

BEYOND TODAY®

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Did Jesus Christ Really Exist?

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BEYOND TODAY

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Scott Ashley
Managing editor

Can We Believe the Gospels?

Many people assume that belief in God's Word is matter of blind faith. But is that really the case? *Beyond Today* is dedicated to demonstrating that we have sound reasons and firm evidence for believing God's Word, therefore our faith should be rock-solid in the face of criticism of the Bible.

Since this issue addresses the question of whether Jesus Christ really existed, how do the Gospels stack up with verifiable history and what we know from archaeology? Entire books have been written on the subject, and more is being uncovered all the time, but let's take a brief overview.

First, let's list individuals in the Gospels whose existence has been confirmed by archaeology and history.

They include the following, in alphabetical order: Annas (high priest), Augustus Caesar (Roman emperor), Archelaus (ruler of Judea), Caiaphas (high priest), Herod the Great (ruler of Judea), Herod Antipas (ruler of Galilee), James (apostle and half-brother of Jesus), Jesus Christ, John the Baptist, Philip (ruler of Galilee), Pontius Pilate (Roman procurator of Judea), Quirinius (governor of Syria) and Tiberius Caesar (Roman emperor).

What kind of evidence do we have of these individuals? For rulers we have things like coins and statues. For lesser-known persons we have historical writings (other than the Bible) and inscriptions bearing their names in locations and the time setting in which the Bible places them.

Let's consider another form of verification—the cities and towns mentioned in the Gospels that have been identified and confirmed through history and archaeology. These include Aenon, Bethany, Bethlehem, Bethphage, Bethsaida, Caesarea Philippi, Capernaum, Cana, Chorazin, Emmaus, Gadara, Gennesaret, Gerasa, Jericho, Jerusalem, Magdala, Nain, Nazareth, Nineveh, Sidon, Sychar, Tiberias and Tyre.

What is truly astounding is that 80 percent of the cities and towns mentioned in the Gospels have been found—and only seven have yet to be located!

Keep in mind that 2,000 years have passed, and

many of these were destroyed by the Romans almost 2,000 years ago. To be able to identify this many sites is truly remarkable and demonstrates that the Gospel writers knew exactly what they were talking about and were very familiar with the places they mentioned.

At kind of accuracy would be impossible if, as Bible critics argue, the biblical writers were making up the story years later or were living somewhere else far removed from these events.

Let's look at a third category of evidence that verifies the Gospel accounts—specific structures confirmed by archaeology and history.



The Siloam Pool of John 9, shown here partially excavated, was discovered in 2005.

Consider this topic for a moment. We would expect some famous people like those named earlier to be mentioned in books, to have statues carved of them or to see them mentioned in inscriptions. But what about specific buildings and structures? How many of those are ever mentioned in books, identified in inscriptions and otherwise recorded for posterity? The number is very small.

And of course, time destroys all of them eventually. But it's remarkable how many individual buildings and structures mentioned in the Gospels archaeologists have excavated or found specific evidence for today. Here's a list: the Bethesda Pool (Jerusalem), the Capernaum synagogue, the Gerizim temple (Samaria), Herod's Temple (Jerusalem), the high priest's palace (Jerusalem), Jacob's well (Samaria), Peter's house (Capernaum), the Praetorium (Jerusalem) and the Siloam Pool (Jerusalem).

Again, considering the ravages of time and the total destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70 and again in 135, it's astounding that this many have been found and identified.

The Gospel writers also get many other details right, such as geography, agricultural practices, fishing methods, dining customs, religious practices and much more. If the Gospel writers get so much right, we have no valid reasons to disbelieve the primary thrust of their story—that Jesus Christ was the divine Son of God who lived, died and rose again to make available to us God's astounding promise of salvation.

So let's trust what they were faithful to deliver to us! 

Scott Ashley



Did Jesus Christ Really Exist?

Was Jesus Christ real? What does the evidence say? In spite of what you may have heard, we have compelling historical documentation of His existence. And you need to understand not only *that* He came, but also *why* He came!

by Darris McNeely

Was Jesus of Nazareth a real person? Did He really exist? Are the stories written about Him in the Bible true? These are important questions, and it's crucial that you know the answers!

Some argue that Jesus couldn't have existed because there are no first-century historical records that mention Him. Of course, there *are* contemporary biographies written about Him—four of them in fact, by different authors. They're called the Gospels, and they're found in the Bible.

But that's not good enough for those determined *not* to believe in Jesus Christ. They insist on more. They demand written records from contemporary first-century historians who were *not* followers of Jesus.

But in so doing they're requiring a standard few historical figures from the ancient world could possibly meet. After all,

Historians are well aware of a few surviving non-Christian Roman works from early in the second century that mention Jesus Christ and Christianity.

Very few surviving histories survive from the first century, and basically the only sizeable and largely complete Roman written works from this time are a manual on agriculture, a comedy from a friend of one of the emperors and a few other miscellaneous works—none of which we would expect to include any mention of Christianity or Jesus Christ.

Roman histories that mention Jesus and Christianity

However, historians are well aware of a few surviving non-Christian Roman works from early in the second century that *do* mention Jesus Christ and Christianity. These include:

- *Lives of the First Twelve Caesars*, by Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, a Roman court official and chief secretary to Emperor Hadrian, who wrote around A.D. 120.
- Letters of Pliny the Younger, a Roman governing official in north-central Turkey, who wrote about A.D. 120.
- *Annals*, by the Roman historian Tacitus, who wrote about A.D. 115.

In addition to these, the famous first-century Jewish historian Josephus wrote about Jesus and a number of other figures mentioned in the Gospels. We'll discuss him a little later.

Followers of "Chrestus" banished from Rome

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (commonly known as Suetonius), writing around 120 A.D., records that the emperor Claudius "banished the Jews from Rome, who were continually making disturbances, Chrestus [Christ] being their leader" (*Lives of the First Twelve Caesars: Life of Claudius*).

Claudius reigned from A.D. 41 to 54. At this point in history the Romans didn't see any difference between Jews and Christians, since they largely believed and practiced the same things, so Claudius apparently expelled them all.

What's significant in Suetonius' brief statement, mentioned in passing, is that a number of the Jews in Rome had become

followers of "Chrestus," which seems to be a misspelling of "Christus," the Latinized form of "Christ." So we see that by approximately the year 50 there already were significant numbers of Christians in Rome, and this was leading to conflict with the Roman authorities—exactly why, we're not told.

This expulsion of the Jews from Rome is mentioned in the Bible, in Acts 18:2: "And he [Paul] found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome); and he came to them."

What is especially interesting is how closely this brief mention correlates with what we read in the book of Acts. At the Feast of Pentecost when the Church was founded as recorded in Acts 2, ca. A.D. 31, we read that "visitors from Rome" were among those who witnessed the miraculous events of Acts 2:6-12. At that time people speaking multiple languages and dialects from more than a dozen different parts of the Roman Empire heard the apostles "speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God."

We're not explicitly told when the first Christian believers appeared in Rome, but it's not a stretch to assume that some of those in Jerusalem for that Pentecost took their astounding report back with them to Rome, where it spread among the Jews and Jewish proselytes there—leading about two decades later to the expulsion of Jews and Christians from Rome.

How to deal with Christians who wouldn't worship the emperor as divine?

Around A.D. 120, Pliny the Younger, a Roman governing official in what is today north-central Turkey, wrote to the emperor Trajan requesting advice on how to deal with Christians who refused to reverence the Roman emperor's image. Pliny noted that these Christians met regularly and sang hymns "to Christ as if to a god" (*Letters* 10:96:7).

Two facts are immediately notable about this brief mention of Christians and Christianity. The first is that there were a considerable number of followers of Jesus Christ in northern Asia Minor less than a hundred years after His death. A second notable fact is that these people met together and sang hymns to Christ "as if to a god."

The first fact is notable because this is exactly the pattern we see time and time again in the book of Acts: Early Christian teachers like Paul, Barnabas and Apollos went from city to city in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and Greece, proclaiming the divinity and resurrection of Jesus Christ and that salvation was available only through Him. Sometimes they met great hostility; at other times they met a receptive audience, and Christianity began to slowly and steadily spread—often in spite of persecution.

The second fact here is notable because Pliny's inquiry to the emperor shows that the Christians he encountered considered Jesus Christ to be divine. And his correspondence shows that they were so firm in this belief that some refused to renounce that belief even under penalty of torture and death!

Again, this is the pattern we see time and time again in the book of Acts—people who were so firmly convinced that Jesus

Christ was a real person who had lived, died and been raised to life again that they were willing to die rather than renounce that belief.

“Christus . . . suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of . . . Pontius Pilate”

The most complete information we have from a Roman writer from this period comes from Publius (or Gaius) Cornelius Tacitus, a Roman senator and historian, who was born around A.D. 56 and wrote his works early in the second century. Being a historian, he discussed the devastating fire of Rome in A.D. 64 during the reign of Emperor Nero. Notice what he adds in a side discussion about Nero blaming Christians for the fire:

“Consequently, to get rid of the report [that Nero himself had started the fire to expand his own properties], Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome . . .”

So what do we learn from this account from the historian Tacitus about conditions in Rome in 64 A.D.?

Keep in mind that Tacitus was no friend of Christians. He considered them deplorable.

- There was a group in Rome at that time—barely three decades after Jesus’ crucifixion—known as “Christians.”
- They were called “Christians” after someone called “Christus” (the Latin form of “Christ”).
- Their leader “Christus” was executed during the governance of the procurator Pontius Pilate (A.D. 26-36) and the reign of the emperor Tiberius (A.D. 14-37).
- The Romans thought the Christians believed in “a most mischievous superstition.”
- The Christians were “hated for their abominations.”
- Their movement originated in Judea (the Holy Land) and from there spread to Rome.
- By 64, there was a “vast multitude” of Christians in Rome.

Again, this is astonishing because it verifies exactly what we read in the Gospels and the book of Acts (including the timing of Christ’s crucifixion during the rule of Tiberius and Pontius Pilate, Luke 3:1-2).

What was this “most mischievous superstition” the Christians believed? Tacitus does not say. Could it have been that a man was executed by crucifixion and rose from the dead? Or that the Christians themselves believed they also would rise from the dead? Or that their leader “Christus” would come again as King of a Kingdom that would replace Rome and rule the world?

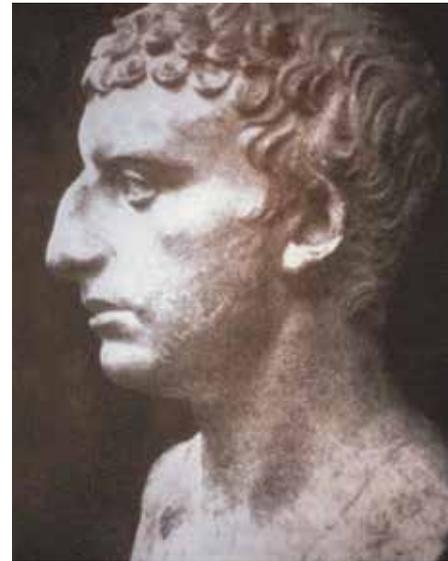
We don’t know, but Tacitus’ wording about this movement being rooted in “a most mischievous superstition” is quite striking—especially since the Romans, with their great variety of pagan religious beliefs, accepted almost anything *except* the

resurrection of the dead!

Josephus’ mention of John the Baptist

Let’s look at another non-Christian writer, and that is the famous Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. He wrote *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews* late in the first century. In his *Antiquities*, Josephus refers to many people named in the New Testament, including Jesus, John the Baptist and James the half-brother of Jesus.

Born into a priestly



Marble bust thought to depict Flavius Josephus

The first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus refers to many people named in the New Testament, including Jesus, John the Baptist and James, the half-brother of Jesus.

family in A.D. 37, Josephus was well educated and, as a military commander, led a Jewish detachment in Galilee during the Jewish revolt of 66-70 until his capture by the Romans. At the end of the war he went to Rome with the Roman general Titus, where he lived and wrote until his death around A.D. 100.

Here is what Josephus writes about John the Baptist and his executioner, Herod Antipas:

“Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod’s army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism . . .

“Now when many others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late.

“Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod’s suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God’s displeasure to him” (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 18, chap. 5, sec. 2).

Again, this corresponds very closely with what we read about John in the Gospels. Matthew 3:1-10, Mark 1:1-6 and Luke 3:1-14 all mention John's popularity and message of repentance as recorded decades later by Josephus. And Matthew 14:3-12 describes the scene in Herod's palace when John was executed on Herod's orders.

Josephus and James, "brother of Jesus, who was called Christ"

In addition to various rulers and members of the high priest's family mentioned in the Gospels (and confirmed through archaeological discoveries), Josephus also mentions James, half-brother of Jesus Christ:

"[The Roman governor] Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he [Ananias, the high priest] assembled the sanhedrin of the judges, and brought before them *the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James*, and some others [or some of his companions;] and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned . . ." (*Antiquities*, 20:9:1).

This same James is the author of the book of the Bible that bears his name. Although a half-brother of Jesus, he wasn't initially a believer in His messiahship (John 7:5), but after Jesus' death and resurrection he was among those gathered in Jerusalem at the Feast of Pentecost when the Church was founded ca. A.D. 31 (Acts 1:14).

So here we have three major figures of the New Testament—John the Baptizer, the apostle James and his half-brother Jesus, who was called Christ or Messiah—mentioned by a Jewish historian later that same century. Does Josephus say anything else about Jesus?

Josephus' account of Jesus Christ

Note this (with **bold portions** for discussion following): "Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, **if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works**, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. **He was Christ.**

"And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; **for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him.** And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day" (*Antiquities* 18:3:3).

While many scholars dispute parts or all of the passage, it is quoted as above by the historian Eusebius in Greek as early as A.D. 315 and appears this way in all the earliest surviving copies of Josephus' works.

But the boldfaced portions are very odd for a Jewish writer who wasn't apparently a Christian. Most scholars agree that the boldfaced portions were added sometime in the second or third century by a scribe copying this work, which would mean these parts aren't the actual words of Josephus. Supporting this view is an Arabic-language version of this portion of Josephus' writings that was apparently preserved in its more original form. It reads this way:

"At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus,

and his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon their loyalty to him. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive. Accordingly they believed that he was the Messiah, concerning whom the Prophets have recounted wonders."

This leaves out the parts apparently added later about Jesus working miracles, that he *was* the Messiah foretold by the prophets rather than others believing Him so, and that He *was* raised from the dead rather than this having been reported. It would appear that this Arabic-language manuscript was copied from what Josephus originally wrote before a scribe added his own thoughts to the text. Most scholars who have looked into this agree that Josephus originally wrote about Jesus, but a later scribe elaborated on Josephus' account, inserting his Christian beliefs.

Regardless, here, in the most extensive preserved history of Judea from the first century, we have confirmation of the existence of Jesus, as well as John the Baptist and James, the half-brother of Jesus!

We also have confirmation of the key points of the Gospels and book of Acts—that Jesus was a wise and virtuous man whom both Jews and gentiles chose to follow as the Messiah, that He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and that He was reported to have been resurrected to life and appeared to His followers three days after His death.

Those who would deny the existence of Jesus Christ have to explain away not only a number of specific references to Him, but also historic references to His half-brother James and John the Baptist, plus historians' statements confirming the key themes and facts of the Gospels and the book of Acts!

Yes, Jesus lived—but what of His claims?

The Bible, which declares itself the inspired Word of God, says Jesus lived, died and was resurrected to life again and that He was the divine Son of God and God in the flesh. The Bible can be demonstrated to be a true and accurate history, attesting to the lives of people who really lived and walked with God and to events that occurred in the time and manner stated (see our free study guide *Is the Bible True?*).

As we have seen from the remaining works of the earliest historians who wrote about that period, they testify that Jesus was real and was indeed a historic figure living in the first century. Both history and the weight of tradition affirm this truth.

The next obvious question is, *Was He who He said He was? If so, was Jesus God? Was He God in the flesh?*

As noted theologian C.S. Lewis wrote: "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 patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to" (*Mere Christianity*, 1996, p. 56).

The first-century witnesses of Jesus' life, death and resurrec-

tion say He was God. Either He was or He wasn't. (Be sure to read "Who Was Jesus?" beginning on page 10.)

Why did Jesus have to exist as a man?

And this leads us to a critically important question: *Why did Jesus have to live as a man?* Why did the One identified in Scripture as the Word, who was God and was with God (John 1:1), have to become the flesh-and-blood Jesus of Nazareth?

The answer to this question is little understood, but opens up to another dimension of understanding the essential nature of God and His purpose for creating human life here on earth.

Let's begin with what we know about the Word. The starting point is in the writings of the apostle John. John 1:1 says: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it*" (John 1:1-4, emphasis added throughout).

This passage tells us that before Jesus came in the flesh He was *with God from the beginning* and *was God*. Called here "the Word," the Being who became Jesus Christ was of the very essence of God, which means He was divine spirit. He was eternal and co-existed as God in eternity.

We might think of "eternity" as a different dimension of existence apart from the material, time- and space-bound world we inhabit. God dwells in the *spirit* dimension of eternity: "For thus says the High and Holy One *who inhabits eternity*, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place . . .'" (Isaiah 57:15). Eternity is challenging for our mortal minds to comprehend, yet it is where God exists.

God reveals Himself as without beginning or end. He is spirit. He exists beyond the cosmos He created. God's essence is spirit—*holy spirit*, which is eternal.

John reveals that the Being called "the Word" created this world. Paul confirms this when he writes: "For *by Him all things were created* that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. *All things were created through Him and for Him*" (Colossians 1:16). The One who became Jesus of Nazareth is revealed to be *the One through whom God created the universe*. This fundamental understanding helps us understand the enormity of the decision He made to come in the flesh and live among men.

What else do we need to understand about Jesus having come in the flesh?

From position of God to position of a servant

God's love for His creation did not stop at setting in motion the sun, moon, stars and planets in their elegant cosmic ballet. He was never to be an absentee Creator.

The plan from before the foundation of the world was that a sacrifice would be necessary. It would first be a sacrifice of *position*—from existing on the same level with God to coming to earth in the likeness of the human creation as a man. It is difficult if not impossible to begin to understand the love of this *self-sacrificing decision*.

The Word emptied Himself of His divine might and glory,

retaining the identity of God, but coming as a servant to perform a deed essential for human salvation.

Notice what Paul reveals in Philippians 2:6-8: "Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God [in terms of sharing divine nature] as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross" (New Living Translation).

This helps us understand why, during His last night with His disciples before His death, He prayed, "And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, *with the glory which I had with You before the world was*" (John 17:5).

Supreme sacrifice for us

The next part of His sacrifice was "as of a lamb . . . foreordained before the foundation of the world" (1 Peter 1:19-20).

The human race was set on a path away from God with the decision by the first human beings, Adam and Eve, to sin in partaking of the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden, rejecting access to the knowledge and understanding God offered through the tree of life (see Genesis 2:9). That brought about the need for a sacrifice to redeem mankind from sin.

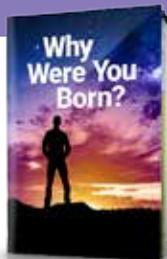
The plan called for the shedding of blood of the one and only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of sin, which is ultimately death.

God's Word has a great deal to say about Christ's death and shedding of blood for the forgiveness of sin to redeem mankind. It is a critical and essential part of God's purpose. He intends to "gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and in earth—in Him" (Ephesians 1:10).

Christ's death by the shedding of His blood provides the one sacrifice for sin for all time: "So Christ has now become the High Priest over all the good things that have come . . . With his own blood—not the blood of goats and calves—he entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever. Just think how much more the blood of Christ will purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God. For by the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins.

That is why he is the one who mediates a new covenant between God and people, so that all who are called can receive the eternal inheritance God has promised them. For Christ died to set them free from the penalty of the sins they had committed under that first covenant" (Hebrews 9:11-15, NLT).

Jesus Christ, "after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God . . . For by one offering



LEARN MORE

Understanding why Jesus Christ came to earth is crucial to understanding your existence and why you are here. God has an incredible plan for you, and that plan is spelled out in our free study guide *Why Were You Born?* Download or request your free copy today!

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ing He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified” (Hebrews 10:12, 14). His sacrifice, His blood, is the means for mankind to be reconciled to God in an eternal covenant that offers and guarantees salvation, eternal life and the sharing of the divine existence in eternity.

A God of love

God’s essential character is love (1 John 4:8, 16). Of all the apostles Christ trained, it was John who seemed to detect



God’s Word has a great deal to say about Christ’s death and shedding of blood for the forgiveness of sin to redeem mankind. It is a critical and essential part of God’s purpose.

this critical detail of the One he forsook all to follow. In the well-known passage of John 3:16 he wrote, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

John would also quote Jesus in another far-reaching discourse saying: “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63, New Revised Standard Version). The life we anticipate is the eternal spirit life from God, who is Spirit (John 4:24).

It is this great love, told throughout Scripture, that led God the Father and the Word who would become Jesus to determine they would share who and what they were with other created beings beyond the angelic realm—human beings. Created in God’s image and endowed with a mind and nature to which God could confer His Spirit, these would have the potential to inherit eternal spirit life.

(It should be noted that spirit life does not mean existence as formless energy, as some might imagine. Those in the spirit realm will have form and substance as spiritual bodies.)

Human beings are created in the image of God but do not, as first formed, possess the same spiritual essence. Man is physical, created from the elements of the earth (though with a human spirit for intellect, emotion and personality as part of his makeup). Having free will, we can and do sin, but as we have seen, God has provided a means for reconciling human beings to Himself through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Before the foundation of this world the Word and the One who would become the Father conceived the plan of redemption for mankind. A verse quoted in part earlier states: “You were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you” (1 Peter 1:18-20).

The plan would call for the Word to become flesh, thereby showing that the eternal spirit could be joined to a human being. The Word, the eternally existing spirit Being who was God along with the Father, was sent to become Jesus of Nazareth—God in the flesh. He became flesh and then through His resurrection returned to spirit so that human beings created in the image of God would have the path opened to becoming spirit beings in the Kingdom of God.

That is why it is so critically important to know that Jesus really existed and why He came. Jesus Christ’s actual historical existence here on earth in the first century is central to that crucial facet of God’s plan being able to take place.

Without Jesus Christ’s life, death and resurrection we have no hope of eternal life with God. The Bible reveals to us not only that there is a God, but also what His purpose for creating human life is all about. The great meaning of life is that human beings created in the image of God can become glorified divine spirit members of the immortal family and Kingdom of God.

What are you to do?

Jesus Christ’s resurrection back to spirit existence makes Him the first of

God’s plan for human salvation (see Romans 8:29; 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23; Colossians 1:18). Christ’s followers who have died and those still alive at His coming will be changed from mortal to immortality in a glorious moment (verses 50-54). Transformed to share spirit existence with Christ and the Father, they will then inherit the Kingdom of God.

This hope of eternal life is revealed in Scripture.

Jesus Christ existed in the flesh as the Son of God. He exists today as your High Priest and soon-coming King. He lives, and He is the means for reconciliation and salvation.

Coming to know this true and compelling picture of Jesus Christ is vital to receiving eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

The words of the apostle Peter in Acts 2:38 ring clear today: “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit!” **BT**

Who Was Jesus?

Who was Jesus, really? Why did He come? Who and what is He now?
You need to understand the answers right from your Bible!

by Scott Ashley

Who was Jesus of Nazareth, really? He is undoubtedly one of history's most famous figures—so famous that history is divided into the period before and after His birth (B.C., or “before Christ” and A.D., Latin *Anno Domini*, “the year of our Lord”). A third of the human race claims to be His followers.

Ideas about Him have ranged all over the map for the last 2,000 years—from madman to Messiah, from Son of God to common criminal. People have wildly varying ideas about what He taught and what His mission and purpose was. Countless forests of trees have been cut down to provide the paper for the millions of books printed about Him, and tons of ink have been poured out on those pages.

But who did *Jesus Himself* say He was? What did *He* say His mission and purpose was? What did He state plainly about Himself?

Most people view Him as a wise man and teacher. However, Jesus claimed to be far more than that—more than a man, more than a teacher, more than a prophet.

He claimed to be *nothing less than God in the flesh!*

Let that sink in for a moment.

Does it matter if Jesus is what He claimed to be?

It's become something of a cliché for deluded individuals to think that they are Napoleon Bonaparte, George Washington or some other notable historical figure. But not many make the astounding claim that they're God in the flesh!

Yet *Jesus did*. Not once, but *many* times. Some of those occasions were rather oblique. Some were very obvious—so obvious that those who heard were enraged and immediately *wanted to kill Him* for blasphemy.

Does it matter? *You bet it does*. If Jesus wasn't divine, if He wasn't who and what He claimed to be, then the Christian belief means nothing. Yes, it certainly has good principles to follow, but who would want to follow a religion based on the delusions of a liar or madman?

But if Jesus' claims are true—that He is the Son of God and God in the flesh come to earth to live and die and live again to show us the way to life everlasting—then *this is the most astounding event in human history*. It demands *our absolute attention*. It demands that we *consider the*

The Claim of Jesus' Disciples

The statements of those who personally knew and were taught by Jesus, and who then wrote most of the New Testament, are thoroughly consistent with Jesus' declarations about Himself.

His disciples were monotheistic Jews. For them to agree that Jesus was God, and then to give their lives for this belief, tells us that they had come to see for themselves that the claims Jesus made about Himself were so convincing as to leave no doubt in their minds.

The first Gospel writer, Matthew, opens with the story of the virgin birth of Jesus. Matthew comments on this miraculous event with the quote from Isaiah 7:14, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). Matthew is making it clear that he understands that this child is God—"God with us."

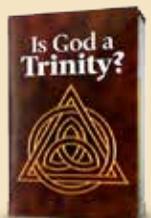
John is likewise explicit in the prologue to his Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1-14).

Some of the disciples called Jesus God directly. When Thomas saw His wounds, he exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). Some view this as simply an expression of surprise. But such profane use of God's name would have been unacceptable among the Jews of that day.

Paul refers to Jesus in Titus 2:13 as "our great God and Savior Jesus Christ." Peter likewise calls Him "our God and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:1).

The book of Hebrews is most emphatic that Jesus is God. Hebrews 1:8, applying Psalm 45:6 to Jesus Christ, states: "But to the Son He [the Father] says: 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.'" Other parts of Hebrews explain that Jesus is higher than the angels (Hebrews 1:4-13), superior to Moses (Hebrews 3:1-6) and greater than the high priests (Hebrews 4:14-16; Hebrews 5:1-10). He is greater than all these because *He is God*—along with the Father.

—From our free study guide *Is God a Trinity?*



What did this mean? What did Jesus say that made them want to stone Him to death for blasphemy?

Abraham had lived some 2,000 years earlier. Jesus was saying not only that He existed before Abraham, but also that He was *the very God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*. He was revealing His true identity—that He was the Being whom the Jews knew and worshipped as God in the Old Testament period!

A while after Abraham, when the great God revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush, Moses asked God what His name was. "I AM WHO I AM," was the reply. "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:13-14, emphasis added throughout).

When Jesus startled them by saying, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM," the Jews understood exactly what He meant. "Then they took up stones to throw at Him" (John 8:59). They wanted to kill Him because in their minds He was guilty of blasphemy for claiming to be God!

When Jesus claimed to be "I AM," He was saying that He was the God who revealed Himself to Moses and who said His name was "I AM."

The Jews understood exactly who and what Jesus claimed to be—the One whom their nation worshipped as the God of Israel.

"I and My Father are one"

On another occasion the Jews confronted Jesus, asking, "How long do You keep us in doubt? If you are the Christ [the prophesied Messiah], tell us plainly" (John 10:24). Jesus answered, "I told you, and you do not believe" (John 10:25). He had previously confirmed His divine identity, as we just saw, as well as on another previous occasion (John 5:17-18).

Jesus then added, "The works that I do in My Father's name, they bear witness of Me" (John 10:25). These "works" were miracles that God alone could do. Jesus' enemies couldn't refute the miraculous deeds Jesus did, many of which are recorded in the Gospels.

Jesus then made another statement that infuriated them: "I and My Father

evidence. It demands that we act, for we are fully accountable for how we decide we'll respond!

Nothing could be more important for you and your life!

Jesus' astounding claims

So who—and what—did Jesus claim to be?

He made His boldest assertion about His identity in John 8:58. In one of His

If Jesus wasn't divine, if He wasn't who and what He claimed to be, then the Christian belief means nothing.

many debates with those who opposed Him, He stated: "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." In English this appears confusing. But Jesus was speaking Aramaic or Hebrew, and those listening understood that He was making a claim that immediately led them to try to kill Him.

are one" (verse 30). He claimed that both the Father and He were divine. As before, there was no mistaking the intent of His statement, because "then the Jews took up stones again to stone Him" (verse 31).

Recognizing their murderous intent, Jesus said: "Many good works I have shown you from My Father. For which of those works do you stone Me?" The Jews responded, "For a good work we do not stone You, *but for blasphemy*, and because You, being a Man, *make Yourself God*" (verses 32-33).

Again, they understood exactly what Jesus meant. He was clearly telling them of His divine identity, that He was God as God the Father was God.

"My Father has been working until now, and I have been working"

John's Gospel records yet another occasion when Jesus angered the Jews with claims of divinity. This took place after Jesus healed a lame man at Jerusalem's Pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath.

According to the law of God, no work was to be done on the Sabbath. And the Jewish religious authorities were angry, because they misinterpreted the Sabbath command to include what Jesus was doing. "For this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath" (John 5:16).

On this occasion, too, Jesus made a statement that they could take only one way: "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working."

How did they respond to His statement? "Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath [according to their misguided interpretation], but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God" (verses 17-18).

The Word was with God and was God

The Bible clearly reveals two divine Beings, God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son. Yet before Jesus was begotten and born as a human being, the Bible doesn't speak of these two beings as Father and Son. This is understandable, as they were not yet in a father-son relationship at that time.

In a dramatic vision recorded in Daniel 7, some 550 years before Jesus Christ's birth, Daniel describes these two divine beings as "the Ancient of Days" (God the Father) and "One like the Son of Man" (who would become human as Jesus Christ, whose most common term He used for Himself was "the Son of Man").

John 1:1-2 describes a time before the world was created, when two divine Beings existed: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.*" Here John refers to those two

In What Other Ways Did Jesus Claim to Be God?

Jesus claimed to be divine in various other ways not specifically covered in this article. Let's look at some of them.

• Jesus claimed authority to forgive sins

When Jesus healed one paralyzed man, He also said to him, "Son, your sins are forgiven you" (Mark 2:5). The scribes who heard this reasoned He was blaspheming, because, as they rightly understood and asked, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (verses 6-7).

Responding to the scribes, Jesus said: "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? . . . But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—He said to the paralytic—"I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home" (verses 8-11, New Revised Standard Version).

The scribes knew Jesus was claiming an authority that belonged to God only. Again, the LORD (*YHWH*) is the One pictured in the Old Testament who forgives sin (Jeremiah 31:34).

• Christ claimed power to raise the dead

Jesus claimed yet another power that God alone possessed—to raise and judge the dead. Notice His statements in John 5:25-29:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. . . All who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation."

There was no doubt about what He meant. He had said in verse 21, "For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even

so the Son gives life to whom He will." When Jesus resurrected Lazarus from the dead, He said to Lazarus' sister Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25).

Compare this to 1 Samuel 2:6, which tells us that "the LORD [*YHWH*] kills and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and brings up."

• Jesus accepted honor and worship

Jesus demonstrated His divinity in yet another way when He said, "All should honor the Son just as they honor the Father" (John 5:23). Over and over, Jesus told His disciples to believe in Him as they would believe in God. "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me" (John 14:1).

Jesus received worship on many occasions without forbidding such acts. A leper worshipped Him (Matthew 8:2). A ruler worshipped Him with his plea to raise his daughter from the dead (Matthew 9:18). When Jesus had stilled the storm, those in the boat worshipped Him as the Son of God (Matthew 14:33).

A Canaanite woman worshipped Him (Matthew 15:25). When Jesus met the women who came to His tomb after His resurrection, they worshipped Him, as did His apostles (Matthew 28:9, 17). The demon-possessed man of the Gadarenes, "ran to meet Jesus and fell down before him" (Mark 5:6, New Living Translation). The blind man whom Jesus healed in John 9 worshipped Him (verse 38).

The First and Second of the Ten Commandments forbid worship of anyone or anything other than God (Exodus 20:2-5). Barnabas and Paul were very disturbed when the people of Lystra tried to worship

Beings “the Word” and “God”—specifically stating that “the Word was God” also.

John goes on to explain who “the Word” was: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (verse 14). Obviously “the only begotten of the

John reveals that the Being who became Jesus Christ was actually the One through whom the universe was created as recorded in the book of Genesis.

Father” who “became flesh and dwelt among us” is the Being who became Jesus Christ. And “God” In John 1:1-2 is referring to the Father—though “the Word [who became Jesus Christ] was God” also.

Jesus was the Creator of all things

Immediately after stating that “the Word was God” and that “He was in the beginning with God,” John makes a startling statement: “All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (verse 3).

Yes—astonishingly, John reveals that the Being who became Jesus Christ was actually the One through whom the universe

was created as recorded in the book of Genesis! Several other Bible passages confirm this truth. Notice:

“For by Him [Jesus Christ] all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is

before all things, and in Him all things consist” (Colossians 1:16-17).

“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets,

has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds” (Hebrews 1:1-2).

While God the Father is the supreme authority, it was Christ who actually did the work of creating. “God . . . created all things through Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 3:9). Colossians 1:17 verifies that the Being who became Jesus Christ had to exist “before all things,” since He created “all things . . . that are in heaven and that are on earth.”

These passages make it abundantly clear that Jesus Christ was not only divine, but was the God who created the entire universe!

them after their healing of a crippled man (Acts 14:13-15). In Revelation 22:8-9, when John the apostle fell down to worship the angel, the angel refused to accept worship, saying, “You must not do that! . . . Worship God!” (Revelation 22:8-9, NRSV).

Yet Jesus accepted worship and did not rebuke those who chose to kneel before Him and worship.

• Jesus’ instruction to pray in His name

Jesus not only tells His followers to believe in Him, but that when we pray to the Father, we are to pray in Christ’s name. “And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (John 14:13). Jesus made it clear that access to the Father is through Him, telling us that “no one comes to the Father except through Me” (verse 6).

The apostle Paul states of Jesus: “Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11).

Paul is telling us that God the Father Himself is upholding the fact that Jesus is God, by exalting His name to the level of the One through whom we make our requests and the One before whom we bow. Jesus also assures us that He will be the One who will give the answer to our prayers (“ . . . that I will do,” John 14:13).

In so many ways Jesus revealed Himself as the God of the Old Testament. The Jews saw Him do many things that only God would or could do. They heard Him say things about Himself that could only apply to God. They were angered and responded with outrage and charged Him with blasphemy. They were so infuriated by His

claims that they wanted to kill Him on the spot.

• Jesus’ special relationship with God

Jesus understood Himself to be unique in His close relationship with the Father in that He was the only One who could reveal the Father. “All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him” (Matthew 11:27).

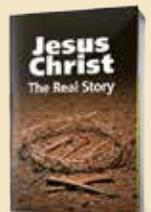
Dr. William Lane Craig, author of many books and articles defending Christian belief, says this verse “tells us that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God in an exclusive and absolute sense. Jesus says here that his relationship of sonship to God is unique. And he also claims to be the *only one* who can reveal the Father to men. In other words, Jesus claims to be the absolute revelation of God” (*Reasonable Faith*, 1994, p. 246).

• Christ’s claims to hold people’s eternal destiny

On several occasions Jesus asserted that He was the One through whom people could attain eternal life. “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:40; compare verses 47 and 54). He not only says that people must believe in Him, but also that He will be the One to resurrect them. No mere man can take this role.

The conclusion is inescapable: Jesus understood Himself as divine along with the Father and as possessing the right to do things only God has the right to do.

—Condensed from our free study guide *Jesus Christ: The Real Story*





“God . . . has in these last days, spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.”

“No one has seen the Father”

But John 1 contains another astounding statement that helps us understand who and what Jesus Christ really is. John, concluding his explanation of Jesus Christ’s existence from the beginning with the Father, states: “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son . . . He has declared Him” (verse 18).

Jesus Christ Himself makes the same point in John 5:37: “And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form.”

Jesus confirms this in John 6:46: “No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father” (New International Version).

The apostle Paul also states that no human being has ever seen the Father, speaking of “God . . . whom no man has seen or can see” (1 Timothy 6:13, 16).

And John, last surviving of the original apostles, says plainly that “no one has seen God at any time” (1 John 4:12).

Yet the Bible specifically records that many individuals saw and heard God, among them Jacob (Genesis 32:30), Moses (Exodus 3:6; 33:17-23; Numbers 12:6-8), Joshua (Joshua 5:13-6:2), Gideon (Judges 6:12-14), Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-3) and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:26-2:4).

Putting all of these scriptures together—some saying that no one has ever seen God and others showing that the God of the Old Testament many times visibly appeared and audibly spoke to individuals, we are left with one inescapable fact: *The God who appeared to these individuals was not God the Father, but the Being who became Jesus Christ.*

is explains why John stated that “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son . . . He has declared Him” (John 1:18). is also helps us understand Jesus’ statement in Matthew 11:27, that “no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

To summarize: No human being has ever seen God the Father. e God who appeared to various individuals in Old Testament times was actually the Being who would later come in human form as Jesus Christ. Jesus now reveals the Father to those whom He chooses and whom the Father calls (John 6:44, 65).

e apostle Paul confirms this. Writing of ancient Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness after the Exodus, he states that “they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:4).

Where does that leave us?

Jesus’ claims as to His identity are indeed staggering. Some who heard those claims wanted to kill Him. Others were bewildered. Some put His claims to the test, followed Him, and became part of a movement that “turned the world upside down” (Acts

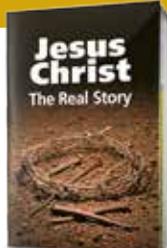
17:6). ose who were closest to Him were so convinced that they willingly followed Him down the pathway to death, never wavering in their convictions.

is understanding of who and what Jesus Christ was and is today is why His sacrifice is so enormously important. It took nothing less than the death of the Creator of all mankind to pay the penalty for all the sins of all mankind for all time!

And what is Jesus Christ today? In His last hours with His disciples before He was arrested and crucified, He prayed to His Father: “And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (John 17:5). Resurrected from the tomb, He now sits in glory at the Father’s right hand, awaiting the time of His return to earth to establish His Kingdom and to reward His faithful flock.

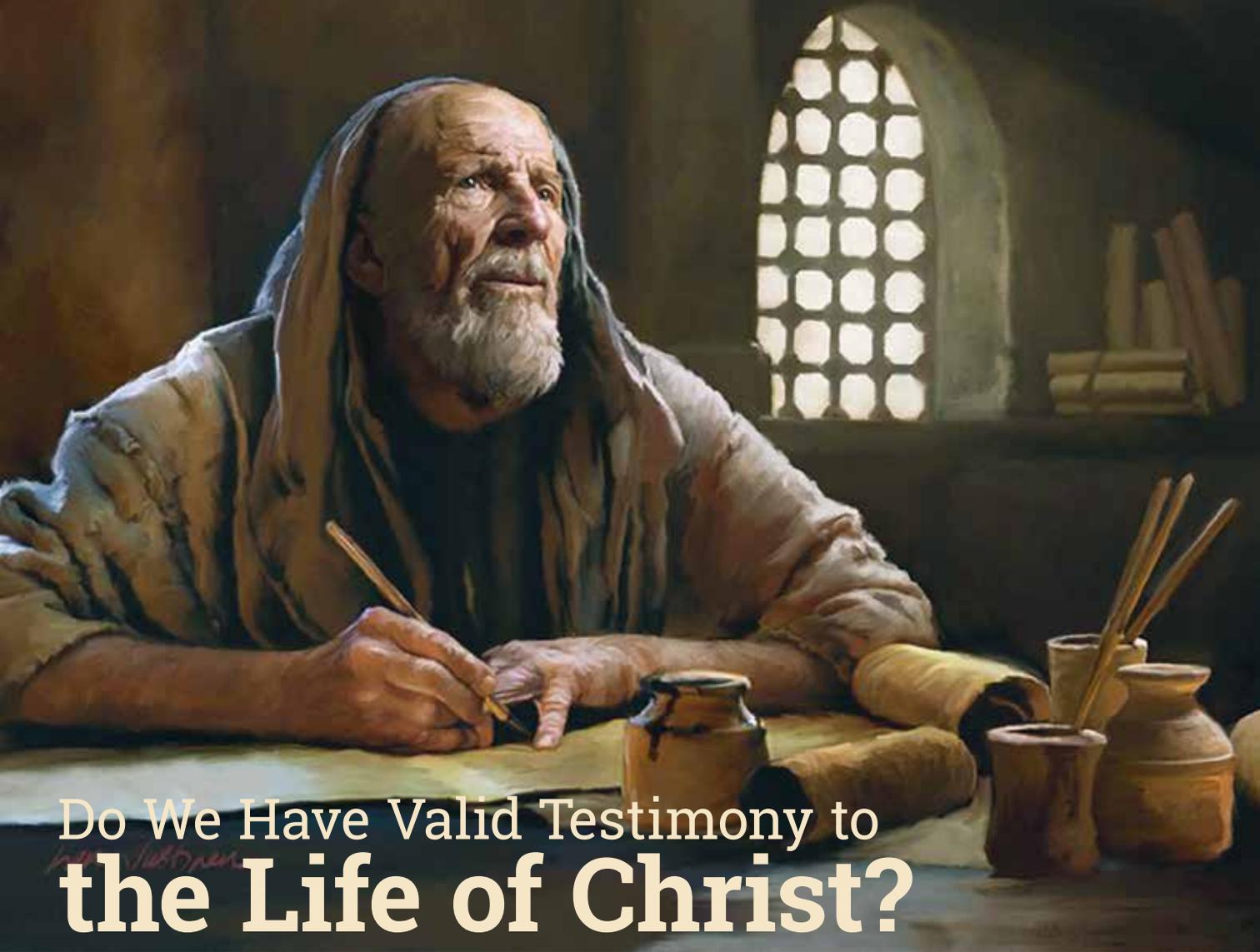
What about you? Do you have the courage and conviction to surrender your life to the God who not only made you, but surrendered His life for you? e choice is yours! 

LEARN MORE



The true story of Jesus Christ is astonishing! Most people are familiar with some of the pieces, but few grasp the amazing overall picture of who and what He was and is! Read our study guide *Jesus Christ: The Real Story*. Download or request your free copy today!

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Do We Have Valid Testimony to the Life of Christ?

The story of Jesus Christ and His early followers is found in the New Testament. But has this source been faithfully passed on to us? And can we believe what is written? What does the evidence tell us?

by Peter Eddington

The collection of ancient books and letters known as the New Testament or Apostolic Scriptures presents the amazing story of the birth, life, ministry, teachings, miracles, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, proclaiming Him the long-awaited Messiah or Christ foretold in Old Testament prophecies.

Note this bold claim from one of its writers: “For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but *were eyewitnesses of His majesty*” (2 Peter 1:16, emphasis added throughout).

But can we trust this statement and the rest of the Apostolic Scriptures? Bible critics have long criticized the New Testament, along with the rest of the Bible, arguing that there’s no way its accounts and teachings as we have them today accurately reflect what was originally written, and even that these weren’t accurate to start with or written by whom they were claimed to be. But is there substance to such criticisms? Is there a way to really know?

The short answer is that no, the criticism does not prove substantive, and yes, there are *many* valid reasons to accept that the New Testament we have today has been faithfully

preserved and passed on to us from Jesus’ early followers.

It is very important to establish if we are to believe *what the Apostolic Scriptures actually say* about Jesus, His life and His resurrection.

We will briefly go through just *four* reasons to support the position that we do have an accurate copy of the New Testament along with some other factors to consider. (You could easily research this yourself and come up with more than four.)

Many early manuscripts of the Bible

To quote from biblical scholars Norman Geisler and Frank Turek in their book *I Don’t Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*: “At last count, there are *nearly 5,700 hand-written Greek manuscripts of the New Testament*. In addition, there are *more than 9,000 manuscripts in other languages*, (e.g., Syriac, Coptic, Latin, Arabic). Some of the nearly 15,000 manuscripts are complete Bibles, others are books or pages, and a few are just fragments . . .

“There is nothing in the ancient world that even comes close in terms of manuscript support. The next closest work is the *Iliad* by Homer, with 643 manuscripts. Most other ancient

works survive on *fewer than a dozen* manuscripts, yet few historians question the historicity of the events those works describe” (2004, p. 225).

So we see that there are numerous manuscripts of the New Testament—*thousands more* than any other writings from the

God’s Word has a great deal to say about Christ’s death and shedding of blood for the forgiveness of sin. It is a critical and essential part of God’s purpose.

ancient world. For example, people believe that Alexander the Great existed, even though the historical record is relatively sparse. Why not believe that Jesus existed and that we have a reliable record of His life, considering there is so much more evidence for Him than for anyone else in ancient history?

Very early manuscripts

As Drs. Geisler and Turek further state: “Not only does the New Testament enjoy abundant manuscript support, but it also has manuscripts that were written soon after the originals. The earliest undisputed manuscript is a segment from John 18 . . . Scholars date it between A.D. 117-138, but some say it is even earlier” (p. 226).

Some even earlier fragments have been dated to as early as A.D. 50 to 70, although some dispute these claims. *Even the most conservative estimates* on early New Testament copies of the Bible are dated within 100 years of the original books being penned by the authors.

Geisler and Turek point out: “The time gap between the original and the first surviving copy [of the New Testament] is still vastly shorter than anything else from the ancient world.

The *Iliad* has the next shortest gap at about 500 years, most other works are 1,000 years or more from the original. The New Testament gap is about 25 years and may be less” (p. 227).

Thus, the earliest known New Testament manuscripts are copies made of the original apostolic manuscripts very soon after they were first written—just a couple of decades or so. For other ancient works the earliest copies we have are usually from *1,000 years or more* after the original.

And so we begin to ask, why would skeptics question the veracity of the story of Jesus Christ and the New Testament teachings, when so many early manuscripts can verify the accuracy of what was written? And yet skeptics don’t question Plato, Herodotus or Caesar, or even Homer to the same

extent—when the earliest copies of their works are upwards of *1,400 years from the originals*, and only a handful of manuscripts have been found. Scholars have only found seven copies of Plato’s work and only 10 of Caesar’s—yet they are considered authoritative and accurate. Remember, there are *15,000* manuscripts of New Testament writings.

Remarkably, it’s been claimed that a recent manuscript fragment of Mark’s Gospel dates all the way back to the first century (see “Earliest New Testament Manuscript Fragment Discovered?” on page 17).

Manuscripts abundantly supported by other early writers

Early in the fourth century, the Roman emperor Diocletian gave three separate edicts ordering the persecution of Christians. He called for the destruction of church meeting places, manuscripts of the New Testament and later Christian writings, as well as the murdering of Christians. He didn’t succeed in wiping out all copies or all Christians. But even if he had, there is enough written *by other early authors* quoting the New Testament that almost the whole collection could be reconstructed from these quotations.

Geisler and Turek explain: “Hundreds if not thousands of manuscripts were destroyed across the Roman Empire during this persecution, which lasted until A.D. 311. But even if Diocletian had succeeded in wiping every biblical manuscript off the face of the earth, he could not have destroyed our ability to reconstruct the New Testament.

“Why? Because the early church fathers—men of the second and third centuries such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, and others—quoted the New Testament so much (36,289 times, to be exact) that all but eleven verses of the New Testament can be reconstructed just from their quotations . . . So we have not only thousands of manuscripts but *thousands of quotations* from those manuscripts. This makes reconstruction of the original text virtually certain” (p. 228).

Few significant manuscript variations, accurate reading evident

Some scholars claim that there are 200,000 errors in the New Testament manuscripts. But, first of all, these are not errors, but *variant readings*—the vast majority of which are

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strictly grammatical, like spelling and punctuation. And, because these variations are spread throughout more than 5,000 manuscripts, a variant in spelling of just one word that appears in 2,000 manuscripts is counted as 2,000 errors of that same word. The actual differences are far fewer than the 200,000 some skeptics claim.

Textual scholars estimate that only 1 in 60 variations is of any significance at all, with only 50 of real significance, and that the New Testament text we have can be relied on to be 99.5 percent accurate. Researching the conclusions that historians and textual experts reach in this regard, considering actual textual examples, makes for an interesting study.

There are *no new disclosures* that have cast any doubt on the essential reliability of the New Testament. Only about one percent of the manuscript variants affect the meaning of the text to any degree, and not a single Christian doctrine is at stake. The *variety and multitude* of New Testament manuscripts actually enhance the credibility of the Bible's portrayal of Jesus, not make us worry about errors.

Where there are differences, widespread agreement among vast numbers of manuscripts reveals the accurate reading.

Extrabiblical attestation

In a *Beyond Today* article earlier this year, I pointed out that there are 10 known non-Christian writers who mentioned Jesus within 150 years of his lifetime—compared to just nine that mention Tiberius, the Roman emperor of Christ's day (and if you include Christian sources, authors mentioning Jesus outnumber those mentioning Tiberius 43 to 10).

I recommend going back and taking a look at that article, which lists a number of specific details about Christ's life from non-Christian authors—details that corroborate the New Testament accounts (see "Was Jesus Really Resurrected?" in the March-April 2016 issue).

Adding to that, here's a quote from an anti-Christian author about Jesus' crucifixion—the Roman historian Tacitus writing that Christ "suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius." The Jewish historian Josephus wrote that Pontius Pilate "condemned him to be crucified." Lucian of Samosata, a Greek satirist, mentioned the crucifixion, and Mara Bar-Serapion, a pagan, confirmed Jesus was executed. Even the Jewish Talmud reports that "Yeshua was hanged" on a tree. More on this can be found in *The Case for the Real Jesus* by Lee Strobel (2007, p. 113). And see "Did Jesus Christ Really Exist?" beginning on page 4 of this magazine.

Admissions from atheists and liberal scholars

Looking back from modern times, even many academics who reject the claims of the New Testament recognize it as historical in large part.

The atheist historian Gerd Lüdemann is forced to admit that Christ and His disciples existed and that there was a genuine experience of Christ's resurrection, but he claims it must have been hallucinatory. He wrote: "It may be taken as *historically certain* that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus's death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ" (*What Really Happened?*, p. 80, quoted by William Lane Craig, "Visions of Jesus: A Critical Assessment of Gerd Lüdemann's Hallucination Hypothesis").

Earliest New Testament Manuscript Fragment Discovered?

Christianity Today reported in 2012 about findings announced by Dallas Theological Seminary professor Daniel Wallace regarding a very intriguing manuscript. The article was titled "Earliest Manuscript of Gospel of Mark Reportedly Found" (Stoyan Zaimov, Feb. 20). This manuscript of the Gospel of Mark would have been copied in the first century A.D.—when some of Jesus' early followers were still alive.

As the article stated, "The most remarkable aspect about this find, if it is indeed confirmed to be from the first century, is that it will be the first ever manuscript discovered dated within the lifetime of some of the eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection, according to Wallace."

Noted New Testament scholar Craig Evans commented: "If authenticity and early date are confirmed, this fragment of the Gospel of Mark could be very significant and show how well preserved the text of the New Testament really is. We all await its publication" (ibid.).

The publication was supposed to come the next year, but it has been delayed, reportedly until sometime in 2017, apparently because several other fragments are being studied, and the intention is to publish them all together in book form. Thus we will have to wait to see the fragment itself. But we do have the attestation of Daniel Wallace, a reputable scholar who stands behind what he publicly disclosed—that this fragment dates to the 80s or 90s A.D.

In any case, we already have not *quite* so early attestation to Mark and other books of the New Testament.

If the events of Jesus' life recorded in Mark's Gospel, including the resurrection, never happened, then the book would have been ridiculed by all those who read it. Obviously, it was believed to be true, not discredited. So copies of Mark's work—and the other New Testament documents—were made early on for distribution through the first-century Church and for posterity.

So many thousands of people witnessed events in Christ's life, including hundreds who saw Him after He was resurrected, that no sane author would write something like the Gospel of Mark while eyewitnesses were alive—if it wasn't true. Otherwise, it would easily be discredited. And it would be foolish to copy such lies, as copying such manuscripts involved skill, time and effort—and for what?

On the contrary, it was an accepted fact that Jesus lived—and it was widely recognized that He was resurrected, or at least that He was believed to have been by multitudes of people.

—Tom Robinson



2nd century biblical text fragment from Egypt

Others have made this claim too. But a mass hallucination seems itself supernatural, so why not just take the New Testament account at face value, which is much more reasonable?

Liberal scholar Paula Fredriksen of Boston University said this about what the disciples witnessed: “I know in their own terms what they saw was the raised Jesus. That’s what they say and then all the historic evidence we have afterwards attests to their conviction that that’s what they saw. I’m not saying that they really did see the raised Jesus. I wasn’t there. I don’t know what they saw. But I do know that as a historian that they must have seen something” (quoted by Strobel, p. 119).

In fact, Fredriksen also stated that “the disciples’ conviction that they had seen the risen Christ . . . is [part of] *historical bedrock, facts known past doubting*” (ibid.).

Of course, if one would accept the genuineness of what the disciples reported, why not just accept that they knew what they were seeing as a group? That makes by far the most sense.

An orderly account—for certainty

The men who wrote the New Testament were deeply thoughtful concerning what they recorded. Consider the physician Luke, who traveled with the apostle Paul. He began his Gospel about Jesus’ life with these words, writing to a supportive patron named Theophilus:

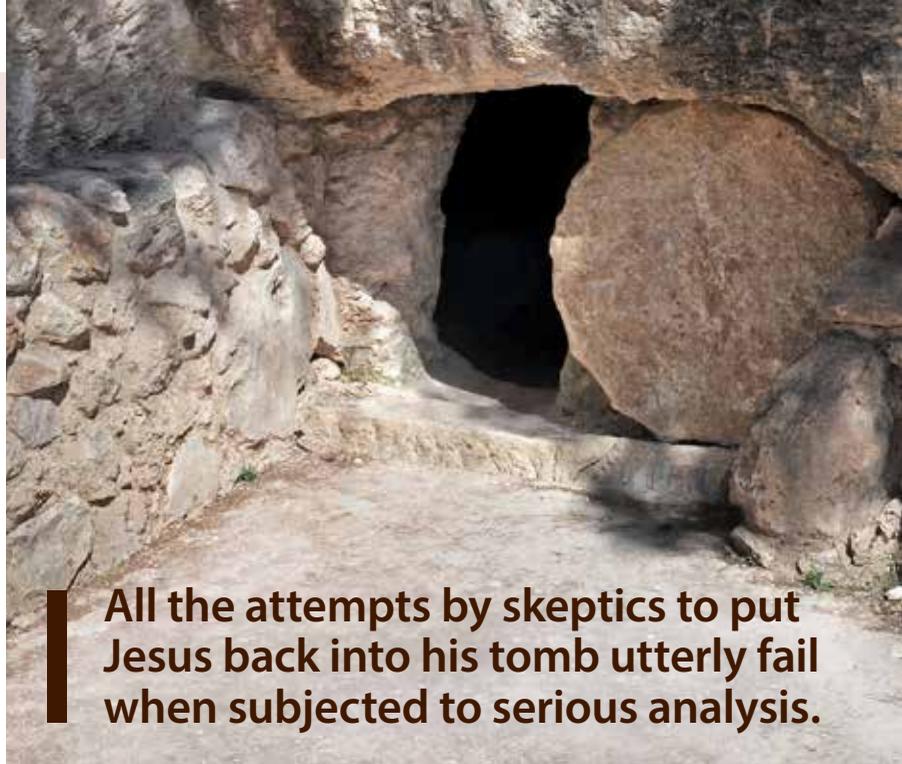
“Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed” (Luke 1:1-4).

Does this sound like some manufactured account—especially in an ancient context? Does it sound like it was written by someone who would have been duped by others involved in some mass hallucination? Luke interviewed multiple eyewitnesses to make sure that what he wrote was accurate. He was in fact a tremendous historian—as well as a writer inspired of God. (See “A Historian Comes to Faith by Luke the Historian” on page 19.)

Evidence we can trust

The reality is, we can have confidence that the New Testament we have is an accurate copy of the original manuscripts penned by the apostles and their companions. And we can trust that what they tell us is the truth—including the awesome fact of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.

As we’ve seen, there are thousands of manuscripts, including very early manuscripts, with enough quotes by other ancient writers to actually reconstruct almost the entire New Testament. The variations in the thousands of manuscripts are quite minimal and do not substantively alter what is being communicated. Nothing else from the ancient world has such



All the attempts by skeptics to put Jesus back into his tomb utterly fail when subjected to serious analysis.

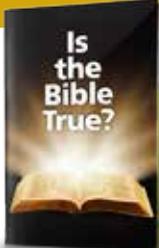
manuscript verification. Indeed, nothing else even comes close.

Yet faced with this, many still resort to dismissing what the manuscripts say—for example, trying to explain away the accounts of Christ being resurrected.

Strobel writes: “Have new explanations refuted Jesus’ resurrection? No, the truth is that a persuasive case for Jesus rising from the dead can be made by using the facts that are well-evidenced and which the vast majority of today’s scholars on the subject—including the skeptical ones—accept as true: Jesus’ death by crucifixion; his disciples’ belief that he rose and appeared to them; the conversion of the church persecutor, Paul; the conversion of the skeptic James, who was Jesus’ half-brother; and Jesus’ empty tomb. All the attempts by skeptics and Muslims to put Jesus back into his tomb utterly fail when subjected to serious analysis” (p. 266).

Yes, Jesus Christ *did* exist. He was born of a virgin. He taught His disciples. He preached to and miraculously fed the multitudes. He walked on water. He healed the sick. He raised the dead. He died by crucifixion. And that wasn’t the end. He rose from the grave. He continued to instruct His disciples. He ascended to heaven. And He promised to come back. His disciples continued in His teachings, proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

Yes, all of it happened—all of it—just as the New Testament accurately presents it. You have every reason to believe it—and no genuine reason to disbelieve, whether the New Testament or the Old, to which the New attests. Trust the Word of God. For that’s what it is! Start reading it. Start believing it. Start obeying it. There is nothing more vital in life! 



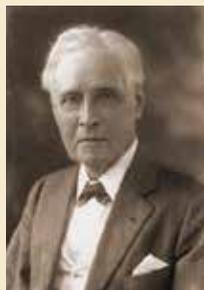
LEARN MORE

In addition to those covered in this article, there are many more evidences for the truthfulness and accuracy of the Bible. We’ve prepared a thoroughly researched study guide titled *Is the Bible True?* that covers this critical issue. Request your free copy today!

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A Historian Comes to Faith by Luke the Historian

Sir William Ramsay, an English historian and prolific writer, was a product of a mid-19th-century education and of pervasive antibiblical bias. He believed the historical accounts in the book of Acts had been written not in the time of the apostolic Church, but considerably later—in the mid-second century. If this were true, the biblical book of Acts could not have been written by Luke, the traveling companion of the apostle Paul, and could only be a fabricated history.



Scholar Sir William Ramsay

Luke claimed to have been with Paul as the two men trudged over the cobblestoned roads of the Roman Empire. He wrote as one who watched as Paul was used by God to bring a young convert back to life after a fatal fall (Acts 20:8-12). Ramsay was skeptical of the historicity of Luke and the historical record of Acts and set out to disprove it.

After many years of detailed study of the archaeological evidence, Ramsay came to a disconcerting conclusion: The historical and archaeological evidence came down solidly in favor of Luke's having written the book of Acts in the first century, during the time of the apostles. Rather than Luke being a historical fraud, Ramsay concluded that there are "reasons for placing the author of Acts among the historians of the first rank" (*St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, 1925, p. 4).

Ramsay became convinced of Luke's reliability because Luke wrote about the work of the early Church as it was intertwined with secular events and personalities of the day. In Luke's Gospel account we are introduced to Pontius Pilate, Herod the Great, Augustus and other political players. In Acts we meet an even larger assemblage, including Sergius Paulus, Gallio, Felix, Festus and Herod Agrippa I and II.

Luke not only writes about these people, but he mentions details, sometimes relatively minute facts, about them. "One of the most remarkable tokens of [Luke's] accuracy is his sure familiarity with the proper titles of all the notable persons who are mentioned . . . Cyprus, for example, which was an imperial province until 22 BC, became a senatorial province in that year, and was therefore governed no longer by an imperial legate but by a proconsul. And so, when Paul and Barnabas arrived in Cyprus about AD 47, it was the *proconsul* Sergius Paulus whom they met" (F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 1981, pp. 82-83).

Luke mentions other particulars about the offices and titles of officials of the Roman Empire. In every case he gets it right, as confirmed by archaeological discoveries *many centuries later*.

As Ramsay discovered, to show such accuracy required that the author be well versed at the time in the intricacies of politics of the day over a wide region—with no readily accessible reference works to check. Few of us could do as well if quizzed about the exact official titles of national and international political figures today.

Such fine details of the historical setting make the Bible interesting, but they also put an author, such as Luke, to the test—and the Bible along with him. If he makes a mistake in his reporting, then his work loses credibility. How does Luke survive the test? F.F. Bruce, professor of biblical studies, says of Luke's work: "A writer who thus relates his story to the wider context of world history is courting trouble if he is not careful; he affords his critical readers so many opportunities for testing his accuracy. Luke takes this risk, and stands the test admirably" (p. 82).

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