

THE HISTORICAL CASE FOR JESUS

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Chapter 1: Sources outside the New Testament

Introduction

Among all of the world's major religions, Christianity has come under greater assault by secular scholars and other skeptics. Undoubtedly, there are several reasons for this. One reason is the fact that the secular worldview—whether atheistic or merely agnostic—is more concentrated in Western civilization than in any other. In fact, it cut its proverbial teeth from the seventeenth century A.D. onward by combatting the abuses of Church authority and power in the West, which long stood in the way of its more tolerant and liberal agenda. Second, Christianity represents a threat of sorts to both the secular mind and the remainder of the religious world as well, because it teaches that ultimate salvation from mankind's problems is exclusively through one person—Jesus of Nazareth. Human nature does not like being told that there is only one spiritual path to salvation or restoration from evil; it sounds too intolerant and arrogant in the post-modern world in which truth is less objective and more subjective. Third, Christianity has too often been allied with Western nations whose agendas seemed more concerned with political and economic domination than with peaceful conversion of non-Christians. Finally, in contrast to all other major world religions, Christianity claims that its founder Jesus is also God in human flesh. In the context of other world religions, this claim is so outlandish that many naturally reject it out of hand.

In response to these criticisms, first we acknowledge that the established Church often assumed authority that we believe it did not possess. It further abused the power that it assumed to the point that it often stood squarely against the science that was clearly observed and measured and persecuted those “heretics” who questioned its authority to dictate to other people's consciences. Second, Christianity does offer an exclusive spiritual path to salvation, through the one named Jesus. But if this path is truly the only path, then the fact that it is exclusive should not cause us to reject it. And if truth is objective, that is, if it exists independently of what anyone thinks, knows, or desires, then we must concede the possibility that Jesus is the only way to salvation. Third, Christian missionaries naturally followed the imperialistic activities of the nations they belonged to because that happened to offer the easiest access to non-Christian lands. But that does not necessarily make them responsible for those political imperialistic policies. Finally, because Christianity claims that its founder is God in human flesh makes it relatively easy to either refute or confirm. And if it can be confirmed, then Jesus is God, and Christianity is the true world religion.

We all know that Christian New Testament documents provide by far the most detailed evidence for the existence of Jesus. But are there reliable non-Christian sources that at least tell us that a first-century Palestinian Jewish male religious figure named Jesus existed? It is to those sources of Jesus' historicity that we first turn.

Sources Outside the New Testament that Speak of the Christian Jesus

First, we should not expect to find large numbers of non-Christian sources referring to Jesus. Rome reached the height of its imperial power in the first century A.D. and was concerned with political intrigues and threats to its dominance of Western civilization. Second police and other records of the first century have disappeared long ago, and it is unlikely that yet another religious leader among the Jews in the backwaters of the Roman province of Judea would attract much attention among those who could read and write.

Despite these facts, however, there are at least six direct or indirect authentic statements of history that strongly suggest that the Christian Jesus really did exist. We will examine them in the approximate chronological order they were written.

Josephus

Josephus was a first-century Jewish historian who never became a Christian. He made two unmistakable references to the Christian Jesus.

Now, there was about this time, Jesus, a wise man, *if it be lawful to call him a man*, for he was a doer of wonderful works,—a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. *He was [the] Christ*; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, *for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him*; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.¹

Scholars who have studied all available manuscripts of Josephus' works see no reason to doubt the authenticity of the basic verse. In fact, the manuscript evidence is unanimous as to this verse.² However, since we know that Josephus was not a Christian, those words in italics were probably added by Christian writer; such additions are called interpolations. An alternative view has been suggested that Josephus may have used sarcasm in actually writing the words in italics.³ In any case, even without those italicized words, Josephus obviously knew that a Jewish man called Jesus lived in first-century Palestine and was condemned to the cross by Pilate, which is confirmed by his statement later in the same book:

...when, therefore, Ananus was of this disposition, he thought he had now a proper opportunity [to exercise his authority.] Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the Sanhedrin of the judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James,

¹ Flavius Josephus. *The Complete Works of Josephus*, translated by William Whiston. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1981, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XVIII, Ch. 3, Verse 3.

² F. F. Bruce. *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdsman, 1975, 108.

³ F. F. Bruce, 109.

and some others [or some of his companions;] and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned....⁴

In this passage, Josephus clearly refers to the death of James, whom he called the ‘brother of Jesus, who was called Christ....’ From these two statements of Josephus, he confirms several points of Christian belief about Jesus: (1) He lived in the first century (from his reference to Pilate); (2) Pilate condemned him to the cross at the instigation of Jewish leaders; (3) He was the leader of a group called Christians; (4) He claimed to be the Messiah; and (5) He had a brother named James.

Mara Bar-Serapion

We have a manuscript of a letter written by this Syrian father to his son. It was written sometime after A.D. 73, but scholars don’t know how long after that date.⁵

What advantage did the Athenians gain from putting Socrates to death? Famine and plague came upon them as a judgment for their crime. What advantage did the men of Samos gain from burning Pythagoras? In a moment their land was covered with sand. What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise king? It was just after that that their kingdom was abolished. God justly avenged these three wise men: the Athenians died of hunger; the Samians were overwhelmed by the sea; the Jews, ruined and driven from their land, live in complete dispersion. But Socrates did not die for good; he lived on in the teaching of Plato. Pythagoras did not die for good; he lived on in the statue of Hera. Nor did the wise King die for good; He lived on in the teaching which He had given.⁶

This non-Christian Syrian writer refers to a king of the Jews, after whose execution, the latter were driven from their land and living in dispersion. Certainly, this *king* is a reference to Jesus.

Tacitus

Cornelius Tacitus was a pagan Roman historian who lived from either A.D. 55 or 56-117. In A.D. 112, he was the governor of Asia when he wrote these words about the time of Roman Emperor Nero.

Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, from whom they got their name, had been

⁴ Flavius Josephus. *The Complete Works of Josephus*, translated by William Whiston. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1981, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XX, Ch. 9, Verse 1.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, 114.

⁶ Ibid.

executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate when Tiberius was emperor....⁷

Tacitus was the most famous ancient Roman historian. His testimony here concerns Nero's burning of the city of Rome and how he blamed Christians for that fire. He confirms Josephus' testimony that the Christian leader was called *Christus* [Christ] and that he was executed by Pontius Pilate.

Pliny the Younger

Pliny the Younger (A.D. 61-c. 113) wrote to Emperor Trajan while governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor in A.D. 112. Pliny had been killing so many Christians—men, women, and children—that he wondered if he should seek them out or only execute certain ones.

They affirmed, however, that the whole of their guilt, or their error, was that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verse a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves to a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, adultery, never to falsify their word, not do deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up.⁸

Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr was a Christian writing to Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius in about A.D. 150.

But the words, 'They pierced my hands and feet,' refer to the nails which were fixed in Jesus' hands and feet on the cross; and after He was crucified, His executioners cast lots for His garments, and divided them among themselves. That these things happened you may learn from the 'Acts' which were recorded under Pontius Pilate.⁹

That He performed these miracles you may easily satisfy yourself from the 'Acts' of Pontius Pilate.¹⁰

Even though Justin Martyr was a Christian, we quote him here because twice he told the Roman emperor himself that he could verify what he was saying by checking the "Acts" of Pontius Pilate. Actually, none of the many written reports from governors and other officials to Rome have been found to date, undoubtedly lost long ago. But for a Christian to basically ask a Roman emperor to check Pontius Pilate's "Acts" to confirm what he was writing would have been quite audacious if no such documents existed in Rome at that time. Therefore, this is very strong

⁷ Cornelius Tacitus. *Annals* XV.44, Quoted by F.F. Bruce in his *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975, p. 117.

⁸ *Epistles*, X. 96, Quoted in *The Best of Josh McDowell: A Ready Defense*, compiled by Bill Wilson. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993, p. 200.

⁹ Justin Martyr. *First Apology*, 35.7-9.

¹⁰ Justin Martyr. *First Apology*, 48.3.

evidence that Pilate must have reported the miracles as well as the fact that he had Jesus crucified.

Lucian of Samosata

Lucian (c. A.D. 120-c. 180) was a second-century satirist who often mocked Christians. Here are two examples from his *The Passing of Peregrinus*:

It was then that he [Peregrinus] learned the wondrous lore of the Christians, by associating with their priests and scribes in Palestine. And—how else could it be?—in a trice he made them all look like children, for he was prophet, cult-leader, head of the synagogue, and everything, all by himself. He interpreted and explained some of their books and even composed many, and they revered him as a god, made use of him as a lawgiver, and set him down as a protector, next after that other, to be sure, whom they sill worship, the man who was crucified in Palestine [Jesus] because he introduced this new cult into the world.¹¹

Furthermore, their first lawgiver [Jesus] persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another after they have transgressed once, for all by denying the Greek gods and by worshipping that crucified sophist himself [Jesus] and living under his laws.¹²

In these passages, Lucian can only be referring to Jesus, and he declares that (1) Jesus is the founder of the Christians; (2) Christians worship this Jesus; (3) Jesus was crucified in Palestine; (4) Christians followed His teachings; and (5) Jesus taught that His followers were all brothers.

Julius Africanus

Julius Africanus was an early third-century Christian writer who refers to an alleged first-century Gentile named Thallus, who made reference to the darkness that accompanied the death of Jesus.

Thallus, in the third book of his histories, explains away this darkness as an eclipse of the sun—unreasonably, as it seems to me.¹³

It would seem unreasonable, indeed, since we know that Jesus died in the season of the Paschal full moon. And a solar eclipse could not have been the reason for the darkness. In any case, this statement purports to show that pagan writers knew about the darkness at the time of Jesus' crucifixion and attempted to account for it by natural means, albeit false means. However, there

¹¹ www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/peregrinus.html, *The Passing of Peregrinus*, Par. 11.

¹² *Ibid*, Par. 13.

¹³ Quoted in *The Best of Josh McDowell: A Ready Defense*, compiled by Bill Wilson. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993, p. 201.

is no known manuscripts of a first-century Thallus, and there is considerable doubt that this particular Thallus existed, of if he did, that he lived in the first century B.C.¹⁴

Jewish Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin Folio 43a

The most famous of the Jewish Talmud's references to Jesus is found in the Sanhedrin Folio 43a, which reads in part:

On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, 'He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Any one who can say anything in his favour, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.' But since nothing was brought forward in his favour he was hanged on the eve of the Passover.

This statement is good evidence for the argument that the Christian Jesus lived because it not only agrees with the New Testament testimony that Jesus was executed at the Passover time¹⁵, but that Jewish leaders attributed Jesus' miracles to sorcery.¹⁶ Thus, there is some historical value to it—not because it agrees with the New Testament per se, but because the two sources, separated by several centuries, are connected by their agreement on two historical facts.

Unfortunately, there is very considerable debate over the large majority of numerous references to Jesus in the Talmud. Opinions range from the position that none of the Jesus references is to the Christian Jesus since His was such a common name, to the thesis that any references to the Christian Jesus were added by later rabbis as a polemic against Christians and thus do not stand as historical testimony to the existence of Jesus and His teachings per se, but only of Christians and their teachings as such.¹⁷

We believe that the great numbers of Talmudic references clearly are to the Christian Jesus, but critics are correct that most of them are part of polemical arguments against Christians. While this does assume that such a Jesus did live in the first century A.D., they are far more useful in referring to what Christians in the Middle Ages thought about Jesus rather than being reliable and straightforward historical accounts of His life and teachings. Therefore, while they may be valid in assuming that Jesus lived, their use in Christian apologetics should be quite limited, with the exception above as already noted.

Despite doubts over the claim of Julius Africanus, there can be no doubt that a first-century Jewish male religious leader by the name of Jesus or Christ did live, was the founder of Christianity, and was executed by Pilate at the instigation of certain Jewish leaders in Palestine. No trained historian would have a reasonable doubt about these facts.

¹⁴ Richard Carrier. http://infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/thallus.html.

¹⁵ See Matthew 26:17 onward; Mark 14:12 onward; Luke 22:1 onward; and John 13:1 onward.

¹⁶ See Matthew 12:24; Mark 3:22; and Luke 11:15.

¹⁷ Robert E. Van Voorst. *Jesus outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000, 111-120.

Chapter 2: Do we have the Authentic New Testament?

Introduction

Although we have strong evidence outside the New Testament that Jesus lived and founded Christianity in first-century A.D. Palestine, plainly it is the New Testament that gives us by far the largest body of knowledge concerning His life and teachings. But in order to mine that data, we must first ascertain whether or not we have the authentic text of the New Testament documents. In order to do that, we need to examine those documents, especially the four gospels, as a trained historian would do so. If their authenticity can be confirmed, our next step will be to discover whether the information presented in those documents are reliable historical information.

New Testament Claims of Dates for Jesus' Ministry

The first thing we note is that the New Testament claims a general time-frame for the time of Jesus that secular historians can check from other sources. This is one way of saying that Christianity, like Judaism, is a religion based on alleged historical facts. The downside to that fact is that if the history can be debunked, the religion should naturally be rejected as well. On the other hand, the upside is that if the history can be confirmed, we can continue to explore what Jesus taught about Himself and evaluate that in the light of logical reasoning.

The New Testament associates the beginning of Jesus' public ministry shortly after His baptism and names several political and religious officials that have been confirmed by other sources to have lived and functioned in those positions at the time the New Testament says they did. Note how meticulous Luke's gospel is in dating the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins...When all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened. And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, 'You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased.'...Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being tempted for forty days by the devil...Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time. Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news of Him went out through all the surrounding region. And He taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.¹⁸

¹⁸ Luke 3:1-3, 21-22; 4:1-2a, 13-15, New King James' Version (NKJV).

Historians know that Roman Emperor Tiberius Caesar became emperor in September, A.D. 14, after the death of Caesar Augustus that year. To determine the years an emperor reigned by Jewish reckoning, the new regnal year began in the fall of each year. By that reckoning, the fifteenth year of Tiberius' reign would have begun in the fall A.D. 27.¹⁹ The above text tells us that Jesus was led into the wilderness immediately after His baptism for forty days of temptations, after which He began His public ministry. The Gospel of John mentions three Passover celebrations, which occurred in the spring of each year among the Jews. Since we know that He was crucified at a Passover time, this would make His crucifixion in the spring A.D. 30 or 31.²⁰

The Bibliographical Test—The Number of Manuscripts

The first step in determining the authenticity of the New Testament documents is to compare the number of manuscripts—handwritten copies—and to determine how close the oldest manuscripts are to the actual alleged events. This is necessary since we do not have any of the original autographs.²¹ The larger the number of known manuscripts, the easier it will be to tell if major changes were made to them over the centuries. The number of years from the alleged historical events to the oldest known manuscripts will inform us whether or not there was a sufficiently reasonable amount of time to expect legendary material to have crept into the story. It is common knowledge that historians usually regard a period of more than 150-200 years is necessary before legendary, unreliable elements are added to biographies or other historical data. Therefore, we will keep that time-frame in mind as we examine the manuscript evidence.

In libraries, monasteries, archived materials, and archaeological findings, scholars have discovered between 5,000 and 6,000 Greek manuscripts of fragments or of whole New Testament documents. There are also between 8,000 and 10,000 Latin Vulgate manuscripts and approximately 9,000 other manuscripts of New Testament documents. This means that scholars have approximately 24,000 manuscripts of New Testament documents that can be compared to each other and dated.²²

Just comparing the approximately 5,700 Greek manuscripts now available, we see how very favorable that number compares to manuscripts of other ancient writings. For example, the closest in the number of extant manuscripts²³ is that of Homer's epic poem *The Iliad*, of which there are 643. After that are the written speeches of the Greek orator and statesman Demosthenes (384-322 B.C.), with 200 extant manuscripts. Then there are 20 extant manuscripts of the Roman historian Tacitus' *Annals*. There are also 20 whole or fragmented extant manuscripts of Livy's *History of Rome*. Finally, the last number of extant manuscripts in

¹⁹ Since he was proclaimed emperor in September, which has to count as year 1 under the non-accession-year method, then the fall of the same year would begin his second regnal year. Thus, the beginning of his fifteenth year would be in the fall of A.D. 27.

²⁰ See John 2:13; 6:4; 11:55. Some scholars believe there is good evidence to conclude that the unnamed feast in John 5:1 was a Passover, but not all agree. This is the major reason that all scholars do not agree on the precise year of Jesus' death.

²¹ Autographs would be the original manuscript that the actual writer of the document wrote. We have none of those to study.

²² Bruce Metzger as interviewed by Lee Strobel. *The Case for Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998, 62-63.

²³ An extant manuscript is one that has been discovered and is available for scholars to study.

double digits is Julius Caesar's *History of the Gallic Wars*, of which there are 10. This means there are only five ancient written works with ten or more extant manuscripts in sharp contrast to almost 5,700 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament documents.²⁴

How Manuscripts are Dated

There are four basic methods to determine the approximate age of ancient manuscripts. First, there is the analysis of the chemical composition of the ink that was used. Scholars know during what general periods of time what kinds of ink were used. Second, the style of writing the letters can also give experts a pretty good idea of the general time frame that a document was written. Third, the type of material on which the manuscript was written also indicates its age and/or its likely point of origin. Finally, carbon-14 dating has been used in the post-World War II era, and comparative studies suggest a high rate of accuracy within historic times, + or – 100-150 years. Of course, use of carbon-14 dating methods does destroy a small piece of the manuscript.

Regular paper made from tree pulp was not used in Western Europe until the late High Middle Ages, being introduced there in the thirteenth century from China. Then, of course, the printing press was first utilized by the German printer Johann Gutenberg about 1450.

In the earliest days of the Middle East and Mediterranean areas, papyrus was used as a material on which to keep written records. Papyrus is a reed that grew extensively along the Nile River in Egypt. Part of it was used to roll out, stretch, and dry before it could be used to write on. Longer records required the sticking together of several reeds, which were usually rolled up into a roll. When there was a temporary stoppage of sales of papyri from Alexandria, Egypt, a ruler in Pergamon turned to animal skins and created parchment²⁵ as a new material to write on. This occurred either in the third or second century B.C. Parchment was made from any animal skin, but especially cow, sheep, or goat that was scraped and dried under some tension.

Another material used for writing on was a more refined version of animal skins called vellum. Although the word *vellum* is derived from a Latin word for “made from calf”, by the time of ancient Rome, more refined parchments made from many different kinds of animal skins were called vellum. What made vellum more refined was that, in addition to scraping and drying the animal skin under tension, it was also bleached, and the surface was treated with lime or chalk to make it easier to accept the writing of ink.

But whether a scholar is examining a document consisting of papyrus, parchment, or vellum, such material comes from an organic source and can thus be dated using the carbon-14 method.

The Bibliographical Test—the Dates of Manuscripts

The two oldest most complete manuscripts date to the early to mid-fourth century A.D. and are the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus.²⁶ The first one is kept in the Vatican Library,

²⁴ Josh McDowell. *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999, 38.

²⁵ The word *parchment* is believed to have derived from the word *Pergamon*.

²⁶ Ralph O. Muncaster. *Examine the Evidence: Exploring the Case for Christianity*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2004, 204.

and the latter one is in the British Museum in London. The Codex Vaticanus contains all of the Old Testament except for most of Genesis and the New Testament from the gospels through part of Hebrews, while the Codex Sinaiticus contains more than half of the Old Testament and nearly all of the New Testament.²⁷

The oldest fragment of a New Testament document is part of a papyrus codex containing John 18:31-33, 37-38, which is now kept in the John Rylands Library in Manchester, England. It is dated to about A.D. 125.²⁸

Another important part of the bibliographical test is the number of manuscripts written by various people who cite quotations from different New Testament documents. Let me outline the three oldest known sets of manuscripts that quote from large portions of the New Testament.

Estimated Date of around A.D. 100—The *Epistle of Barnabas*, probably written in Alexandria, Egypt; *The Didache* (or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*), produced either in Syria or Palestine; and a letter sent to the church in Corinth, Greece about A.D. 96 by Clement, bishop of Rome. Among these three sources, we have found quotations and paraphrases from at least 10 New Testament books, including Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, Romans, I Corinthians, Ephesians, Titus, Hebrews, and I Peter.

Estimated Date of A.D. 115—Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, Syria wrote several letters as he journeyed to his martyrdom in Rome. His letters refer to at least 11 New Testament books, including Matthew, John, Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, I and II Timothy, and Titus.

Estimated Date of A.D. 120—Polycarp, a personal disciple of John, wrote a letter to the church at Philippi and quotes from at least 16 New Testament books, including Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, II Thessalonians, I and II Timothy, Hebrews, I Peter, and I John.

These three early sets of quotations from among the Early Church Fathers quote from 20 of the 27 New Testament books. Furthermore, the dates of these quotations which were used in an authoritative manner, strongly implies that they were originally written in the first century A.D.

Now we are ready to compare this New Testament evidence with the manuscript evidence for the previous five secular documents we noted previously. The earliest manuscripts of the *Iliad* date to about 400 years after the eighth-century B.C., the traditional century for Homer's life. The oldest known manuscripts for Demosthenes' speeches date some 1,400 years after he lived. For Livy, the one fragment of his *History of Rome* is dated to about 400 years after he probably wrote it, with the 19 complete manuscripts dating to about 1,000 years after the original. Tacitus' *Annals*' oldest extant manuscripts date approximately 1,000 years after his time. Finally, the oldest extant manuscript of Julius Caesar's *History of the Gallic Wars* is dated to about 1,000 years from the time it was originally written.²⁹ Excluding the tiny fragment of just a

²⁷ Ibid, 203-204.

²⁸ Ibid, 201-202.

²⁹ McDowell, 38.

few verses in the gospel of John, the oldest extant manuscript of nearly the entire New Testament dates no later than 250 years after the original was most likely written.

More Specific Dating of New Testament Documents

The Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Western civilization helped lead scholars first to question the age of the earth as traditionally interpreted by the Church for almost two millennia. With its bias against the supernatural and historicity of the Bible in general, Higher Criticism emerged first among German scholars in the nineteenth century and then spread elsewhere in Western nations. The Higher Critics taught that the New Testament documents had all been written in the late second century, allegedly long enough that legends and other exaggerated stories had corrupted the original Christian religion. Miracles violated natural law, so the miracles of the Bible were dismissed as irrational exaggerations or as downright lies.

But facts are stubborn things. As more New Testament manuscripts were discovered, and better dating techniques perfected, it became increasingly clear during the nineteenth century that the 27 books of the New Testament had all been written in the first century A.D. Moreover, the Higher Critics' original estimate of the late second century for these documents did still not allow for most historians to agree that legendary material had corrupted the texts.

Many Higher Critics were forced by this evidence to revise their dates for these documents closer toward the middle of the second century. By the end of the nineteenth century, any honest manuscript scholar had to admit that these documents were actually first century documents. There remain, however, modern critics who ignore the overwhelming evidence and still use old arguments in an attempt to insist that these documents are second century documents and thus cannot be reliable.

Now that we have established the New Testament documents as of first century origin, we can proceed to date most of them more precisely. For example, the book of Acts is a linchpin in this effort. It seems quite odd that Acts records the martyrdoms of Stephen,³⁰ one of the first deacons, and James,³¹ the brother of John, but says nothing at all about the martyrdom of James, the leader of the Christians in Jerusalem and probably one of the brothers of Jesus, who was killed in A.D. 61.³² Neither does the book of Acts record any reference to the beheading of Paul by Nero, perhaps as early as A.D. 64 or the crucifixion of Peter about the same time.³³ Instead, the book ends with Paul sitting in a Roman prison under the authority of Emperor Nero. Furthermore, it says nothing about the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, when that city played such a prominent role in the book. Therefore, the logical explanation is that the book of Acts was written no later than in early A.D. 61.

³⁰ See Acts 7:54-60.

³¹ See Acts 12:1-2.

³² R. V. G. Tasker. *The General Epistle of James*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980, 27-28.

³³ Eusebius. Ecclesiastical History. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/250102.htm>, Ch. 25.

By comparing the introductions to the books of Luke and Acts,³⁴ we find that they were both written by the same writer to a man named Theophilus, and that Luke was written before the book of Acts. This suggests that the book of Luke should probably be dated to the late 50s. Scholars generally believe that Mark was the first written gospel³⁵, which would place its writing no later than the mid-to-late 50s. The writing of Matthew's gospel is in much greater dispute, partly depending upon whether the Greek version in the New Testament is a translation of an original Hebrew or Aramaic or not.³⁶

In terms of Paul's letters, ten of them were written when he was in prison at Rome.³⁷ Although the chronological order of these ten cannot be precisely given, all of them must have been completed by about A.D. 60. Although in some dispute, many scholars believe Paul was imprisoned twice in Rome, with the second time commencing in A.D. 63 or 64. The three pastoral letters³⁸ of Paul provide some evidence of a later date than his prison epistles, but those three must not have been written any later than A.D. 67 or 68³⁹, because Nero had him beheaded as part of his tirade against the Christians, and Nero died in 68.

Although the author of the book of Hebrews is in doubt, the Early Church Fathers give conflicting testimony that Paul or some other apostle wrote the book. And that certainty was sufficient to approve the book as part of the New Testament. Whoever wrote the book, it appears to have been written to believers who were still looking to the Temple in Jerusalem and its priesthood. Even a skim reading of Hebrews will tell you that the author was attempting to get these believers to look toward Jesus as the true Sacrifice for sins, to Jesus as the High Priest, to Jesus' blood in place of the blood of sacrificed animals, and to the Temple in heaven where Jesus works on our behalf. Clearly, then, the Temple in Jerusalem must have still stood when Hebrews was written. This makes the date for Hebrews no later than early A.D. 70.

The book of James has traditionally been considered to be James, the half-brother of Jesus. If so, then it must have been written before his death in A.D. 61. The apostle Peter undoubtedly wrote the two epistles of I and II Peter, which meant they were written before his death about the same time as Paul's martyrdom, somewhere in the late 60s.⁴⁰ The only evidence by which to date the little book of Jude is its uncanny relationship with II Peter 2:1-3:3. This suggests, but does not prove, that Jude was also written in the 60s.⁴¹

The last five books of the New Testament which we have not yet mentioned were all written by the apostle John. They are the Gospel of John, I, II, and III John, and the book of Revelation. Church tradition, along with John's testimony in Revelation 1:9 that he was on the island of

³⁴ See Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-3.

³⁵ R. V. G. Tasker. *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979, 13.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 11-17.

³⁷ Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I and II Thessalonians, and Philemon.

³⁸ I and II Timothy and Titus.

³⁹ See Merrill Unger. *Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1980, p. 838.

⁴⁰ See Merrill Unger. *Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1980, p. 850.

⁴¹ The names Jude and Judas were commonly used interchangeably in New Testament times. It certainly was not written by Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus. The only Jude mentioned in the New Testament with a brother named James—see Jude 1—was James, the half-brother of Jesus. So Jude was another half-brother of Jesus.

Patmos for religious persecution seems to confirm that he was suffering under the persecution of Domitian in the 90s. The common Greek terms and expressions used in all five of these books strongly suggest that the apostle John wrote all of them. Without evidence to the contrary, most scholars generally assign dates in the 90s to all five of these books, making them the latest New Testament documents to be written.⁴²

What is the length of time from the Jesus-events to the earliest New Testament documents? No one can declare with certainty what the first book to be written was and precisely when it was written. However, it is reasonable to believe that Matthew, Mark, or Luke was probably the first such document to be written, although some advocate for Galatians. What we can be relatively certain of is that the first New Testament document was written no later than the mid-50s. This gives us a period of 25 years between the last of the Jesus-events and the first written record of those events.

Given the bibliographic test of the New Testament manuscripts, we must conclude that the New Testament documents were originally written in the first century A.D., the same century they claim the Jesus-events occurred. This is far too short a time span for a trained historian to believe that legendary or fanciful materials could have corrupted the texts.

Oral Jewish Tradition

Moreover, even though there were written texts among first century A.D. Jews, disciples of a rabbi were expected to memorize the teachings of their rabbi. The *Mishna* was orally handed down for generations before it was finally placed in written form about the year A.D. 200⁴³ to eventually form the basis of the Jewish Babylonian Talmud.

There is evidence that Jesus was treated as a rabbi by His apostles, for they sometimes called Him by that title.⁴⁴ When the apostles sought to replace Judas Iscariot to keep the kingdom number of twelve intact, they determined that it must be someone who had been with Jesus during His ministry and had seen the resurrected Jesus.⁴⁵ All of this is strong evidence that the apostles of Jesus had memorized His teachings, sayings, and actions, just as any good Jewish disciple of any particular rabbi would do. Therefore, we can say with great confidence that we have the authentic New Testament documents.

Textual Errors

The reader might object at this point by inquiring about the thousands of discrepancies among the various New Testament manuscripts. It is a reasonable inquiry, and fortunately it can be honestly and accurately answered.

⁴² John MacArthur, General Editor. *The MacArthur Study Bible*. New King James' Version. Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1997, 1569, 1961, 1975, 1979, 1989.

⁴³ Amiot, Francois; Brunot, Amedee; Danielou, Jean; and Daniel-Rops, Henri. *The Sources for the Life of Christ*. Translated by P.J. Hepburne-Scott. New York: Hawthorn Books, 1962, p. 35.

⁴⁴ See John 1:38, 49.

⁴⁵ See Acts 1:21-22.

The way manuscript scholars count errors or discrepancies is to take the total number discovered among the thousands of manuscripts that we have for study. In most cases, the very same discrepancy is repeated hundreds of times; thus, it is reported as hundreds of errors. So it is quite misleading to say that the New Testament documents are full of thousands of errors. At the same time, in the days when scribes or other scholars had to hand copy each letter, there are bound to be hundreds of mistakes. Even one wrong letter can often change the meaning of a word. But most of the mistakes among the New Testament documents are quite small and do not jeopardize any teaching of those documents. Let us illustrate this fact by briefly discussing the two largest passages in dispute.

First, the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus, the earliest nearly complete texts of the New Testament that date to the fourth century A.D., do not contain verses 9-20 of Mark chapter 16. However, nearly all other manuscripts contain those verses. Some look at Mark's gospel as ending with verse 8 as too abrupt to have been the original ending. But rejecting the longer ending of the vast majority of manuscripts, they assume a shorter ending must have been lost. Thus, some Bible translations add a short two-sentence ending after verse 8. Now if you left out verses 9-20, you would not have to change a single teaching or doctrine of the New Testament. Since the vast majority of other manuscripts contain those verses, we personally believe they were part of the original autograph written by Mark. But it really makes no significant difference whether it should or should not be there.

Second, the other discrepancy of any significance concerns I John 5:7. In some Bibles, chiefly the King James' Version and the New King James' Version, it reads as follows: "For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one." There is almost universal agreement among scholars today that those words were not part of the original text, because only a handful of manuscripts contain them, and those texts are no earlier than the fifteenth century. It is believed that a theological note on the margin of a Latin manuscript was misread by a copyist and was thus inserted into the text.⁴⁶

Conclusion

At this point in our study, whatever the New Testament documents tell us about Jesus, we can draw two conclusions. First, we can easily conclude that a first century A.D. Palestinian Jew by the name of Jesus, or Christ, definitely existed as a religious leader. Indeed, the numbers and ages of some of the manuscripts that speak of Jesus make Him the best attested person in all of ancient history! If you doubt the existence of Jesus, you must also doubt the existence of Homer, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Julius Caesar, and a host of other world-famous individuals. You would simply have no other intellectually honest choice. Second, the evidence is overwhelming that we do indeed have the authentic New Testament, very substantially as it was written in the first century A.D.

⁴⁶ Christian legend has it that the 16th century Dutch scholar Erasmus inserted those words into his manuscript because someone showed him one manuscript that had those words.

Chapter 3: Do we have a Reliable New Testament?

Introduction

Now that we have established the historicity of Jesus and the authenticity of the New Testament documents, we need to determine whether those documents contain reliable history. In other words, can their contents be trusted?

There are two types of tests historians use to answer the question of reliability. Right now we know that the New Testament texts that we have in our modern translations accurately reflect very substantially what the autographs stated. Now we must decide if these documents are telling us the truth about Jesus and His movement. Those tests are the Internal and External tests.

The Internal Test

For an internal test, scholars look primarily for significant factual inconsistencies and excessively glowing accounts of the character and actions of the author. If some alleged inconsistencies have other reasonable explanations, even if one cannot be proven to be the correct explanation, the benefit of the doubt should be given to the document. This principle was another contribution made by Aristotle. Furthermore, if a document attempts to persuade others of some concept or other reality that is obviously not fanciful and legendary, but the concept or reality is highly unlikely to be accepted, that is considered as good evidence that the document's author is not lying. He may be mistaken, but he is not lying. This is the accepted conclusion on the grounds that if one is simply making up a story, he would want to make up one that would be believable to the people he is attempting to persuade.

The Nature of the Messiah

There were a few variations among first century A.D. Jews concerning their concept of the Messiah. However, the common points included that he would be a male descendent of King David; he would be entirely human and in no way divine. He would overthrow the Romans and establish an independent, sovereign nation of Judah. His headquarters would be in Jerusalem with its functioning Temple, and he would gradually bring justice to the whole earth.⁴⁷

In the genealogies of Matthew and Luke, these authors went out of their way to demonstrate that Jesus was born in the royal line of King David.⁴⁸ But as to Jesus' nature, New Testament writers repeated over and over their claim that Jesus was also God as well as man. At least ten of the 27 New Testament documents insist upon their belief that Jesus is God.⁴⁹ In no text anywhere in the New Testament is it denied that Jesus is God. As for the Messiah being a military and political

⁴⁷ See Stephen M. Wylen. *The Jews in the Time of Jesus*. New York: Paulist Press, 1996, pp. 170-171.

⁴⁸ See Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38.

⁴⁹ See Matthew 14:33; Mark 15:39; Luke 1:35; John 1:34; Acts 3:13-15; Romans 1:3-4; II Corinthians 1:19; Ephesians 4:13; Hebrews 4:14; and I John 3:8. There are other texts in these ten books that also called Jesus God. This is just a representative sample.

leader, Jesus expressly denied this when He spoke with Pilate shortly after being ordered to be crucified: “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.”⁵⁰ And on an earlier occasion, three of the gospel writers quoted Jesus saying, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”⁵¹

In all of these ways, Jesus or His apostles made it very clear that Jesus was definitely not the kind of Messiah that the Jews were expecting at all. Plainly, the Christian movement attempted to persuade others that He was the Messiah. But if they were guilty of inventing a Messiah, Jesus was most decidedly not the kind of Messiah they would have made up. This does not prove that Jesus was the Messiah. However, it is a good indication that those who wrote the New Testament documents were not willfully lying about Jesus either.

The Character of the Apostles

How writers of alleged history record their own actions and roles in events is a key factor in determining whether they are reliable recorders of history or not. For example, one should expect to find the weaknesses of the apostles glossed over and possibly their actions a bit heroic if they were unreliable writers of history. However, that is not what we find in the case of the New Testament writers. First, three of the four gospel writers tell us that Jesus’ disciples—that includes all of them—were arguing among themselves and trying to find out from Jesus who among them would be the greatest in His kingdom when He set it up.⁵² Two of the gospel writers record that Peter, James, and John fell asleep repeatedly in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus anxiously wanted them to be praying for Him.⁵³ And it is worth noting here that Mark was a close associate of Peter, who obtained the information for his gospel from Peter.

Mark’s gospel acknowledges that all of Jesus’ followers fled the scene after Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane.⁵⁴ Matthew, Mark, and Luke each told the story of Peter’s denial of Jesus on three specific occasions on the night of Jesus’ arrest and trial, including the fact that he swore or cursed.⁵⁵ Finally, John’s gospel admits that the apostles were hiding out in a room after the crucifixion of Jesus because they were afraid of the Jews.⁵⁶ In other words, since the Jewish leaders had killed their leader, they might be coming after them next.

In other words, the writers of the New Testament documents show no signs of glossing over their weaknesses or even cowardice. Instead, they portray themselves as whimpering, selfish, and fearful individuals, prone to run at the first sign of trouble heading their way. This is yet another internal test that these writers were giving an accurate account in their histories.

Below is the testimony of one trained historian who studied the gospel accounts.

⁵⁰ John 18:36.

⁵¹ Luke 20:25. See also Matthew 22:21 and Mark 12:17.

⁵² See Matthew 18:1; Mark 9:34; and Luke 9:46.

⁵³ See Matthew 26:36-45 and Mark 14:32-41.

⁵⁴ See Mark 14:50.

⁵⁵ See Matthew 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; and Luke 22:54-62.

⁵⁶ See John 20:19.

Despite the prejudices and theological preconceptions of the evangelists [gospel writers], they record many incidents that mere inventors would have concealed—the competition of the apostles for high places in the Kingdom, their flight after Jesus’ arrest, Peter’s denial,...the references of some auditors to his [Christ’s] insanity,...his moments of bitterness, his despairing cry on the cross; no one reading these scenes can doubt the reality of the figure behind them.⁵⁷

Factual Inconsistencies

Factual inconsistencies can be a warning sign that a writer has made invented something, but it actually depends upon the kind of inconsistency that are made. We will address what are probably the three most commonly alleged factual inconsistencies in the gospel accounts.

First, on Saul’s road to Damascus experience, where he allegedly spoke with Jesus who was in heaven, there appears to be an inconsistency between two accounts of the same event. In Acts 9:7, Luke writes, “And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one.” Then in Acts 22:9 are these words, “And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me.” These two statements seem to contradict each other, one telling the reader that the others with Saul heard a voice, and the other one saying that they did not hear a voice. However, three times in the book of Acts, Saul [later became Paul] relates his experience on that particular journey. Concerning a great light that shone down from the sky, he mentions the light only in reference to himself in Acts 9:3, whereas he mentions the light shining upon himself and those with him in Acts 22:9 and Acts 26:13, while saying nothing about the voice in relation to his fellow travelers in the latter account. Therefore, it is clear that his goal in relating this story three times is not to chronicle every detail but to highlight what he wants to highlight. The supposed inconsistency about what his companions heard or did not hear is easily resolved by concluding that they indeed heard the sound of the voice but did not understand the words that were spoken. Thus, there is no actual contradiction.

Second, regarding the death of Judas Iscariot, the apostle who betrayed Jesus, the account in Matthew 27:5 says, “Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself.” Speaking of the same person and event, Luke’s account recorded in Acts 1:18 states, “Now this man purchased a field with the wages of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out.” While these are two different accounts of Judas’ death, they do not necessarily contradict each other. Judas may have hung himself near a rocky ledge, and at some point before or after his death, the rope may have broken, and he hit the rocks below and his guts came out. Since this is a reasonable explanation, the benefit of the doubt goes to both writers.

Finally, let us examine one more alleged factual inconsistency. In Matthew 27:9-10, the apostle attributes a prophecy to Jeremiah when it was actually a prophecy from Zechariah:

Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, ‘And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of Him who was priced, whom they of

⁵⁷ Will Durant. “Caesar and Christ”. *The Story of Civilization*, Vol. 3. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1944, 557.

the children of Israel priced, and gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me.⁵⁸

Some apologists have attempted to reconcile Matthew's reference to Jeremiah on the grounds that Jeremiah 32:6-8 says that God directed him to buy a field but Zechariah adds the details about the thirty pieces of silver. Therefore, Matthew may have understood Jeremiah's prophecy that God was declaring that fields and vineyards would be bought and sold in the land at a future time as a type of the purchase of the potter's field by the priests of Judah, and that Zechariah predicted the price of the field. As a result, Matthew may have seen both prophets' prophecies as fulfilled, but only mentioned one of the prophets. We concede that such a proposed resolution is not a very satisfying explanation, although it is possible. However, it is just as plausible that he made a mistake.

For example, Luke declares that he must have interviewed eyewitnesses of the gospel stories and wrote an orderly account of the facts that he gathered. In other words, he did what any good historian would do.⁵⁹ This suggests to me that none of the writers of the New Testament documents were in straight-jackets, as it were, and thus guaranteed to never make a mistake. The real question, it seems to me, concerns the nature of the mistakes or inconsistencies. For example, if one gospel writer reported that Jesus died on the second day on the cross, or if another writer reported that Jesus was resurrected on Sabbath afternoon, these would be significant discrepancies with the other testimonies about that alleged event. It would be of such a nature that would call the whole event into question as to the reliability or accuracy of the alleged event. But mistaking one prophet for another when attributing a prophecy to someone hardly qualifies as evidence that would jeopardize the veracity of the main story you are telling.

Moreover, even a cursory reading of the four gospels reveals that each author tells the story of Jesus in his own unique order, selects which episodes to present and which to omit altogether, and provides details that are different from the other gospel writers. In doing so, this demonstrates that these writers did not get together and invent the story of Jesus, or else they would have made certain that every detail among their accounts was identical. Therefore, insignificant differences in details—those differences that do not call the basic story into question—actually offers good evidence from an historian's perspective that the basic story must essentially be true.

Nowhere are there more inconsistencies in details among the New Testament documents than those concerning the crucifixion and alleged resurrection of Jesus. On the next page, we will outline most of those differences. Many scholars have spent hours of their time attempting to harmonize all of these details, and we have no doubt that some of them can indeed be harmonized. But if a different detail does not call into question the main event being narrated, then there really is no problem. In fact, such differences simply highlight the fact that the gospel writers did not invent the story. We outline most of the differences in details below.

⁵⁸ Compare Matthew's quotation with Zechariah 11:12-13.

⁵⁹ See Luke 1:1-4.

| MATTHEW ⁶⁰ | MARK ⁶¹ | LUKE ⁶² | JOHN ⁶³ |
|--|---|---|--|
| “This is Jesus the king of the Jews” | “The king of the Jews” | “This is the king of the Jews” (in 3 languages) | “Jesus of Nazareth the king of the Jews” |
| Mary Magdalene & the other Mary came to tomb | Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, & Salome came to tomb when sun had risen. | Mary Magdalene , Joanna, Mary, the mother of James, & the other women found the empty tomb. | Mary Magdalene came to tomb when it was still dark, but saw it was empty. |
| They saw 1 angel roll away the stone from tomb and sat on stone. | The stone had already been rolled away, & they saw 1 angel sitting inside empty tomb. | They found stone already had been rolled away & the tomb was empty, when 2 angels suddenly appeared standing with them. | She ran to Peter & John, who ran back to tomb; & then went back to others. 2 angels suddenly appeared sitting in tomb. Then Jesus suddenly was standing behind her; At first, she didn’t recognize Him, but then she did so. |
| The angel told them to tell disciples Jesus had risen; on the way, Jesus met them. | Angel told them to tell disciples to meet Him in Galilee. | They ran to the disciples; Peter runs to tomb & marveled. | She then went and told disciples that she had seen & talked with Jesus. |

Conclusion

Based on the internal evidence of the New Testament documents, we must conclude that they have easily passed this internal test and have all the earmarks of accurate, reliable history.

The External Test

The major issue in examining external evidence is to determine whether or not other sources of information validate the historical accuracy of a document. The best external sources are widely accepted historical documents and artifacts uncovered by archaeologists. Although not every question of historical detail has yet been answered, neither has any external evidence proved any of the New Testament’s history to be erroneous. Indeed, archaeological discoveries from the nineteenth century onward have verified countless references in the New Testament without refuting a single one.

Rather than chronicling the numerous archaeological findings, we will quote two renown scholars. The first one is noted archaeologist Joseph Free, who declared, “Archaeology has

⁶⁰ See Matthew 27:37; 28:1-10.

⁶¹ See Mark 15:26; 16:1-8.

⁶² See Luke 23:38; 24:1-12.

⁶³ See John 19:19; 20:1-18.

confirmed countless passages which have been rejected by critics as unhistorical or contradictory to known facts.”⁶⁴

The other scholar is the late prominent theologian, Dr. Clark H. Pinnock:

There exists no document from the ancient world witnessed by so excellent a set of textual and historical testimonies, and offering so superb an array of historical data on which an intelligent decision may be made. An honest [person] cannot dismiss a source of this kind. Skepticism regarding the historical credentials of Christianity is based on an irrational [i.e., anti-supernatural] bias.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Joseph Free. *Archaeology and Bible History*. Wheaton, ILL: Scripture Press, 1969, 1.

⁶⁵ Clark Pinnock. *Set Forth Your Case*. New Jersey: The Craig Press, 1968, 58.

Chapter 4: The Claims of Jesus

Introduction

Having established that we have the authentic and historically reliable New Testament documents, we fully agree that an honest person must demand more evidence for alleged miracles and other examples of the supernatural. This is only reasonable because we may never experience such phenomena in a lifetime. We have seen that the earliest Christians believed that Jesus is God as well as man. But were they mistaken? Did they take any of Jesus' words out of context and draw the wrong conclusion? We must admit that this is possible, or otherwise we shall be gullible enough to believe anything. Therefore, the next step in our historical journey is to determine what claims Jesus made about Himself.

Seven categories of statements and actions by Jesus leave no reasonable doubt whatsoever that He did claim to be God as well as man. We will provide only representative samples for these seven categories in order to not unduly burden the reader.

Jesus Accepted the Title of God

Then He [Jesus] said to Thomas, 'Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.' And Thomas answered and said to Him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'⁶⁶

Jesus Accepted the Title "Son of God"

Simon Peter answered and said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.'⁶⁷

Nathaniel answered and said to Him, 'Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel!' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree', do you believe? You will see greater things than these.' And He said to him, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'⁶⁸

Jesus Used the Title "Son of Man"

But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ John 20:27-29, NKJV.

⁶⁷ Matthew 16:16-17, NKJV.

⁶⁸ John 1:49-51, NKJV.

⁶⁹ Matthew 24:37, NKJV.

I was watching in the night visions, And behold, One like the Son of Man, Coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, And they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, That all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, Which shall not pass away, And His kingdom the one Which shall not be destroyed.⁷⁰

“The Son of Man” was Jesus’ favorite title for Himself, as He used it more than 80 times in the gospels.⁷¹ This title originates in Daniel 7, quoted above, where He is taken to a courtroom judgment scene and then given an everlasting kingdom. The “Son of Man” was a Messianic title among the Jews.⁷² However, since His kingdom—not merely His dynasty, but kingdom—is everlasting, He is also everlasting, and thus a divine Being. Yet most first century Jews ignored this important evidence that the Messiah would be both human and divine. This favorite title of Jesus constituted a claim not only of His Messianic status, but also of His claim to divine nature.

Jesus Called Himself the ‘I Am’

“Jesus said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.’ Then they took up stones to throw at Him....”⁷³

The reference to “I AM” means that Jesus claimed to be the God who spoke to Moses from the burning bush in Exodus 3:14: “And God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And He said, ‘Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” Note that Jesus’ statement here was in answer to a question by His critics to the effect that he could not have seen Abraham because the latter lived so long ago (see vv. 56-57). Therefore, when Jesus replied that “before Abraham was, I AM”, His critics knew that Jesus was claiming to be God. Indeed, that is the reason they took up stones to kill Him (see v. 59).

Jesus Claimed the Authority to Forgive Sins

When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven you.’ And some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, ‘Why does this Man speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone?’⁷⁴

Then He [Jesus] said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ And those who sat at the table with Him began to say to themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Daniel 7:13-14, NKJV.

⁷¹ Merrill F. Unger. Unger’s Bible Dictionary. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966, 1038.

⁷² W. E. Vine. Ed. by John R. Kohlenberger III. *The Expanded Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984, 1063.

⁷³ John 8:58, NKJV.

⁷⁴ Mark 2:5-7, NKJV.

⁷⁵ Luke 7:48-49, NKJV.

Jesus Approved of People Worshiping Him

Matthew 14:33 declares, “Then those who were in the boat came and worshiped Him [Jesus], saying, ‘Truly You are the Son of God.’” There is another example in Matthew when certain people worshiped Jesus:

And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, ‘Rejoice!’ So they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me.’⁷⁶

Jesus Claimed Equality with God by Certain Statements

In John 14:9, Jesus declared emphatically, “...He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” Then in John 10:30, Jesus plainly said: ‘I [Jesus] and My Father are one.’

The Islamic Claim against Christianity

Islam teaches that Judaism was originally the one true monotheistic religion, as it claims Abraham as its progenitor in addition to Jews and Christians. They also assert that later Jewish scholars changed and otherwise corrupted their Hebrew Scriptures, so that God had to start over with Christianity. Then original Christianity was the one true monotheistic religion. Once again, however, the allegation is made that later Christian scholars changed their New Testament Scriptures. That was the reason that God finally raised up Muhammed as His last prophet and gave them Scriptures that were considered to be the direct words of God, in the *Quran*. In this plan, God’s Scriptures could not be corrupted by His people since they are not words *about* God, but God’s direct words themselves.⁷⁷

Although there were other alleged alterations, the most significant change Islam charged Christian scholars with making was to change the New Testament to make it appear that Jesus claimed to be God, because this religion asserts that Jesus Himself never made that claim, nor did the earliest Christians believe that about Jesus.⁷⁸

Now, however, we have incontrovertible evidence that Jesus did indeed claim to be God, and that the earliest Christians believed Him to be God also. Moreover, if Islam had to come into existence because certain Christians corrupted their Scriptures, then Islam should not exist as a world religion, because its very reason for existing is based on a charge that has proven to be untrue.

⁷⁶ *Matthew* Ch. 28, Vv. 9-10, NKJV.

⁷⁷ Doug Baker. Unpublished World Religions lecture notes.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*.

The Da Vinci Code Claim against Christianity

Writer Dan Brown wrote a critique of Christianity in 2003 and charged that Emperor Constantine forced a new version of Christianity that excluded the Gnostic gospels at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325.⁷⁹ His book was set in the genre of a mystery thriller and eventually became a popular movie.

The word *Gnosticism* is derived from the Greek word meaning “knowledge”.⁸⁰ Gnosticism was clearly influenced by the writings of the pagan Greek philosopher Plato, although it differs from Plato in some respects. Plato sometimes called Creator-God the demiurge. In Gnosticism, the demiurge is associated with space, time, matter, and that which is imperfect or even evil, a kind of inferior God who made the material universe. God as the Supreme Being, on the other hand, is associated with that which is eternal and is not part of the material world, but of the world of perfection and the soul. The gnostic goal is to free the human soul from the confinement of evil matter so that it can enter the eternal realm of God. This requires a special, secret knowledge, learned through the mystical arts and secret wisdom. Concerning Jesus, some Gnostics declared Him to be the incarnation of God who came to give this special knowledge to the world. Others deny His incarnation and claim that He is only a human being who became divine through learning the secret knowledge and wisdom.⁸¹

In December 1945 a farmer discovered thirteen leather-bound papyrus codices buried in a sealed clay jar near the Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi in southern Egypt. These codices contained 52 documents, most of which were gnostic in nature. They were written in the Coptic language and dated to the third and fourth centuries A.D. The most famous of these documents, and the only one present in its entirety was the Gospel of Thomas, dated to the fourth century. It is not a story of Jesus at all, but a list of 114 sayings of Jesus frequently alluded to as *mysterious* and *secret*. Due to its absence of historical references or events, it is very difficult to date the original Gospel of Thomas. Most scholars believe its origin was in the second century and thus could not have been written by the New Testament apostle Thomas.⁸²

The following is an outline of the major claims made in *The Da Vinci Code*:⁸³

- That Jesus was only a human being and that no one before A.D. 325 believed He was God.
- Emperor Constantine politically bribed and otherwise corrupted the process at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 to elevate Jesus’ status to Godhood because he thought it would give the emperor and church leaders a more powerful status.

⁷⁹ Dan Brown. *The Da Vinci Code*. New York: Doubleday, 2003.

⁸⁰ Gnosticism. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Etymology*.

<http://www.oxfordreference.com/search?q=gnosticism&searchBtn=Search&isQuickSearch=true>.

⁸¹ Howard F. Vos. *Exploring Church History*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, Inc., 1994, 31-32.

⁸² See Douglas Groothuis. Christian Research Institute. <http://www.equip.org/article/what-were-the-nag-hammadi-scrolls>. See also Philip Jenkins. *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, 92-93.

⁸³ See Grenville Kent and Philip Rodionoff. *The Da Vinci Code: Is Christianity “The Greatest Cover-up in Human History”?* Victoria, Australia: Signs Publishing Company, 2006

- That Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and that some of their descendants included the kings of France.
- That Constantine ordered the burning of several, mostly gnostic gospels of Jesus.

First, it is common knowledge among Christian scholars that there were competing versions of Christianity by or before the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325. There is no denying that fact. However true that may be, we have already seen very good evidence that the original Christians believed that Jesus was God and He Himself claimed to be God.

Second, there is no evidence of great conflict over the issue of Jesus' status. In the end, only two bishops, out of approximately 300, opposed the Nicene Creed that was written by the Council of Nicea. A priest from Alexandria, Egypt had been stirring things up by preaching and writing that Jesus was not equal with God the Father. This was the major reason for calling the council of bishops together in the first place.⁸⁴ After his teachings on Jesus were soundly rejected, Constantine did order his writings to be burned. But they were not gospels. If any gnostic gospels were burned, it was because they were known to have been written no earlier than the middle of the second century—too late to be genuine gospels, of Thomas, Mary, or any of the other eyewitnesses of the Jesus-events. In short, there was therefore no conspiracy to create a new, revised version of the Christian Jesus and to suppress the earliest version.

Finally, there is absolutely no historical evidence that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene or any other woman for that matter. It is sheer speculation that certainly titillated novel readers and moviegoers, but that's all it is.

Evaluating the Claims of Jesus

One thing is absolutely clear after examining the historical documents that give us the most information about Jesus. No one can be intellectually honest and simply call Him a great moral teacher. C.S. Lewis, former atheist and converted Christian, made this point most eloquently:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him [Jesus]: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Catholic Encyclopedia, "The First Council of Nicea". <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11044a.htm>.

⁸⁵ C. S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972, 55-56.

The question remains: How should we evaluate the claims of Jesus that He is God? Most Christian apologists have adopted a trilogy of questions, answering each one from the evidence we have in the authentic and reliable gospels. This trilogy asks about Jesus whether He was a *lunatic*, *liar*, or *Lord*. The reason that it is almost universally used by apologists is that there seems to be no reasonable argument against it. If it can be demonstrated that Jesus was not a lunatic or a liar, then the only viable conclusion remaining is that He was who He claimed to be. Therefore, we will use this trilogy and explain our response according to the evidence as we move through it.

Was Jesus a Lunatic?

First, no one can simply be mistaken about a claim to be God. There are hundreds of people who claim to be God, but most of them wind up in a mental institution, surrounded by professionals in white coats, living in rooms with padded walls, and sometimes wearing straight-jackets. No, anyone who claims to be God who is not God must be delusional to a very strong degree.

Second, if Jesus had been that delusional about His identity, His closest disciples would have seen a sufficient amount of strange and illogical behavior to alert them that something was very wrong. If they had witnessed such behavior, why would they have tried to conceal it? You might argue that perhaps they wanted to believe Him so much because it made them more important by their association with Him. But we have already seen that they did not in the least bit gloss over their own character defects and misdeeds. This fact alone is sufficient reason to reject the notion that they would have hung on to Jesus as “God” for their own reputations’ sakes. This would be particularly the case as Jesus became the object of more and more criticism, rejection, and finally, execution. Nevertheless, they insisted that Jesus was God and risked their own lives for their faith in this person.

Third, persons who are so delusional that they think themselves to be God when they are not, does not attract such large crowds to hear Him speak. This is just plain logic.

By contrast, the profound statements uttered by Jesus, and the effect those statements and His life had, and still has, on others exists as remarkable testimony, not only to His sanity, but also to His great wisdom. One psychiatrist drew the following conclusions about Jesus’ mental health:

If you were to take the sum total of all authoritative articles ever written by the most qualified of psychologists and psychiatrists on the subject of mental hygiene...and if you were to have these unadulterated bits of pure scientific knowledge concisely expressed by the most capable of living poets, you would have an awkward and incomplete summation of the Sermon on the Mount. And it would suffer immeasurably through comparison. For nearly two thousand years the Christian world has been holding in its hands the complete answer to its restless and fruitless yearnings...the blueprint for successful human life with optimism, mental health, and contentment.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ J. T. Fisher and L. S. Hawley. *A Few Buttons Missing*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1951, 273.

Was Jesus the World's Greatest Liar?

If Jesus was not a lunatic, then was He the world's greatest liar or con man? In His many dealings with His Jewish critics, Jesus had plenty of motive to lie or shade the truth, for it could have easily delayed His arrest, trial, and execution, if not prevented it altogether. Indeed, if one accepts this idea that Jesus was a great liar about who He was, then we have to believe that He willingly accepted His own execution rather than to retract His claims of Deity. For one who gave evidence of such great sanity, it is inconceivable to believe that Jesus was a con artist.

Second, it is important to note that none of Jesus' critics accused Him of lying about anything except about His claims to being God. When your critics do not accuse you of being a liar, this speaks volumes to your character.

Finally, why would a lying con man choose Judea as the primary place to gather a following. The Jewish religion was, and is, so fiercely monotheistic, most of them could hardly be expected to embrace a man walking on earth claiming to be God. Almost any other culture would have been preferable. Moreover, rabbinical Judaism did not expect the coming Messiah to be God, but only a male descendent of King David. So if Jesus were a lying con man, He would have been one of the dumbest would-be Messiahs in history!

Conclusion

It is precisely because Jesus made such an outlandish and stupendous claim that He was God that Christianity is the easiest world religion to test for its truthfulness. After examining the evidence that the New Testament documents almost certainly reflect accurate history—suspending judgment on the alleged miracles for the moment—and those gospels themselves, we are really left with just one conclusion: It is far more likely that Jesus really is God than that He was either a lunatic or the world's greatest lying con artist.

However, in agreement with the proposition that miracles demand greater evidence to support them, we examine the subject of miracles in general in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Are Miracles ever Possible?

Introduction

It is common knowledge that the New Testament gospels and the book of Acts report numerous miracles allegedly performed by Jesus and even some of His closest disciples. The greatest reports of miracles are of those who were raised from the dead. Of course, the ultimate test of whether Jesus really was God or not would concern the Christian belief that Jesus Himself rose from the dead. Before addressing this particular and all-important report of the miracle of Jesus' resurrection, we should first discuss the very possibility of miracles, given the obvious fact that the most charitable objector might assert that we observe them rarely if ever.

David Hume's Objection to Miracles

The philosopher that virtually every skeptic of Christianity mirrors is the Scottish eighteenth century David Hume (1711-1776). Hume's basic argument against the possibility of miracles is that a miracle must, by definition, violate natural law. That, he reasoned, is virtually impossible, because natural laws rest on very high degrees of probability based on observations over long periods of time by thousands of people. Therefore, it is far more probable that those who report observing a miracle are mistaken or lying than it is that the miracle actually occurred. In theory, Hume left a slim chance that a miracle might occur. He said that only if the report of a miracle being false would be a greater miracle than the miracle reported, should one accept the report of a miracle as being true. But Hume thought that this really could not be the case, or at least that it never had been, for he never believed any reports of miracles of any kind from any source.⁸⁷

Hume's Argument Analyzed

First, we would challenge Hume's assumption that a miracle would be a violation of a natural law. Technically, a natural law cannot be violated, or else it would not be a law. Human laws can and are violated everyday by some people. But how could a law of nature be violated if it were really a law? It might be counteracted by some force or even neutralized temporarily, but it could not be violated. Or, it might be temporarily suspended, but only the law-maker would have the ability to do that. And when we are speaking of natural physical laws of the universe, that Law-Maker would be God, having already established elsewhere that He exists.⁸⁸ It also seems highly improbable that God would allow even a created supernatural being—supernatural in relation to human beings—to suspend one of His laws since the creator of a law is the only one who should naturally have the ability to suspend it.

Second, Hume's assumption that there are natural laws in the first place is ultimately inconsistent with his own philosophy. Hume taught that no cause-and-effect relationships can ever be known with certainty because perhaps the trillionth and first time someone takes the same action as

⁸⁷ Brooke Noel Moore and Kenneth Bruder. *Philosophy: The Power of Ideas*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002, 356.

⁸⁸ Baker, A Search for Ultimate Truths: A Philosophical and Historical Journey. Builders of Faith, 2014-2016, and in *A Philosophical Defense of God: Mini Lessons*. Builders of Faith, 2016.

others have done before him, something unexpected and very different occurs instead.⁸⁹ For example, when a person kicks a soccer ball with his toes aimed in a specific direction, the ball is always observed to move in that direction. The reaction of the ball follows the same path as the direction of the force applied to the ball. But Hume was famous for saying you cannot experience the future, so that the trillionth and first time someone kicks the soccer ball toward the same direction, the ball might just go in the opposite direction; or perhaps it will go straight up into the air. So if you cannot establish a cause-and-effect relationship, you cannot know that a natural law really exists. Yet, when it comes to the possibility of miracles, Hume assumes that natural law does exist, and that a miracle would be a violation of that natural law.

Third, Hume was guilty of circular reasoning in his argument against miracles. He dismissed all reports of miracles as false. But the great Christian apologist, C. S. Lewis, responded to Hume in this way:

Unfortunately, we know the experience against them [miracles] to be uniform only if we know that all the reports of them are false. And we can know all the reports of them to be false only if we know already that miracles have never occurred. In fact, we are arguing in a circle.⁹⁰

As to Hume's criteria for accepting a reported miracle as having actually been a miracle, that seems to be sound logic. It is certainly true that miracles are not everyday occurrences. Therefore, to avoid being a gullible individual, one should demand a higher standard of evidence before he believes in a miracle. But if a reported miracle is consistent with the historical-legal evidence *and* is the most reasonable option available, then it may be believed. Or, to put it in Hume's terms, if the report of a miracle being false would be more miraculous than the alleged miracle itself, then it is more rational to believe that a miracle really occurred. The difference between Hume and us is that we will actually examine the reports of the resurrection of Jesus in the next chapter and allow the evidence to lead wherever it leads. Hume's bias would not allow him to do that.

What Miracles Can be Performed by Whom

Because we have already used philosophy to argue for the existence of a monotheistic God and the Devil⁹¹, let us explore the possibilities of who can and cannot perform miracles and what limitations there might be on some.

The Devil and His Demons

First, the Devil certainly must know about some natural laws of which modern human science is still not aware. Therefore, the Devil and his demons may utilize those laws to perform what appears to us to be miracles. Second, within whatever parameters God has set for him, the Devil can create problems and then turn around and delete them. For example, he could probably

⁸⁹ Moore and Bruder, 124-126.

⁹⁰ C. S. Lewis. *Miracles*. New York: Macmillan, 1947, 105.

⁹¹ See Footnote 88. *A Search for Ultimate Truths*.

speed up the Law of Entropy⁹² in a specific location within a person or animal, and then invisibly re-enter the life-form and undo the results of that particular action. In this way, the Devil and his demons could heal people.

However, the Devil cannot create anything *ex nihilo*,⁹³ so this limits him in what he can do. This means that he cannot create a cancerous tumor directly and then remove it. He would have to create a tumor by manipulating the genetic code, and then re-set the genetic code so that the tumor will naturally disappear. Moreover, since the Law of Entropy exists because of God's partial withdraw from the world, the Devil would be powerless to suspend it. In fact, logic suggests that his presence would only make that natural law more intense. Therefore, he could not cure someone who naturally became ill. To heal someone, the Devil would have to have first caused the health problem himself.

Regarding miracles such as weeping or bleeding statues, although the Devil cannot create *ex nihilo*, he almost certainly could synthesize almost anything he wanted to, and invisibly place it on a statue so as to make it appear to be crying or bleeding—even to the point that chemical analysis would show the substance as human tears or human blood.

Finally, as supernatural beings, the Devil and his demons can take on any form they wish to. Therefore, not all ghostly appearances in séances are necessarily tricks played by the medium. These creatures could indeed appear like anyone, sound like anyone, and have all the mannerisms and body language of anyone. Naturally, they would do this only for the purpose of deceiving people. They would be limited in this ability only by any parameters that God might set for them.

God

As for God, since He is the author of all natural laws, He would be able to suspend them in any given location in order to perform what would be a miracle. Second, He too would be able to utilize natural laws that are unknown to humans and thus work a miracle. Third, since God did not create the Law of Entropy, the application of His presence in any specific location would automatically suspend it, thus resulting in the healing of any life-form no matter how it became hurt or ill. Fourth, God can create *ex nihilo*, so He is not limited in what He can do. Fifth, since God alone is the source of all life, He can resurrect people from the dead if He chose to do so. Finally, God is omnipotent, which means that He can direct His power simultaneously to several specific locations in the universe in order to perform a miracle or to prevent His creatures, including the Devil and his demons, from going beyond God's set boundaries for them. In other words, the existence of God allows for the possibility of miracles. In fact, we would go further and state that whether one believes in God or not probably determines whether he believes that miracles can or cannot occur.

⁹² This is also known as the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which states that left to its natural state, every living and non-living entity naturally will progressively break down or die.

⁹³ This is Latin for "out of nothing".

Chapter 6: The Resurrection of Jesus

Introduction

The Christian apostle Paul emphatically wrote that ‘if Christ [Jesus] is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty.’⁹⁴ Beyond that, he made it even more clear that Christianity is the most massive successful fraud ever perpetuated on the human race of Jesus did not rise from the dead.

Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.⁹⁵

Clearly, then, the greatest apostle in the early Christian Church believed that the whole Christian faith depended entirely on whether Jesus rose from the dead or not. And it would be very difficult to argue with his logic. For if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then He must still be dead. Because Christians accept this same Jesus as their Savior from sin⁹⁶ who is also coming back to take His people home with Him⁹⁷ and to eventually put a final end to evil in the universe⁹⁸, if He is still dead in some tomb in the Middle East, then none of these things can occur either. Under that scenario, there is absolutely no meaning to the word salvation, evil will always exist on through the ages, and there is no hope of ultimate justice or eternal life ever coming to reality. Under these circumstances, one might as well do whatever it takes to get ahead in this life, for that is all there would be. Thus, the Christian lifestyle has no real value. Oh, living a healthier lifestyle might gain you a few more years of quality life than the average person. But what is that in contrast to an unending life of health and joy? It is all in vain.

On the other hand, if Jesus did in fact rise from the dead, then dedicating your life to Him as a faithful Christian means everything. It means that if you die before Jesus returns in glory, you also will be raised from the dead. You also will be given eternal life in a universe in which all evil has been eradicated, and there is justice, love, and harmony reigning supreme, both at the individual level and on the grand universal scale. This would have to mean unimaginable joy, with none of these things ever being marred by evil again throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity going forward in time.

The stakes for us as individuals and for the universe itself could not possibly be higher—to say nothing of the fact that if Jesus was not resurrected from the dead, Christianity is not only a false religion but the cruelest hoax ever played on the minds of people. No, there can be no doubt

⁹⁴ I Corinthians 15:14, NKJV.

⁹⁵ I Corinthians 15:15-19, NKJV.

⁹⁶ Matthew 1:21; Luke 1:47; 2:11; Acts 5:30-31; Ephesians 5:23; II Timothy 1:10; and Titus 2:13.

⁹⁷ Matthew 13:36-43; 24:30-31; John 14:1-3; Acts 1:11; I Thessalonians 4:16-17; and Revelation 14:14-16.

⁹⁸ Revelation 20:7-9, 11-15.; 21:1, 4.

about the significance of this question of whether Jesus was resurrected or not. Seen in this light, it is not an exaggeration to state that it is the single most important issue facing the human race. The answer to no other question contains so much consequences for all of humanity.

The Resurrection Story as Myth

One objection to the resurrection of Jesus, as to the entire story of Christianity, is that it is myth. By myth, these critics allege that the writers of the Christian story never intended for anyone to take it on face value, to believe that it literally happened in history. Instead, it was completely invented as a mythical, or legendary, story designed only to teach certain spiritual lessons that cannot be understood as having literally happened. Thus, there was no one named Jesus who lived or did any of the things attributed to Him. Therefore, the resurrection can be rejected outright as having never happened; thus, there is no need to analyze its story and attempt to refute it.

We cannot take this mythology objection seriously because we have already disproven most of the evidence used to support the objection. First, any genuine literary scholar who has seriously read the Christian gospels or other New Testament documents will testify that the writing style of these documents do *not* contain the elements you always find in mythological stories—fanciful, exaggerated, and super-like heroes and events.⁹⁹ Instead, these documents read like straightforward, eyewitness accounts of historical events.

Second, as we mentioned previously, there simply was not sufficient time for mythical or legendary material to creep into this story, for historians generally believe that it takes 150-200 years—several generations—for such material to corrupt historical accounts. Because we have determined that the manuscript evidence for the New Testament documents places them all as having been originally written in the first century A.D., there simply is not enough time for legendary materials to have been introduced into the story of Jesus. This is the reason that such material is not found in those documents. Furthermore, there were too many eyewitnesses still alive who could have vigorously objected to such mythical material or to the straightforward historical quality of the writings. In other words, whether the Jesus story had been mythical, *or* if it had been straight historical material, too many people still alive in the first century could have exposed the writings as either mythological or objected to their historical nature in other ways. Yet no manuscripts or references in other sources to such persons or manuscripts has ever been discovered. This reinforces the evidence that shows these documents to be written as historical accounts.

Finally, the apostle Peter knew the difference between myths and history and explicitly and boldly proclaimed that he and his fellow Christians “...did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty.”¹⁰⁰ As Kreeft and Tacelli logically point out, since the New Testament emphatically denies the Jesus story to be myth, if it really were mythological in nature, then the story would either be a deliberate lie or a mistake based on several

⁹⁹ Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli. *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994, 189.

¹⁰⁰ II Peter 1:16, NKJV.

hallucinations.¹⁰¹ In either case, we would then examine the evidence for and against the idea that it was a lie and that it was a series of hallucinations. Indeed, we shall do this later in this chapter.

Some Basic Facts

Burial Facts

All four gospels tell us that Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy believer on the Jewish council, obtained permission from Pilate to take and bury the body of Jesus; only John's gospel adds that Nicodemus went to the tomb with Joseph.¹⁰² All four gospels also tell us that they wrapped Jesus' body in fine linen and laid Him in a brand new tomb. John's account adds that some spices of about 100 pounds were bound on the body with the linen strips.¹⁰³ Matthew also adds that an unknown number of Roman soldiers were sent to guard the tomb and to seal the stone in order to prevent any of Jesus' disciples from stealing the body.¹⁰⁴ It was common knowledge that any Roman soldier caught sleeping on duty could be executed on the spot, as would be true for anyone who tried to mess with a Roman seal.

The Empty Tomb

All four gospels report that the tomb in which Jesus' body had been laid was found empty by various followers of Jesus on Sunday morning following His crucifixion.¹⁰⁵ Some critics have alleged that the followers of Jesus were confused in the early morning air and went to the wrong tomb. The tomb they found was empty, so they concluded that Jesus had been resurrected. After all, at least the first four persons to see the empty tomb were women,¹⁰⁶ and they weren't even allowed to give testimony in a trial.

But how reasonable is this suggestion? First, even if the first followers to arrive on the scene went to the wrong tomb by mistake, it is not reasonable to expect that all of them would have done so. Certainly, one of them would have recognized that this was the wrong tomb and said something. Second, they surely knew that Roman guards had been posted at the tomb. So if they had gone to the wrong tomb, the absence of those guards would have immediately told them that they were at the wrong tomb. Third, the Roman guards and the Jewish leaders which arranged for them to protect the tomb would certainly have known where the real tomb was located. All they had to do, under those circumstances, was to take witnesses to the actual tomb and display Jesus' body. That would have squashed rumors of a resurrection. The fact that no one produced the body of Jesus from the tomb demonstrates beyond reasonable doubt that the tomb was indeed empty. In fact, so clear is this point that very few critics of the resurrection attempt to disprove it.

¹⁰¹ Kreeft and Tacelli, 192-193.

¹⁰² See Matthew 27:57-60; Mark 15:42-46; Luke 23:50-54; and John 19:38-42.

¹⁰³ See John 19:39-40.

¹⁰⁴ See Matthew 27:62-66.

¹⁰⁵ See Matthew 28:1-8; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; and John 20:1-13.

¹⁰⁶ See Matthew 28:1-8; Mark 16:1-5; Luke 24:1-3, 10; and John 20:1-2.

Non-Resurrection Options for Explaining the Empty Tomb

Reason informs us that only two basic options exist for explaining the empty tomb other than that Jesus was actually resurrected. One option is that Jesus had not really died on the cross, but was prematurely buried and then revived in the tomb and left it. The other option is that someone, or some group, stole His body from the tomb—either His followers, His enemies, or some pranksters or grave robbers. The only other option for rejecting the resurrection of Jesus was that His followers were mistaken and hallucinated the numerous “experiences” they had with the apparently resurrected Jesus. Because this latter option could have simply been disproven by the enemies of Jesus producing His body from the tomb, this option does not explain the empty tomb. Therefore, we will examine this option last.

We briefly outline all of the options derived from reason and arguments with skeptics of Jesus through history to the alleged resurrection of Jesus as follows:

1. *The Swoon Theory*: That Jesus did not die.
2. *The Conspiracy Theories*: That Jesus died, and someone placed the body elsewhere.
3. *The Hallucination Theory*: That Jesus died, but His followers were deceived by a series of hallucinations.
4. *The Christian Answer*: That Jesus died and was resurrected.

We are now ready to return to the historical-legal approach to the investigation of whether Jesus really died and was resurrected or not. We should use David Hume’s criteria in making our final decision. Unless the circumstances of the reports of Jesus’ resurrection are more miraculous than the alleged resurrection of Jesus, we should not conscientiously conclude that Jesus was raised from the dead. On the other hand, if they *are*, then we should be prepared to accept the resurrection of Jesus, and thus to accept Him as God and to determine to follow what He has directed as the final authority for our beliefs and practices.

The Swoon Theory

Explanation: The Swoon Theory states that Jesus did not really die on the cross, but had fainted in a very weak condition. The soldiers, and others who handled the body, lived in ancient times when medical knowledge was virtually unknown, so it was easy to make the mistake in pronouncing Jesus dead. Then, while in the tomb, the cool air revived Him, after which He left the tomb.

Response: Is this a plausible explanation? First, ancient peoples were not nearly as ignorant of basic medical facts as we tend to think in our modern era. The Romans were quite experienced in crucifixions and thus knew what they were doing. Moreover, the death penalty was imposed upon any soldier who failed to properly execute a prisoner by crucifixion. Second, the soldiers in Jesus’ case did not break His legs—a tactic normally done to speed up death—because they perceived he was already dead.¹⁰⁷ Instead, of the soldier thrust his spear into Jesus’ side just to make absolutely certain He was dead.¹⁰⁸ This demonstrated that Jesus’ lungs had already

¹⁰⁷ John 19:33.

¹⁰⁸ John 19:34.

collapsed, and He was indeed dead. Third, the record states that Jesus was beaten twice¹⁰⁹ and had a crown of thorns pressed onto His head.¹¹⁰ With all of His wounds, and the conditions existing under crucifixion, it is hardly possible that Jesus was alive when He was removed from the cross. In fact, a study of Jesus' crucifixion by modern medical scientists drew the conclusion that Jesus was definitely dead by the time He was taken down from the cross.¹¹¹

Even if by some rare chance Jesus was not dead by that time, it would be more miraculous than a resurrection if He had been able to revive after His excruciating ordeal and bound with 100 pounds of spices by linen cloths in the smelly, damp, dark environment of a Judean tomb. Indeed, a few questions would have been impossible to adequately answer: First, how would such an emaciated man be able to roll back the heavy stone covering His tomb. Second, if that miraculous event had somehow occurred, how could he have overpowered a whole contingent of Roman guards who were there guarding the tomb precisely to prevent his body from being stolen or otherwise escape? Finally, where did Jesus go even if He had been able to do all of these impossible things? Any subsequent appearances of Jesus to His followers under this scenario would hardly have been the picture of eternal life and divine power necessary to produce a revitalized Christian movement, a movement whose major players eventually died for their faith founded on the resurrection of Jesus.

The series of so highly improbable events just enunciated would surely constitute a series of miracles far greater than the alleged miracle of Jesus' resurrection that we have partially met David Hume's case for believing in the miracle of Jesus' resurrection. The Swoon Theory is simply ludicrous and highly unreasonable and should thus be thoroughly rejected.

Conspiracy Theory #1: The Disciples Stole the Body

Explanation: This particular conspiracy theory states that the disciples of Jesus stole His body from the tomb, hid or buried it somewhere else, and proclaimed that He had risen from the dead. According to Matthew 28:11-15, this was the official explanation given for the disappearance of Jesus' body from the tomb by the legal authorities in Jerusalem.

Response: However, evidence of the disciples' cowardice and fear at the time of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion¹¹² makes it highly unlikely that any of them would have been courageous enough to even attempt to get past the Roman guards at the tomb and steal the body. Even if they made such an attempt, they most certainly would have been overcome by the Roman guards, who were always well-trained. Besides, it was certain death if caught tampering with the Roman seal. And for what? A lie! Moreover, this option means that the apostles of Jesus eventually died for their faith in what they knew was a lie. Many people have probably died for a lie which they mistakenly believed was the truth. But no one would die for what they *knew* was a lie.

¹⁰⁹ See Matthew 26:67; 27: 26 and Mark 14:65; 15:15.

¹¹⁰ See Matthew 27:29; Mark 15:17; and John 19:2.

¹¹¹ See William D. Edwards, M.D. and others. "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ", *Journal of the American Medical Association*, March 21, 1986, 1455-1463.

¹¹² Matthew 26:56; Mark 14:50, 66-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-18, 25-27; 20:19.

Even in the face of the unbelievable fact that any of them would have lied about Jesus' resurrection, no one could have gotten away with such a lie surrounded by people in Jerusalem who had seen Jesus crucified and would have refused to believe the resurrection story when Jesus was not presented alive to any of them. Finally, there were so many enemies of Jesus in Jerusalem that it is inconceivable that no one would have proved that a conspiracy had been concocted.

No, this option simply doesn't pass the "smell" test and must therefore be rejected as more miraculous than the account of Jesus' resurrection itself.

Conspiracy #2: Enemies Stole the Body

Explanation: This option states that the Romans or the Jewish authorities stole the body of Jesus.

Response: But what could possibly have been their motive? The Romans wanted to maintain law and order in the troubled region of Judea. A missing body of a charismatic religious leader could not have reasonably been expected to produce peace and stability. Instead, it would most likely have stirred up passions about what did or did not happen, and why?

For their part, the Jewish leaders would not have wanted an empty tomb either because that would, as it did, lead to the Christian proclamation that Jesus had risen from the dead. Besides, these groups could have shut down the entire Christian movement by simply producing the dead body of Jesus. The fact that they never did so leads to the logical conclusion that they had not taken His body.

Conspiracy #3: Pranksters or Grave Robbers Stole the Body

Explanation: This option states that one or more neutral pranksters stole the body of Jesus simply for the fun of it.

Response: But again, there would be the nearly impossible task of getting past the Roman guards to roll away the stone entrance and steal the body. And if they were grave robbers rather than pranksters, it would have been far more likely that they would have stolen the spices which had been packed by the linen cloths rather than take the entire body of a man. But John 20:5-7 tells us that the linen cloths that Jesus' body had been wrapped in were left in the tomb. Besides, there were obviously numerous other tombs around Jerusalem that were not guarded by Roman soldiers, and therefore much easier to rob. Also, the penalty for defying Roman authority was death. Therefore, there appears to be neither a reasonable motive nor the possibility of success for pranksters or grave robbers to have stolen the body of Jesus.

The Hallucination Theory

Explanation: The Hallucination Theory does not really attempt to explain the empty tomb, but the many alleged appearances of Jesus. The idea is that the followers of Jesus were so anxious to

believe that their master had been resurrected that extreme psychological desire produced a mass hysteria wave of sightings that were only hallucinations.

Response: However, medical experts state that aside from direct brain stimulation, as from a surgeon's electrode, hallucinations can occur in people with the following kinds of serious illnesses or under certain other conditions:¹¹³

- Schizophrenia
- Parkinson's
- Alzheimer's (or other forms of dementia)
- Brain tumor (if it is an area having to do with one's vision)
- Charles Bonnet Syndrome (in people with vision problems such as macular degeneration, glaucoma, or cataracts)
- Epilepsy
- Narcolepsy (a nervous system disease that can cause extreme sleepiness. Such persons may hallucinate as they are falling asleep or when they first wake up.)
- Sensory Defects (such as visual or hearing impairment)
- Severe illnesses (such as kidney and liver failure, AIDS, and brain cancer)
- High Fever (particularly in the very young and the very old)
- Hallucinogenic Drugs

By extrapolation from the medical causes of hallucinations, we may also add these causes of hallucinations:

- Sensory Deprivation (as when a person has been kept in extreme isolation for an extended period of time)
- Extreme Anxiety
- High Mental Expectation

Furthermore, famed psychologist Dr. Gary Collins wrote this about the nature of hallucinations:

Hallucinations are individual occurrences. By their very nature only one person can see a given hallucination at a time. They certainly aren't something which can be seen by a group of people. Neither is it possible that one person could somehow induce an hallucination in somebody else. Since an hallucination exists on in this subjective, personal sense, it is obvious that others cannot witness it.¹¹⁴

According to Luke's testimony in Acts 1:3, Jesus spent the 40 days after His resurrection with His apostles and other believers, doing a variety of things. Luke's gospel records that Jesus ate bread and fish and allowed His followers to touch His hands and feet to prove that He was not a

¹¹³ Web MD. "What Causes Hallucinations?" www.webmd.com/brain/what-are-hallucinations, 1-2. See also Medline Plus. National Institutes of Health. www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/003258.htm, 1-2.

¹¹⁴ Quoted by Lee Strobel via conversation with Dr. Gary Habermas in Strobel. *The Case for Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998, 238-239.

spirit.¹¹⁵ Finally, the apostle Paul openly declared that Jesus rose again from the dead and was seen by more than 500 persons at one time, “of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.”¹¹⁶ Then the record in Acts declares that Jesus ascended up to heaven in their sight, with the promise that He would return in the same manner.¹¹⁷

Do the critics want us to believe that everyone who claimed to see the resurrected Jesus had one of the serious illnesses or was experiencing one of the physical or mental conditions that are known to cause hallucinations? And further, are they asking us to believe that the reports of multiple witnesses of the resurrected Jesus experienced the same hallucination at the same time, in defiance of known medical knowledge?

There is not a single clue in the historical record that any of the extreme physical or mental conditions known to produce hallucinations was in effect on any of the people who claimed to have seen Jesus after His resurrection, except possibly for a reference to *fear* in John 20:19. The mental condition of His followers immediately after the crucifixion can best be described as dejected; their hopes had been dashed. The last thing any of them expected was to see Jesus alive again. They were afraid of the Jewish leaders, apparently fearing that they might be their next targets. But even if such anxiety were sufficiently extreme to cause hallucinations, why would any of them hallucinate the figure of a living Jesus, whom they did not expect to see? And if *none* were likely to see such a hallucination, what is the probability that *all*, or most, of them would see the same thing, in light of medical science telling us that this is impossible?

Furthermore, hallucinations cannot touch physical objects or be touched by anything physical. Yet the gospels state that Jesus was touched on His feet as well as His hands and side¹¹⁸, that He broke bread and ate it, and that He also ate fish and honeycomb in the presence of multiple witnesses.¹¹⁹

In addition to these factors, hallucinations are not known to last for long periods of time. But some of the recorded appearances of Jesus after His crucifixion must have lasted a considerable amount of time. Also, not only is the medical testimony that 500 people could not have seen the same hallucination at the same time, but it is all the more significant that the historical testimony about the more than 500 simultaneous witnesses of Jesus was openly declared when most of those people were still alive and able to refute it. Finally, there is no record of any further sightings of Jesus after His reported ascension to heaven, with the exception of Paul many years later, under very different circumstances from the original apostles of Jesus. In other words, the appearances of Jesus all stopped at the same time. How strange this is if the appearances were nothing more than hallucinations.

Clearly, the Hallucination Theory represents a last-gasp, desperate effort by the critics of Jesus to throw anything against the wall and hope that it sticks in some people’s minds that Jesus was never resurrected. This idea is quite frankly very pathetic and should be rejected for what it is.

¹¹⁵ See Luke 24:30-43.

¹¹⁶ See I Corinthians 15:3-6, NKJV.

¹¹⁷ See Acts 1:9-11.

¹¹⁸ Matthew 28:9; Luke 24:39; and John 20:27.

¹¹⁹ Luke 24:30, 42-43; John 21:1-14.

Conclusion

Using the historical-legal method of determining the truth about an alleged event of history, we discovered several important facts. First, it is quite clear that Jesus was dead by the time His body was removed from the cross. Second, the tomb in which Jesus' body was placed after His death was actually empty the next Sunday morning. Third, all of the possible explanations for the empty tomb other than a resurrection are completely unreasonable. Fourth, the allegation that the post-crucifixion appearances of Jesus were all hallucinations violates the nature and conditions for hallucinations to occur. Finally, most of the followers of Jesus were dejected and greatly disappointed when Jesus died; their hopes and dreams had been shattered. Then suddenly, after they allegedly saw the resurrected Jesus, these men and women became fearless leaders to proclaim that Jesus had risen from the dead, and that He really was the Savior of all mankind. Finally, most of them died for their faith. If they had died for what they knew was a lie, this would have been a greater miracle than their reports of the resurrection of Jesus.

Therefore, by the skeptic David Hume's own criteria for accepting an alleged miracle as a fact, we are compelled by the historical evidence and logic to conclude that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. This truth reinforces our philosophical arguments that God really exists. It also leads us to Christianity as the one true world religion. Of course, there are many versions of Christianity. But God will have and protect a faithful people among Christians. Therefore, all that remains is to allow Jesus to show us what our authority and guide should be, and to follow that wherever it leads. Nothing—and I repeat nothing—that this evil world offers is more than temporary and illusionary. An eternal life with God is worth any so-called sacrifice. And it is absolutely amazing!

To continue this spiritual journey, we invite you to take our online courses on our Builders of Faith web site, Explorer I, Exploring Bible Truth and then Explorer II, Exploring End-Time Prophecy. May the Lord Jesus Christ richly bless you as you study His Word and follow its teachings wherever they lead!