

# 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.

Ellen Johnson, president of American Atheists, summarizes the Christ-myth view on CNN TV *Larry King Live*:

There is not one shred of secular evidence there ever was a Jesus Christ.... Jesus is a compilation from other gods...who had the same origins, the same death as the mythological Jesus Christ.

The stunned host, replied, "So you don't believe there was a Jesus Christ?"

Johnson fired back, "There was not...there is no secular evidence that Jesus Christ ever existed."

King immediately requested a commercial break. The international television audience was left wondering.[1]

In his early years as an atheist Oxford literary scholar C. S. Lewis also considered Jesus a myth, thinking all religions were simply inventions.[2]

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 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." [3]

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' friend discover for Jesus Christ?

## 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?

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.[4] Not one eyewitness account of Alexander exists.

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 British journalist who considered Jesus a myth until he saw such evidence during a BBC television assignment to Israel.

After 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...."[5]

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 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 as authentic "beyond a reasonable doubt." [6]

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!" [7]

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 (see "Was Jesus Really from Nazareth?" at <http://y-jesus.com/more/jrn-jesus-from-nazareth>).

Although these archaeological finds don't prove that Jesus lived there, they do support the Gospel accounts of his life. Historians note that mounting evidence from archaeology confirms rather than contradicts the accounts of Jesus. [8]

## Early Non-Christian Accounts

Skeptics like Ellen Johnson 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 catalogued 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. [9] Yet no

historian questions Caesar's existence.

And since he wasn't a great political or military leader, Darrell Bock notes, "It is amazing and significant that Jesus shows up at all in the sources we have." [10]

So, who are these sources Bock mentions? Which early historians who wrote of Jesus did not have a Christian agenda? First of all, 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. "Several Jewish writings refer to Jesus as a real person whom they opposed." [11]

Noted Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote of James, "the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ." [12] If Jesus wasn't a real person why wouldn't Josephus have said so?

In another somewhat controversial passage, Josephus speaks more extensively of Jesus. [13]

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." [14]

Although some of his words 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. [17]

**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 (a.d. 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." [18]

Suetonius (a.d. 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 a.d. 64. [19]

**Roman Officials:** 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. [20]

Pliny the Younger was an imperial magistrate under Emperor Trajan. In a.d. 112, Pliny wrote to Trajan of his attempts to force Christians to renounce Christ, whom they "worshiped as a god."

Emperor Trajan (a.d. 56-117) wrote letters mentioning Jesus and early Christian origins.

Emperor Hadrian (a.d. 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.[21] Thallus' remarks about Jesus were written in a.d. 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.[22]

### **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.[23]

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." [24] According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* "These independent accounts prove that in ancient times even the opponents of Christianity never doubted the historicity of Jesus." [25]

### **Early Christian Accounts**

Early Christians wrote thousands of letters, sermons and commentaries about Jesus. Also, creeds which speak of Jesus, appeared as early as five years after his crucifixion.[26]

These non-biblical writings confirm most New Testament details about Jesus, including his crucifixion and resurrection.[27]

Incredibly, over 36,000 complete or partial such writings have been discovered, some from the first century.[28] These non-biblical writings could reconstruct the entire New Testament except for a few verses.[29]

Each of these authors writes of Jesus as a real person. 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 within a few decades of his life?

### **The New Testament**

Skeptics like Ellen Johnson also 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:

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.[30]

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." [31]

Noted archaeologist Sir William Ramsey originally rejected Luke's historical account of Jesus. However, he later acknowledged, "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." [32]

The earliest accounts about Alexander were written 300 years after him. 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 scholars argued that the New Testament was written in the 3rd century, much too late to have been written by Jesus' apostles. However, manuscript copies discovered in the 19th and 20th centuries by archaeologists proved these accounts of Jesus were written much earlier. (See "But is it True?" at <http://y-jesus.com/wwrj/4-are-gospels-true>)

William Albright dated all the New Testament books "between about a.d. 50 and a.d. 75." [33] John A. T. Robinson of Cambridge dates all New Testament books by a.d. 40-65. Such early dating means they were written when eyewitnesses were alive, much too early for a myth or legend to develop. [34]

After C. S. Lewis read the Gospels he 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." [35]

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. [36]

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." [37]

(For more on the reliability of the New Testament, see "Are the Gospels Reliable?" at <http://y-jesus.com/wwrj/4-are-gospels-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." [38]

There is no nation or regime which owes its foundation or heritage to a mythological person or 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?

- More books have been written about Jesus than about any other person in history.
- Nations have used his words as the bedrock of their governments. According to Durant, “The triumph of Christ was the beginning of democracy.”[39]
- 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.[40]
- 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 was asked who has left the greatest legacy on history, he replied, “By this test Jesus stands first.”[41]

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.”[42]

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.”[43]

Is it possible Jesus’ death and resurrection was plagiarised from these myths? Their case against Jesus was presented in the YouTube movie, *Zeitgeist*, where author Peter Joseph boldly claims,

The reality is, Jesus was...a mythical figure....Christianity, along with all other theistic belief systems, is the fraud of the age.[44]

As one compares the Jesus of the Gospels with the gods of mythology, a distinction becomes obvious. In contrast to the reality of Jesus revealed in the Gospels, accounts of mythological gods depict unrealistic gods with elements of fantasy:

- Mithra was supposedly born out of a rock.[45]
- Horus is depicted with the head of a falcon.[46]
- Bacchus, Hercules, and others were flown to heaven on the horse Pegasus.[47]
- Osiris was killed, chopped into 14 pieces, and reassembled by his wife, Isis, and brought back to life.[48]

But could Christianity have copied Jesus’ death and resurrection from these myths?

His followers certainly didn’t think so; they willingly gave their lives proclaiming that the account of Jesus’ resurrection was true. (See “Did Jesus rise from the dead?” at <http://y-jesus.com/wwrj/6-jesus-rise-dead>)

Furthermore, “accounts of a dying and rising god that somewhat parallel the story of Jesus’ resurrection appeared at least 100 years after the reports of Jesus’ resurrection.”[49]

In other words, accounts of Horus, Osiris, and Mithra dying and rising from the dead were not in their original mythologies, but were added after the Gospel accounts of Jesus were written.

T. N. D. Mettinger, professor at Lund University, writes, "The consensus among modern scholars — nearly universal — is that there were no dying and rising gods that preceded Christianity. They all post-dated the first century." [50] [See note 50]

According to most historians there really are no true parallels between any of these mythological gods and Jesus Christ. However, as C. S. Lewis observes, there are some common themes that speak to man's desire for immortality.

Lewis recounts a conversation he had with J. R. R. Tolkien, the author of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. "The story of Christ," said Tolkien, "is simply a true myth: a myth...with this tremendous difference that it really happened." [51]

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." [52]

## 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 men. Yet the manuscript evidence for Jesus is far greater and hundreds of years closer to his life than the historical writings for Alexander are to his. Furthermore, the historical impact of Jesus Christ far exceeds that of Alexander.

Historians cite the following evidence for Jesus' existence:

- Archaeological discoveries continue to verify the Gospel accounts of people and places they record, the latest being Pilate, Caiaphas and the existence of first-century Nazareth.
- Thousands of historical writings document Jesus' existence. Within 150 years of Jesus' life 42 authors mention him in their writings, including nine non-Christian sources. During that same time period, only nine secular authors mention Tiberius Caesar; only five sources report the conquests of Julius Caesar. Yet no historian denies their existence. [53]
- Historians, secular and religious, readily acknowledge Jesus Christ has influenced our world more than any other person.

After investigating the Christ-myth theory, the great world historian Will Durant concluded that, unlike the gods of mythology, Jesus was a real person. [54]

Historian Paul Johnson states that all serious scholars acknowledge Jesus as real. [55]

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." [56]

Perhaps the non-Christian 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. [57]

## Did Jesus Really Rise From The Dead?

The eyewitnesses to Jesus Christ actually spoke and acted like they believed he rose from the dead after his crucifixion. No god of mythology or any other religion ever had followers with such fervent conviction.

But must we take the resurrection of Jesus Christ by faith alone, or is there solid historical evidence? Several skeptics began investigations into the historical record to prove the resurrection account false. What did they discover? [See: <http://y-jesus.com/wwrj/6-jesus-rise-dead>]

### Endnotes

1. Ellen Johnson and Larry King, "What Happens After We Die?" *Larry King Live, CNN*, April 14, 2005, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0504/14/lkl.01.html>.
2. Quoted in David C. Downing, *The Most Reluctant Convert* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 57.
3. C. S. Lewis, *The Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy* (New York: Inspirational Press, 1986), 122-3.
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8. Paul Johnson, "A Historian Looks at Jesus," speech to Dallas Seminary, 1986.
9. Quoted in Josh McDowell and Bill Wilson, *Evidence for the Historical Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1993), 23.
10. Darrell L. Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 46.
11. D. James Kennedy, *Skeptics Answered* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1997), 76.
12. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1966), 423. The quote is from book 20 of the Antiquities.
13. *Ibid.*, 379. Quotation is from the Arabic translation of Josephus' words about Jesus because some scholars believe the Christian version, which affirmed Jesus' resurrection as historical, was altered. However, the Arabic translation cited here was under Islamic control, where alterations by Christians would have been virtually impossible.
14. Bock, 57.
15. McDowell and Wilson, 42-43.
16. *Ibid.*, 44.
17. Will Durant, "Caesar and Christ," vol. 3 of *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 555.
18. Quoted in Durant, 281. The quote is from *Annals* 15:44.
19. McDowell and Wilson, 49-50.
20. Gary R. Habermas, "Was Jesus Real," *InterVarsity.org*, August 8, 2008, <http://www.intervarsity.org/student soul/item/was-jesus-real>.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004), 127.
23. Norman Geisler and Peter Bocchino, *Unshakable Foundations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bethany House, 2001), 269.
24. Habermas, "Was Jesus Real".
25. Quoted in Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict, vol. 1* (Nashville: Nelson, 1979), 87.
26. Habermas and Licona, 212.

27. McDowell and Wilson, 74-79.
28. Norman L. Geisler and Paul K. Hoffman, eds., *Why I Am a Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 150.
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32. Quoted in Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 61.
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37. Paul Johnson, *Ibid.*
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41. Quoted in Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957), 163.
42. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 1.
43. Quoted in "What Life Means to Einstein: An Interview by George Sylvester Viereck," *Saturday Evening Post*, October 26, 1929, 17.
44. Peter Joseph, *Zeitgeist*, <http://zeitgeistmovie.com/http://vimeo.com/13726978>. In the YouTube documentary, *Zeitgeist*, Peter Joseph uses hand-picked sources (Gerald Massey and Acharya S.), attempting to build a case that Jesus is a "copycat" of the ancient Egyptian god, Horus. Regarding *Zeitgeist's* sources, Dr. Ben Witherington notes, "Not a single one of these authors and sources are experts in the Bible, Biblical history, the Ancient Near East, Egyptology, or any of the cognate fields....they are not reliable sources of information about the origins of Christianity, Judaism, or much of anything else of relevance to this discussion." <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2007/12/zeitgeist-of-zeitgeist-movie.html>. The alleged parallels between Jesus and Horus are analyzed and systematically refuted in the following website: <http://kingdavid8.com/Copycat/JesusHorus.html>.
45. Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 170-71. Mithraism developed too late to have influenced Christianity. "Mithraism was a late Roman mystery religion that became a chief rival to Christianity in the second century and later." Quoted in Strobel, 166-76.
46. *Ibid* 163.
47. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horus>.
48. Habermas and Licona, 90.
49. *Ibid.*
50. Quoted in Strobel, 160-61. [In his interview with Strobel, Michael Licona states that Mettinger takes exception to that nearly universal scholarship by claiming that there are at least three and possibly as many as five dying and rising gods that predate Christianity. However, after combing through all these accounts and critically analyzing them Mettinger adds that "none of these serve as parallels to Jesus." Mettinger writes, "There is, as far as I am aware, no prima facie evidence that the death and resurrection of Jesus is a mythological construct, drawing on the myths and rites of the dying and rising gods of the surrounding world.... The death and resurrection of Jesus retains its unique character in the history of religions."]
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