

The Historical Jesus

He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize Him. He came to His own people, and even they rejected Him. But to all who believed Him and accepted Him, He gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God. So the Word became human and made His home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen His glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.
(John 1:10-14)

Did Jesus ever actually live? There are some people who claim He did not. They suggest that Jesus was not a real person at all. And in recent years, there seem to be more and more people who hold this opinion. Where did this belief originate? And is there any validity to it?

This claim that Jesus did not really exist arose in the 18th and 19th centuries and has been almost universally refuted. There are very few scholars who would make such a claim today, as it is difficult to find evidence to support that position. Nevertheless, there are still many people in society who buy into it and a few (often anti-Christian activists) who promote it.

Usually when you hear someone making this claim, they are simply repeating what they have heard someone else say. They have not researched it for themselves. Because the truth is, there is overwhelming evidence for the historic Jesus, both biblical *and* non-biblical.

How Do I Know Jesus Even Existed?

A. The hundreds of references in the New Testament

The books of the New Testament present a Jesus who lived in real time and space. Which immediately raises another argument, because people who claim Jesus did not exist are also likely to contend that you cannot use the Bible to prove Jesus did exist. After all, the writers were biased, right?

But that is simply an absurd restriction. It would be like trying to learn about the Great Wall of China but you could not talk to anyone who has ever actually seen it. Or like going to court but you could not call any eyewitnesses because they would have their own beliefs about what happened. Of course you would accept their accounts, because they were there. And without any evidence that they were deliberately trying to mislead you, you would consider their testimony to be valid.

Were the writers biased? Of course they were. We are all biased in favor of what believe to be true. That alone does not invalidate a person's testimony. The fact is, the writers of the New Testament books believed they were writing about authentic historic events.

So why would you ignore the earliest, the most detailed, and the most credible sources we have about the person of Jesus? Even without using the Bible as the "infallible Word of God", you can treat the books of the New Testament like any other historical texts.

Remember, the New Testament was not originally written as one volume. There were 27 individual books and letters that were being circulated among the churches of the first century, and they were eventually compiled into one volume. Some of them can be dated to as early as 20 years after the events actually took place, and that's an incredibly short period of time for any historic text. In fact, even if you concur with those who argue that some of the books were not written until sometime in the second century, that would still be an incredibly early date. For most historic events or people, the earliest records we have were written hundreds or even thousands of years later. So the books of the New Testament are actually strong evidence for the historic Jesus.

B. The abundance of non-Biblical references

Mostly from the late 1st and early 2nd centuries, you have the documents and writings of people like these:

Clement of Rome (c. AD 96)

Pliny the Younger (c. AD 61-112)

Ignatius of Antioch (c. AD 107-110)

Mara bar Sarapion (1st-3rd century)

Flavius Josephus (AD 37–100)	Suetonius (c. AD 70-130)
Julius Africanus (c. AD 221)	Justin Martyr (AD 103-165)
Acts of Pilate (c. AD 37?)	Apocrypha & Gnostic writings (up to 4 th century)
Babylonian Talmud (AD 70-200)	Lucian (c. AD 125-180)
Thallus (c. AD 50-100)	Celsus (c. AD 180)
Papias (c. AD 90)	Tacitus (c. AD 56-117)
Quadratus (d. AD 124)	

To have this many people referencing Jesus really is amazing. Because remember, at the time not a lot of people knew about Jesus. Jesus lived and ministered in a relatively localized area, in a rather insignificant part of the Roman Empire, and was only a public figure for about three years. Yet we have a lot more information about Jesus than most major public figures at the time.

According to historian Dr. Edwin Yamauchi, Professor Emeritus of History at Miami University and an expert on first-century Christianity, we could know over one hundred facts about Jesus without even consulting the New Testament. We could know that some saw Him as a miracle worker, a healer, and the Messiah. We could know that He was executed by crucifixion on a Roman-style cross. And we could know that even after His crucifixion there were those who claimed He was still alive. The extra-biblical sources contain an abundance of information about Jesus and treat Him as a real historical figure.

C. The thousands of Christian martyrs in the first century

Those martyrs were put to death because they believed Jesus was a real person as well as the Son of God. To them, He was not just a comic book character, nor was He just a compilation of pagan myths; He was a real breathing person who lived and walked where they lived and walked. Many of them even knew Him personally.

People will die for what they believe to be true, but nobody will willingly die for what they know to be a lie. These martyrs were not giving their lives for some grand deception, nor were they dying to protect their loved ones; they were dying because they truly believed that the Jesus who lived among them was in fact the Son of God. Thousands of people in the first century alone willingly went to their deaths for this claim.

Did they believe Jesus was real? They certainly did. And their proximity to the timeframe when Jesus lived makes them prime witnesses.

There's really no doubt that Jesus was in fact a real historical figure and not just a work of fiction. But was He more than that? That's what we're about to discover...

Truly God, Truly Man

Though He was God, He did not think of equality with God 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. (Philippians 2:6-7)

Ask people on the street about Jesus and you'll get a variety of answers. Many people say He was an inspiring man, a good teacher, a prophet who lived long ago; others will tell you everything about Jesus is a myth; a few will tell you that Jesus is different for each person—it's all subjective; and still others will tell you that they believe to the core of their being that Jesus was and is God in the flesh.

The earliest Christ-followers would fall in that final camp. In fact, they understood Jesus to be a man *and* they understood Him to be God. And this was not a belief that arose later on; it was there right at the beginning. It can be seen in the way they treated Him, the way they wrote about Him, and even in the words of Jesus Himself.

Which understandably has led to some confusion. And for centuries, theologians have debated about how these two natures of Jesus were balanced. In what ways was He a man? In what ways was He God? How could He be both at the same time?

The early Church would eventually call conferences (or councils) specifically to discuss this balance, known today as the *hypostatic union*. But as early as the second century, Irenaeus (c. AD 180) encapsulated their understanding of Jesus in these four Latin words:

“Vere Deus, Vere Homo” which means, “Truly God, Truly Man.”

Since that time, this simple formula (or variations of it) has been repeated by billions of Christ-followers and expressed in the creeds of the Christian Church. But what does it actually mean? How can Jesus be both God and man?

Was Jesus “Truly Man”?

The less contentious half of the formula deals with the humanity of Jesus. Was He a man? Although there are a few who argue that Jesus never even existed, most people have no difficulty believing Jesus was truly a man. They may believe He was a teacher, a philosopher, a prophet, a revolutionary, or a con artist, but they at least believe He was a man.

However, even this was a point of contention in the formative days of Christianity because Jesus’ followers also fervently believed that He was God. So this led to some people coming to believe Jesus was simply God disguised as a human. But the Gospel of John asserts that Jesus was not just disguised as a man; He really was a man. Referring to Jesus as “the Word”, John wrote:

So the Word became human and made his home among us. (John 1:14)

He did not just *look* like a human. John says He *became* human. The New Testament even illustrates how Jesus experienced everything that humans experience. He grew fatigued, He got thirsty, He became angry, He faced temptation, He was saddened, and He knew hunger.

So was Jesus a man? According to the New Testament texts and the beliefs of the earliest Christ-followers, yes. And He experienced all of life. He was born, He grew up, He learned a trade, He had his heart broken, He was loved by some, He was rejected by others, and He endured an extremely painful execution on a Roman-style cross. He was truly human.

So that leaves the question, “Was Jesus truly God?” And if that is what the Christian Church believes, where did that belief originate?

Was Jesus “Truly God”?

A lot of people think that Jesus was not considered to be God until the fourth century. They have the mistaken belief that Jesus was declared to be God in AD 325 by Constantine at the Council of Nicaea. (This belief was popularized by Dan Brown’s book, *The DaVinci Code*.)

But remember, the formula describing Jesus as “Truly God, Truly Man” came out of the second century. And even that was simply a summary—a clarification—of what first-century Christ-followers already believed.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul records an early Christian creed that some date to within 2 years of the Resurrection.¹ The most primitive Christian hymns affirm the divine nature of Jesus. And then there’s the Gospel of Mark.

Of the four Gospels in the Bible, Mark was the earliest. It was possibly written within 20 years of the Resurrection. Plus, it is believed Mark used source material dating back to within three years. And in his very first sentence, Mark says:

This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1)

So the idea that Jesus is divine was not a belief that evolved through the centuries; it was there right at the beginning. It’s how His followers saw Him. It’s how Jesus described Himself. And it’s what the writers of the books of the New Testament believed about Him.

The Gospel of John, written between AD 65 and AD 90 according to most scholars, starts out with these words:

In the beginning the Word already existed. He was with God, and he was God. He was in the beginning with God. He created everything there is. Nothing exists that he didn’t make... (John 1:1-3)

John was referring to Jesus as “the Word,” and therefore stating that Jesus is God. And a few pages later, Jesus Himself makes that claim. In chapter eight, Jesus is talking with a Jewish crowd, and He tells them:

“Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.” “You are not yet fifty years old,” the Jews said to him, “and you have seen Abraham!” “I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I AM!” At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds. (John 8:54-59, NIV)

Why did the Jews react so violently? It was because they remembered what God had told Moses over a thousand years earlier. God was calling Moses to lead the Israelites out of

¹ Habermas, Gary R., *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, (Kregel Publications, 2004), p. 260

slavery in Egypt, but Moses was afraid the people would not believe God had sent him. Therefore God told him:

“I AM THE ONE WHO ALWAYS IS. Just tell them, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:14)

So when Jesus referred to himself as “I AM”, He knew exactly what He was claiming, and so did the Jews. He was claiming to be God. Then a couple of chapters later Jesus made that claim again:

“The Father and I are one.”

Once again the Jewish leaders picked up stones to kill him. Jesus said, “At my Father’s direction I have done many things to help the people. For which one of these good deeds are you killing me?”

They replied, “Not for any good work, but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, have made yourself God.” (John 10:30-33)

And Jesus did not object to that accusation. Nor did He tell them they misunderstood Him. He simply instructed them to look at the evidence.

Or how about when Thomas first saw Jesus after the resurrection? When he saw the risen Christ he fell down and proclaimed:

“My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28)

Instead of rebuking Thomas for making such a claim, Jesus affirmed what he said.

The book of Hebrews was most likely written between AD 60 and AD 70, though some date it a little earlier and others a little later. And it also recognizes the divinity of Jesus.

The Son reflects God’s own glory, and everything about him represents God exactly. He sustains the universe by the mighty power of his command. (Hebrews 1:3)

And then in the Gospel of Matthew, there’s an interesting exchange between Jesus and Peter:

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

“Well,” they replied, “some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.”

Then he asked them, “Who do you say I am?”

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus replied, "You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being." (Matthew 16:13-17)

Do you think Simon Peter and the other disciples saw Jesus as being more than a mere mortal? They certainly did. To the core of their being they believed He was also divine. And this was not the belief of just a small group of people. Hundreds and thousands of people in the first century came to recognize Him as God. And they had support for this belief.

The Credentials for the Divinity of Jesus:

Old Testament Prophecies

There were hundreds of prophecies written down centuries earlier that were fulfilled in the person of Jesus. And not just vague prophecies, but specific prophecies about the Messiah: that He would be born of a virgin, in the town of Bethlehem, of the tribe of Judah, from the house of David. His birth would be announced by angels, He would cleanse the Temple, He would be betrayed for a precise amount of money, and He would be executed at a specific time in a specific way. Centuries before crucifixion was even implemented by the Romans as a form of execution, the Old Testament prophecies painted a picture of how Jesus would die. As Jesus Himself said:

*"...**Everything** written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and in the Psalms must be fulfilled." (Luke 24:44)*

Supernatural Miracles

The miracles of Jesus went beyond the ability of any illusionist. People who had been blind, crippled, or deaf were suddenly able to see, walk, and hear. People who had died were brought back to life. Lepers were made well, water was turned into wine, and a young boy's bag lunch was used to feed thousands. Even extra-Biblical sources tell us that Jesus was regarded as a miracle worker. For example, the Jewish Talmud, which is skeptical toward Jesus, acknowledges that Jesus dealt in the supernatural.

The Teachings of Jesus

Jesus spoke with authority, wisdom, and insight. This by itself doesn't prove anything. But it certainly supports the idea that Jesus was more than just a man. And if you read through the New Testament and consider what Jesus taught, you have to either accept what He said as the words of God or discard them as the ramblings of a madman.

The Resurrection

The greatest evidence of all for the divinity of Jesus is the Resurrection. And we will be discussing the evidence for the resurrection in another chapter. But if Jesus really did rise from the dead, then it proves that He really is who He said He is... the Son of God.

It boggles the mind that Jesus could be truly God and truly man at the same time. But that is exactly what He claimed to be. It is what His disciples and the writers of the New Testament believed Him to be. And the billions of Christ-followers since then have understood Him to be both human and divine.