



Who Is the Real Jesus?

Discover the Evidence
and Decide for Yourself ...

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Was Jesus a Real Person?

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.¹

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."²

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 ruled 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.³ 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...."⁴

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."⁵

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 first-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!"⁶

However, on December 21, 2009, archaeologists announced the discovery of first-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."⁷

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.⁸ 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.”⁹

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.”¹⁰

Noted first-century Jewish historian (who eventually wrote for Rome), Flavius Josephus, documented the existence of Jesus as, “the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ.”¹¹ 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.¹²

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.¹³

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

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."¹⁵

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 64.¹⁶

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.¹⁷

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 second century. These include Thallus, Phlegon, Mara Bar-Serapion and Lucian of Samosate.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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."²⁰ According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, "These independent accounts prove that in ancient times even the opponents of Christianity never doubted the historicity of Jesus."²¹

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.²²

These letters, sermons, and commentaries, confirm most New Testament details about Jesus, including his crucifixion and resurrection.²³ Incredibly, over 36,000 complete or partial such writings have been discovered, some from the first century.²⁴ 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.²⁵

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."²⁶

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.²⁷

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."²⁸ 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.²⁹

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.³⁰

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.³¹

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.³²

(For more on the reliability of the New Testament, see "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."³³

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.”³⁴
- 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.³⁵
- 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.”³⁶

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.³⁷

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."³⁸

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

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."⁴⁰

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."⁴¹

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.⁴²

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.⁴³

Was There a Jesus Conspiracy?

We have seen that leading historians unanimously accept the fact that Jesus was a real person who has significantly impacted our world.

Nevertheless, countless conspiracy theories have attacked the New Testament teaching of his deity. Perhaps the most widely believed conspiracy theory has been postulated by Dan Brown in his fictional novel, *The Da Vinci Code*.

The Da Vinci Code is not to be ignored as a fictional plot. Its premise, that Jesus Christ has been reinvented by the church for political purposes, attacks the very foundation of Christianity. Its author, Dan Brown, has stated on national TV that, even though the plot is fictional, he believes its account of Jesus' identity is true. So, what is the truth? Let's take a look.

- Was Jesus' deity invented by Constantine and the church?
- Were the original records of Jesus destroyed?
- Do recently discovered manuscripts tell the truth about Jesus?
- Did Jesus have a secret marriage with Mary Magdalene?

Several of Brown's assertions regarding Jesus-Christ's identity try to persuade the reader of a conspiracy. For example, the fictional scholar in the book states:

Nobody is saying Christ was a fraud or denying that He walked the earth and inspired millions to better lives. All we are saying is that Constantine took advantage of Christ's substantial influence and importance. And in doing so, he shaped the face of Christianity as we know it today.¹

The Da Vinci Code book has sold over 80 million copies and has been watched by millions more in a blockbuster movie starring Tom Hanks. Although the plot is fictional, it has convinced many readers that its theme of a Jesus conspiracy is actually true.

The Jesus Conspiracy

Brown's fictional plot begins with the murder of a French museum curator named Jacques Sauniere. A scholarly Harvard professor and a beautiful French cryptologist are commissioned to decipher a message left by the curator before his death.

The message turns out to reveal the most profound conspiracy in the history of humankind: a cover-up of the true message of Jesus Christ by a secret arm of the Roman Catholic Church called Opus Dei.

Before his death, the curator claimed to have evidence that could disprove the deity of Christ. Although (according to the plot) the church tried for centuries to suppress the evidence, great thinkers and artists have planted clues everywhere: in paintings such as the *Mona Lisa* and *Last Supper* by da Vinci, in the architecture of cathedrals, even in Disney cartoons. The book's sensational claims are these:

- The Roman emperor Constantine conspired to deify Jesus Christ by personally selecting the books of the New Testament.
- The Gnostic gospels were banned by men to suppress women.
- Jesus and Mary Magdalene were secretly married and had a child.
- Thousands of secret documents disprove key points of Christianity.

Brown reveals his conspiracy through the book's fictional expert, British royal historian Sir Leigh Teabing. Presented as a wise old scholar, Teabing reveals to cryptologist Sophie Neveu that at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 "many aspects of Christianity were debated and voted upon," including the deity of Jesus.

"Until that moment in history," he says, "Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet ... a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless." Neveu is shocked. "Not the Son of God?" she asks.

Teabing explains: "Jesus' establishment as 'the Son of God' was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea."

“Hold on,” she exclaimed. “You’re saying Jesus’ divinity was the result of a vote?”

“A relatively close vote at that,” Teabing tells the stunned cryptologist.²

So, according to Teabing, Jesus was not regarded as God until the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, when the real records of Jesus were allegedly banned and destroyed. Thus, according to *The Da Vinci Code* conspiracy theory, the entire foundation of Christianity rests upon a lie.

The Da Vinci Code has sold its story so well that many readers think its plot is factual rather than fictional. For example, one reader concluded, “If it were not true it could not have been published!” Another reader said he would “never set foot in a church again.” A reviewer of the book praised it for its “impeccable research.”³ Pretty convincing for a fictional work.

Although *The Da Vinci Code* is fictional, it does base much of its premise upon actual events (the Council of Nicaea), actual people (Constantine and Arius), and actual documents (the Gnostic gospels). If we are to get to the bottom of the conspiracy, our investigation must be to address Brown’s accusations and separate fact from fiction.

Constantine And Christianity

In the centuries prior to Constantine’s reign over the Roman Empire Christians had been severely persecuted---even martyred--- because they worshiped Jesus rather than Caesar. Yet, the church grew through persecution, and when Constantine became Emperor in AD 306, over 10% of the Roman Empire were Christians.

Although Constantine wasn’t a Christian when he became Emperor, six years later he claimed to have seen a bright image of a cross in the sky inscribed with the words “Conquer by this.” Inspired by this vision, he marched into battle under the sign of the cross and embraced Christianity.

Constantine's apparent conversion to Christianity was a watershed in church history. Under his reign, Rome became a Christian empire. For the first time in nearly 300 years, it was relatively safe to be a Christian.

No longer were Christians persecuted for their faith. Constantine then sought to unify his Eastern and Western Empires, which had been badly divided by schisms, sects, and cults, centering primarily on the issue of Jesus Christ's identity.

These are some of the kernels of truth in *The Da Vinci Code*, and kernels of truth are a prerequisite for any successful conspiracy theory. But the book's plot turns Constantine into a conspirator. So, let's address a key question raised by Brown's theory: did Constantine invent the Christian doctrine of Jesus' deity?

Deifying Jesus?

To answer Brown's accusation, we must first determine what Christians in general believed before Constantine ever convened the council at Nicaea. According to ancient manuscripts, Christians had been worshiping Jesus as God since the first century. But in the fourth century, Arius, a church leader from the east, launched a campaign to defend God's oneness. He taught that Jesus was a specially created being, higher than the angels, but not God.

Athanasius and most church leaders, on the other hand, were convinced that Jesus was---as the New Testament eyewitnesses claimed--- God in the flesh. Constantine wanted to settle the dispute, hoping to bring peace to his empire, uniting the east and west divisions. Therefore, in AD 325 he convened more than 300 bishops at Nicaea (now part of Turkey) from throughout the Christian world.

The crucial question is, did the early church think Jesus was the Creator or merely a creation—Son of God or merely son of a carpenter? To answer that question they looked to what the apostles believed and taught. So, what did the apostles teach about Jesus?

From their very first recorded statements, the apostles regarded Jesus as God. About 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul wrote the Philippians that Jesus was God in human form (Philippians 2:6-7, NLT). And John, a close eyewitness, confirms Jesus' divinity in the following passage:

In the beginning the Word already existed. He was with God, and he was God. He created everything there is. Nothing exists that he didn't make. Life itself was in him...So the Word became human and lived here on earth among us (John 1: 1-4, 14, NLT).

This passage from John 1, has been discovered in an ancient manuscript, a copy of the original, carbon-dated at AD 175-225. Earlier fragments from John's Gospel have also been discovered, proving that Jesus was clearly spoken of as God over a hundred years before Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea. (See "Did the Apostles Believe Jesus is God?")

This forensic manuscript evidence contradicts *The Da Vinci Code's* claim that Jesus' deity was a fourth century invention. But what does history tell us about the Council of Nicaea? Brown asserts in his book, through Teabing, that the majority of bishops at Nicaea overruled Arius's belief that Jesus was a "mortal prophet" and adopted the doctrine of Jesus' deity by a "relatively close vote." True or false?

The historical record reveals that only two of the 318 bishops dissented, one of them being Arius himself. Whereas Arius believed that the Father alone was God, and that Jesus was His supreme creation, the council overwhelmingly concluded that Jesus and the Father were of the same divine essence, condemning Arius as a heretic. The nearly unanimous vote only confirmed what the apostles had taught.

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were deemed to be distinct, coexistent, coeternal Persons, but one God. This doctrine of one God in three Persons became known as the Nicene Creed, which is the central core of the Christian Faith and its trinitarian doctrine.

From the first days of the Christian church, Jesus was regarded as far more than a mere man, and most of his followers worshiped him as Lord-the Creator of the universe. So, how could Constantine have invented the doctrine of Jesus' divinity if the church had regarded Jesus as God for more than 200 years? *The Da Vinci Code* doesn't address this question.

Firing On the Canon

The Da Vinci Code also states that Constantine suppressed all documents about Jesus other than those found in our current New Testament canon. The early church fathers were committed to preserving the writings of the original apostles, eliminating those that were fraudulent or questionable. This preservation of the original New Testament documents (canon) is recognized by the church as authentic eyewitness reports of the apostles.

However, in the book, Brown asserts that the New Testament accounts were altered by Constantine and the bishops to reinvent Jesus. Another key element of *The Da Vinci Code* conspiracy is that the four New Testament Gospels were cherry-picked from a total of "more than 80 gospels," most of which were supposedly suppressed by Constantine.⁵

There are two central issues here, and we need to address both. The first is whether Constantine altered or biased the selection of the New Testament books. The second is whether he barred documents that should have been included in the Bible.

Regarding the first issue, letters and documents written by second century church leaders and heretics alike confirm the wide usage of the New Testament books nearly 200 years before Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea.

So, if the New Testament was already widely in use 200 years before Constantine and the Council of Nicaea, how could the emperor have invented or altered it? By that time the church was widespread and encompassed millions of believers, all of whom were familiar with and trusted the traditional New Testament accounts.

In his book *The Da Vinci Deception*, an analysis of *The Da Vinci Code*, New Testament scholar Dr. Erwin Lutzer sets the record straight about the New Testament's authenticity,

Constantine did not decide which books would be in the canon; indeed, the topic of the canon did not even come up at the Council of Nicaea. By that time the early church was reading a canon of books it had determined was the Word of God two hundred years earlier.⁶

Although the official canon was still years from being finalized, the New Testament of today was deemed authentic more than two centuries before Nicaea.

Why the Gnostic Gospels Were Excluded

This brings us to our second issue; why were these mysterious Gnostic gospels destroyed and excluded from the New Testament? In Brown's book, *Teabing* asserts that the Gnostic writings were eliminated from 50 authorized Bibles commissioned by Constantine at the council. He excitedly tells Neveu:

Because Constantine upgraded Jesus' status almost four centuries after Jesus' death, thousands of documents already existed chronicling His life as a mortal man. To rewrite the history books, Constantine knew he would need a bold stroke. From this sprang the most profound moment in Christian history. ...

Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned.⁷

Are these Gnostic writings the real history of Jesus Christ? Let's take a deeper look to see if we can separate truth from fiction.

The Gnostic gospels name comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning “knowledge.” These people thought they had secret, special knowledge hidden from ordinary people.

The Gnostic writings date from the 2nd to the 4th century, at least a hundred years after Christ. Therefore, they couldn’t have been written by eyewitnesses. In comparison, the New Testament writings date from the mid to late 1st century while eyewitnesses would still have been living.

Of the 52 Gnostic writings, only five are actually listed as gospels. As we shall see, these so-called gospels are markedly different from the New Testament Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

As Christianity spread, the Gnostics mixed some doctrines and elements of Christianity into their beliefs, morphing Gnosticism into a counterfeit Christianity. However, for their system of thought to fit with Christianity, Jesus needed to be reinvented, stripped of both his humanity and his absolute deity.

In *The Oxford History of Christianity* John McManners wrote of the Gnostics’ mixture of Christian and mythical beliefs.

Gnosticism was (and still is) a theosophy with many ingredients. Occultism and oriental mysticism became fused with astrology and magic. ... They collected sayings of Jesus shaped to fit their own interpretation (as in the Gospel of Thomas), and offered their adherents an alternative or rival form of Christianity.⁸

Early Critics

Contrary to Brown’s assertions, it was not Constantine who branded the Gnostic beliefs as heretical; it was the apostles themselves. A mild strain of the philosophy was already growing in the first century just decades after the death of Jesus. The apostles, in their teaching and writings, went to great lengths to condemn these beliefs as being opposed to the truth of Jesus, to whom they were eyewitnesses.

Check out, for example, what the apostle John wrote near the end of the first century:

Who is the great liar? The one who says that Jesus is not the Christ. Such people are antichrists, for they have denied the Father and the Son (1 John 2:22).

Following the apostles' teaching, the early church leaders unanimously condemned the Gnostics as a cult. Church father Irenaeus, writing 140 years before the Council of Nicaea, confirmed that Gnostics were condemned by the church as heretics. He also rejected their "gospels." However, referring to the four New Testament Gospels, he said, "It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are."⁹

Christian theologian Origen wrote this in the early third century, more than a hundred years before Nicaea:

I know a certain gospel which is called "The Gospel according to Thomas" and a "Gospel according to Matthias," and many others have we read—lest we should in any way be considered ignorant because of those who imagine they possess some knowledge if they are acquainted with these. Nevertheless, among all these we have approved solely what the church has recognized, which is that only four gospels should be accepted.¹⁰

There we have it in the words of a highly regarded early church leader. The Gnostics were recognized as a non-Christian cult well before the Council of Nicaea. But there's more evidence calling into question claims made in *The Da Vinci Code*.

Who's Sexist?

Brown suggests that one of the motives for Constantine's alleged banning of the Gnostic writings was a desire to suppress women in the church. Ironically, it is the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas that demeans women. It concludes

(supposedly quoting Peter) with this eye-popping statement: “Let Mary go away from us, because women are not worthy of life.”¹¹

In stark contrast, the Jesus of the biblical Gospels always treated women with dignity and respect. The New Testament writings have been foundational to attempts at raising women’s status. As the apostle Paul writes,

In Christ there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. For you are all Christians-you are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28, NLT).

Mystery Authors

When it comes to the Gnostic gospels, just about every book carries the name of a New Testament character: the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Mary, The Gospel of Judas, and so on.

But since the Gnostic gospels are dated about 110 to 300 years after Christ, no credible scholar believes any of them could have been written by their namesakes. In James M. Robinson’s comprehensive *The Nag Hammadi Library*, we learn that the Gnostic gospels were written by “largely unrelated and anonymous authors.”¹² Dr. Darrell L. Bock, professor of New Testament studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, wrote,

The bulk of this material is a few generations removed from the foundations of the Christian faith, a vital point to remember when assessing the contents.¹³

Biblical scholar Norman Geisler summarizes the case against including the Gnostic writings in the New Testament:

The Gnostic writings were not written by the apostles, but by men in the second century (and later) pretending to use apostolic authority to advance their own teachings. Today we call this fraud and forgery.¹⁴

Mrs. Jesus

The most provocative assertion of the Da Vinci conspiracy is that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a secret marriage, resulting in a child that perpetuated his bloodline. Furthermore, Mary Magdalene's womb, carrying Jesus' offspring, is presented in the book as the legendary Holy Grail, a secret closely held by a Catholic organization called the Priory of Sion. Sir Isaac Newton, Botticelli, Victor Hugo, and Leonardo Da Vinci were all cited in the book as members of this secret organization.

Romance. Scandal. Intrigue. Great stuff for a conspiracy theory. But is it true? Let's look at what scholars say.

A *Newsweek* magazine article, that summarized leading scholars' opinions, concluded that the theory that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were secretly married has no historical basis.¹⁵ The proposal set forth in *The Da Vinci Code* is built primarily upon one solitary verse in the Gnostic Gospel of Philip that indicates Jesus and Mary were companions.

In the book, Teabing tries to build a case that the word for companion (koinonos) could mean spouse.¹⁶ But Teabing's theory is not accepted by scholars.

There is also a single verse in the Gospel of Philip that says Jesus kissed Mary. Greeting friends with a kiss was common in the 1st century and had no sexual connotation. There is no historical document to confirm its theory that Jesus and Mary had a marital relationship. And since the Gospel of Philip is a forged document written 150-220 years after Christ by an unknown author, its statement about Jesus isn't historically reliable.

The "Secret" Documents

But what about Teabing's disclosure that "thousands of secret documents" prove that Christianity is a hoax? Could this be true?

If there were such documents, scholars opposed to Christianity would have a field day with them. Fraudulent writings that were rejected by the early church for heretical views are not secret, having been known about for centuries. No surprise there. They have never been considered part of the authentic writings of the apostles.

And if the book's expert, Teabing, is referring to the apocryphal, or Gnostic Gospels, they are not secret, nor do they disprove Christianity. New Testament scholar Raymond Brown has said of the Gnostic gospels,

We learn not a single verifiable new fact about the historical Jesus' ministry, and only a few new sayings that might possibly have been his.¹⁷

The historical evidence reveals that Jesus' followers believed in his deity from the time of the resurrection and early church history. The true church never deviated from the eyewitness accounts recorded in the New Testament. And although conspiracy theories like *The Da Vinci Code* attack the validity of the New Testament, scholars deem it the most reliable of all ancient writings. As New Testament Historian F. F. Bruce explains,

There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament.¹⁸

New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger revealed why the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas was not accepted by the early church:

It is not right to say that the Gospel of Thomas was excluded by some fiat on the part of a council: the right way to put it is, the Gospel of Thomas excluded itself! It did not harmonize with other testimony about Jesus that early Christians accepted as trustworthy.¹⁹

History's Verdict

So, what are we to conclude regarding the various conspiracy theories about Jesus Christ? Karen King, professor of ecclesiastical history at Harvard, has written several books on the Gnostic gospels, including *The Gospel of Mary of*

Magdala and *What Is Gnosticism?* King, though a strong advocate of Gnostic teaching, concluded, "These notions about the conspiracy theory ... are all marginal ideas that have no historical basis."²⁰

Despite the lack of historical evidence, conspiracy theories will still sell millions of books and set box office records. Scholars in related fields, some Christians and some with no faith at all, have disputed the claims of *The Da Vinci Code*. However, the easily swayed will still wonder; Could there be something to it after all?

But if you want to read the true accounts of Jesus Christ, then Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell us what the eyewitnesses saw, heard, and wrote.

And what the eyewitnesses wrote about was the most amazing person in the history of our planet: A man who healed the lame, deaf and blind, raised the dead, and defeated death. But the claim he made that led to his rejection and death was the same one that *The Da Vinci Code* attempts to refute---that God put on humanity to become our Savior.

In the next chapter we will examine the question: Is Jesus God.

Is Jesus God?

Have you ever met a man who is the focus of attention wherever he goes? Some mysterious, indefinable characteristic sets him apart from all other men.

Well, that's the way it was two thousand years ago with Jesus Christ. Jesus' greatness was obvious to all those who saw and heard him. And while most great people eventually fade into history books, Jesus is still the focus of thousands of books and endless media controversy. And much of that controversy centers on the radical claims Jesus made about himself—claims that astounded both his followers and his adversaries.

Jesus' unique claims caused him to be viewed as a threat by both the Roman authorities and the Jewish hierarchy. Although he was an outsider with no credentials or political powerbase, within three years, Jesus changed the world for the next 20 centuries. Other moral and religious leaders have left an impact on our world—but nothing like that unknown carpenter's son from Nazareth.

What was it about Jesus Christ that made the difference? Was he merely a great man, or something more?

Some believe Jesus was merely a great moral teacher; others believe he was simply the leader of the world's greatest religion. But many believe something far more. Christians believe that God actually visited us in human form. And they believe the evidence backs that up.

After carefully examining Jesus' life and words, former Oxford scholar and skeptic, C. S. Lewis, came to a startling conclusion about him that altered the course of his life. So, who is the real Jesus? Many will answer that Jesus was a great moral teacher, but nothing more. As we take a deeper look at the world's most controversial person, we begin by asking: could Jesus have been merely a great moral teacher?

Great Moral Teacher?

Even those from other religions acknowledge that Jesus was a great moral teacher. Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi, spoke highly of Jesus' righteous life and profound words.¹ Likewise, Jewish scholar Joseph Klausner wrote,

It is universally admitted ... that Christ taught the purest and sublimest ethics ... which throws the moral precepts and maxims of the wisest men of antiquity far into the shade.²

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount has been called the most superlative teaching of human ethics ever uttered by an individual. In fact, much of what we know today as "equal rights" is largely the result of Jesus' teaching. Historian Will Durant, a non-Christian, said of Jesus that,

...he lived and struggled unremittingly for 'equal rights'; in modern times he would have been sent to Siberia. 'He that is greatest among you, let him be your servant'—this is the inversion of all political wisdom, of all sanity.³

Many, like Gandhi, have tried to separate Jesus' teaching on ethics from his claims about himself, believing that he was simply a great man who taught lofty moral principles.

But if Jesus falsely claimed to be God, he couldn't have been a good moral teacher. Before we look at what Jesus claimed, we need to examine the possibility that he was simply a great religious leader?

Great Religious Leader?

Surprisingly, Jesus never claimed to be a religious leader. He never got into religious politics or pushed an ambitious agenda, and he ministered almost entirely outside the established religious framework.

When one compares Jesus with the other great religious leaders, a remarkable distinction emerges. All other religions provide instruction for a way of living.

But only Jesus offers deliverance, forgiveness for sin, and personal life transformation through faith in him. Jesus' teaching message was simply "Come to me" or "Follow me" or "Obey me." Also, Jesus made it clear that his primary mission was to forgive sins, something only God could do.

And that leads us to the question of what Jesus really did claim for himself; specifically, did Jesus claim to be God?

Did Jesus Claim to Be God?

In *The World's Great Religions*, Huston Smith observed that of all great religious leaders, only Jesus claimed to be divine.⁴

What is it that convinces many scholars that Jesus claimed to be God? Author, John Piper explains that Jesus claimed power which uniquely belonged to God. He cites a few of Jesus' radical claims,

...Jesus' friends and enemies were staggered again and again by what he said and did. He would be walking down the road, seemingly like any other man, then turn and say something like, 'Before Abraham was, I am.' Or 'If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.'

Or, very calmly, after being accused of blasphemy, he would say, 'The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.' To the dead he might simply say, 'Come forth,' or 'Rise up.' And they would obey. To the storms on the sea he would say, 'Be still.' And to a loaf of bread he would say, 'Become a thousand meals.' And it was done immediately.⁵

But what did Jesus really mean by such statements? Is it possible Jesus was merely a prophet like Moses or Elijah, or Daniel? Even his enemies acknowledged that no prophet ever spoke like Jesus (John 7:46).

The Gospels reveal that Jesus claimed to be someone more than a prophet. No other prophet had made such claims about himself; in fact, no other prophet ever put himself in God's place.

Although Jesus never explicitly said, “I am God,” He also never said, “I am a man,” or “I am a prophet.” Yet Jesus was undoubtedly human, and his followers considered him a prophet like Moses and Elijah.

In fact, Jesus’ statements about himself contradict the notion that he was simply a great man or a prophet.

- On more than one occasion, Jesus referred to himself as God’s Son.
- He told Philip, “If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father” (John 14:9).
- He said, “I and my Father are one” (John 10:30).

So, the question is: “Was Jesus claiming to be the Hebrew God who created the universe?”

Did Jesus Claim to Be the God of Abraham & Moses?

In the Hebrew Scriptures, when Moses asked God His name at the burning bush, God answered, “I AM (Yahweh).” God was revealing to Moses that He is the one and only God who is outside of time and has always existed. Since the time of Moses, no practicing Jew would ever refer to himself or anyone else by “I AM” (Yahweh). The name was holy and revered exclusively for God. Yet Jesus referred to himself as “I am,” when telling the Pharisees, “Before Abraham was, I am.”

As a result, Jesus’ “I AM” claims infuriated the Jewish leaders. One time, for example, some leaders explained to Jesus why they were trying to kill him: “Because you, a mere man, have made yourself God.”⁶

These Old Testament scholars knew exactly what Jesus was saying—he was claiming to be God, the Creator of the universe. It is only this claim that would have brought the accusation of blasphemy. To read into the text that Jesus claimed to be God is clearly warranted, not simply by his words, but also by their reaction to those words. Former atheist C. S. Lewis explains the shock Jesus’ claim had on the Jewish leaders:

Then comes the real shock,—among these Jews there suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if He was God. He claims to forgive

sins. He says He always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time.⁷

To Lewis, Jesus' claims were simply too radical and profound to have been made by an ordinary teacher or religious leader. (For a more in-depth look at Jesus' claim to deity, see Appendix A. "Did Jesus Claim to be God?")

What Kind of God?

Some have argued that Jesus was only claiming to be part of God. But the idea that we are all part of God, and that within us is the seed of divinity, is simply not a possible meaning for Jesus' words and actions.

Jesus taught that he is God in the way the Jews understood God and the way the Hebrew Scriptures portrayed God, not in the way the New Age movement understands God. Neither Jesus nor his audience had been weaned on Star Wars, and so when they spoke of God, they were not speaking of cosmic forces.

Lewis explains,

Now let us get this clear. Among Pantheists, like the Indians, anyone might say that he was a part of God, or one with God....

But this man, since He was a Jew, could not mean that kind of God. God, in their language, meant the Being outside the world, who had made it and was infinitely different from anything else.

And when you have grasped that, you will see that what this man said was, quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips.⁸

Although there are still people who believe Jesus was just a great moral teacher, Lewis argued that such a belief defies logic. He writes,

I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: '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.⁹

In his quest for truth, Lewis knew that he could not have it both ways with the identity of Jesus. Either Jesus was who he claimed to be—God in the flesh—or his claims were false. And if they were false, Jesus could not be a great moral teacher. He would either be lying intentionally, or he would be a lunatic with a God complex.

Could Jesus Have Been Lying?

Having dismissed the possibility that Jesus was merely a great moral teacher, Lewis concluded he was either lying, or he was a self-deluded lunatic---or he was who he claimed to be---the Son of God.

If Jesus was lying, the question we must deal with is: What could possibly motivate Jesus to live his entire life as a lie? He taught that God was opposed to lying and hypocrisy, so he wouldn't have been doing it to please his Father. He certainly didn't lie for his followers' benefit, since all but one were martyred rather than renouncing his Lordship.

Do historians believe Jesus lied? Scholars have scrutinized Jesus' words and life to see if there is any evidence of a defect in his moral character. In fact, even the most ardent skeptics are stunned by Jesus' moral and ethical purity.

According to historian Philip Schaff, there is no evidence, either in church history or in secular history that Jesus lied about anything. Schaff argued,

How, in the name of logic, common sense, and experience, could a deceitful, selfish, depraved man have invented, and consistently maintained from the beginning to end, the purest and noblest character known in history with the most perfect air of truth and reality?¹⁰

To go with the option of liar is in direct contradiction to everything Jesus taught, lived, and died for. To most scholars, it just doesn't make sense. Yet, to deny Jesus' claims, one must come up with some explanation. And if Jesus' claims are not true, and he wasn't lying, the only option remaining is that he must have been self-deceived.

Could Jesus Have Been Self-Deceived?

Lewis considered this option carefully. He deduced that if Jesus' claims weren't true, then he must have been insane. Lewis reasons that someone who claimed to be God 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.¹¹

Most who have studied Jesus' life and words acknowledge him as extremely rational---the opposite of someone self-deceived. Although his own life was filled with immorality and personal skepticism, the renowned French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) acknowledged Jesus' superior character and presence of mind, stating,

When Plato describes his imaginary righteous man...he describes exactly the character of Christ. ...If the life and death of Socrates are those of a philosopher, the life and death of Jesus Christ are those of a God.¹²

The claims of Jesus Christ force us to choose. As Lewis stated, we cannot put Jesus in the category of being just a great religious leader or good moral teacher. Neither does the evidence support him being a liar or madman. This former skeptic challenges us to make up our own minds about Jesus, stating,

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 you 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.¹³

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis explores the options regarding the identity of Jesus, concluding that he is exactly who he claimed to be. His careful examination of the life and words of Jesus led this great literary genius to renounce his former atheism and become a committed Christian.

The greatest question in human history is, “Who is the real Jesus Christ?” Lewis and countless others have concluded that God visited our planet in human form.

In the next chapter we will examine the historical and textual evidence demonstrating the overwhelming reliability of the New Testament.

Are the Gospel Accounts of Jesus True?

The New Testament Gospels give us the accounts of Jesus' life, words, death and resurrection. The book of Acts tells us how the apostles spread the message of Jesus throughout the 1st century, and the letters to early churches are foundational to Christian doctrines believed today.

They claim to be eyewitness accounts of Jesus and the apostles. Jesus' close apostle, Simon Peter, wrote as an eyewitness when he declared,

We were not making up clever stories when we told you about the power of our Lord Jesus Christ and his coming again. We have seen his majestic splendor with our own eyes (2 Peter 1:16, NLT).

Regarding their accounts of Jesus, the apostle John wrote, "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard..." (1 John 1:3).

But skeptics have argued that the New Testament was corrupted through its two thousand years of history, and what we read about Jesus today is the result of conspiring church leaders.

Furthermore, since none of the original manuscripts exist today, skeptics say that the New Testament accounts of Jesus we have today are unreliable due to numerous copying errors and textual variants.

So, is the New Testament a reliable witness of who Jesus Christ is, and what he said? Can we rely on its gospel message that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again on the third day? And can we trust his promise of eternal life to all those who embrace him as their Savior?

In the following pages we will examine the evidence for the following:

- When were the original New Testament manuscripts written?
- How do we know if the copies are faithful to the original words?
- How does the New Testament compare with other ancient writings?

Redating the New Testament

German critic Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) once contended that John's Gospel was not written until about AD 160, when all eyewitnesses of Jesus would have been dead. Other critical scholars went further, stating that the entire New Testament was written between the 2nd and 3rd centuries. If these critics were right, the books named after Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and other New Testament books would all be forgeries.

This skeptical view of New Testament dating destroyed the faith of many for nearly a century until new forensic evidence proved Baur's claim false. So, what evidence do we have concerning when the Gospel accounts of Jesus were really written? The consensus of most scholars today is that the Gospels were written by the apostles during the first century. Four primary forms of evidence build a solid case for their conclusions:

Extrabiblical Documents

Late 1st century to early 2nd century writings from Christian sources such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp cite New Testament passages, proving they had already existed within 10-35 years after Christ, and were regarded by early Christians as authentic.

Plus, over 36,000 extrabiblical quotations from New Testament passages in letters and sermons from early church leaders date from the first three centuries, some only ten years after its last book was written.¹ New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger notes, "If all other sources for our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, they would be sufficient for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament."²

Non-Christian Historians

Josephus, Tacitus and Suetonius—all non-Christian Roman historians, confirm New Testament details about Jesus. These confirmations of New Testament details date from 20 to 150 years after Christ, "quite early by the standards of ancient historiography."³

Early New Testament Manuscript Copies

In the early 20th century a cache of New Testament papyri fragments was discovered in Egypt; among them was a fragment of the Gospel of John (specifically, P52: John 18:31-33) dated to about AD 125, only 25-50 years after John wrote the original. Since P52 was a copy of John's Gospel, his original writing would have already existed.

Princeton New Testament professor, Bruce Metzger, explains its significance in dating the New Testament much earlier than critics like Baur had claimed:

Just as Robinson Crusoe, seeing but a single footprint in the sand, concluded that another human being, with two feet, was present on the island with him, so P52 [the label of the fragment] proves the existence and use of the Fourth Gospel during the first half of the second century in a provincial town along the Nile far removed from its traditional place of composition (Ephesus in Asia Minor).⁴

Paul's Letters

Paul wrote 13 early letters to churches and individuals, forming a significant portion of the New Testament. Paul's letters, dated by scholars between the mid-40s and the mid-60s (12 to 33 years after Christ), constitute the earliest witnesses to Jesus' life and teaching.

Non-Christian historian, Will Durant, wrote of the historical importance of Paul's letters, "The Christian evidence for Christ begins with the letters ascribed to Saint Paul. ... No one has questioned the existence of Paul, or his repeated meetings with Peter, James, and John; and Paul enviously admits that these men had known Christ in the flesh."⁵

Most scholars date Paul's writings from AD 48-67. That's consistent with Biblical archaeologist William Albright's research, who concluded that all the New Testament books were written while most of the apostles were still alive. He wrote,

We can already say emphatically that there is no longer any solid basis for dating any book after about 80 A.D., two full generations before the date given by the more radical New Testament critics of today.”⁶

Albright dates the writing of the entire New Testament at “very probably sometime between about 50 A.D. and 75 A.D.”⁷

In *Redating the New Testament* critical scholar, John A. T. Robinson of Cambridge concludes that most of the New Testament books were written between AD 40 and AD 65 and are the eyewitness accounts of the apostles. His scholarly work that led to his conclusions of early dating for the New Testament is impeccable.

Robinson puts its writing as early as seven years after Christ lived⁸ when any historical errors pertaining to Jesus’ teaching, death, and resurrection would have been immediately exposed by both eyewitnesses and the enemies of Christianity. For example, Peter could say of a forgery in his name, “That’s not my Gospel, I didn’t write that.” And Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John could respond to questions or challenges aimed at their accounts of Jesus.

Early dating of the New Testament is also confirmed by early Christian creeds and hymns citing various passages, including 1 Corinthians 15: 3-5 about Jesus’ resurrection within a few years after its occurrence. As mentioned, there are also thousands of early extrabiblical documents, as well as writings from non-Christian historians that refer to accounts found in the New Testament.

Together with the early manuscript copies of the Gospels, and the early dating of Paul’s letters, there is overwhelming evidence that the entire New Testament was written while eyewitnesses to Jesus would still have been living.

Are New Testament Copies Reliable?

The original New Testament manuscripts were handwritten on papyrus, a paper-like material which deteriorated rapidly as they were used to make

hundreds of copies for dozens of churches and thousands of believers in the 1st century. Although none of the originals exist today, the same is true for all ancient historical documents—Christian or secular.

As the church spread throughout the Roman world, hundreds of copies of the originals were made by various scribes, who meticulously attempted to duplicate the original document. Yet, because slight copying errors occasionally occurred, how do we know whether copies, and copies of copies we have today are reliable, faithfully representing writings of the original authors of the New Testament?

Scholars studying ancient literature have devised the science of textual criticism, using three tests to determine the accuracy of manuscripts, and their faithfulness to the original writings:⁹

- Bibliographical test
- Internal evidence test
- External evidence test

Let's see what happens when we apply these essential tests to the New Testament manuscript copies in existence today.

Bibliographical Test

In this test, textual critics examine both the quantity and quality of existing manuscript copies and the time gap from the original writings. It asks:

- How many copies of the original document are in existence?
- How large of a time gap is there between the original writings and the earliest copies?
- How well does a document compare with other ancient history?

Number of New Testament Manuscripts

Over 5,600 copies of New Testament manuscripts exist today in the original Greek language.¹⁰ Many are small fragments; a few are virtually complete books. Counting translations into Latin, Armenian, Slavic, Syriac & Coptic, 25,000 manuscripts exist today – dating from the second to the fifteenth century. That's over 2.6 million pages of biblical text for scholars to examine!

Textual critics have compared dating and accuracy of these manuscripts to determine what was in the original text. Since the New Testament has a wealth of manuscript copies to examine and compare, these scholars have great confidence in what was written in the original documents.

Since there are over 2.6 million pages of handwritten text in 25,000 manuscripts, minor errors such as misspellings, skipping lines, or reordering words during the copying process have led to over 400,000 textual variants. Most of these copying errors are so minor that even the outspoken skeptic, Bart Ehrman, has concluded that no major New Testament doctrine is impacted by its textual variants. Biblical scholar John Wenham affirms, “The resulting text is 99.99 percent accurate, and the remaining questions do not affect any area of cardinal Christian doctrine.”¹¹

Time Gap from Originals

Most extant New Testament manuscripts date after the 3rd century. However, as mentioned earlier, a tiny fragment from a copy of John’s Gospel (John 18:31-33, labeled P52) is dated by scholars to roughly 25-50 years after John wrote the original in Ephesus. This early copy of John’s Gospel supports Albright’s and Robinson’s opinions that the entire New Testament was written during the lifetimes of the apostles.

Internal Evidence Test

Like good detectives, historians also verify reliability by looking at internal clues. Such clues reveal motives of the authors and their willingness to disclose details and other features that could be verified. The internal clues textual critics use to test a document’s reliability are the following:¹²

- Consistency of eyewitness reports
- Details of names, places, and events
- Letters to individuals or small groups
- Features embarrassing to the authors
- Irrelevant or counterproductive material
- Lack of relevant material

Consistency

Eyewitnesses to a crime or an accident generally get the big events right but see it from different perspectives. Likewise, the four Gospels describe the events of Jesus' life from different perspectives. Yet, critical scholars are amazed at the consistency of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' teaching, miracles, death and resurrection. Despite the different perspectives of the writers, all New Testament manuscripts present Jesus consistently in these key areas.

Details

Historians also verify the authenticity of a document by the accuracy of its details. Classical historian Colin Hemer "identifies 84 facts in the last 16 chapters of Acts that have been confirmed by Archaeological research."¹³ From the Gospel accounts to Paul's letters, the New Testament authors openly described details, even citing the names of at least thirty individuals who were alive at the time.

New Testament scholar Gary Habermas writes,

Overall, at least seventeen non-Christian writings record more than fifty details concerning the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus, plus details concerning the early church.¹⁴

Jesus is mentioned by more sources than the conquests of Caesar during this same period. It is even more astounding since these confirmations of New Testament details date from 20 to 150 years after Christ, "quite early by the standards of ancient historiography."

Letters To Small Groups

Historical expert Louis Gottschalk notes that personal letters intended for small audiences have a high probability of being reliable. Since large portions of the New Testament consist of personal letters written to small groups and individuals, scholars deem them to be highly reliable.

Embarrassing Features

Surprisingly, the authors of the New Testament presented themselves all too frequently as cowardly, and faithless. For example, consider Peter's threefold

denial of Jesus or the disciples' arguments over which of them was the greatest—both stories recorded in the Gospels. As respect for the apostles was crucial in the early church, inclusion of this kind of material doesn't make sense unless the apostles were reporting their accounts truthfully.

In *The Story of Civilization*, non-Christian historian Will Durant writes of the apostles,

These men were hardly of the type that one would have chosen to remold the world. The Gospels realistically differentiate their characters, and honestly expose their faults.¹⁵

Irrelevant or Counterproductive Material

The Gospels tell us that the empty tomb of Jesus was discovered by a woman, even though in Israel the testimony of women wasn't even admissible in court. Also, some of Jesus' final words on the cross are said to have been "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Scholars have determined that irrelevant or counterproductive material like these are evidence of authenticity.

Lack of Relevant Material

Few of the major issues facing the 1st century church—the Gentile mission, spiritual gifts, baptism, leadership—were addressed directly in the recorded words of Jesus. If his followers were inventing Jesus' words, it is inexplicable why they would not have made up instructions from Jesus on these issues. The lack of relevant material is evidence of the New Testament's faithfulness to the original writings.

The New Testament manuscripts meet textual critics' bibliographical and internal evidence tests used to evaluate the authenticity of ancient documents. However, there is one more important test to consider.

External Evidence Test

The third and final test to determine the reliability of the New Testament is to compare its copies with those of other ancient historical documents.

Comparison with other Ancient Historical Documents

- **Number of copies:** Most ancient historical works have fewer than 10 copies. The second best documented ancient historical manuscript, Homer's Iliad (8th century BC), has just 643 copies, compared with 25,000 for the New Testament.¹⁶ New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger remarked, "In contrast with these figures [of other ancient manuscripts], the textual critic of the New Testament is embarrassed by the wealth of his material."¹⁷
- **Time Gap:** Most ancient documents have time gaps of from 400 to 1,400 years from the originals. For example, Aristotle's Poetics was written about 343 BC, yet the earliest copy is dated AD 1100, a time gap of over 1,400 years. In stark contrast, the earliest New Testament manuscript (P52) has a time gap of only 25-50 years.

Even critical scholar Robinson has admitted,

The wealth of manuscripts, and above all the narrow interval of time between the writing and the earliest extant copies, make it by far the best attested text of any ancient writing in the world.¹⁸

Clark Pinnock, professor of interpretations at McMaster Divinity College, summed it up well when he said,

There exists no document from the ancient world witnessed by so excellent a set of textual and historical testimonies. ... An honest [person] cannot dismiss a source of this kind. Skepticism regarding the historical credentials of Christianity is based upon an irrational basis.¹⁹

As copies of the New Testament spread throughout the Roman world, the message of Jesus Christ written by the apostles transformed lives.

The New Testament was originally written in Koine Greek, but its text has been faithfully translated by scholar into hundreds of languages, including several different English versions. Although these translations from the

original Greek language have somewhat different sentence structures, the original meaning as written by the apostles is faithfully preserved in them.

The New Testament's reliability assures us that we can trust the eyewitness accounts of Jesus today, including the fact that he died for our sins, rose again to give us eternal life, and is coming back for those who put their trust in Him.

As the apostle Peter wrote nearly 2,000 years ago,

We were not making up clever stories when we told you about the power of our Lord Jesus Christ and his coming again. We have seen his majestic splendor with our own eyes (2 Peter 1:16, NLT).

So, as you read the New Testament today, you can be confident that it's God's inspired Word to you, calling you into a deeper relationship with him.

For the Word that God speaks is alive and active; it cuts more keenly than any two-edged sword: it strikes through to the place where soul and spirit meet, to the innermost intimacies of a man's being: it exposes the very thoughts and motives of a man's heart (Hebrews 4:12, Phillips).

Is Jesus the Jewish Messiah?

When Jesus was born, wise men from the East traveled to Israel to find and worship the newborn King of the Jews, following a bright star in the sky. They believed this brilliant star was a sign of the birth of a great king, who had been promised by ancient Hebrew prophets.

Author Ray Stedman reveals that the long-awaited hope for the Jewish Messiah is a resounding theme throughout the Old Testament (The Hebrew Scriptures also known as the *Tanakh*).

From the very beginning of the Old Testament, there is a sense of hope and expectation, like the sound of approaching footsteps: Someone is coming!... That hope increases...as prophet after prophet declares yet another tantalizing hint: Someone is coming!¹

Christians and Messianic Jews (Jewish followers of Jesus) are convinced that while on earth, Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled hundreds of these ancient messianic prophecies in detail.² However, most religious Jews are still waiting for their Messiah.

In his book, *A Rabbi Looks at Jesus of Nazareth*³, Jonathan Bernis attempts to unravel the mystery of the Messiah by taking a deeper look at Jesus (Yeshua) and his claims. As a Jew, Bernis thought Jesus was just a great moral teacher who started a new religion. After being challenged to look at Jesus in light of ancient Hebrew prophecies, he began his search.

Five profound questions intrigued Bernis:

1. Did Jesus truly fulfill the prophetic “fingerprint” of the Messiah?
2. Why did the Jewish leaders reject Jesus as their Messiah?
3. What was the Messiah’s Mysterious Identity?
4. Was Jesus the “suffering servant” of Isaiah 53?
5. Did Jesus’ rise from the dead?

Did Jesus Fulfill the Prophetic “Fingerprint” of the Messiah?

Bernis was shocked to learn that the original followers of Jesus were all Jews who saw him as the fulfillment of their scriptures. In fact, many of their writings in the gospels connect the ancient Hebrew prophecies to Jesus’ alleged fulfillment. So, Bernis read both the Old Testament messianic prophecies as well as the claims in the New Testament of how they were fulfilled by the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

Bernis notes that the prophetic clues provide a “fingerprint” for the Messiah’s identity. He wondered if they would fit together like pieces of a puzzle to reveal Jesus as the Christ (Greek for Messiah). Or would they expose him as a fraud?

He also wanted to see if recently found mysteries from over 980 Dead Sea Scrolls would shed light on the Messiah’s identity. Hidden in caves for 1,900 years, these ancient scrolls were finally telling their story about the identity of the true Messiah. He wondered what clues they would reveal.

As he read the Scriptures, Bernis was shocked to see how ancient prophets had indeed provided a “fingerprint” from which the Messiah could be identified. A few examples are,

- He would be from the lineage of David⁴
- He would be born in Bethlehem⁵
- He would be rejected by his own people⁶
- He would be betrayed by a friend⁷
- He would be sold for 30 pieces of silver⁸
- He would be pierced in his hands and feet⁹
- He would be buried in a rich man’s tomb¹⁰
- He would be raised from the dead¹¹

Bernis was shocked to read that Jesus was from the line of David¹², was born in Bethlehem¹³, was rejected by the Jewish leaders¹⁴, was betrayed for 30 pieces of silver¹⁵, was nailed to a cross and then buried in a rich man’s tomb¹⁶. And, his followers proclaimed that he rose from the dead.¹⁷

Wondering if Jesus' fulfillment might have been coincidental, Bernis read that the odds of Jesus fulfilling these eight prophecies would be one in 100 quadrillion. Professor of Mathematics Peter Stoner illustrates how improbable that would be:

First, blanket every inch of an area the size of Texas (268,000 square miles) with silver dollars two feet high.

Second, put a special mark on one dollar and bury it among the trillions of other silver dollars throughout the State of Texas.

Then blindfold someone and ask them to travel throughout Texas and pick up that marked dollar on *one try*.

It would have been more difficult for Jesus to have fulfilled eight prophecies than to pick up that one marked dollar. Yet, Jesus fulfilled far more— over forty-eight prophetic details written in roughly 300 Old Testament Scriptures.¹⁸ According to mathematicians, that's statistically impossible.¹⁹

Why Did Jewish Leaders Reject Jesus?

Since Jesus fulfilled so many of these prophecies, Bernis wondered why Israel's religious leaders wouldn't have been able to recognize him as the Messiah.

However, as he read the gospel accounts, he realized that Jesus fulfilled messianic prophecies in ways that no one was expecting. Israel was looking for another Moses who would deliver them from the oppression of Rome. Yet, instead of conquering Rome, Jesus captured the hearts of people with his love and message of forgiveness. Instead of promoting himself, he brought glory to God by his words and deeds of compassion. Instead of wielding power, he exemplified humility and servitude. Instead of teaching legalistic rules about outward appearance, Jesus offered us a relationship with God by transforming hearts.

Jesus spoke of himself as a savior rather than a military conqueror, stating that he must suffer and die for our sins. He told his follower Zacchaeus, "I came to seek and save those who are lost."²⁰

What Was Messiah's Mysterious Identity?

Jesus also made claims that infuriated many of the Scribes and Pharisees such as claiming his eternal existence by telling them he had pre-existed the Jewish patriarch, Abraham who had lived two thousand years earlier.²¹

Several hundred years before Jesus was born, Isaiah wrote of the Messiah's divine nature. He said, "For unto us a child is born," whose identity would be "Mighty God," "Everlasting Father," "Prince of Peace."²² Mysteriously, the prophet reveals that God would take on human form.

Although Jesus always pointed to his Father as God, he also called himself God's only Son, claiming oneness with his Father.²³ And when Philip asked Jesus to show him the Father, Jesus replied, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and yet you still don't know who I am? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!"²⁴

Bernis was stunned to discover that the prophet Zechariah actually wrote of the day when the Jewish people would recognize Jesus as the Messiah they had rejected, a day when they will enter a time of repentance. In Zechariah 12:10 we read, "They will look on me whom they have pierced and mourn for him as for an only son. They will grieve bitterly for him as for a firstborn son who has died."²⁵

Imagine the scene! Zechariah prophesies that Israel will be nearly destroyed by its enemies. Then the Lord himself will descend in majestic power and glory, overthrowing Israel's enemies. But when the rescued people of Israel see the wounds he had previously suffered—written hundreds of years before Jesus—they will suddenly weep bitterly.

Why would these surviving Israelis be so distraught at such a time of victory? Could it be that their bitter anguish comes from the realization that their forefathers had rejected him two thousand years earlier and continued to reject him for almost 2000 years? Or could it be that their hearts had been unwilling to consider Jesus' claims?

Was Jesus the Suffering Servant Depicted in Isaiah 53?

Just how strong is the case for Jesus being the long-promised Messiah? The most comprehensive description of the Messiah is in Isaiah 53 where the prophet foretells the Messiah suffering and dying for our sins. Here are just a few portions of that messianic prophecy:

He took our suffering on him....the Lord has put on him the punishment for all the evil we have done....but he didn't say a word. He was like a lamb being led to be killed....He was put to death....He had done nothing wrong....He willingly gave his life....he carried away the sins of many...and asked forgiveness for those who sinned.²⁶

So, how do Jewish rabbis today deal with the obvious parallels between Isaiah 53 and their fulfillment by Jesus of Nazareth?

Unbelievably, most Jewish people are unaware of Isaiah's 53rd chapter because the synagogue readings of the weekly Haftarah purposely omit it, skipping from chapter 52 to 54.²⁷ Most rabbis today believe Isaiah 53 refers to the suffering servant as the nation of Israel, rather than the Messiah.²⁸

Bernis was shocked to learn Isaiah 53 was always viewed as messianic until a thousand years after Christ. The 2nd century Rabbi Jonathan ben Uzziel viewed Isaiah's prophecy as messianic. So too did The Babylonian Talmud, The Midrash Ruth Rabbah, the Zohar, and even the great Rabbi Maimonides, who wrote, "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah; and, though he tarry, I will wait daily for his coming."²⁹

That view was prevalent among Jewish sages until the eleventh century when Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaqi (known by the acronym Rashi) began teaching that the suffering servant was the nation of Israel, not the Messiah.³⁰

However, a careful reading of Isaiah 53 reveals that the prophecy of the suffering servant is speaking of a person, not the nation of Israel itself.

Since the oldest copies of Isaiah were from the Masoretic Text, dated around 1000 C.E., skeptics suggested the prophecies might have been changed later by Christians to make it appear Jesus had fulfilled them.

However, in 1947, ancient Hebrew scrolls carbon dated around 200 years before Christ were discovered near the Dead Sea. Hidden for 1,900 years was a copy of Isaiah, virtually identical to the Book of Isaiah in our Bibles today. It's clear that Jesus' fulfillment of Isaiah's 53rd chapter occurred hundreds of years after the prophecy was written and couldn't have been contrived.³¹

Isaiah clearly reveals the Messiah would give his life for our sins. And, when John the Baptist first saw Jesus, he prophetically said of him, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."³²

Is there Evidence for Jesus' Resurrection?

Bernis needed to know one more vital thing to be convinced that Jesus is the true Messiah. He asks, "Did Yeshua rise from the dead? For all of us, and most especially for Jews, the answer to this question makes all the difference."³³

He read the Old Testament prophecy where David refers to the Messiah as "Your holy one who would not undergo decay for You will not abandon my soul to Sheol; Nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay."³⁴

After examining the compelling evidence for Jesus' resurrection, he became convinced that it was an actual historical event. (See "Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?") What other explanation could there be for Jesus' followers to willingly risk their lives proclaiming the risen Jesus as the true Messiah?

Conclusion

After searching both the Old and New Testaments, Bernis finally became convinced that Jesus Christ fulfilled over 300 messianic prophecies written hundreds of years before his birth. He concluded that the odds for Jesus being the prophesied Messiah overwhelmingly pointed to him as the fulfillment.

Finally, Bernis became a Messianic Jew, accepting Jesus Christ as the Messiah of Israel, as well as his own personal Savior and Lord. He concludes,

Embracing Yeshua is the most Jewish thing I have ever done. In fact, it is the most important thing I have ever done. The same God who changed my life...still has the power to change lives today. His love is transforming the lives of Jew and Gentile alike, all over the world.

God created you with a divine destiny to fulfill, and the only way to come into that destiny is to say yes to God and surrender yourself completely to Him. ³⁵

Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?

According to eyewitnesses, a man named Jesus Christ demonstrated his power over death. They tell us that after he died on a cross and was buried, Jesus suddenly appeared to them alive on the third day. Then he was seen by other followers, including 500 people on a single occasion.

Soon word spread everywhere that Jesus had risen from the dead, impacting the entire Roman Empire, and our world today.

But could Jesus' resurrection simply be a 2000-year-old legend? Or is it based upon verifiable historical evidence? If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then the foundation for the Christian Faith would forever be destroyed. Let's examine the evidence.

Jesus Predicts His Own Death and Resurrection

Hundreds of years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah had written about a future Messiah who would suffer and die for our sins but later be restored to life (Isaiah 53).

Echoing the prophecy in Isaiah 53, Jesus claimed that he was the Messiah who would be betrayed, arrested, condemned, spit upon, scourged, and killed. But then three days later he would come back to life (See Mark 10:33).

Everything Jesus taught and claimed depended on his resurrection from the dead. If Jesus didn't rise as he promised, his message of forgiveness and hope for eternal life would be meaningless. Jesus was putting his words to the ultimate test of truth.

Bible scholar Wilbur Smith explains, "When he said He would rise again from the dead, the third day after He was crucified, He said something that only a fool would dare say if He expected the devotion of any disciples – unless He was sure He was going to rise."¹

So, what actually happened?

A Horrific Death and Then . . . ?

Exactly as Jesus predicted, eyewitnesses report he was betrayed by one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot. Then in a mock trial under the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, he was condemned, scourged, kicked, spat upon, brutally whipped, and finally crucified on a wooden cross.

Jesus suffered on the cross for approximately six hours. Then, at 3:00 in the afternoon he cried out, “It is finished” and died.² Suddenly the sky went dark and an earthquake shook the land.³

Pilate wanted to verify that Jesus was dead before allowing his crucified body to be buried. So, a Roman guard thrust a spear into Jesus’ side. The mixture of blood and water that flowed out, according to eyewitnesses, was a clear indication that Jesus was dead. Once his death was certified, Jesus’ body was taken down from the cross, tightly wrapped in linen and buried in Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb. Roman guards then sealed the tomb with a large stone and were under strict orders from Pilate to watch the tomb 24 hours a day.

Jesus’ disciples were so utterly devastated by his death on the cross that they fled for their lives, fearing they too would be captured and killed. But then something happened . . .

According to a *New York Times* article,

Shortly after Jesus was executed, his followers were suddenly galvanized from a baffled and cowering group into people whose message about a living Jesus and a coming kingdom, preached at the risk of their lives, eventually changed an empire. Something happened ... But exactly what?⁴

A Skeptic Examines the Evidence

English journalist Frank Morison believed Jesus' resurrection was mythical and began research for a book proving his case. Morison wanted to know what actually happened that changed Jesus' followers and started a movement that has made such a profound impact on our world.

He realized there were five possible explanations:

1. Jesus didn't really die on the cross.
2. Jesus' body was stolen.
3. The disciples were hallucinating.
4. The account is legendary. Or,
5. It really happened.

Morison began examining the facts patiently and impartially to see where they would lead him.

1. Was Jesus Dead?

Morison first wanted verification that Jesus was really dead when placed in the tomb. He learned that Jesus' death was considered factual for nearly 1800 years. Then about 200 years ago, a few skeptics postulated that Jesus didn't die on the cross, but merely lost consciousness, and was revived by the cool, damp air of the tomb. This became known as the "swoon theory."

Morison wondered if Jesus could have survived the cross. He researched both Jewish and Roman contemporary history and discovered the following facts supporting Jesus' death:

- Jewish and Christian accounts affirm he died.
- Pilate verified he died.
- During the eyewitnesses' lifetimes, no one disputes his death.
- Secular and contemporary historians, Lucian,⁵ Josephus,⁶ and Tacitus⁷ cite his death as factual.

Morison became convinced that Jesus was truly dead, a fact almost universally accepted as true by trusted scholars and historians.

Morison concludes, "That Jesus Christ died on the cross, in the full physical sense of the term...seems to me to be one of the certainties of history."⁸ But, he wondered, maybe Jesus' body was stolen?

2. Was Jesus' Body Stolen?

Morison wanted to see if the disciples faked the resurrection story by stealing Jesus' body, and then claiming he was alive. That might be plausible if the tomb was in an obscure area where no one would see them.

However, the tomb belonged to a well-known member of the Sanhedrin Council, Joseph of Arimathea. Since Joseph's tomb was at a well-known location and easily identifiable, it would have been virtually impossible for Jesus' body to have been stolen by his disciples.

Not only was the location well known, but the Romans had assigned guards to watch the tomb 24 hours a day. This was a highly trained guard unit comprised of four to 16 soldiers.

Former atheist and skeptic Josh McDowell spent more than seven hundred hours researching the evidence for the resurrection. McDowell notes, "The Roman Guard unit was committed to discipline and they feared failure in any way."⁹

It would have been impossible for anyone to have slipped by the guards unnoticed and then move the stone. Yet the stone was rolled away, making it possible for eyewitnesses to enter the tomb. And when they did, the body of Jesus was missing.

If Jesus' body was anywhere to be found, his enemies would have quickly exposed the resurrection as a fraud. Tom Anderson, former president of the California Trial Lawyers Association, summarizes the strength of this argument:

With an event so well publicized, don't you think that it's reasonable that one historian, one eyewitness, one antagonist would record for all time that he had seen Christ's body? ... The silence of history is deafening when it comes to the testimony against the resurrection.¹⁰

So, with no body of evidence, and with a known tomb clearly empty, Morison accepted that Jesus' body had somehow disappeared from the tomb.

Perhaps the disciples were just hallucinating and only thought they saw Jesus? Morison began researching that possibility.

3. Were the Disciples Hallucinating?

Morison wondered if the disciples might have been so emotionally distraught that they hallucinated and imagined Jesus' resurrection.

Psychologist Gary Collins, former president of the American Association of Christian Counselors, explains that,

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.¹¹

Hallucination is not even a remote possibility, according to psychologist Thomas J. Thorburn.

It is absolutely inconceivable that ... five hundred persons, of average soundness of mind ... should experience all kinds of sensuous impressions – visual, auditory, tactual – and that all these ... experiences should rest entirely upon ... hallucination.¹²

Morison concluded that the hallucination theory was another dead end. He wondered, what else could explain away the resurrection?

4. Is the Resurrection Just a Legend?

Morison realized that some skeptics attribute the resurrection story to a legend that began with one or more persons lying or thinking they saw the resurrected Jesus. Over time, they speculated the legend would have grown and been embellished as it was passed on. But there are three major problems with that theory.

1. Legends simply don't develop while multiple eyewitnesses are alive to refute them. One historian of ancient Rome and Greece, A. N. Sherwin-White, argued that the resurrection news spread too soon and too quickly for it to have been a legend.¹³ Even skeptical scholars admit that Christian hymns and creeds were recited in early churches within two to three years of Jesus' crucifixion.¹⁴
2. Legends develop by oral tradition and are not supported with contemporary historical documents. Yet the Gospels were written within three decades of the resurrection.¹⁵
3. The legend theory doesn't adequately explain either the empty tomb or the fervent conviction of the apostles that Jesus was alive.¹⁶

Morison's original assumption that the resurrection account was mythical or legendary didn't coincide with the facts. His book was on hold until he concluded what really happened after Jesus' death on the cross.

So, what really happened?

5. Did the Resurrection Really Happen?

Having eliminated the main arguments against Jesus' resurrection due to their inconsistency with the facts, Morison began asking himself, "did it really happen?" Instead of looking for evidence against Jesus' resurrection, he wondered how strong the case was for its actual occurrence. Several facts stood out.

Women First

Each eyewitness account reports that Jesus suddenly appeared bodily to his followers, the women first. Morison wondered why conspirators would make

women central to the plot. In the first century, women had virtually no rights, personhood, or status. Morison reasoned that conspirators would have portrayed men, not women, as the first to see Jesus alive. And yet we read that women touched him, spoke with him, and were the first to find the empty tomb.

Multiple Eyewitnesses

The disciples claim they saw Jesus on more than ten separate occasions. They said he showed them his hands and feet and told them to touch him. He reportedly ate with them and later, on one occasion, appeared alive to more than 500 followers.

In Caesarea, Peter told a crowd why he and the other disciples were so convinced Jesus was alive.

We apostles are witnesses of all he did throughout Israel and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by crucifying him, but God raised him to life three days later ... We were those who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.¹⁷

Morison realized that these early sightings of a risen Jesus by so many of his followers would have been virtually impossible to fake.

Then what else could have happened?

Consistent to the End

As Morison continued his investigation, he began to examine the motives of Jesus' followers. He reasoned that something extraordinary must have happened, because the followers of Jesus ceased mourning, ceased hiding, and began fearlessly proclaiming that they had seen Jesus alive.

As if the eyewitness reports were not enough to challenge Morison's skepticism, he was also baffled by the disciples' behavior. These eleven former cowards were suddenly willing to suffer humiliation, torture, and death. All but one of Jesus' disciples were slain as martyrs. He questioned, if they had

taken the body, would they have sacrificed so much for a lie? Something happened that changed everything for these men and women.

It was this significant fact that persuaded Morison the resurrection must have really happened. He acknowledged,

Whoever comes to this problem has sooner or later to confront a fact that cannot be explained away ... This fact is that ... a profound conviction came to the little group of people—a change that attests to the fact that Jesus had risen from the grave.¹⁸

Professor J. N. D. Anderson and author of *Evidence for the Resurrection* concurs,

Think of the psychological absurdity of picturing a little band of defeated cowards cowering in an upper room one day and a few days later transformed into a company that no persecution could silence – and then attempting to attribute this dramatic change to nothing more convincing than a miserable fabrication ... That simply wouldn't make sense.¹⁹

Why Did It Win?

Finally, Morison was bewildered by the fact that “a tiny insignificant movement was able to prevail over the cunning grip of the Jewish establishment, as well as the might of Rome. He explains,

Within twenty years, the claim of these Galilean peasants had disrupted the Jewish church... In less than fifty years it had begun to threaten the peace of the Roman Empire. When we have said everything that can be said... we stand confronted with the greatest mystery of all. Why did it win?²⁰

By all rights, if there were no resurrection, Christianity should have died out at the cross when the disciples fled for their lives. But the apostles went on to establish a growing Christian movement.

Whatever one believes about the validity of Jesus' resurrection, clearly "*something happened*" after his death that has made a lasting impact on our world. When world historian H. G. Wells was asked who has left the greatest legacy on history, the non-Christian scholar replied, "By this test Jesus stands first."²¹

What is that legacy? Let's look at just some of Jesus' impact:

- Time is marked by his birth, B.C.– before Christ; A.D. – in the year of our Lord.
- More books have been written about Jesus than about any other person.
- About 100 great universities were originally established to spread his teaching — including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, Columbia, and Oxford.²²
- Jesus' teaching that all people are created equal laid the bedrock for human rights and democracy in more than 100 countries.²³
- The high value Jesus placed on each person regardless of sex or race led his followers to promote the rights of women as well as abolish slavery.
- Humanitarian works such as the Red Cross, World Vision, Samaritan's Purse, Mercy Ships and the Salvation Army were founded by his followers.

A Surprise Conclusion

In a reversal of his skepticism, Morison changed the title of his book to, *Who Moved the Stone*, which documents the evidence that persuaded him the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a true historical event.

Another scholar who wrote about evidence for Jesus' resurrection was Dr. Simon Greenleaf, founder of the Harvard Law School. Greenleaf wrote many of the rules of evidence still used in our legal system today. Applying those rules to the events surrounding Jesus' death, Greenleaf concluded that any honest jury would render a verdict that Jesus' resurrection really happened. As with

Morison, it was the sudden change in the disciples' behavior that persuaded him. He writes,

It would have been impossible for the disciples to persist with their conviction that Jesus had risen if they hadn't actually seen the risen Christ.²⁴

Jesus' resurrection convinced his disciples that he was the Messiah who had died for our sins. He was "the only way to God," and "the resurrection and the life." They now knew Jesus alone had the power over life and death, and they gave their lives proclaiming him as the risen Lord.

Although he was originally a skeptic, Oxford scholar C. S. Lewis explains how Jesus' resurrection was unique among all events in human history.

Something perfectly new in the history of the Universe had happened. Christ had defeated death. The door which had always been locked had for the first time been forced open.²⁵

The apostle Paul, who had also initially been a skeptic of Jesus' resurrection, explains its impact on our lives.

For Christ has completely abolished death, and has now, through the Gospel, opened to us men the shining possibilities of the life that is eternal (2 Timothy 1:10, Phillips).

In the next chapter we will examine Jesus' relevance to us today, and how we can have an eternal relationship with him.

Is Jesus Relevant Today?

We have seen who Jesus Christ is to historians, theologians and others who acknowledge his uniqueness, including his resurrection and deity.

But the question many people have is whether he can bring meaning and purpose to their lives today, two thousand years after his crucifixion and resurrection. In other words, is Jesus relevant today?

Josh McDowell was a college student who rejected Christianity because he hated religion, and thought Jesus was totally irrelevant to his life. Then one day at a student union lunch table McDowell sat next to a vibrant female collegian with a radiant smile. Intrigued by her demeanor, Josh asked her why she was so happy. Her immediate reply was, *“Jesus Christ!”*

Jesus Christ? McDowell bristled, firing back: *“Oh, for God’s sake, don’t give me that garbage. I’m fed up with religion; I’m fed up with the church; I’m fed up with the Bible. Don’t give me that garbage about religion.”*

But the unfazed young coed calmly informed him,
“Mister, I didn’t say religion, I said Jesus Christ.”

McDowell was stunned. He thought Jesus was just a religious figure and he didn’t want any part of religious hypocrisy. Yet this joyful Christian woman spoke about Jesus as someone who had brought meaning to her life.

Jesus Christ claimed to answer all the deep questions about our existence. At one time or another, we all wonder if there is a purpose to our existence. Have you ever gazed up at the stars on a pitch-black evening and wondered who put them there? Or have you ever seen a sunset and thought about life’s biggest questions:

- “Who am I?”
- “Why am I here?”
- “Where am I going after I die?”

Jesus offers life with real meaning. He said that life is much more than making money, having fun, being successful, and then ending up in a graveyard. Yet success doesn't satisfy our desire for real meaning.

Kurt Cobain, lead singer of the Seattle grunge band Nirvana, despaired of life at age 27 and committed suicide. Jazz-age cartoonist Ralph Barton also found life to be meaningless, leaving the following suicide note: "I have had few difficulties, many friends, great successes; I have gone from wife to wife, and from house to house, visited countries of the world, but I am fed up with inventing devices to fill up 24 hours of the day."¹

Pascal, the great French philosopher believed this inner void we all experience can only be filled by God. He states, "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which only Jesus Christ can fill."²

Atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell, wrote, "Unless you assume a god, the question of life's purpose is meaningless."³ Russell resigned himself to ultimately "rot" in the grave. In his book, *Why I am not a Christian*, Russell dismissed everything Jesus said about life's meaning, including his promise of eternal life.

Although philosophers and religious leaders have offered their answers to the meaning of life, only Jesus Christ proved his credentials by rising from the dead. Skeptics like McDowell who originally scoffed at Jesus' resurrection, have discovered that there is compelling evidence that it really occurred.

If Jesus actually defeated death as eyewitnesses claim, (See "Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?") then he alone would be able to tell us what life is all about, and answer, "Where am I going?" For us to understand how Jesus' words, life, and death can establish our identities, give us meaning in life, and provide hope for the future, we need to understand what he said about God, about us, and about himself.

What Did Jesus Say About God?

God Is Relational

Most so-called “gods” of other religions are impersonal. The God of whom Jesus spoke is not like the impersonal Force in *Star Wars*. Neither is He some great unsympathetic bogeyman in the sky, delighting in making our lives miserable.

On the contrary, Jesus taught that God is relational like us, but even more so. He thinks, He hears. He communicates in language we can understand. Jesus told us and showed us what God is like. According to Jesus, God knows each of us intimately and personally, and thinks about us continually. Let’s look at other things Jesus told us about God.

God Is Loving

Jesus told us that God is loving. Jesus demonstrated God’s love wherever he went, as he healed the sick and reached out to the hurting and poor.

He taught that God’s love is radically different from ours in that it is not based upon attraction or performance. It is totally sacrificial and unselfish. That means God loves everyone the same regardless of race, sex, social status, financial success, or intelligence.

Jesus compared God’s love with the love of a perfect father. A good father wants the best for his children, sacrifices for them, and provides for them. But in their best interests, he also disciplines them.

Jesus illustrates God’s heart of love with a story about a rebellious son who rejected his father’s advice about life and what is important. Arrogant and self-willed, the son wanted to quit working and “live it up.” Rather than waiting until his father was ready to give him his inheritance, he began insisting that his father give it to him early.

In Jesus’ story, the father granted his son’s request. But things went bad for the son. After squandering his money on sinful living and self-indulgence, the rebellious son became desperate and became so hungry he began working on

a pig farm and eating pig food. Finally, unsure whether his father would accept him back, he took a chance, packed his bag and headed home. He was willing to accept the scorn and even rejection of his father.

While even many earthly fathers would be angry and scold their son, Jesus tells us that God's love isn't like that. In Jesus' story, not only did the father welcome him home, but he had been waiting for his son, even running out to meet him. The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (Luke 15:21).

Then, in an amazing act of love and mercy, the father embraced his son and gave him the best family robe to wear and placed a ring for his finger to confirm his love and acceptance. Afterwards he celebrated his son's return home with a family feast, honoring his son's return home.

It is noteworthy that even though the father greatly loved his son, he didn't chase after him. He let the son he loved feel pain and suffer the consequences of his rebellious choice. In a similar way, the Scriptures teach that God's love will never compromise what is best for us. It will allow us to suffer the consequences of our own wrong choices. However, He will always welcome us back if we are willing to return in humility.

God's great love is best expressed in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life."

Jesus also taught that God will never compromise His character. Character is who we are down deep. It is our essence from which all our thoughts and actions stem. So, what is God's character like—down deep?

God Is Holy

Throughout the Scriptures (nearly 600 times), God is spoken of as "holy." Holy means that God's character is morally pure and perfect in every way. Unblemished. This means that God never entertains a thought that is impure or inconsistent with His moral excellence.

God's holiness means that evil cannot exist in His presence. Since evil is the opposite of His nature, He hates it. It's like pollution to Him.

But if God is holy and abhors evil, why didn't He make our character like His? Why are there child molesters, murderers, rapists, and perverts? And why do we struggle so with our own moral choices? That brings us to the next part of our quest for meaning. What did Jesus say about us?

What Did Jesus Say About Us?

Made For a Relationship with God

If you were to read through the New Testament you would discover that Jesus continually spoke of our immense value to God, telling us that God created us to be His children.

God's Word tells us that before the universe was created, God planned to create us and adopt us into His family. Not only that, but He has planned an incredible inheritance that is ours for the taking. Like the father's heart in Jesus' story about the prodigal son, God wants to lavish on us an inheritance of blessing and royal privilege. In His eyes, we are special.

Freedom To Choose

Real love needs to be a free choice, not a computer program or strictly a set of algorithms used in artificial intelligence. To make freely exchanged love possible, God created human beings with a unique capacity: free will.

Rebellion Against God's Moral Laws

Former skeptic C.S. Lewis reasoned that although we are internally programmed with a desire to know God, we rebel against it from the moment we are born.⁴ Lewis also began to examine his own motives, which led him to the discovery that he instinctively knew right from wrong.

We all experience this sense of right and wrong when we read of Hitler killing six million Jews, or a hero sacrificing his or her life for someone. We instinctively know it is wrong to lie and cheat. Lewis wondered where this sense of right and wrong came from. This recognition that we are

programmed with an inner moral law led the former atheist to the conclusion there must be a moral “Lawgiver.”

Indeed, according to both Jesus and the Scriptures, God has given us a moral law to obey. And not only have we turned our backs on a relationship with Him, we also have broken these moral laws that God established.

Most of us know some of The Ten Commandments: “Don’t lie, steal, murder, commit adultery,” etc. Jesus summarized them by saying we should love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves. Sin, therefore, is not only the wrong that we do in breaking the law, but also our failure to do what is right.

From the very first man and woman, we have disobeyed God’s laws, even though they are for our best. And we have failed to do what is right. We have inherited this condition from the first man, Adam. The Bible calls this disobedience, sin, which means “missing the mark,” like an archer missing his intended target. The result is that our sins have broken God’s intended relationship with us. Using the archer’s example, we have missed the mark when it comes to the purpose we were created for.

Sin causes the severing of all relationships: humanity severed from its environment (alienation), individuals severed from themselves (guilt and shame), people severed from other people (war, murder), and people severed from God (spiritual death). Like links on a chain, once the first link between God and humanity was broken, all contingent links became uncoupled.

Our Sins Have Separated Us from God’s Love

Our rebellion (sin) has created a wall of separation between God and us (see Isaiah 59:2). In the Scriptures, “separation” means spiritual death. And spiritual death means being completely separated from the light and life of God.

“But wait a minute,” you might say. “Didn’t God know all of that before He made us? Why didn’t He see that His plan was doomed for failure?”

Of course, an all-knowing God would realize that we would rebel and sin. In fact, it is our failure that makes His plan so mind-blowing. This brings us to the reason that God came to Earth in human form. And even more incredible—the remarkable reason for his death.

What Did Jesus Say About Himself?

God's Perfect Solution

During his three years of public ministry, Jesus taught us how to live, and He performed many miracles, even raising the dead. But he stated that his primary mission was to save us from our sins.

Jesus claimed to be the promised Messiah who would take our iniquity upon himself. The prophet Isaiah had written about the Messiah 700 years earlier, giving us several clues regarding his identity. But the clue most difficult to grasp is that the Messiah would be *both man and God!*

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. And his name shall be called...Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

The ancient prophets had foretold that the Messiah would become God's perfect sin offering, satisfying his justice. This perfect man would qualify to die for us (Isaiah 53:6).

According to the New Testament authors, the only reason Jesus was qualified to die for the rest of us is because, as God, he lived a morally perfect life and wasn't subject to sin's judgment.

It's difficult to understand how Jesus' death paid for our sins. Perhaps a judicial analogy might clarify how Jesus solves the dilemma of God's perfect love and justice.

Imagine entering a courtroom, guilty of murder. As you approach the bench, you realize that the judge is your father. Knowing that he loves you, you immediately begin to plead, “*Dad, just let me go!*”

To which he responds, *“I love you, son, but I’m a judge. I can’t simply let you go.”*

He is torn. Eventually he bangs the gavel down and declares you guilty. Justice cannot be compromised, at least not by a judge. But because he loves you, he steps down from the bench, takes off the robe, and offers to pay the penalty for you. And in fact, he takes your place in the electric chair.

This is the picture painted by the New Testament. God stepped down into human history, in the person of Jesus Christ, and went to the electric chair (read: cross) instead of us, for us. Jesus is not a third-party whipping boy, taking our sins, but rather he is God himself. Put more bluntly, God had two choices: to judge sin in us or to assume the punishment himself. In Christ, He chose the latter.

In other words, God’s perfect justice is completely satisfied by the death of his Son, Jesus Christ. All our sins—no matter how bad they are or have been—are completely paid for by the blood of Christ.

Some people don’t think they need a savior, believing God must be pleased by their lives and charitable deeds. They don’t consider themselves as sinners. This is especially true with people who spend much of their lives trying to live according to a particular moral or religious code.

Perhaps Hitler is deserving of judgment, they reason, but not them or others who live “decent lives”. It’s like saying that God grades on the curve, and everybody who gets a D- or better will get in. But this presents a dilemma. As we have seen, sin is the absolute opposite of God’s holy character.

Therefore, we have offended the one who created us and loved us enough to sacrifice His very Son for us. In a sense our rebellion is like spitting in His face. Neither good deeds, religion, meditation, or Karma can pay the debt our sins have incurred.

So, why is Jesus alone able to save us from our sins? Aren’t there others qualified to save us? Although there have been many people and prophets

who have lived good lives, the New Testament eyewitnesses of Jesus tell us that he was morally righteous in every way and was therefore the only one who could pay for our sins. Paul tells the Romans, “The proof of God’s amazing love is this: that...while we were sinners...Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

A Gift Undeserved

The biblical term to describe God’s free forgiveness through Christ’s sacrificial death is *grace*. Whereas mercy saves us from what we deserve, the grace of God gives us what we don’t deserve. Let’s review for a minute how Christ has done for us what we could not do for ourselves:

- God loves us and created us to have a relationship with Himself. ⁵
- We have been given the freedom to accept or reject that relationship.⁶
- Our sin and rebellion against God and His laws have created a wall of separation between us and Him.⁷
- Though we are deserving of eternal judgment, God has paid our debt in full by Jesus’ death in our place, making eternal life with Him possible.⁸

We now have the picture of God’s plan of the ages coming together, and the reason we were created. But there still is one missing ingredient. According to Jesus and the authors of the New Testament, each of us must respond to Jesus’ offer of forgiveness for our sins. It’s a free gift---he won’t force us to take it.

You Choose the Ending

We continually make choices—what to wear, what to eat, our career, marriage partner, etc. It is the same when it comes to a relationship with God. Our choices are often influenced by others. But in some instances, we are given the wrong advice. On September 11, 2001, 600 innocent people put their trust in the wrong advice and innocently suffered the consequences. The true story goes like this:

One man who was on the 92nd floor of the south tower of the World Trade Center had just heard a jet crashing into the north tower. Stunned by the explosion, he called the police for instructions on what to do. *"We need to know if we need to get out of here, because we know there's an explosion,"* he said urgently on the phone.

The voice on the other end advised him not to evacuate. *"I would wait 'til further notice."*

"All right," the caller said. *"Don't evacuate."* He then hung up.

Shortly after 9:00 A.M., another jet crashed into the 80th floor of the south tower. Nearly all 600 people in the top floors of the south tower perished. The failure to evacuate the building was one of the day's great tragedies.⁸

Those 600 people perished because they relied on the wrong information, even though it was given by a person who was trying to help. The tragedy would not have occurred had the 600 victims been given the right information.

Our conscious choice about Jesus is infinitely more important than the one facing the ill-informed 9/11 victims. Eternity is at stake. We can choose one of three different responses. We can ignore him. We can reject him. Or we can accept him.

The reason many people go through life ignoring God is that they are too busy pushing their own agenda. Chuck Colson was like that. At age 39, Colson occupied the office next to the president of the United States. He was the "tough guy" of the Nixon White House, the "hatchet man" who could make the hard decisions. Yet, in 1972, the Watergate scandal ruined his reputation and his world became unglued. Later he writes:

I had been concerned with myself. I had done this and that, I had achieved, I had succeeded, and I had given God none of the credit, never once thanking Him for any of His gifts to me. I had never thought of anything being 'immeasurably superior' to myself, or if I had in

fleeting moments thought about the infinite power of God, I had not related Him to my life.⁹

Many can identify with Colson. It's easy to get caught in the fast pace of life and have little or no time for God. Yet ignoring God's gracious offer of forgiveness has the same dire consequences as outright rejection. Our sin debt would still remain unpaid.

When it comes to rejecting Christ's full pardon, people give a variety of reasons. Some refuse to look beyond some hypocritical Christians they know, pointing to unloving or inconsistent behavior as an excuse. Others reject Christ because they blame God for some sad or tragic experience they have suffered. However, the reason most people reject Christ is because they don't want him interfering with their moral choices.

The desire for moral freedom kept C. S. Lewis from God for most of his college years. After his quest for truth led him to God, Lewis explains how acceptance of Christ involves more than just intellectual agreement with the facts. He writes:

Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms. Laying down your arms, surrendering, saying you are sorry, realizing that you have been on the wrong track and getting ready to start life over again...is what Christians call repentance.¹⁰

Repentance means a dramatic turn-around in thinking. That's what happened to former US President Nixon's "hatchet man." After Watergate was exposed, Colson began thinking about life differently. Sensing his own lack of purpose, he began reading Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, given to him by a friend. Trained as a lawyer, Colson took out a yellow legal pad and began writing down Lewis's arguments. Colson recalled:

I knew the time had come for me. ...Was I to accept without reservations Jesus Christ as Lord of my life? It was like a gate before me. There was no way to walk around it. I would step through, or I

would remain outside. A 'maybe' or 'I need more time' was kidding myself.

After an inner struggle, this former aide to the president of the United States finally realized that Jesus Christ was deserving of his full allegiance. He writes:

And so early Friday morning, while I sat alone staring at the sea I love, words I had not been certain I could understand or say fell naturally from my lips: 'Lord Jesus, I believe You. I accept You. Please come into my life. I commit it to You.'¹¹

Colson discovered that his questions, "Who am I?" "Why am I here?" and "Where am I going?" are all answered in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul writes, "It is in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for" (Ephesians 1:11, The Message).

When we enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, he fills our inner void, gives us peace, and satisfies our desire for meaning and hope. And we no longer need to resort to temporary stimuli for our fulfillment. When He enters our lives, he also satisfies our deepest longings and needs for true, lasting love and security.

And the staggering thing is that God Himself came as a man to pay our entire debt. Therefore, no longer are we under the penalty of sin. Paul states this clearly to the Colossians when he writes,

You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions, yet now he has brought you back as his friends. He has done this through his death on the cross in his own human body. As a result, he has brought you into the very presence of God, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault (Colossians 1:21b-22a, NLT).

In other words, God did what we were unable to do for ourselves. We are set free from our sins by Jesus' sacrificial death. It is like a mass murderer going

before a judge and being granted a full and complete pardon. He doesn't deserve a pardon, and neither do we. God's gift of eternal life is absolutely free—and it is for the taking. But even though the pardon is offered to us, it is up to us to accept it. The choice is yours.

Are you at the point in your life where you would like to accept God's free offer?

Perhaps like Lewis and Colson, your life has also been empty. Nothing you have tried satisfies the inner void you feel. God can fill that void and change you in a moment. He created you to have life that is flooded with meaning and purpose. Jesus said, "My purpose is to give life in all its fullness" (John 10:10b).

Or perhaps things are going well for you in life, but you are restless and lack peace. You realize that you have broken God's laws and are separated from his love and forgiveness. You fear God's judgment. Jesus said, "I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give isn't like the peace the world gives" (John 14:27, NLT).

So, whether you are simply tired of a life of empty pursuits or are troubled by a lack of peace with your Creator, the answer is in Jesus Christ.

When you put your trust in Jesus Christ, God will forgive you of all your sins—past, present, and future and make you his child. And as his loving child, He gives you purpose and meaning in life on Earth and the promise of eternal life with him.

God's Word says, "to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

Forgiveness of sin, purpose in life, and eternal life are all yours for the asking. You can invite Christ into your life right now by faith through prayer. Prayer is talking with God. God knows your heart and is not as concerned with your words as He is with the attitude of your heart. The following is a suggested prayer:

“Dear God, I want to know You personally and live eternally with You. Thank You, Lord Jesus, for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Take control of my life and change me, making me the kind of person You want me to be.”

Does this prayer express the desire of your heart? If so, simply pray the above suggested prayer in your own native language.

When you make a commitment to Jesus Christ, he enters your life, becoming your guide, your counselor, your comforter, and your best friend.

Furthermore, he gives you strength to overcome trials and temptation, freeing you to experience a new life full of meaning, purpose, and power.

In the next chapter we will discover the exciting new life Jesus offers to those who receive him into their lives.

What Is Jesus' Plan for Us?

A New Purpose

When we invite Jesus into our lives, he gives us new purpose and meaning that is centered on our new relationship with him. The apostle Paul puts it this way:

Christ died for all so that those who live would not continue to live for themselves. He died for them and was raised from the dead so that they would live for him (2 Corinthians 5:15, NCV).

What greater purpose could we have than to live for the one who loved us so much that he gave his life for us on the cross so that we could live with him forever as his beloved children? As Paul tells us, such amazing love constrains us to live the rest of our lives for him (2 Corinthians 5:14).

A New Nature

If you received Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, God gives you his nature through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Although your old nature remains with you until you die, you are no longer a slave to it. In fact, the apostle Paul speaks of our old nature, with its pride and sinful cravings as "being crucified with Christ." He tells the Galatians,

My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So, I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20, NLT).

When he left earth, Jesus told his followers they would receive the Holy Spirit who would give them the power to live for him and share the gospel worldwide (Acts 1:8).

The Christian life will be a continual battle between the old self (flesh) and the new nature (Spirit) which Jesus gives us when we receive him as Savior

and Lord. Paul explains, “Our sinful selves want what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit wants what is against our sinful selves. The two are against each other, so you cannot do just what you please.” Paul then explains how living in the flesh produces sinful behavior like lust, greed, hatred and murder.

But living in the Spirit produces the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Portions of Galatians 5:16-23, NCV).

A New Relationship

In the 14th and 15th chapters of John, Jesus tells his disciples that he and the Father will actually abide in their lives by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Paul reveals this amazing truth to the Ephesian Christians.

I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God’s love and keep you strong (Ephesians 3:16-17, NLT).

In the little booklet, *My Heart Christ’s Home*, Robert Munger writes about his new relationship with Jesus, and how it changed his life. Munger relates,

After Christ entered my heart, in the joy of the new-found relationship, I said to him, ‘Lord, I want this heart of mine to be yours. I want you to settle down here and be fully at home. I want you to use it as your own.... I want you to enjoy our time together.’

Munger imagined Jesus encouraging him to spend time together in the Bible, learning more about his love and his desire to make us more like himself.

I will be here every morning early. Meet me here and we will start the day together. So, morning after morning, I would come downstairs to the living room. He would take a book of the Bible from the case. We would open it and read together. He would unfold to me the wonder of God’s

saving truths. My heart sang as He shared the love and the grace He had toward me.

Give Him Control

As they spent precious time together, Munger discovered that Jesus doesn't simply want to make improvements in our lives. He wants to become Lord of our lives by the power of his Holy Spirit. And that can only happen when we give him control of our will. Munger referred to this as turning over the "Title Deed" of his house to Christ. Paul writes of it as being dead to self and alive to Christ.

The Bible calls a life controlled by the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit filled life." When Munger allowed Jesus to transform his house, he discovered the warmth, music and joy that Jesus' Spirit brought into it. You can discover that too, simply by yielding control to the Holy Spirit and trusting him with every part of your life.

It is important for you to know that the Spirit-controlled life is the normal Christian life. It is God's plan for your life, and available to each believer. Once you experience the joy, peace and satisfaction it brings, you will never want to go back to a self-centered life.

When you sin (and we all will), confess it immediately and get back in fellowship with your Lord. He will forgive you and hold no grudge. God's Word promises,

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

Once you have confessed your sins, trust his promise that you are forgiven and restored into fellowship with God. Then, go on walking in the Spirit by faith.

In his booklet, "Spiritual Breathing," Dr. Bill Bright compares walking in the Spirit to the way we inhale and exhale oxygen. We inhale fresh oxygen which

is necessary for life, and exhale carbon dioxide which is impure and harmful to life.

In a similar way, when we sin, we need to confess our sins (exhale) and breathe in (inhale) the filling of the Holy Spirit by yielding our lives back to him in prayer.

As you learn to walk with Christ, there will be setbacks and times of discouragement. Jesus doesn't promise that everything in your new life will go smoothly. But he does promise to be there helping you every step of your journey. Paul encourages the Philippians,

I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns (Philippians 1:6, NLT).

Paul's words remind us that God is faithful and will never give up on you as his beloved child. In fact, as the song says, "His goodness is running after you!"

There are many additional helps, articles and videos that are available to you free on the JO APP (See app.JesusOnline.com). We encourage you to download it at JesusOnline.com/app and discover more wonderful things about your new life in Christ.

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A. Did Jesus Claim to Be God?

At the core of Christianity is the belief that God came to earth in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ.

At least two of those who saw and wrote about Jesus called him the Creator of the universe. The apostle John said, “All things were made by Him, and without Him nothing was made (John 1:3). The apostle Paul said, “All things were made by Him and for Him” (Colossians 1:16).

As J. I. Packer explains, “The gospel tells us that our Creator has become our Redeemer.”¹ Because this conviction is the central theme of Christianity, denying the deity of Jesus Christ places a dagger into the heart of the Christian message.

But did Jesus really claim to be God, or is that a teaching that evolved over time? Since Jesus spoke Aramaic (a dialect of Hebrew), we need to understand what his claims meant to his Aramaic-speaking audience. How did they react to his claims?

Since his Jewish audience was immersed in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), we need to understand Jesus’ claims about himself in light of their teaching about God.

Did Jesus Teach God is One?

The Bible reveals God as the sole Creator of the universe. He alone is infinite, eternal, all powerful, all-knowing, personal, righteous, loving, just, and holy. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God says, “I alone am God. There is no other God; there never has been and never will be. I am the Lord, and there is no other Savior” (Isaiah 43:10-11, NLT).

When God spoke to Moses at the burning bush 1500 years before Christ, he told Moses his name is Yahweh, (I AM) (English translation: Jehovah or

LORD). Since that time, the foundational Scripture (Shema) for Judaism has been: “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD” (Deuteronomy 6:4). It is in this world of monotheistic belief in one God that Jesus Christ began making claims that astounded all who heard them.

The question we must ask is: did Jesus equate himself with Yahweh, the one true God who spoke with Moses at the burning bush?

To find out, let’s look further at the names Jesus used for himself, and what those names meant to his Jewish audience. Who did they think Jesus was claiming to be?

Did Jesus use God’s Name for Himself?

As Jesus’ popularity swelled with the masses, the Jewish leaders (Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes) began to see Jesus as a threat. Suddenly they began looking for ways to trap him.

One day Jesus was debating some Pharisees at the Temple, when suddenly he said, “I am the light of the world.” It is almost bizarre to picture this scene, where a traveling carpenter from the lowlands of Galilee tells these PhD’s in religion that he is “the light of the world?”

Believing Yahweh alone is the light of the world, they replied indignantly: “You are making false claims about yourself” (John 8:13 NLT).

Jesus then told them that, 2,000 years earlier, Abraham had foreseen him. Their response was incredulous: “You aren’t even fifty years old. How can you say you have seen Abraham?” (John 8:57 NLT).

Then Jesus shocked them even more with words no ordinary man would dare to say: “The truth is, before Abraham was, I AM” (John 8:58 NLT).

To the shock of the religious leaders who heard him, Jesus claimed to have always existed with God the Father, meaning he never had a beginning.

Furthermore, he had used the I AM title (Greek translation: ego eimi),² the sacred name for God! These religious experts lived and breathed the Old Testament Scriptures declaring Yahweh alone as God.

It's easy to understand the rage of those who realized Jesus was speaking of himself as God. Since the penalty for blasphemy was death by stoning, the Jewish leaders angrily picked up stones to kill Jesus. At that point Jesus could have said, "Wait! You misunderstood me—I'm not claiming to be Yahweh." But Jesus didn't alter his statement, even at the risk of being killed.

C. S. Lewis explains their anger:

He says... "I am begotten of the One God, before Abraham was, I am," and remember what the words "I am" were in Hebrew. They were the name of God, which must not be spoken by any human being, the name which it was death to utter.³

Some may argue that this was an isolated instance, and Jesus never meant to use God's holy name for himself. But Jesus also used "I AM" for himself on several other occasions. Imagine the religious leaders' reactions upon hearing Jesus' other radical claims:

- "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12)
- "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6)
- "I am the only way to the Father" (John 14:6)
- "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25)
- "I am the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11)
- "I am the door" (John 10:9)
- "I am the living bread" (John 6:51)
- "I am the true vine" (John 15:1)
- "I am the Alpha and Omega" Revelation 1:7-8)

As Lewis observes, if these claims were not from God himself, Jesus would have been deemed a lunatic. But what made Jesus credible to those who heard him were the numerous miracles he performed, and eventually his resurrection from the dead.

Jesus called himself “Son of man,” and “Son of God” on several occasions. Let’s examine the meaning of those names in context of how his Jewish audience understood them.

What Did Jesus Mean by Son of Man?

Over eighty times in the New Testament Jesus refers to himself as “Son of man.” So, what did Jesus mean by Son of man, and what did it mean to his Jewish audience?

Packer writes that the name, Son of man referred to Jesus’ role as Savior-King, fulfilling the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 53.⁴ In other words, God’s Messiah would be a man. Yet, the prophet Isaiah also said that the child who would be born would be the “Mighty God,” “Everlasting Father,” Prince of Peace,” indicating he would be both man and God (Isaiah 9:6).

By calling himself the Son of man, Jesus was also referring to himself as the fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy. Daniel prophesies,

I looked, and there before me was one like a Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him (Daniel 7:13-14).

In Luke 21:27, Jesus said that when he returns to earth, he will fulfill Daniel’s prophecy of the Son of man. “Then everyone will see the Son of man arrive on the clouds with power and great glory.”

So, why is the Son of man being worshiped, when God alone is to be worshiped—unless he is God? Jesus’ claim to be the “I AM,” and his claim to be the Son of Man point to his claim to deity.

What Did Jesus Mean by Son of God?

Jesus also claimed to be the “Son of God.” This title doesn’t mean Jesus is God’s biological Son. Nor does it imply inferiority any more than a human son is inferior in essence to his father. A son shares his father’s DNA, and although he is different, they are both equal as men.

Scholars say that the term “Son of God” in the original languages refers to likeness, or “of the same order.” Jesus meant by it that he has divine essence, or in 21st century terms, the “DNA of God”. Professor Peter Kreeft explains,

What did Jesus mean when he called himself the “Son of God?” The son of a man is a man. (Both “son” and “man,” in the traditional language, mean males and females equally.) The son of an ape is an ape. The son of a dog is a dog. The son of a shark is a shark. And so, the Son of God is God. “Son of God” is a divine title.⁵

Jesus continually referred to his Father as God. And in John 17 Jesus refers to his Father as “the one true God.” However, in the same passage, Jesus speaks about the glory he and his Father shared before the world began. How could Jesus have existed eternally with the Father unless he and his Father shared the same divine attribute of eternal existence?

Packer explains what Jesus meant by using the term, “Son of God.”

When, therefore, the Bible proclaims Jesus as the Son of God, the statement is meant as an assertion of his distinct personal deity.⁶

Jesus’ use of the names, “I AM,” “Son of Man,” and “Son of God,” all point to the fact that he was claiming equality with God. Certainly, that’s the way the Jewish leaders understood him.

But if Jesus was truly claiming to be God, did he make it known in other ways? To find out, we need to examine Jesus’ actions during his three-year ministry. Did he speak and act with the authority of God? Or did he simply speak for God like Moses and other prophets?

How Could Jesus Forgive Sin?

In the Jewish religion, forgiveness of sin was reserved for God alone. Forgiveness is always personal; someone else cannot do the forgiving for the person offended, especially if the Person offended is God. But on several occasions Jesus acted as if he was God by forgiving sinners. His jaw-dropping claim to forgive sins infuriated the Jewish religious leaders who witnessed Jesus' claim to forgive the sins of a man with palsy.

Mark records the instance. "The scribes who heard him said blasphemy! Who but God can forgive sins!" (Mark 2:7).

That's just the point; no man has the right or authority to speak for God when it comes to forgiveness of sins. Lewis imagines the stunned reactions of all those who heard Jesus. Lewis wrote:

Then comes the real shock. Among these Jews there suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if He was God. He claims to forgive sins. He says He always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time.

Now let us get this clear. Among Pantheists, like the Indians, anyone might say that he was a part of God, or one with God....

But this man, since He was a Jew, could not mean that kind of God. God, in their language, meant the Being outside the world, who had made it and was infinitely different from anything else. And when you have grasped that, you will see that what this man said was, quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips.⁷

What Did Jesus Mean by Being "One with God?"

Those who listened to Jesus, observed his moral perfection, and saw him perform miracles, wondered if he was the long-promised Messiah. Finally, in order to find out, his opponents surrounded him at the Temple, asking: "How

long are you going to keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

Jesus answered, “The proof is what I do in the name of my Father.” He compared his followers with sheep saying, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.” He then revealed to them that “the Father is greater than all,” and that his deeds were “at the Father’s direction.” Jesus’ humility must have been disarming. But then Jesus dropped a bombshell, telling them, “The Father and I are one.” (John 10:25-30).

Some argue that Jesus only meant he was in agreement with God. But if Jesus had meant that he was merely in agreement with God, why did the Jews respond by picking up stones to kill him? Their understanding of Jesus’ claim to be one with his Father becomes clear in the follow-up conversation.

Jesus then asked them, “At my Father’s direction I have done many things to help the people. For which one of these good deeds are you killing me?” They replied, “Not for any good work; but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, have made yourself God” (John 10:33). Once again, Jesus could have denied that he was God—but the fact that he didn’t is evidence that his statement about being one with the Father was a claim to deity.

Was Jesus the image of God?

As Jesus was preparing his disciples for his upcoming death on the cross and departure, Thomas wanted to know where he was going and the way there. Jesus answered Thomas:

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me. If you had known who I am, then you would have known who my Father is. From now on you know him and have seen him (John 14:6).

They were confused. Philip then speaks up, asking Jesus to “show us the Father.” Jesus answers Philip with these shocking words: “Philip, don’t you even yet know who I am, even after all the time I have been with you? Anyone

who has seen me has seen the Father!” (John 14:9). In effect Jesus was saying, “Philip if you want to see the Father, look at me!”

In John 17 Jesus reveals that this oneness with his Father had existed in eternity past, “before the world began.” According to Jesus, there has never been a time when he did not share God’s very glory and essence.

It wasn’t just Jesus’ enemies who were astounded at his jaw-dropping words. John Piper writes,

Jesus’ friends and enemies were staggered again and again by what he said and did. He would be walking down the road, seemingly like any other man, then turn and say something like, ‘Before Abraham was, I am.’ Or, ‘If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.’ Or, very calmly, after being accused of blasphemy, he would say, ‘The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.’ To the dead he might simply say, ‘Come forth,’ or, ‘Rise up.’ And they would obey. To the storms on the sea he would say, ‘Be still.’ And to a loaf of bread he would say, ‘Become a thousand meals.’ And it was done immediately.”⁸

Why Did Jesus Accept Worship?

Nothing is more fundamental to the Hebrew Scriptures than the fact that God alone is to be worshiped. In fact, the first of the sacred Ten Commandments is, “Do not worship any other gods besides me” (Exodus 20:3, NLT).

The most terrible sin a Jew could commit was to either worship another creature as God, or to receive worship. So, if Jesus is not God, it would be blasphemy for him to receive worship. That is why the words of his disciple, Thomas, are so significant.

After Jesus’ resurrection, the other disciples told Thomas they had seen the Lord alive (see John 20:24-29). The skeptical Thomas scoffed, telling them he would only believe if he could put his fingers on the nail wounds of Jesus’ hands and into his pierced side.

Eight days later the disciples were all together in a locked room when the resurrected Jesus suddenly appeared in front of them. Jesus looked at Thomas and told him to “Put your finger here and see my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side.” Thomas needed no more proof. He instantly believed, exclaiming to Jesus: “My Lord and my God!”

Thomas could have simply called him, “Lord.” However, he further called Jesus “God,” and worshiped him. If Jesus is not God, he certainly should have reprimanded Thomas right there. But instead of reprimanding Thomas for worshiping him as God, Jesus commended him, saying: “You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who haven’t seen me and believe anyway.”

Jesus accepted worship on nine recorded occasions. In context of Jewish belief, Jesus’ acceptance of worship speaks volumes about his claim to deity. But it was after Jesus ascended to heaven that his disciples fully understood. Before Jesus left earth, he told them to “baptize new disciples in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19), putting both the Holy Spirit and himself on the same level as the Father.

Was Jesus the Alpha and Omega?

While John the apostle was in exile on the Island of Patmos, Jesus revealed to him in a vision the events that will occur in the last days. In the vision, John describes the following incredible scene:

“Look! He comes with the clouds of heaven. And everyone will see him—even those who pierced him.... I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End,” says the Lord God. “I am the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come, the Almighty One.”
(Revelation 1:7-8, NLT).

So, who is this Person who is called “the Alpha and Omega,” “the Lord God,” “the Almighty One”? We are told that he was “pierced.” Jesus is the one who was pierced on the cross.

Then John sees Jesus on a throne, judging people from every nation. “And I saw a great white throne, and I saw the one who was sitting on it. ... And the one sitting on the throne said ... “I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End” (Revelation 20:11; 21:6).

It is the Lord Jesus Christ who reigns from the throne. Jesus had already told his disciples that he would be the final judge of men. Then, in the following verse, Jesus removes all doubt about whether he is God. As the Alpha and Omega, Jesus says, “All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and *I will be their God*, and they will be my children” (Revelation 21:7).

So, did Jesus claim to be God?

- He did so by calling himself, I AM.
- He did so by calling himself the Son of Man.
- He did so by calling himself the Son of God.
- He did so by forgiving sin.
- He did so by accepting worship.
- He did so by rising from the dead.
- He did so by claiming to be the Alpha and Omega.
- He did so by saying, “I will be their God.”

C. S. Lewis writes of Jesus’ uniqueness as both God and man. “What is beyond all space and time, what is uncreated, eternal, came into nature, descended into His own universe, and rose again.”⁹

And, his purpose was to become our Savior, making it possible for us to live eternally with God. As Packer writes, “Our Creator has become our Redeemer.” Jesus’ claim to be God the Son needs to be understood in the context of his oneness with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:14; Matthew 28:19). The Bible teaches that all three persons of the Godhead are one in essence, attributes and eternal existence. The early church fathers called this unique oneness of God in three distinct persons the “Trinity.”

So, what did the apostles and early church fathers believe about Jesus’ deity? To find out, see Appendix B: “Did the Apostles Believe Jesus is God?”

B. Did the Apostles Believe Jesus is God?

Were the eyewitnesses, who heard Jesus' words and saw his miraculous deeds, convinced that he is equal in every way with his Father? Or did they think that Jesus was merely a higher created being or a great prophet like Moses?

To sort out truth from fiction, we need to go back to the words of the apostles who were there when Jesus walked the earth and wrote their testimonies of what they saw and heard. We also want to examine what the early church fathers believed and taught since several of them knew and heard the apostles teach.

The Eyewitnesses

Jesus spent three years with his disciples, teaching them about God and explaining to them the deep truths of God's Word. During those three years, Jesus performed numerous miracles, made audacious claims, and lived a righteous life. After his resurrection, these eyewitnesses wrote down many of Jesus' words and deeds.

Simon Peter, one of Jesus' disciples who wrote of Jesus' glory after his resurrection:

We saw it with our own eyes: Jesus resplendent with light from God the Father.... We couldn't be more sure of what we saw and heard—God's glory, God's voice (2 Peter 1:16-17, The Message).

But does the fact that the apostles saw God's glory and heard God's voice through Jesus mean that they regarded him as God? New Testament scholar A. H. McNeile explains,

...no sooner had the Life of Jesus ended in apparent failure and shame than the great body of Christians—not an individual here and there, but

the mass of the Church—passed over at once to the fixed belief that He was God.¹

Those who deny Jesus' deity say that the apostles taught that Jesus is God's supreme creation, and that the Father alone is the eternal God. So, to clarify their beliefs about Jesus, we will examine their words, asking three essential questions:

1. Did the apostles and early Christians worship Jesus and pray to him as Lord?
2. Did the apostles teach that Jesus is the Creator written of in Genesis?
3. Did the apostles worship Jesus as Preeminent in the universe?

Did the Apostles Pray to Jesus as Lord?

After Jesus ascended, the apostles stunned both Jew and Roman by proclaiming Jesus as "Lord".² Both the apostles and early Christians did the unthinkable and worshiped Jesus, even praying to him as if he was God. Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" as he was being stoned to death (Acts 7:59).

Other believers soon joined Stephen, who even while they were facing death, "never ceased for a single day...to teach and to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus" (Acts 5:42). The apostles, most of whom were martyred, passed on their knowledge of Jesus to church fathers who carried their message onto the next generation.

Although letters from early church fathers were written too late to be included in the New Testament, they strongly emphasize the apostles' teaching that Jesus is both God and man.

For example, Ignatius, a disciple of the apostle John, wrote about Jesus' 2nd coming, "Look for him that is above the times, him who has not times, him who is invisible." In a letter to Polycarp, who was also a disciple of the apostle John, Ignatius states, "Jesus is God", "God incarnate," and to the Ephesians he writes, ... "God Himself appearing in the form of a man, for the renewal of eternal life" (Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians 4:13). Clement of Rome in

AD 96 also taught Jesus' deity, saying, "We ought to think of Jesus Christ as of God" (2nd Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians 1:1).

So, the idea that belief in Jesus' deity was invented by the church decades after the apostles were dead simply doesn't agree with the historical facts. It's clear that the early church was merely continuing the apostles' belief in Jesus' deity.

As the early church grew, Gnostics and other cults began teaching that Jesus was a created being, inferior to the Father. This came to a head in the fourth century when Arius, a popular preacher from Libya, persuaded many leaders that Jesus wasn't fully God.

Then in AD 325, at the Council of Nicaea, church leaders met to resolve the issue of whether Jesus is the Creator, or merely a creation.³ Over 300 church leaders overwhelmingly affirmed the long-held Christian conviction and New Testament teaching that Jesus is fully God.⁴

Did the Apostles Believe Jesus was the Creator?

But did the apostles believe Jesus was the one who created everything—including us?

In Genesis the God of the Bible is revealed as Creator of everything from tiny quantum particles to over a trillion galaxies averaging 100 billion stars each. He also created the complex coding of DNA that organizes proteins to develop all living life forms including us.

The prophet Isaiah confirms that God (Yahweh) is the Creator:

I (Yahweh) am the one who made the earth and created people to live on it.... I stretched out the heavens.... All the millions of stars are at my command!" (Isaiah 45:11a, 12, 13b).

The Apostle John's Testimony

When Jesus' disciples gazed at the stars on dark evenings, they didn't dream or imagine that the Creator of those stars was in their very presence. Although Jesus healed the blind and deaf, calmed storms, and even raised Lazarus from the dead, John and the other disciples saw him as a man with real physical needs for food, rest and sleep.

Yet once they saw Jesus alive after his crucifixion, their eyes were open to his deity. They immediately began spreading the word that Jesus was both God and man.

The apostle John, inspired by the Holy Spirit, begins his Gospel by revealing Jesus as the eternal "Word" who created everything:

In the beginning there was the Word. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were made by him, and nothing was made without him. In him there was life, and that life was the light of all people (John 1:1,3-4, NCV).

Let's look closely at what John, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, is saying here:

1. the "Word" existed before creation
2. the "Word" is the Creator who created everything
3. the "Word" is God⁵

John has told us that the Word is eternal, created everything that exists, and is God. But he doesn't tell us whether the Word is just a force or a person until verse 14, which makes it clear that John is speaking about Jesus as the Son of God.

The Word became a human and lived among us. We saw his glory—the glory that belongs to the only Son of the Father—and he was full of grace and truth (John 1;14, NCV).

John also refers to Jesus as the Word in his epistle,

Christ is the Word of Life. He was from the beginning. We have heard Him and have seen Him with our own eyes. We have looked at Him and put our hands on Him (1 John 1:1, NIV).

The apostle John tells us that “nothing exists that he (Jesus) didn’t make.” If nothing existed apart from him, it follows that Jesus couldn’t have been a created being.

Paul’s Testimony

Unlike John, the apostle Paul, (formerly Saul) was a bitter opponent and persecutor of Christians until Jesus revealed himself to him in a vision. Years later, Paul writes about Jesus as the Creator to the Colossians:

He (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of creation. For by Him all things were created...all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together (Colossians 1:15-17, NASB).

Paul reveals several important things in this passage:

1. Jesus is the exact image of God.
2. Jesus is the “first-born” of creation.
3. Jesus created everything.
4. Jesus is the reason for creation.
5. Jesus existed before everything.
6. Jesus holds creation together.

What does “exact image of God” mean? Bible scholar F. F. Bruce remarks: “To call Christ the image of God is to say that in Him the being and nature of God have been perfectly manifested—that in Him the invisible has become visible.”⁶ Thus, God being visible in Christ coincides with Jesus’ own words to Philip, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

In verse 15, the Greek word for “first-born” (prototokos) means “supreme” rather than in the temporal sense of ‘born after.’⁷ According to Bruce, Paul is referring to “Christ’s pre-existence and cosmic activity in creation, and

“denotes not only Jesus’ priority but also his primacy.”⁸ What makes this clear is verse 16 which tells us that everything in the universe was created both through Jesus Christ, and also for him.

In verse 17 we see the eternal Christ sustaining creation. According to Paul, every atom, each DNA strand, and trillions of galaxies are held together by the power of Jesus Christ.

The Book of Hebrews’ Testimony

The New Testament book of Hebrews⁹ also reveals Jesus as the Creator of everything. Its opening passage mirrors Paul’s words to the Colossians:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word (Hebrews 1:1-3, NIV).

Just as John and Paul reveal, the author of Hebrews tells us that prior to Jesus becoming a man, God created the universe through him. And Hebrews also reveals Jesus Christ as the one who sustains it.

Hebrews 1:3 speaks of Jesus as the “perfect imprint and very image of God’s nature.”¹⁰ The Greek word here means that “the Son is the effulgence, the out-raying of the glory of God’s glory.”¹¹ This statement, that Jesus is the “perfect imprint” of the infinite God, confirms that the apostles believed Jesus is fully God.

The author of Hebrews then goes on to tell us that Jesus is not only superior to the prophets, but he also is far above the angels. “This shows that God’s Son is far greater than the angels, just as the name God gave him is far greater than their names” (Hebrews 1:4).

John Piper explains why Jesus is vastly superior to angels:

No angel in heaven ever received such honor and affection as the Son has received from all eternity from his Father. As great and wonderful as angels are, they do not rival the Son.... The Son of God is not an angel—not even the highest archangel. Rather God says, “Let God’s angels worship him!” (Hebrews 1:6). The Son of God is worthy of all the worship that the hosts of heaven can give—not to mention ours.”¹²

The author of Hebrews then removes all doubt regarding Jesus’ deity: “But as to the Son, He [the Father] says to Him, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever....’” (Hebrews 1:8, Amplified).

Later in Hebrews, we learn that Jesus Christ “is the same yesterday, today, and forever,” a clear statement of his eternal Deity (Hebrews 13:8). A created being is not the same today as yesterday because there would have been a time when he didn’t exist.

It would be difficult to construe these passages in Hebrews to mean anything other than the fact that Jesus is the God spoken of in the Old Testament, who along with His Father and the Holy Spirit, created the universe.

Pre-Eminent One

The early Christians were accused by the Romans of stealing glory from Caesar, and by the Jews of robbing glory from God (Yahweh). Christianity is criticized by some as being “too Jesus focused.” But is that what the apostles thought? Let’s hear again from Paul as he writes to the Colossians about Jesus.

He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Colossians 1:19, ESV).

Paul writes that God is pleased to have Jesus as the preeminent person in the universe. But the Old Testament clearly teaches that God will never relinquish his preeminence to a created being (Deuteronomy. 6:4-5; Psalm 83:18; Proverbs 16:4; Isaiah 42:11). Isaiah speaks clearly of God’s (Yahweh’s) preeminence.

Let all the world look to me for salvation! For I am God; there is no other. I have sworn by my own name, and I will never go back on my word: Every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will confess allegiance to my name (Isaiah 45:22-23, NLT).

But how can both Jesus and Yahweh be preeminent? In Genesis the Hebrew word used for God the Creator is plural (Elohim). And, when Isaiah states that God alone created everything, the Hebrew word for God (Yahweh) is also plural. Dr. Norman Geisler concludes,

Biblically speaking, there is more than enough evidence to conclude that the fundamental nature of God is portrayed by the Scriptures as a plural oneness.¹³

Paul attributes to Jesus the same words of honor Isaiah attributes to Yahweh:

Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross.

Because of this, God raised him up to the heights of heaven and gave him a name that is above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:6-11, NLT).

This passage reveals that before Jesus became a man, he had the full rights of the Godhead. Paul concludes by attributing to Jesus the worship Isaiah said belongs only to Yahweh, "that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

Over seven hundred years before Christ, God tells us through Isaiah, "every knee shall bow to him (Yahweh)." That he is "the Lord, the King of Israel." "The

Redeemer.” “The First and the Last.” Zechariah speaks of God as “the King, the Lord of Hosts who will judge the earth.”

Note the parallels between Yahweh in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament:

- “Every Knee shall bow to Jesus” (Philippians 2:11,12)
- Jesus is the “Alpha and Omega—God” (Revelation 21: 6, 7)
- Jesus is the “First and the Last—God” (Revelation 21:7-22:13)
- Jesus is the “Beginning and the End—God” (Revelation 21:6, 7)
- Jesus is the “Almighty Lord” (Revelation 1:8)
- Jesus is the King of Kings” (Revelation 17:14)
- Jesus is the “Lord of Lords” (Revelation 17:14)

Conclusion

The Christian message is that God the Creator came to earth, allowed men to spit on him, mock him, and nail him to a cross as a supreme sacrifice for our sins. God’s perfect justice could only be satisfied by a mediator who was both man and God, taking on himself payment for our sin. No angel or created proxy would suffice. Such an act of condescension demonstrates the immensity of God’s love and grace, as well as the high value He places upon each of us.

In his parting words to the Ephesian elders, Paul encouraged them to “shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28 NASB). Paul is echoing Zechariah’s prophecy where God (Yahweh) says, “In that day the Lord will defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem....and they will look on Me whom they have pierced, and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son (Zechariah 12:8a,10b).

Zechariah reveals that the one pierced on the cross was none other than God, himself. Jesus Christ brings Old and New Testaments together like separate instruments harmonizing to create a beautiful symphony. “For, unless Jesus is God, Christianity loses its central theme. But if Jesus is God, all other major Christian doctrines fit together like pieces of a puzzle.”

Kreeft and Tacelli explain:¹⁴

- “If Christ is divine, then the incarnation, or ‘enfleshing’ of God, is the most important event in history. It is the hinge of history. It changes everything.”
- “If Christ is God, then when he died on the cross, heaven’s gate, closed by sin, opened up to us for the first time since Eden. No event in history could be more important to every person on earth than that.”
- “If Christ is God, then, since he is omnipotent and present right now, he can transform you and your life right now as nothing and no one else possibly can.”
- “If Christ is divine, he has a right to our entire lives, including our inner life and our thoughts.”

The apostles made Jesus Lord of their lives, wrote of him as the Creator, and worshiped him as preeminent. These firsthand eyewitnesses were absolutely convinced that God had visited planet earth in the Person of Jesus Christ, who will return as King of kings and Lord of lords, as well as our eternal Judge.

It was because of the apostles unswerving conviction that Jesus was God in the flesh that they willingly gave their lives proclaiming him as both Savior and Lord.

Why Aren't Gnostic Gospels in the New Testament?

There is solid historical and textual evidence to support the New Testament's accounts of Jesus and the apostles. But many wonder why other so-called gospels aren't included. Two of the most discussed writings that people wonder about are the Gnostic Gospels and the Gospel of Barnabas. We'll look at the Gnostic Gospels first.

Are There Secret Writings About Jesus?

In 1945 a discovery was made in Upper Egypt, near the town of Nag Hammadi. Fifty-two copies of ancient writings, called the Gnostic gospels were found in 13 leather-bound papyrus codices (handwritten books). They were written in Coptic and belonged to a library in a monastery.

A few Gnostic scholars have gone so far as to assert that these recently discovered writings are the authentic history of Jesus instead of the New Testament.

But does their faith in these documents square with the historical evidence? Let's take a deeper look to see if we can separate truth from fiction.

Secret "Knowers"

The Gnostic gospels are attributed to a group known as the Gnostics. Their name comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge." These people thought they had secret, special knowledge hidden from ordinary people.

As Christianity spread, the Gnostics mixed some doctrines and elements of Christianity into their beliefs, morphing Gnosticism into a counterfeit Christianity. However, for their system of thought to fit with Christianity, Jesus needed to be reinvented, stripped of both his humanity and his absolute deity.

In *The Oxford History of Christianity* John McManners wrote of the Gnostics' mixture of Christian and mythical beliefs.

Gnosticism was (and still is) a theosophy with many ingredients. Occultism and oriental mysticism became fused with astrology... They collected sayings of Jesus shaped to fit their own interpretation (as in the Gospel of Thomas) and offered their adherents an alternative or rival form of Christianity.¹

Early Critics

A mild strain of Gnostic philosophy was already growing in the first century just decades after the death of Jesus. The apostles, in their teaching and writings, went to great lengths to condemn these beliefs as being opposed to the truth of Jesus, of whom they were eyewitnesses.

Check out, for example, what the apostle John wrote near the end of the first century: "Who is the great liar? The one who says that Jesus is not the Christ. Such people are antichrists, for they have denied the Father and the Son" (1 John 2:22, NIV).

Following the apostles' teaching, the early church leaders unanimously condemned the Gnostics as a cult. Church father Irenaeus, writing 140 years before the Council of Nicaea, confirmed that Gnostics were condemned by the church as heretics. He also rejected their "gospels." But, referring to the four New Testament Gospels, he said, "It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are."²

Christian theologian Origen wrote this in the early third century, more than a hundred years before Nicaea:

I know a certain gospel which is called "The Gospel according to Thomas" and a "Gospel according to Matthias," and many others have we read—lest we should in any way be considered ignorant because of those who imagine they possess some knowledge if they are acquainted with these. Nevertheless, among all these we have approved

solely what the church has recognized, which is that only four gospels should be accepted.³

Mystery Authors

When it comes to the Gnostic gospels, just about every book carries the name of a New Testament character: the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Mary, and so on. But could they have even been written by their purported authors? Let's take a look.

The Gnostic gospels are dated about 110 to 300 years after Christ, and no credible scholar believes any of them could have been written by their namesakes. In James M. Robinson's comprehensive *The Nag Hammadi Library*, we learn that the Gnostic gospels were written by "largely unrelated and anonymous authors."⁴

New Testament scholar Norman Geisler writes,

The Gnostic writings were not written by the apostles, but by men in the second century (and later) pretending to use apostolic authority to advance their own teachings. Today we call this fraud and forgery.⁵

Mystery Versus History

The Gnostic gospels are not historical accounts of Jesus' life but instead are largely esoteric sayings, shrouded in mystery, leaving out historical details such as names, places, and events. This is in striking contrast to the New Testament Gospels, which contain innumerable historical facts about Jesus' life, ministry, and words.

Consider the following two statements, the first from the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas (c. AD 110-150), and the second from the New Testament's Gospel of Luke (AD 55-70)

- **Gospel of Thomas:** "These are the hidden sayings that the living Jesus spoke, and Judas Thomas the Twin recorded."⁶

- **Gospel of Luke:** “Many people have written accounts about the events that took place among us. They used as their source material the reports circulating among us from the early disciples and other eyewitnesses of what God has done in fulfillment of his promises. Having carefully investigated all of these accounts from the beginning, I have decided to write a careful summary for you, to reassure you of the truth of all you were taught” (Luke 1:1-4, NLT).

Hidden sayings in the Gnostic gospels compared with factual accounts in the New Testament. Noted professor Raymond Brown has said of the Gnostic gospels,

We learn not a single verifiable new fact about the historical Jesus’ ministry, and only a few new sayings that might possibly have been his.⁷

Such contrast between the New Testament and the Gnostic writings is devastating to those pushing conspiracy theories.

In summary, the Gnostic gospels simply don’t meet the high standards required by scholars for inclusion in the New Testament. New Testament historian F. F. Bruce wrote,

There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament.⁸

The Gospel of Barnabas: Secret Bible?

A Turkish official discovered a 1,500-year-old ancient leather-bound text, secretly hidden for 12 years, that could be an authentic version of the Gospel of Barnabas.

According to this “secret Bible,” Barnabas was one of Jesus’ original twelve apostles. However, in the book of Acts, Luke introduces Barnabas as an apostle who came after the original twelve and was a fellow missionary with

the apostle Paul. In their travels, Paul and Barnabas boldly declared Jesus' death, resurrection and lordship in the first century.⁹

A Different Jesus?

Although the document entitled the Gospel of Barnabas contains much of the same information as the four New Testament Gospels, it differs greatly about the identity of Jesus Christ. A few of the significant differences are that the Gospel of Barnabas:

- Denies Jesus' deity
- Rejects the Trinity
- Denies Jesus' crucifixion

Let's look at what the Gospel of Barnabas says about Jesus' deity.

Gospel of Barnabas:

I confess before heaven, and call to witness everything that dwells upon the earth, that I am a stranger to all that men have said of me, to wit, that I am more than man. For I am a man, born of a woman, subject to the judgment of God; that live here like as other men, subject to the common miseries.¹⁰

Clearly the Gospel of Barnabas depicts Jesus denying his deity, whereas the apostle John clearly writes of Jesus as God the Son, Creator of the world.

Gospel of John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory...¹¹

In this passage, John claims he actually saw Jesus. Later he tells us he touched him, traveled with him and heard him teach for three years. He speaks about Jesus as a close companion. But the writer of the Gospel of Barnabas makes no such claim.

Both writings also differ regarding Jesus' crucifixion. The Gospel of Barnabas presents Judas Iscariot as the one who died on the cross instead of Jesus, whereas in the New Testament, Judas betrays Jesus.

Both messages can't be true since the New Testament says Jesus clearly died on the cross and the Gospel of Barnabas states otherwise. So how can we know which Jesus is real?

The best way to know the truth about whether or not Jesus died on the cross is to check the historical record. Even secular historians are convinced that Jesus did truly die on the cross.

Another important way to verify whether the Gospel of Barnabas or the New Testament is portraying events truthfully is to compare the reliability of the two different accounts.

Although scholars use several tests to determine a manuscript's reliability, the most important is whether it is an eyewitness account. In a criminal trial, eyewitness testimony is always considered far superior to the testimony of someone who didn't witness the crime. If either gospel can be traced back to the first century, the likelihood of its reliability greatly increases. So, what does the evidence tell us? Let's begin with the Gospel of Barnabas.

Is The Gospel of Barnabas an Eyewitness Account?

In order for the Gospel of Barnabas to have been an eyewitness account, it would need to have been written during Jesus' lifetime in the first century. Since we don't have the original writings for either the Gospel of Barnabas or the New Testament, we need to verify their dating by both historical evidence and the evidence from ancient manuscript copies.

There are only two ancient manuscripts of the Gospel of Barnabas other than the one discovered in Turkey: an Italian manuscript which dates to the fifteenth or sixteenth century, and a Spanish copy from around the same period which has been lost.¹² The text in the newly discovered Turkish

manuscript is in Aramaic. None of these copies are in Greek, the language of Barnabas and the apostles.

Two early Christian lists of apocryphal works, one from the 5th century and one from the 7th century, mention “A Gospel of Barnabas.” If these refer to the same Gospel, it would place its writing 400-500 years after Christ or earlier. But that still is several hundred years after the first century.

The Acts of Barnabas is a 5th century apocryphal work directed to the church of Cyprus that is sometimes mistakenly confused with the Gospel of Barnabas. The only book from the first century attributed to the apostle Barnabas is the Epistle of Barnabas, which is an apocryphal writing not in the New Testament. This first-century letter speaks of Jesus as the crucified and resurrected Lord. Scholars believe it was written by Barnabas between AD 70 and 90.

But if Barnabas writes of Jesus as Lord in the first century Epistle of Barnabas, why would he then write of Jesus as merely a prophet in the Gospel of Barnabas? Why would he write two contradictory accounts of Jesus?

The Epistle of Barnabas is accepted by scholars as an authentic first-century account of Jesus that agrees with the New Testament. However, the Gospel of Barnabas is a completely different book with a completely different timeline.

The following evidence suggests that the Gospel of Barnabas wasn’t recognized as a first-century gospel by early Christians or non-Christians:¹³

- No non-Christian writer refers to it until the fifteenth or sixteenth century.
- No Christian writer refers to it from the first to the fifteenth century.
- The earliest reference to it was made in the fifth century, but it is in doubt.
- It cites historical facts that didn’t exist until hundreds of years later.¹⁴

Medieval Forgery?

Christian writers such as Irenaeus wrote extensively about anti-Christian documents such as the Gnostic gospels, classifying them as heretical. Yet not one of Irenaeus' letters or documents mentions the Gospel of Barnabas. There is simply no mention of it from any early writer.

Perhaps most indicative of its late date is that the Gospel of Barnabas describes medieval life in Western Europe, as well as a 100-year Jubilee, which wasn't declared until the 14th century. How would Barnabas or any 1st century writer know such historical detail hundreds of years before it was declared?

Dr. Norman Geisler concludes, "The evidence that this was not a first-century gospel, written by a disciple of Christ, is overwhelming."¹⁵

Not only does the evidence argue against it being written by Barnabas in the 1st century, but some scholars believe the Gospel is a forgery. One expert writes, "In my opinion scholarly research has proved absolutely that this 'gospel' is a fake."¹⁶

Is The New Testament an Eyewitness Account?

History provides clues from three primary sources regarding the date of origin for the 27 books of the New Testament:

- Testimony of Church Enemies
- Early Christian Accounts
- Early Manuscript Copies

The first clue is a partial list of New Testament books made by enemies of the Church called heretics. As outlaws of the Church, heretics wouldn't have been concerned about agreeing with Church leaders about the authorship or dating of the New Testament. Yet, two early heretics, Marcion and Valentinus, did attribute the writings of several New Testament books and passages to the apostles.

In AD 140, the heretic Marcion listed 11 of the 27 New Testament books as being the authentic writings of the apostles.

At about the same time, another heretic, Valentinus, alludes to a wide variety of New Testament themes and passages.

What this tells us is that by the middle of the 2nd century many New Testament books had been in circulation for some time. Even heretic “outlaws” accepted these New Testament accounts as the eyewitness reports from the apostles.

Early Christian Accounts

Our second clue is the vast number of early Christian letters, sermons, commentaries, and creeds referring to Jesus as the resurrected Lord. They appeared as early as five years after his crucifixion.

The number of these documents is impressive; more than 36,000 complete or partial writings, some from the first century, have been discovered.¹⁷ Their words could replicate virtually the entire New Testament except for a few verses.¹⁸

So how does that compare with the Gospel of Barnabas? We have already noted that there are only two citations of it prior to the fifteenth century, and it is doubtful those references were to the “Gospel of Barnabas” in question.¹⁹

The earliest writings outside the New Testament were from men who knew and followed Paul, Peter, John and the other apostles. These early church leaders were not eyewitnesses to Jesus but learned about him from those who had actually seen and heard him.

The most important of these early writings outside the New Testament are from Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna.

In AD 96, Clement of Rome wrote a lengthy letter to the church at Corinth in which he cited Matthew, John, and 1 Corinthians. Some believe he is the

Clement mentioned by Paul in Philippians 4:3. Since Clement's letter was written in AD 96, these three books must have been written earlier.

In about AD 110, Ignatius of Antioch, a disciple of the apostle John, wrote six letters to churches and one to a fellow bishop, Polycarp, in which he refers to six of Paul's letters. Polycarp of Smyrna, also a disciple of the apostle John, refers to all 27 New Testament books in his letter to the Philippian church (AD 110-135).

Therefore, the Gospels must have been in existence in the 1st century when eyewitnesses (including John) were still alive. We have seen that no such early reference to the Gospel of Barnabas exists.

Early Manuscript Copies

Our third clue is the abundance of early New Testament manuscripts which have helped scholars determine the approximate time they were originally composed.

Archaeologists have discovered over 5,600 manuscript copies of the New Testament in the original Greek language, some complete books, and some mere fragments. Counting other languages, there are over 24,000.²⁰ However, only three copies of the Gospel of Barnabas have been discovered.

Furthermore, archaeologists have discovered New Testament fragments that date to within a generation or two after Christ, compared with hundreds of years later for the Gospel of Barnabas.

Scholars' Consensus

Prior to these findings, German critical scholars from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had argued that the New Testament was written by unknown authors in the second century. But this new evidence reveals that its books were all written in the first century. Historian Paul Johnson writes:

The late nineteenth-early twentieth-century notion that the New Testament was a collection of late and highly imaginative records can no longer be seriously held. No one now doubts that St. Paul's epistles, the earliest Christian records, are authentic or dates them later than the A.D. 50s.²¹

Archaeologist William Albright states the entire New Testament was written at "very probably sometime between about 50 A.D. and 75 A.D."²²

The following chart illustrates the significant difference between the writing of New Testament and the Gospel of Barnabas.

RELIABILITY TESTS	NEW TESTAMENT	GOSPEL OF BARNABAS
Date of Original	AD 40-95	AD 400-1500
Earliest Verified Copies	AD 117-138	AD 400-1500
Gap from Original	22-98 years	Undetermined
Years after Christ	7-30	370-1,470
Number of Manuscripts in Original Language	5,600+	None
Number of Manuscripts in All Languages	24,000+	3
Citations in other Historical Documents	36,000+	2

Conclusion

Whereas the "secret Bible" called the Gospel of Barnabas was written 400-1500 years after Christ, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were written in the 1st century, within one generation of his life.

Neither the Gnostic Gospels nor the Gospel of Barnabas meet the stringent standards early church fathers used to determine which books were the

authentic eyewitness reports of the apostles. They were excluded for their late dating, fraudulent authorship and inconsistency with the eyewitness accounts of the apostles.

As one reads the New Testament, it becomes apparent that the writers made every attempt to honestly record the life, words and events surrounding Jesus. Luke, the writer of both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, puts it this way,

Many people have set out to write accounts about the events that have been fulfilled among us. They used eyewitness reports circulating among us from the early disciples. Having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I also have decided to write a careful account for you, most honorable Theophilus, so you can be certain of the truth of everything you were taught.²³

Is Jesus Coming Back?

Imagine a moment when the skies split open, and a figure descends in radiant glory, visible to every eye on earth—friend and foe alike. The Bible foretells such a day when Jesus Christ will return to Jerusalem, not as a humble carpenter, but as the triumphant King, wielding unmatched power and divine authority (Revelation 1:7).

Following his resurrection, Jesus' disciples anticipated the immediate establishment of his kingdom. However, after commissioning them to spread the gospel globally, Jesus ascended from the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts 1:9-11. As the disciples watched in awe, two angels appeared, declaring, "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." This aligns with the prophecy in Zechariah 14:4, written 500 years earlier, which foretold the Messiah's return to the Mount of Olives to establish his kingdom.

Not only does the New Testament foretell Jesus physical return to the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, but it also reveals that Jesus will return in the clouds for his Church. Some biblical scholars believe his return for believers and his return to Jerusalem occur at different times, while others think they occur simultaneously. Let's examine what the Bible actually says about Jesus' return to Jerusalem as well as his return for his Church.

Jesus' Return for His Church

Jesus' return for his Church, often referred to as the "rapture," where believers will be caught up to meet him in the clouds (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

The New Testament outlines three key aspects of the rapture:

1. **Imminency:** Jesus instructed his disciples to, "Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come" (Matthew 24:42, NIV). The apostle Paul echoed that Jesus' return for his Church is imminent, urging believers to await "the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory

of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13, NIV). This expectation of imminency encourages believers to live with anticipation and purity, as 1 John 3:2-3 states: “When Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.”

2. **All Believers Caught Up:** Paul reassured the Thessalonian believers that both the living and the dead in Christ will participate in the rapture. He wrote, “The Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, NIV).
3. **A Mystery Known Only to the Father:** Jesus emphasized that the timing of his return is unknown, stating, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matthew 24:36, NIV). Paul further described this event as a “mystery,” occurring “in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet” (1 Corinthians 15:51-52, NIV).

When Jesus was preparing his disciples for his departure to heaven, he comforted them by assuring them he would return to take them home to be with him. “I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” (John 14:2-3, NIV).

The apostles and early church were comforted by their belief that Jesus’ return for them could happen at any time, not expecting any event to precede its occurrence. The apostle John concludes the Book of Revelation with Jesus’ promise, “Yes, I am coming soon,” to which John responds, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20, NIV). This anticipation of Jesus’ soon return has motivated many people to receive Jesus as both Savior and Lord.

Jesus’ Return to Jerusalem

As mentioned previously, the Bible also describes Jesus’ physical return to the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, a dramatic event where “every eye will see him”

(Revelation 1:7). This return will fulfill Old Testament prophecies and establish his earthly kingdom. Four key elements precede this event:

1. **Physical Return to Jerusalem:** Zechariah 14:4 specifies that the Messiah will one day return to the Mount of Olives, the same location from which Jesus ascended. God designated Jerusalem as the focal point of his redemptive plan. It was in Jerusalem (originally Moriah) that God asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac on the altar. (Genesis 22). God was testing Abraham's faith and would never have let Abraham kill his son. He was providing us with a picture, foreshadowing the time when he would sacrifice his only Son on the cross for our sins.
2. **Signs and Wonders:** Jesus outlined specific signs preceding his return to Jerusalem, including increased earthquakes, famines, wars, epidemics, and persecution of believers (Matthew 24:3-14). He also noted that the gospel would be preached worldwide before the end (Matthew 24:14). Today, persecution of Christians is increasing at an alarming rate. And global communication technologies like the internet and media facilitate this unprecedented spread of the gospel, while natural disasters and conflicts align with Jesus' predictions.
3. **Jerusalem Surrounded by Enemies:** Prophecies in Ezekiel 36-38 and Zechariah 12-14 describe Jerusalem surrounded by hostile nations in the last days. The rebirth of Israel in 1948 and its control of Jerusalem since 1967 set the stage for these events.
4. **Rise of the Antichrist:** Paul and John describe a figure, the "man of lawlessness" or "antichrist," who will rise to power before Christ's return (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4; Revelation 13:1-10). This powerful figure will initiate a seven-year tribulation period with a deceptive peace treaty (Daniel 9:27), control the global economy, and oppose God. In the middle of the tribulation, the antichrist's blasphemous act in the Jewish temple will usher in God's judgment on a sinful world. At the tribulation's climax, Jesus will return to defeat him and establish His kingdom (Revelation 19:11-21).

God's Timetable

Although Scripture tells believers that Jesus could return for them at any moment, there are specific events on God's timetable that must take place prior to his return. In *Israel, God's Clock*, Dr. Jack MacArthur writes that the key to knowing where we are in God's timetable for Jesus' return is Israel's prophesied return to its homeland.

Let's take a brief look at what has happened in Israel, beginning with their rejection of Jesus as its Messiah.

When Jerusalem rejected Jesus as their Messiah, he sadly told the people, their "house will be left completely empty." In AD 70 Romans destroyed the city and those who survived fled to other lands. Jesus then said, "You will not see me again until that time when you will say, 'God bless the One who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Matthew 23:39, NCV).

After AD 70, Jerusalem remained under foreign control for nearly 1,900 years. During that period, most people never expected Israel would ever be reestablished as a nation. But God had promised their return: "I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land" (Ezekiel 36:24).

In fulfillment of prophecy, Jewish people flocked to their original homeland in waves, beginning in the early 20th century, and peaking in the 1930s due to persecution in Europe. Their desire to be restored as a nation was finally realized in 1948. Nineteen years later Jerusalem was conquered by the Jews, setting the stage for Christ's return.

God's timetable for Jesus' return to Jerusalem also requires it to be surrounded by its enemies. The Israel-Hamas conflict, beginning October 7, 2023, and rising global antisemitism highlight the growing threats to Israel, aligning with biblical prophecies. Today, Israel is surrounded by several countries that are committed to Israel's destruction.

So, now that the stage is set for Jesus' return to Jerusalem, what does that mean for his coming for his Church? Although they are separate events, their timing is still related.

In 1894, British scholar Sir Robert Anderson wrote of Jesus' imminent return, although Israel's rebirth was still 54 years from fulfillment. In his classic survey of Daniel's prophecy of the end times, *The Coming Prince*, Anderson writes,

Certain passages testify that Christ will return to earth...and others tell us that He will come, not to earth, but to the air above us, and call His people up to meet Him and be with Him....These difficulties admit of only one solution...namely, that the second advent of Christ is not a single event, but includes several distinct manifestations. At first, He will call up to Himself the righteous dead, together with His own people then living upon earth. Before the return of Christ to earth, many a page of prophecy has yet to be fulfilled...but not a line of Scripture bars the realization of this the Church's special hope of His coming to take His people to Himself.¹

Since Jesus' return for believers and his return to Jerusalem are linked together in the "second advent," Israel's rebirth should cause us to "look up for your redemption is near" (Luke 21:28).

Why the Delay?

In *Why I Am Not a Christian*, Bertrand Russell questioned Jesus' delay, accusing Him of breaking his promise. Peter anticipated such criticism, noting that scoffers would say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised?"² (2 Peter 3:4, NIV). Peter explained, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9, NIV).

Preparing for Jesus' Return

C.S. Lewis summarized three key principles for believers:³

1. Jesus will certainly return.
2. The timing is unknown.
3. Therefore, we must always be ready.

To Prepare:

- **Ensure a Personal Relationship with Jesus:** Accept His forgiveness and salvation. [For guidance, explore resources in JO App](#) like *Is Jesus Relevant Today?*
- **Live to Please Him:** Paul wrote, "We make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it" (2 Corinthians 5:9, NIV). Believers should live in obedience to Christ, sharing the gospel as commanded in Matthew 28:19-20.

There are many additional articles and videos available to you for free on the JO APP (See app.JesusOnline.com). We encourage you to download it at JesusOnline.com/app and discover more resources for your spiritual journey with Christ.

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19. Cited in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 183.
20. Luke 19:10
21. John 8:52, 58.
22. Isaiah 9:6.
23. John 10:30.
24. John 14:9.
25. Zechariah 12:10.
26. Isaiah 53 (NCV).

27. Mitch Glaser, *Isaiah 53 Explained* (New York, New York: Chosen People Ministries, 2010), 12.
28. Bernis, 151.
29. Josh McDowell, *A Ready Defense* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1992), 297.
30. "Isaiah 53: How Do the Rabbis Interpret This?" Hear Now!
http://www.hearnow.org/isa_com.html.
31. McDowell, *The New Evidence*, 79.
32. John 1:29.
33. Bernis, 181.
34. Psalm 16:10.
35. Bernis, 217.

Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?

1. Wilbur M. Smith, *A Great Certainty in This Hour of World Crises* (Wheaton, ILL: Van Kampen Press, 1951), 10, 11
2. The Aramaic word Jesus uttered, tetelestai, is an accounting term meaning "debt paid in full," referring to the debt of our sins.
3. Historian Will Durant reported, "About the middle of this first century a pagan named Thallus ... argued that the abnormal darkness alleged to have accompanied the death of Christ was a purely natural phenomenon and coincidence; the argument took the existence of Christ for granted. The denial of that existence never seems to have occurred even to the bitterest gentile or Jewish opponents of nascent Christianity." Will Durant, "Caesar and Christ," vol. 3 of *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 555.
4. Peter Steinfels, "Jesus Died – And Then What Happened?" *New York Times*, April 3, 1988, E9.
5. Lucian, *Peregrinus Proteus*. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, eds, *Jesus Under Fire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 2.
6. Josephus, Flavius, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18. 63, 64. [Although portions of Josephus' comments about Jesus have been disputed, this reference to Pilate condemning him to the cross is deemed authentic by most scholars.]

7. Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 44. In *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. By Robert Maynard Hutchins, Vol. 15, *The Annals and The Histories by Cornelius Tacitus* (Chicago: William Benton, 1952). "What Is a Skeptic?" editorial in *Skeptic*, vol 11, no. 2), 5.
8. Frank Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Lamplighter, 1958), "What Happened Friday Afternoon."
9. Josh McDowell, *The Resurrection Factor Part 3*, Josh McDowell Ministries, 2009, <http://www.bethinking.org/bible-jesus/intermediate/the-resurrection-factor-part-3.htm>.
10. Quoted in Josh McDowell, *The Resurrection Factor* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life, 1981), 66.
11. Gary Collins quoted in Gary Habermas, "Explaining Away the Resurrection," http://www.garyhabermas.com/articles/crj_explainingaway/crj_explainingaway.htm.
12. Thomas James Thorburn, *The Resurrection Narratives and Modern Criticism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1910.), 158, 159.
13. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society*, 190.
14. Even skeptical scholars agree that the creed in 1 Corinthians 15 is not an interpolation but was a creed formulated and taught at a very early date after Jesus' death. Gerd Lüdemann, a skeptic scholar, maintains that "the elements in the tradition are to be dated to the first two years after the crucifixion of Jesus... not later than three years..." Michael Goulder, another skeptic scholar, states that it "goes back at least to what Paul was taught when he was converted, a couple of years after the crucifixion".
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1_Corinthians_15
15. Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004), 85.
16. Habermas and Licona, 87
17. Acts 10:39-41.
18. Morison, 104.
19. J. N. D. Anderson, "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ," *Christianity Today*, 12. April, 1968.
20. Morison, 115.

21. Quoted in Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957), 163.
22. Quoted in Bill Bright, *Believing God for the Impossible* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life, 1979), 177-8.
23. Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Pocket, 1961), 428.
24. Simon Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelists Examined by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice* (1874; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1995), back cover.
25. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 159.

Is Jesus Relevant Today?

1. Quoted in Josh McDowell, *The Resurrection Factor* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publ., 1981), 1.
2. Quoted in William R. Bright, *Jesus and the Intellectual* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publ., 1968), 33.
3. Quoted in Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 17.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 160.
5. New Testament, John 3:16
6. Ibid., John 1:12
7. Old Testament, Isaiah 59:2
8. Martha T. Moore and Dennis Cauchon, "Delay Meant Death on 9/11," *USA Today*, Sept. 3, 2002, 1A.
9. Charles W. Colson, *Born Again* (Old Tappan, NJ: Chosen, 1976), 114.
10. Lewis, 56.
11. Colson, 129

Did Jesus Claim to be God?

1. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 189.
2. *Ego eimi* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name Isaiah used to describe God in Isaiah 43:10, 11. Dr. James White notes, “The closest and most logical connection between John’s usage of *ego eimi* and the Old Testament is to be found in the Septuagint rendering of a particular Hebrew phrase, *ani hu* in the writings (primarily) of Isaiah. The Septuagint translates the Hebrew phrase *ani hu* as *ego eimi* in Isaiah 41:4, 43:10 and 46:4.” <http://www.aomin.org/>
3. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 157.
4. Packer, 198.
5. *Why I am a Christian*, Norman L. Geisler, Paul K. Hoffman, eds, “Why I Believe Jesus is the Son of God” (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 223.
6. Packer, 57.
7. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1972), 51.
8. John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000), 35.
9. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 80.

Did the Apostles Believe Jesus is God?

1. A. H. McNeile, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 463, 464
2. The title Lord is freely used in both Testaments to refer to God and Jesus. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word for Lord was Adonai. In the Septuagint and the New Testament, the word translated “Lord” is Kurios. Both Adonai and Kurios were used for God by the Jews.” Josh McDowell & Bart Larson, *Jesus: A Biblical Defense of His Deity* (San Bernardino: Here’s Life, 1983), 33.
3. Paul L. Maier, Ed, Eusebius, *The Church History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999), 149.
4. Although most early Christians believed in Jesus’ divinity, the church didn’t clarify what that meant until the Council of Nicaea in 325 A. D.,

when the Roman emperor Constantine convened church leaders together to deal with Arius's view that Jesus was a created being. However, after an intense debate over the meaning of the apostles' words about Jesus in the New Testament, all but two of 318 church leaders reaffirmed the majority Christian belief that he is fully God, co-eternal, co-equal and with the Father and Holy Spirit (See "Was there a Jesus Conspiracy?").

5. Jehovah's Witnesses argue that the Greek word for God (theos) should be translated, "a god", rather than "God." However, the vast majority of scholars disagree. Walter Martin writes, "Contrary to the translations of The Emphatic Diaglott and the New World Translation, the Greek grammatical construction leaves no doubt whatsoever that this ("the Word is God") is the only possible rendering of the text.... in their New World Translation Appendix 773-777 attempt to discredit the Greek text on this point, for they realize that if Jesus and Jehovah are "One" in nature their theology cannot stand...." Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis, Minn: Bethany, 1974), 75.
6. F. F. Bruce, *The Deity of Christ* (Manchester, England: Wright's [Sandbach] Ltd., 1964
7. D. Guthrie & J. A. Motyer, *The New Bible Commentary: Revised* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 1144.
8. F. F. Bruce, "The 'Christ Hymn' of Colossians 1:15-20," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (April-June 1984): 101.
9. Although the author of Hebrews is unknown, some scholars believe it was written by Paul.
10. *The Amplified Bible*, Zondervan
11. Kenneth S. Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, Vol. II (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 41.
12. John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000), 33.
13. Norman Geisler & Peter Bocchino, *Unshakable Foundations* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2001), 297.
14. Peter Kreeft & Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 152.

Why Aren't Gnostic Gospels in the New Testament?

1. John McManners, ed., *The Oxford History of Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 28.
2. Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (Nashville: Nelson, 2004), 114.
3. Bock, 119-120.
4. Ibid., 13.
5. Norman Geisler and Ron Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 156.
6. Quoted in Robinson, 126.
7. Quoted in Lutzer, 32.
8. Quoted in Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life, 1999, 37.)
9. Acts 13:1-3, 33.
10. Gospel of Barnabas, 94:1.
11. John 1:1-3, 14. NIV [See <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%201:1-14&version=NIV>].
12. Norman Geisler & Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 303-307.
13. Geisler & Saleeb, Ibid.
14. Geisler & Saleeb, Ibid.
15. J. Slomp, "The Gospel Dispute," *ochristiana*, 68.
16. Norman L. Geisler and Paul K. Hoffman, eds., *Why I Am a Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 150.
17. William F. Albright, "Toward A More Conservative View," *Christianity Today*, January 18, 1993.
18. This early reference might have been to one of the other books named after the apostle Barnabas: the Epistle of Barnabas or the Acts of Barnabas. Scholars question that it refers to the Gospel of Barnabas because there is no other historical document supporting it.
19. Geisler & Saleeb, Ibid.
20. Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 33-68

21. Paul Johnson, "A Historian Looks At Jesus," Speech to Dallas Theological Seminary, 1986.
22. William F. Albright, "Toward A More Conservative View," *Christianity Today*, January 18, 1993.
23. Luke 1:1-4, NLT.

Is Jesus Coming Back?

1. Sir Robert Anderson, *The Coming Prince* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1975, 19th edition), 155.
2. Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Touchstone, 1957), 16.
3. C. S. Lewis, "Predictions of the Second Coming," quoted in:
<http://www.atkinsmarketingsolutions.com/wp/2011/05/21/rapture-marketing-c-s-lewis-end-of-the-world-predictions/>