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BORN IDENTITY: **Was Jesus a real person?**

Did Jesus Christ really exist, or is Christianity built upon a legend? Few scholars question Jesus' existence, but some enemies of Christianity are attempting to prove otherwise.

In a lawsuit against the Vatican, the Church was accused of inventing the story of Jesus' existence. Although the case was thrown out of court in February, 2006, the plaintiff, Luigi Cascioli, appealed, but ultimately his case was closed. The argument against Jesus' existence was made public on CNN TV when Ellen Johnson, president of American Atheists, declared:

“The reality is there is not one shred of secular evidence there ever was a Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ and Christianity is a modern religion. And Jesus Christ is a compilation from other gods: Osiris, Mithras, who had the same origins, the same death as the mythological Jesus Christ.” - Ellen Johnson, atheist

Johnson and a blue-ribbon panel of religious leaders were discussing the question, “What happens after we die?” on a *Larry King Live* CNN broadcast. The usually unflappable King paused reflectively and then replied, “So you don’t believe there was a Jesus Christ?” With an air of certainty, Johnson responded, “There was not. It is not what I believe; there is no secular evidence that JC, Jesus Christ, ever existed.” King had no follow-up and went to a commercial break. No discussion of any evidence for or against Jesus’ existence was forthcoming. The international television audience was left wondering.¹

Fifty years earlier, in his book *Why I Am Not a Christian*, atheist Bertrand Russell shocked his generation by questioning Jesus’ existence. He wrote: “Historically it is quite doubtful whether Christ ever existed at all, and if He did we do not know anything about Him, so that I am not concerned with the historical question, which is a very difficult one.”²

Is it possible that the Jesus so many believe to be real never existed? In *The Story of Civilization*, secular historian Will Durant posed this question: “Did Christ exist? Is the life story of the founder of Christianity the product of human sorrow, imagination, and hope—a myth comparable to the legends of Krishna, Osiris, Attis, Adonis, Dionysus, and Mithras?”³ Durant pointed out how the story of Christianity has “many suspicious resemblances to the legends of pagan gods.”⁴ Later in this article we will see how this great historian answered his own question about the existence of Jesus. So, how can we know for sure that this man, whom many worship and others curse, was real? Is Johnson right when she asserts that Jesus Christ is a “compilation from other gods”? And is Russell right when he says that Jesus’ existence is “quite doubtful”?

Myth Vs. Reality

Let’s begin with a more foundational question: What distinguishes myth from reality? How do we know, for example, that Alexander the Great really existed? Supposedly, in 336 B.C., Alexander the Great became king of Macedonia at 20 years of age. A military

genius, this handsome, arrogant leader butchered his way through villages, towns, and kingdoms of the Greco-Persian world until he ruled it all. In a short eight years Alexander's armies had traversed a total of 22,000 miles in his conquests.

It has been said of Alexander that he cried when he ran out of worlds to conquer. (I'm thinking this is not the person I want to play Monopoly with.)

Before he died at age 32, Alexander reportedly accomplished greater military deeds than anyone in history, not only of the kings who had lived before him, but also of those who were to come later, down to our own time. But today, other than a bunch of cities named Alexandria, a boring film by Oliver Stone, and a few books, his legacy is all but forgotten. In fact, the name Colin Farrell had more drawing power at the box office than Alexander's.

In spite of the box office flop, historians believe Alexander existed because of three primary reasons:

- written documentation from early historians
- historical impact
- other historical and archaeological evidence

Historical Documents About Jesus

The historicity of Alexander the Great and his military conquests is drawn from five ancient sources, none of whom were eyewitnesses. Although written 400 years after Alexander, Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* is the primary account of his life.

Since Plutarch and the other writers were several hundred years removed from the events of Alexander's life, they based their information on prior accounts. Of the twenty contemporary historical accounts on Alexander, not one survives. Later accounts exist, but each presents a different "Alexander," with much left to our imagination. But regardless of the time gap of several hundred years, historians are convinced that Alexander was a real man and that the essential details of what we read about his life are true.

Keeping Alexander as a reference point, we'll note that for Jesus there are both religious and secular historical accounts. But we must ask the question, were they written by reliable and objective historians? Let's take a brief look.

The New Testament

The 27 New Testament books claim to be written by authors who either knew Jesus or received firsthand knowledge of him from others. The four Gospel accounts record Jesus' life and words from different perspectives. These accounts have been heavily scrutinized by scholars both inside Christianity and outside it.

Scholar John Dominic Crossan believes that less than 20 percent of what we read in the Gospels are original sayings of Jesus. Yet even this skeptic doesn't dispute that Jesus Christ really lived.

In spite of Crossan's views, and those of a few other fringe scholars like him, the consensus of most historians is that the Gospel accounts give us a clear picture of Jesus Christ. Whether the New Testament accounts are trustworthy is the subject of another article (See "Jesus.doc"), so we will look to non-Christian sources for our answer as to whether Jesus existed.

Early Non-Christian Accounts

So, which first-century historians who wrote of Jesus did not have a Christian agenda? First of all, let's look to Jesus' enemies.

His Jewish opponents had the most to gain by denying Jesus' existence. But the evidence points in the opposite direction. "Several Jewish writings also tell of His flesh-and-blood existence. Both Gemaras of the Jewish Talmud refer to Jesus. Although these consist of only a few brief, bitter passages intended to discount Jesus' deity, these very early Jewish writings don't begin to hint that he was not a historical person."⁵

Flavius Josephus was a noted Jewish historian who began writing under Roman authority in A.D. 67. Josephus, who was born just a few years after Jesus died, would have been keenly aware of Jesus' reputation among both Romans and Jews. In his famous *Antiquities of the Jews* (A.D. 93), Josephus wrote of Jesus as a real person. "At that time lived Jesus, a holy man, if man he may be called, for he performed wonderful works, and taught men, and joyfully received the truth. And he was followed by many Jews and many Greeks. He was the Messiah."⁶ Although there is dispute about some of the wording in the account, especially the reference to Jesus being the Messiah (scholars are skeptical, thinking that Christians inserted this phrase), certainly Josephus confirmed his existence.

What about secular historians—those who lived in ancient times but weren't religiously motivated? There is current confirmation of at least 19 early secular writers who made references to Jesus as a real person.⁷

One of antiquity's greatest historians, Cornelius Tacitus, affirmed that Jesus had suffered under Pilate. Tacitus was born around 25 years after Jesus died, and he had seen the spread of Christianity begin to impact Rome. The Roman historian wrote negatively of Christ and Christians, identifying them in A.D. 115 as "a race of men detested for their evil practices, and commonly called Chrestiani. The name was derived from Chrestus, who, in the reign of Tiberius, suffered under Pontius Pilate, Procurator of Judea."⁸

The Following Facts About Jesus Were Written By Early Non-Christian Sources:

- Jesus was from Nazareth.
- Jesus lived a wise and virtuous life.
- Jesus was crucified in Judea under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius Caesar at Passover time, being considered the Jewish king.
- Jesus was believed by his disciples to have died and risen from the dead three days later.
- Jesus' enemies acknowledged that he performed unusual feats they called "sorcery."

- Jesus' small band of disciples multiplied rapidly, spreading as far as Rome.
- Jesus' disciples denied polytheism, lived moral lives, and worshiped Christ as God.

Theologian Norman Geisler remarked:

“This general outline is perfectly congruent with that of the New Testament.”⁹

All of these independent accounts, religious and secular, speak of a real man who matches up well with the Jesus in the Gospels. Encyclopedia Britannica cites these various secular accounts of Jesus' life as convincing proof of his existence. It states:

“These independent accounts prove that in ancient times even the opponents of Christianity never doubted the historicity of Jesus.”¹⁰

Historical Impact

An important distinction between a myth and a real person is how the figure impacts history. For example, books have been written and movies produced about King Arthur of Camelot and his Knights of the Roundtable. These characters have become so notorious that many believe they were real people. But historians who have searched for clues to their existence have been unable to discover any impact they have had on laws, ethics, or religion. A kingdom with the grandeur of Camelot should certainly have left its footprints on contemporary history. This lack of historical impact indicates King Arthur and his Knights of the Roundtable are simply mythical.

The historian Thomas Carlyle said, “No great man lives in vain. The history of the world is but the biography of great men.”¹¹ As Carlyle notes, it is real people, not myths, who impact history.

As a real person, Alexander impacted history by his military conquests, altering nations, governments, and laws. But what of Jesus Christ and his impact on our world?

The first-century governments of Judea and Rome were largely untouched by Jesus' life. The average Roman citizen didn't know he existed until many years after his death, Roman culture remained largely aloof from his teaching for decades, and it would be several centuries before killing Christians in the coliseum became a national pastime. The rest of the world had little if any knowledge of him. Jesus marshaled no army. He didn't write a book or change any laws. The Jewish leaders hoped to wipe out his memory, and it appeared they would succeed.

Today, however, ancient Rome lies in ruins. Caesar's mighty legions and the pomp of Roman imperial power have faded into oblivion. Yet how is Jesus remembered today? What is *his* enduring influence?

- More books have been written about Jesus than about any other person in history.
- Nations have used his words as the bedrock of their governments. According to Durant, “The triumph of Christ was the beginning of democracy.”¹²

- His Sermon on the Mount established a new paradigm in ethics and morals.
- Schools, hospitals, and humanitarian works have been founded in his name. Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Oxford are but a few universities that have Christians to thank for their beginning.
- The elevated role of women in Western culture traces its roots back to Jesus. (Women in Jesus' day were considered inferior and virtual nonpersons until his teaching was followed.)
- Slavery was abolished in Britain and America due to Jesus' teaching that each human life is valuable.
- Former drug and alcohol dependents, prostitutes, and others seeking purpose in life claim him as the explanation for their changed lives.
- Two billion people call themselves Christians. While some are Christian in name only, others continue to impact our culture by teaching Jesus' principles that all life is valuable and we are to love one another.

Remarkably, Jesus made all of this impact as a result of just a three-year period of public ministry. If Jesus didn't exist, one must wonder how a myth could so alter history. When world historian H. G. Wells was asked who has left the greatest legacy on history, he replied, "By this test Jesus stands first."¹³

Documentary evidence and historical impact point to the fact that Jesus did exist. If Jesus did really exist, we also would expect to discover his footprints imprinted within the details of history. Myths don't leave such confirming details.

One of the keys here for Durant and other scholars is the time factor. Myths and legends usually take hundreds of years to evolve—the story of George Washington never telling a lie was probably a lie, until two centuries turned it into legend. News of Christianity, on the other hand, spread too quickly to be attributed to a myth or legend. Had Jesus not existed, those who opposed Christianity would certainly have labeled him a myth from the outset. But they didn't.

Such evidence, along with the early written accounts and the historical impact of Jesus Christ, convince even skeptical historians that the founder of Christianity was neither myth nor legend. But one expert on myths wasn't so sure.

Like Muggeridge, Oxford scholar C. S. Lewis was initially convinced that Jesus was nothing more than a myth. Lewis once stated, "All religions, that is, all mythologies... are merely man's own invention—Christ as much as Loki."¹⁵ (Loki is an old Norse god. Like Thor, but without the ponytail.)

Ten years after denouncing Jesus as a myth, Lewis discovered that historical details, including several eyewitness documents, verify his existence.

Jesus Christ has impacted history's landscape like a massive earthquake. And this earthquake has left a trail wider than the Grand Canyon. It is this trail of evidence that convinces scholars that Jesus really did exist and really did impact our world 2,000 years ago.

One skeptic who thought Jesus was a myth was British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge. But on a television assignment to Israel, Muggeridge was faced with evidence about Jesus Christ that he didn't know existed. As he checked out historical places—Jesus'

birthplace of Bethlehem, the town of Nazareth, the crucifixion site, and the empty tomb—a sense of Jesus’ reality began to emerge.

Later he stated:

“It was while I was in the Holy Land for the purpose of making three B.B.C. television programmes on the New Testament that a... certainty seized me about Jesus’ birth, ministry and Crucifixion. ...I became aware that there really had been a man, Jesus, who was also God.”¹⁴

Some German higher-critical scholars in the 18th and 19th centuries had questioned Jesus’ existence, pointing out that such key figures as Pontius Pilate and the chief priest Joseph Caiaphas in the Gospel accounts had never been confirmed as real. No rebuttal was possible until the mid-20th century.

Archaeologists in 1962 confirmed Pilate’s existence when they discovered his name included in an inscription on an excavated stone. Likewise, the existence of Caiaphas was uncertain until 1990, when an ossuary (bone box) was discovered bearing his inscription. Archaeologists have also discovered what they believe to be Simon Peter’s house and a cave where John the Baptist did his baptizing.

Finally, perhaps the most convincing historical evidence that Jesus existed was the rapid rise of Christianity. How can it be explained without Christ? How could this group of fishermen and other workingmen invent Jesus in a scant few years? Durant answered his own introductory question—did Christ exist? —with the following conclusion:

That a few simple men should in one generation have invented so powerful and appealing a personality, so lofty an ethic and so inspiring a vision of human brotherhood, would be a miracle far more incredible than any recorded in the Gospels. After two centuries of Higher Criticism the outlines of the life, character, and teaching of Christ, remain reasonably clear, and constitute the most fascinating feature in the history of Western man.

Scholars' Verdict

Clifford Herschel Moore, professor at Harvard University, remarked of Jesus’ historicity, “Christianity knew its Saviour and Redeemer not as some god whose history was contained in a mythical faith. ...Jesus was a historical not a mythical being. No remote or foul myth obtruded itself on the Christian believer; his faith was founded on positive, historical, and acceptable facts.”¹⁶

Few if any serious historians agree with Ellen Johnson’s and Bertrand Russell’s assertions that Jesus didn’t exist. The extensive documentation of Jesus’ life by contemporary writers, his profound historical impact, and the confirming tangible evidence of history have persuaded scholars that Jesus really did exist. Could a myth have done all that? All but a few extremely skeptical scholars say no.

Dr. Michael Grant of Cambridge has written, “To sum up, modern critical methods fail to support the Christ-myth theory. It has ‘again and again been answered and annihilated by first rank scholars.’ In recent years ‘no serious scholar has ventured to postulate the non-historicity of Jesus.’ ”¹⁷

Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan declared, “Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries. ...It is from his birth that most of the human race dates its calendars, it is by his name that millions curse and in his name that millions pray.”¹⁸

Did Jesus Really Rise From The Dead?

The greatest question of our time is “Who is the real Jesus Christ?” Was he just an exceptional man, or was he God in the flesh, as Paul, John, and his other disciples believed? (See "Is Jesus God?")

The eyewitnesses to Jesus Christ actually spoke and acted like they believed he physically rose from the dead after his crucifixion. If they were wrong then Christianity has been founded upon a lie. But if they were right, such a miracle would substantiate all Jesus said about God, himself, and us.

But must we take the resurrection of Jesus Christ by faith alone, or is there solid historical evidence? Several skeptics began investigations into the historical record to prove the resurrection account false. What did they discover?

Endnotes

1. Ellen Johnson and Larry King, “What Happens After We Die?” Larry King Live, CNN, April 14, 2005.
2. Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), 16.
3. Will Durant, Caesar and Christ, vol. 3 of *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 553.
4. Ibid., 557.
5. D. James Kennedy, *Skeptics Answered* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1997), 76.
6. The Gemaras are early rabbinical commentaries of the Jewish Talmud, a body of theological writings, dated a.d. 200–500.6 Quoted in Durant, 554.
7. Quoted in D. James Kennedy, *Skeptics Answered*, (Sisters Oregon: Multnomah Publishers Inc., 1997), 73.
8. Quoted in Durant, 281.
9. Norman Geisler and Peter Bocchino, *Unshakable Foundations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bethany House, 2001), 269.
10. Quoted in Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Nelson, 1979), 87.
11. Quoted in Christopher Lee, *This Sceptred Isle, 55 B.C.–1901* (London: Penguin, 1997), 1.
12. Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Pocket, 1961), 428.
13. Quoted in Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957), 163.
14. Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered* (Bungay, Suffolk, U.K.: Fontana, 1969), 8.
15. David C. Downing, *The Most Reluctant Convert* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 57.
16. Quoted in McDowell, 193.

17. Michael Grant, *Jesus* (London: Rigel, 2004), 200.
18. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 1.

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