claims about himself. He presumed to be God, claimed the authority and attributes of God, and encouraged others to worship Him as God. If, however, Jesus was a liar,

then He knew His message was false but was willing to deceive thousands with claims He knew were untrue. That is, Jesus knew that He was not God, He did not know the way to eternal life, and He died and sent thousands to their deaths for a message He knew was a lie. This would make Jesus history's greatest villain (and perhaps, a demon) for teaching this wicked lie. He would have also been history's greatest fool for it was these claims that lead Him to His death.

Few, if any, seriously hold to this position. Even the skeptics unanimously agree that He was at least a great moral teacher. William Lecky, one of Britain's most respected historians and an opponent of Christianity writes, "It was reserved for Christianity to present the world an ideal character which through all the changes of eighteen centuries has inspired the hearts of men with an impassioned love."[\[1\]](#)

However, it would be inconsistent and illogical to believe that Jesus was a great moral teacher if some of those teachings contained immoral lies about himself. He would have to be a stupendous hypocrite to teach others honesty and virtue and all the while preach the lie that He was God. It is inconceivable to think that such deceitful, selfish, and depraved acts could have issued forth from the same being who otherwise maintained from the beginning to the end the purest and noblest character known in history.

Since the liar conclusion is not logical, let us assume He really believed He was God but was mistaken. If He truly believed He had created the world, had seen Abraham two thousand years before, and had authority over death, and yet none of this was true, we can only conclude that He was mad or insane.

However, when you study the life of Jesus, He clearly does not display the characteristics of insanity. The abnormality and imbalance we find in a deranged person are not there. His teachings, such as the Sermon on the Mount, remain one of the

greatest works ever recorded. Jesus was continually challenged by the Pharisees and lawyers, highly educated men whose modern day equivalent would be our university professors. They were fluent in several languages and were known for their scholarship of the Old Testament and Jewish law. They challenged Jesus with some of the most profound questions of their day and Jesus' quick answers amazed and silenced them. In the face of tremendous pressure, we find He exemplified the greatest composure.

For these reasons, the lunatic argument is not consistent. If both the liar and the lunatic options are not consistent with the facts, we must take a serious look at the third option: that Jesus was really God. The next question is, does He prove to have the credentials of God? Let us investigate this possibility.

Messianic Prophecy

Thus far we have learned that Jesus is unique among all men for the profound statements He made about His divinity. We concluded that it is impossible to state He was simply a good moral teacher. From His amazing statements, He must be a liar, a lunatic, or God. Since the first two were not conceivable, we will begin looking at the third alternative, that He really is God. First, we must see if He had the credentials for these claims.

One of the most incredible types of evidence is the testimony of prophecy. The Old Testament contains a number of messianic prophecies made centuries before Christ appeared on the earth. The fact that He fulfilled each one is powerful testimony that He was no ordinary man. Allow me to illustrate this point using eight prophecies.

- *Genesis 12:1-3 states the Messiah would come from the seed of Abraham.*

- *Genesis 49:10 states that He would be of the tribe of Judah.*
- *2 Samuel 7:12 states that Messiah would be of the line of King David.*
- *Micah 5:2 states that He would be born in the city of Bethlehem.*
- *Daniel 9:24 states He would die or be “cut off” exactly 483 years after the declaration to reconstruct the temple in 444 B.C.*
- *Isaiah 53 states that the Messiah would die with thieves, then be buried in a richman’s tomb.*
- *Psalms 22:16 states upon His death His hands and His feet would be pierced. This is quite significant since Roman crucifixion had not been invented at the time the Psalmist was writing.*
- *Isaiah 49:7 states that Messiah would be known and hated by the entire nation. Not many men become known by their entire nation, and even less are despised by the entire nation.*

Now calculate the possibility of someone fulfilling these by coincidence. Let us suppose you estimate there is a one in a hundred chance a man could fulfill just one of these prophecies by chance. That would mean when all eight are put together there is a 1/10 to the 16th power probability that they were fulfilled by chance. Mathematician Peter Stoner estimates 1/10 to the 17th power possibility that these prophecies were fulfilled by chance.[\[2\]](#) Mathematicians have estimated that the possibility of sixteen of these prophecies being fulfilled by chance are about 1/10 to the 45th power.[\[3\]](#) That’s a decimal point followed by 44 zeroes and a 1! These figures show it is extremely improbable that these prophecies could have been fulfilled by accident. The figures for

fulfillment of the 109 major prophecies are staggering.[{4}](#)

Skeptics have objected to the testimony of prophecy, stating they were written after the times of Jesus and therefore fulfill themselves. However, the evidence overwhelmingly shows these prophecies were clearly written centuries before Christ. It is an established fact even by liberal scholars that the Old Testament canon was completed by 450 B.C. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, was completed in the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus in 250 B.C. The Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in 1948 contained the books of the Old Testament. Prophetic books like Isaiah were dated by paleographers to be written in 100 B.C.[{5}](#) Once again, these prophecies were confirmed to have been written centuries before Christ, and no religious leader has fulfilled anything close to the number of prophecies Jesus has fulfilled.

Confirmation of Miracles

Jesus made some profound statements about His divinity. We concluded that it is impossible to state He was simply a good moral teacher. From His amazing statements we must conclude Him to be a liar, a lunatic, or God. Since the first two were not conceivable, we began looking at the third alternative. If this is true, we must see if He has the credentials for His claims.

If a person claimed to be God, we would expect supernatural confirmations. We've already discovered the phenomenal record of prophecy. We would also expect Him to demonstrate authority over nature, sickness, truth, sin, and death. Jesus demonstrated such authority. One line of evidence is seen in His miraculous deeds.

Jesus' miracles demonstrated His power over creation, sickness, and death. He demonstrated His authority over nature in such miracles as walking on water (Matt. 14:25), multiplying bread (Matt. 14:15-21), and calming the storm

(Mark 4:35-41). He demonstrated authority over sickness with His instantaneous healings over terminal diseases. His healings did not take weeks or days but were instantaneous. He healed blindness (John 9), paralysis (Mark 2), leprosy (Luke 17), and deafness (Mark 7). Such miracles cannot be attributed to psychosomatic healing but to one who rules over creation. Jesus displayed authority over death by raising the dead as recorded in Luke 7 and Matthew 9.

Some doubt whether these miracles occurred. Several view the miracle accounts as fictitious legends developed after the death of Christ. Philosopher David Hume argued that human nature tends to gossip and exaggerate the truth. Others argue that the miracle accounts were propagated in distant lands by the followers of Christ well after the events so that the miracle accounts could not have been verified due to distance and time.

There are several arguments against these attacks. First, the Bible has proven to be a historically reliable document. For more information on this, see the [Authority of the Bible](#) article. Second, legends and exaggerations develop when followers travel to distant lands well after the time of the events and tell of stories which cannot be confirmed. Legends usually develop generations after the death of the figure at which time it is impossible to verify any of the accounts since all available witnesses are not available. However, the miracle accounts of Jesus were being told in the very cities in which they occurred during the lifetime of Jesus and to those who witnessed the event(s). Those who witnessed the miracles were followers of Christ and His enemies. These eye witnesses were questioned carefully by those in authority. If any claims were exaggerated or distorted, it could have easily been refuted. The New Testament with its miracle accounts could not have survived had not the accounts been true.

German scholar Dr. Carsten Theide and British scholar Dr. Matthew D'Ancona in their book *Eyewitness to Jesus* state their

conclusion after a scientific investigation of a fragment from the Gospel of Matthew. The scientific evidence revealed that the book was written before A.D. 70, possibly as early as A.D. 30.^[6] This reveals the fact that the Gospels were written and circulated during the lifetime of the eyewitnesses, who were then able to judge the accuracy of such accounts, and they were unable to refute Jesus' miracles. None of the world's religious leaders performed the miracles Jesus did.

Authority Over Death

A study of the claims of Jesus make it clear that He was professing to be God. It is then impossible to conclude that He was merely a good teacher. In light of these claims, one must conclude that He is a liar, a lunatic, or He is Lord. We investigated to see if His claim to be God was substantiated. Clearly the record of prophecy proved there was something unique about Him. The miracles He performed remain unequalled by anyone, but Jesus' greatest demonstration of authority is revealed in His power over sin and death.

There are many religions and religious leaders who claim to know what lies beyond the grave. The problem is, no one has demonstrated authority over the grave or confirmed their belief of what happens after death. Only Jesus demonstrated authority over death. All men have died, but Jesus is alive.

During His three-year ministry, Jesus exercised His authority over death by raising several people from the grave. Most notable is the account of Lazarus found in John 11. Here even in the face of His enemies, Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave. If this were not a historical account, this story would not have survived since it was recorded and propagated in the very city where it occurred, in the lifetime of the witnesses, both followers and enemies of Christ. The enemies of Christianity could have easily refuted the account if it were not true. The fact is they could not refute it.

In regard to His own death and resurrection, the Old Testament predicted the death of the Messiah in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. However, it also predicts the resurrection in Psalm 16:8 11 and refers to the eternal reign of the Messiah. The only way to reconcile these verses is a resurrected Messiah.

Jesus himself made these predictions in regard to His resurrection: "Destroy this temple and in three days, I will raise it up" (John 2:19). In Mark 8:31 Jesus taught "that the son of Man must suffer many things . . . and be killed, and after three days rise again." In John 10:18 Jesus states, "I have authority to lay it (My life) down, and I have authority to take it up again." In these passages, Jesus predicts His own death and resurrection. Either Jesus was mad, or He really had the authority over death.

Jesus' resurrection proved His authority over sin and death. For a more detailed defense of the historicity of the Resurrection, check the Probe perspective on the Resurrection titled, [Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?](#)

At the beginning of this study we examined the claims of Christ. We realized only three conclusions were possible: liar, lunatic, or Lord. Since the first two were inconceivable, we needed to see if Christ could further confirm His credentials of being God. We discovered that His claims were confirmed by the record of prophecy, His miracles, and the Resurrection.

Jesus proves himself to be unique among all men.

Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and today He is the central figure for much of the human race. All the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever sailed, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as this "One Solitary Life." [\[7\]](#)

Notes

1. William Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* (New York: D.Appleton and Company, 1903), p. 8.
2. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernadino, Calif.: Here's Life Publishers, 1979), p. 167.
3. Norman Geisler, *When Skeptics Ask* (Wheaton, Ill.:Victor Press, 1990), p. 116.
4. Tim LaHaye, *Jesus, Who is He?* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Books, 1996), p. 176.
5. Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), pp. 365-66.
6. Peter Carsten Theide and Matthew D'Ancona, *Eyewitness to Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 163.
7. Anonymous, "One Solitary Life," quoted in Tim LaHaye, *Jesus, Who is He?*, p. 68.

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11. Stott, John. *Basic Christianity*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity Press, 1971.
12. Theide, Peter Carsten, and D'Ancona, Matthew. *Eyewitness to Jesus*. New York: Doubleday, 1996.
13. Walvoord, John. *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Press, 1990.

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