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# Was Jesus a Real Person?

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# Was Jesus a Real Person?

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Did Jesus Christ really exist, or is Christianity a legend built upon a fictitious character like Harry Potter?

For nearly two thousand years most of our world has considered Jesus a real man who had exceptional character, leadership and power over nature. But today some are saying he never existed.

The argument against Jesus' existence, known as the *Christ-myth theory*, began seventeen centuries after Jesus is said to have walked the rocky hills of Judea.

In his early years as an atheist Oxford literary scholar, C. S. Lewis considered Jesus a myth, thinking all religions were simply inventions.<sup>1</sup>

Years later, Lewis was sitting by the fire in an Oxford dorm room with a friend he called "the hardest boiled atheist of all the atheists I ever knew." Suddenly his atheist friend blurted out, "The evidence for the historicity of the Gospels was really surprisingly good...It almost looks as if it had really happened once."<sup>2</sup>

Lewis was stunned. His friend's remark that there was real evidence for Jesus prompted Lewis to investigate the truth for himself. He writes about his search for truth about Jesus in his classic book *Mere Christianity*.

So, what evidence did Lewis' atheist friend discover for Jesus Christ? And, what evidence persuaded Lewis to believe that Jesus really existed?

## Ancient History Speaks

Let's begin with a more foundational question: How can we distinguish a mythical character from a real person? For example, what evidence convinces historians that Alexander the Great was a real person? And does such evidence exist for Jesus? Let's compare.

Both Alexander and Jesus were depicted as charismatic leaders. Both reportedly had brief careers, dying in their early thirties. Jesus is said to have been a man of peace who conquered by love; Alexander, a man of war, who vanquished enemy nations by

the sword.

In 336 B.C. Alexander the Great became king of Macedonia. A military genius, this handsome, arrogant leader swept through villages, towns, and kingdoms of Greco-Persia until he ruled it all. It is said that he cried when there were no more worlds to conquer.

The history of Alexander is drawn from five ancient sources written 300 or more years after he died.<sup>3</sup> Not one eyewitness account of Alexander exists today.

However, historians believe Alexander really existed, largely because the accounts of his life are confirmed by archaeology and his impact on history.

Likewise, to determine if Jesus was a real person, we need to seek evidence for his existence in the following areas:

1. Archaeology
2. Early non-Christian accounts
3. Early Christian accounts
4. Early New Testament manuscripts
5. Historical impact

## **Archaeology**

The sands of time have buried many mysteries about Jesus that only recently have been brought to light.

Perhaps the most significant discoveries are several ancient manuscripts unearthed between the 18th and 20th centuries. We will look closer at these manuscripts in a later section.

Archaeologists have also discovered numerous places and relics that agree with the New Testament accounts of Jesus. Malcolm Muggeridge was a respected British journalist who considered Jesus a myth until he saw such evidence while on a BBC television assignment to Israel.

After visiting and reporting on the very places written about in the New Testament account of Jesus, Muggeridge wrote, "A certainty seized me about Jesus' birth, ministry, and crucifixion...I became aware that there really had been a man, Jesus...."<sup>4</sup>

However, prior to the 20th century no tangible evidence existed for the Roman governor Pontius Pilate and the Jewish chief priest Joseph Caiaphas. Both men were central figures in the trial leading to the crucifixion of Christ. Skeptics cited this apparent lack of evidence for their existence as ammunition for their Christ-myth theory.

However, in 1961 archaeologists discovered a block of limestone inscribed with the name of “Pontius Pilate prefect of Judea.” And in 1990 archaeologists discovered an ossuary (bone box) with the inscription of Caiaphas. It has been verified by scholars as authentic “beyond a reasonable doubt.”<sup>5</sup>

Also, until 2009, there was no tangible evidence that Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth existed during his lifetime. Skeptics like Rene Salm regarded lack of evidence for 1<sup>st</sup> century Nazareth as a deathblow to Christianity. In *The Myth of Nazareth* Salm wrote in 2006, “Celebrate, freethinkers.... Christianity as we know it may be finally coming to an end!”<sup>6</sup>

However, on December 21, 2009, archaeologists announced the discovery of 1<sup>st</sup> century clay shards in Nazareth, confirming that this tiny hamlet existed during the time of Christ.

Although these archaeological finds don’t prove that Jesus lived there, they do support the Gospel accounts of his early life in Nazareth. Historians note that mounting evidence from archaeology confirms rather than contradicts the accounts of Jesus.”<sup>7</sup>

## **Early Non-Christian Accounts**

Skeptics cite the “lack of secular history” for Jesus as evidence that he didn’t exist.

Yet there is very little documentation for *any* person from the time of Christ. Most ancient historical documents have been destroyed through the centuries, by wars, fires, and pillaging, or simply through weathering and deterioration.

According to E. M. Blaiklock, who has cataloged most of the non-Christian writings of the Roman Empire, “practically nothing exists from the time of Christ”, even for great secular leaders such as Julius Caesar.<sup>8</sup> Yet no historian questions Caesar’s existence.

And since he wasn't a great political or military leader, New Testament scholar Darrell Bock notes, "It is amazing and significant that Jesus shows up at all in the sources we have."<sup>9</sup>

So, who are these sources Bock mentions? Which early historians who wrote of Jesus did not have a Christian agenda? First, let's look to Jesus' enemies.

## **Jewish Historians**

The Jews had the most to gain by denying Jesus' existence. But they always regarded him as real. In his book, *Skeptics Answered*, D. James Kennedy observes, "Several Jewish writings refer to Jesus as a real person whom they opposed."<sup>10</sup>

Noted 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish historian (who eventually wrote for Rome), Flavius Josephus, documented the existence of Jesus as, "the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ."<sup>11</sup> If Jesus wasn't a real person why wouldn't Josephus have said so? On the contrary, Josephus confirms his existence.

In another somewhat controversial passage, Josephus speaks more extensively of Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

*At this time there was a man who was called Jesus. His conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified, and he died. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive. Accordingly, he was thought to be the Messiah.*<sup>13</sup>

Although his words about the resurrection are in dispute, Josephus' confirmation here of Jesus' existence is widely accepted by scholars.<sup>14 15</sup> Israeli scholar Shlomo Pines writes, "Even the most bitter opponents of Christianity never expressed any doubt as to Jesus having really lived."<sup>15 16</sup> World historian Will Durant notes that no Jew or Gentile from the 1<sup>st</sup> century ever denied the existence of Jesus.<sup>16 14</sup>

## **Roman Historians**

Early Roman historians wrote primarily of events and people important to their empire. Since Jesus wasn't of immediate importance to the political or military affairs of Rome, very little Roman history referenced him. However, two important Roman historians, Tacitus and Suetonius, do acknowledge Jesus as a real person.

Tacitus (AD 55-120), the greatest early Roman historian, wrote that Christus (Greek for Christ) had lived during the reign of Tiberius and "suffered under Pontius Pilate, that Jesus' teachings had already spread to Rome; and that Christians were considered criminals and tortured in a variety of ways, including crucifixion."<sup>15</sup>

Suetonius (AD 69-130) wrote of "Chrestus" as an instigator. Most scholars believe this is a reference to Christ. Suetonius also wrote of Christians having been persecuted by Nero in AD 64.<sup>16</sup>

## **Roman Officials**

Prior to Emperor Constantine, Christians were considered enemies of Rome because of their worship of Jesus as Lord rather than Caesar. The following Roman government officials, including two Caesars, wrote letters from that perspective, mentioning Jesus and early Christian origins.<sup>17</sup>

- Pliny the Younger was an imperial magistrate under Emperor Trajan. In AD 112, Pliny wrote to Trajan of his attempts to force Christians to renounce Christ, whom they "worshiped as a god."
- Emperor Trajan (AD 56-117) wrote letters mentioning Jesus and early Christian origins.
- Emperor Hadrian (AD 76-136) wrote about Christians as followers of Jesus.

## **Pagan Sources**

Several early pagan writers briefly mention Jesus or Christians prior to the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. These include Thallus, Phlegon, Mara Bar-Serapion and Lucian of Samosate.<sup>18</sup> Thallus' remarks about Jesus were written in AD 52, about twenty years after Christ.

In total, nine early non-Christian secular writers mention Jesus as a real person within 150 years of his death. Interestingly, that is the same number of secular writers who mention Tiberius Caesar, the Roman emperor during Jesus' time. If we

were to consider Christian and non-Christian sources, there are forty-two who mention Jesus, compared to just ten for Tiberius.<sup>19</sup>

## **Historical Facts about Jesus**

These early non-Christian sources provide the following facts about Jesus Christ:

- Jesus was from Nazareth.
- Jesus lived a wise and virtuous life.
- Jesus was crucified in Judea under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius Caesar at Passover time, being considered the Jewish king.
- Jesus was believed by his disciples to have died and risen from the dead three days later.
- Jesus' enemies acknowledged that he performed unusual feats.
- Jesus' disciples multiplied rapidly, spreading as far as Rome.
- Jesus' disciples lived moral lives and worshiped Christ as God.

This general outline of Jesus' life agrees perfectly with the New Testament.

Gary Habermas notes, "In total, about one-third of these non-Christian sources date from the first century; a majority originate no later than the mid-second century."<sup>20</sup> According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, "These independent accounts prove that in ancient times even the opponents of Christianity never doubted the historicity of Jesus."<sup>21</sup>

## **Early Christian Accounts**

Early Christians wrote thousands of letters, sermons and commentaries about Jesus. Also, creeds which speak of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead, appeared as early as five years after his crucifixion.<sup>22</sup>

These letters, sermons, and commentaries, confirm most New Testament details about Jesus, including his crucifixion and resurrection.<sup>23</sup>

Incredibly, over 36,000 complete or partial such writings have been discovered, some from the first century.<sup>24</sup> These non-biblical writings could reconstruct the entire New Testament except for a few verses.

Each of these authors writes of Jesus as a real person. Skeptics called, “Christ-mythers,” disregard these accounts as biased. But the question they must answer is: How could a mythical Jesus have so much written about him from so many different sources within a few decades of his life?

## **The New Testament**

Some skeptics dismiss the New Testament as evidence for Jesus, calling it “biased.” However, even most non-Christian historians consider ancient New Testament manuscripts as solid evidence for Jesus’ existence. Cambridge historian Michael Grant, an atheist, argues that the New Testament should be considered as evidence in the same way as other ancient history. He concedes,

If we apply to the New Testament, as we should, the same sort of criteria as we should apply to other ancient writings containing historical material, we can no more reject Jesus’ existence than we can reject the existence of a mass of pagan personages whose reality as historical figures is never questioned.<sup>25</sup>

The Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke & John) are the primary accounts of Jesus’ life and words. Luke begins his Gospel with these words to Theophilus: “Since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus.”<sup>26</sup>

Noted archaeologist Sir William Ramsay originally rejected Luke’s historical account of Jesus. However, he later changed his opinion, acknowledging,

Luke is a historian of the first rank.... This author should be placed along with the very greatest historians.... Luke’s history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness.<sup>27</sup>

As noted previously, the earliest accounts about Alexander were written 300 years after he died. But how close to the life of Jesus were the Gospels written? Would eyewitnesses to Jesus have still been alive, or was there enough time for a legend to have developed?

In the 1830s, German skeptical scholars argued that the New Testament was written in the 3rd century, much too late to have been written by Jesus’ apostles. This late estimation fueled the Jesus-myth theory.

However, manuscript copies discovered in the 19th and 20th centuries by archaeologists proved these New Testament accounts of Jesus were written much earlier.

The renowned archaeologist, William Albright, dated all the New Testament books “between about AD 50 and AD 75.”<sup>28</sup> John A. T. Robinson of Cambridge dates all New Testament books by AD 40-65. Such early dating means they were written when eyewitnesses were alive, much too early for a myth or legend to develop.<sup>29</sup>

In his search for the truth about Jesus, C. S. Lewis wrote,

Now, as a literary historian, I am perfectly convinced that...the Gospels are...not legends. I have read a great deal of legend, and I am quite clear that they are not the same sort of thing.<sup>30</sup>

In further support of Jesus’ existence, the quantity of manuscripts for the New Testament is enormous. Over 24,000 complete or partial manuscript copies of its books exist, putting it far above all other ancient documents.<sup>31</sup>

No other ancient historical person, religious or secular, is backed up by as much documentation as is Jesus Christ. Historian Paul Johnson remarks,

If we consider that Tacitus, for example, survives in only one medieval manuscript, the quantity of early New Testament manuscripts is remarkable.<sup>32</sup>

(For more on the reliability of the New Testament, see page 36, “Are the Gospel Accounts of Jesus True?”)

## **Historical Impact**

Myths have little, if any, impact on history. The historian Thomas Carlyle said, “The history of the world is but the biography of great men.”<sup>33</sup>

There is no nation or regime which owes its foundation or heritage to a mythological person or so-called—“god”.

But what has been the impact of Jesus Christ?

The average Roman citizen didn't feel his impact until many years after his death. Jesus marshalled no army. He wrote no books and changed no laws. The Jewish leaders and Roman Caesars had hoped to wipe out his memory, and it appeared they would succeed.

Today, all we see of ancient Rome is ruins. Caesar's mighty legions and the pomp of Roman imperial power have faded into oblivion. Yet how is Jesus remembered today? What is his enduring influence? Let's summarize:

- More books have been written about Jesus than about any other person in history.
- Free nations have used his words as the bedrock of their governments. According to Durant, "The triumph of Christ was the beginning of democracy."<sup>34</sup>
- His Sermon on the Mount established a new paradigm in ethics and morals.
- Schools, hospitals, and humanitarian works have been founded in his name. Over 100 great universities — including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, Columbia, and Oxford - were begun by his followers.<sup>35</sup>
- The elevated role of women in Western culture traces its roots back to Jesus. (Women in Jesus' day were considered inferior and virtual nonpersons until his teaching was followed.)
- Slavery was abolished in Britain and America due to Jesus' teaching that each human life is valuable.

Amazingly, Jesus made all of this impact as a result of just a three-year period of public ministry. When noted author and world historian H. G. Wells—a non-Christian—was asked who has left the greatest legacy on history, he replied, "By this test Jesus stands first."<sup>36</sup>

Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan writes of him,

Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries... It is from his birth that most of the human race dates its calendars, it is by his name that millions curse and in his name that millions pray.<sup>37</sup>

If Jesus didn't exist, one must wonder how a myth could so alter history.

## **Myth vs. Reality**

Whereas mythical gods are depicted as superheroes living out human fantasies and lusts, the Gospels portray Jesus as a man of humility, compassion and impeccable moral character. His followers present him as a real person for whom they willingly gave their lives.

The non-Christian scientist Albert Einstein stated, “No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life....No man can deny the fact that Jesus existed, nor that his sayings are beautiful.”<sup>38</sup>

After investigating the Christ-myth theory, the great world historian Will Durant concluded that, unlike the gods of mythology, Jesus was a real person.<sup>39</sup>

New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce concludes, “Some writers may toy with the fancy of a ‘Christ-myth,’ but they do not do so on the grounds of historical evidence. The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar. It is not historians who propagate the ‘Christ-myth’ theories.”<sup>40</sup>

And, finally, from a non-Christian historian, Atheist historian Michael Grant writes, “To sum up, modern critical methods fail to support the Christ-myth theory. It has again and again been answered and annihilated by first-rank scholars.”<sup>41</sup>

## **Here Was a Man**

So, do historians believe Jesus was a man or a myth?

Historians regard both Alexander the Great and Jesus Christ as real. Yet the manuscript evidence for Jesus is far greater and centuries closer to his life than the writings for Alexander are to his. Furthermore, the historical impact of Jesus Christ far exceeds that of Alexander.

British historian Paul Johnson states that all serious scholars acknowledge Jesus as real.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps the non-Christian world historian H. G. Wells put it the best regarding Jesus Christ's existence:

*Here was a man.* This part of the tale could not have been invented.<sup>43</sup>

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## Endnotes