

Who Was Jesus?

The classical way to argue for Christianity is to start with some of the arguments for the existence of God; cosmological argument, teleological argument (argument from design), and the moral argument/problem of evil. All of those arguments get you to a timeless, spaceless, immaterial, all powerful, personal God – the God that Christians, Jews and Muslims believe in. You may have even studied on why the Bible should be considered as accurate and reliable. Up to this point, you've argued that the Jewish and Christian God are the same at least in terms of the Old Testament. The differentiator, then, between Jews and Christians is the New Testament which leads us to our topic today.

Who was Jesus?

For me, as an apologist, this is where I start. Think about it; if you accept Jesus for who he was, then all of the other stuff gets thrown in. This is *not* me forsaking the other arguments. Each of the arguments is important – and can be an important starting point depending on the person you are dealing with. But, for me, Jesus is the linchpin to the whole thing.

And Jesus is really easy to talk about. Because most people have an opinion on who he was. In fact, all of the major religions have something to say about Jesus and they like to make him a figure in their religion at some point.

In 2015 Pew Research released a report that estimated there were 7.7 billion people on the planet; 1.16 b Hindus, 14.6 m Jews, 1 m Hare Krishnas, 506 m Buddhists, 1.9 b Muslims, 5 m Baha'is, and 2.3 b Christians.

All of the world's major religions make claims about who Jesus was one way or another. Many Hindus accept Jesus as one of their many holy men, Hare Krishnas (as form of Hinduism) acknowledge that Jesus was sent by God and he was the Perfect Guru; Buddhists see Jesus as an "Enlightened Man"; and Muslims believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, led a sinless life, was a wise teacher, worked miracles, ascended into Heaven, is the Messiah, and will come again.

Then you have the religions who look an awful lot like Christianity – the LDS church and the Jehovah's Witnesses – but are heretical by definition because of who they think Jesus was. The LDS church teaches that Jesus was the literal son of god and his goddess wife while the Jehovah's Witnesses claim that Jesus was the incarnated archangel Michael.

Even to many who label themselves as Christians, Jesus was little more than a historical figure who taught us how to live a moral life and to stand up for those who have been oppressed and

have no voice.

Clearly, one of the most important questions you can ask someone to get the conversation rolling is “who is Jesus”?

Was Jesus A Real Person?

If you've spent any time online or listening to popular cultural commentators you've probably heard a movement of people who question whether Jesus even existed. This claim first popped up in the mid to late 1800s and was quickly debunked by the early 1900s. It really took on a new head of steam in 2007 with the release of the movie *Zeitgeist*. So, because any claim can find a home on the internet = like the earth being flat or that Elvis is still alive – this idea that Jesus is also a myth has found its home on internet sites and Facebook comment sections. So, we must address it because you are certain to run into it somewhere.

This issue starts off because the person claiming that Jesus was a made-up figure does not consider the Gospels as eyewitness accounts. There are numerous reasons why we should trust the Bible as reliable and accurate which I won't get into here.^[1] The amount of evidence we have for it being accurately preserved eyewitness testimony is *embarrassing*.

This claim that Jesus was a made up figure akin to Zeus or the Easter Bunny isn't held by *anyone* who has a background in Ancient History. Historians know Jesus existed because they know there are *dozens* of references to him outside of the New Testament. Many of them hostile or unfriendly.

Hostile Witnesses

Let's have a look at some of these unfriendly pagan sources.

Thallus

First, we have Thallus. He was an ancient historian between 50-89 AD. Like many ancient historians, his works are lost to us today. But, we know of some things he said based on someone else commenting about his writings. In the 3rd century, historian Julius Afrikanus writes:

On the whole world there pressed a most fearful darkness; and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down. This darkness Thallus in the third book of his *History*, calls, as appears to me without reason, an eclipse of the sun. For the Hebrews celebrate the Passover on the 14th day according to the moon, and the passion of our Saviour falls on the day before the

Passover; but an eclipse of the sun takes place only when the moon comes under the sun. And it cannot happen at any other time but in the interval between the first day of the new moon and the last of the old, that is, at their junction: how then should an eclipse be supposed to happen when the moon is almost diametrically opposite the sun? Let that opinion pass however; let it carry the majority with it; and let this portent of the world be deemed an eclipse of the sun, like others a portent only to the eye. Phlegon records that, in the time of Tiberius Caesar, at full moon, there was a full eclipse of the sun from the sixth hour to the ninth—manifestly that one of which we speak. But what has an eclipse in common with an earthquake, the rending of rocks, and the resurrection of the dead, and so great a perturbation throughout the universe? Surely no such event as this is recorded for a long period. But it was a darkness induced by God, because the Lord happened then to suffer. [2]

Here, Julius informs us that in one of his books about history, Thallus noted that the sky went dark on a given day when it should not have. Thallus didn't know what was going on, so he chalked it up to an unexpected eclipse.

Cornelius Tacitus

Next, we have Cornelius Tacitus, another ancient historian who lived between 56-120 AD. He wrote about Nero and the fires that destroyed Rome in his work *Annals*. Tacitus records that Nero blamed the destruction of Rome on the Christians

Yet no human effort, no princely largess nor offerings to the gods could make that infamous rumor disappear that Nero had somehow ordered the fire. Therefore, in order to abolish that rumor, Nero falsely accused and executed with the most exquisite punishments those people called Christians, who were infamous for their abominations. The originator of the name, Christ, was executed as a criminal by the procurator Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius; and though repressed, this destructive superstition erupted again, not only through Judea, which was the origin of this evil, but also through the city of Rome, to which all that is horrible and shameful floods together and is celebrated.[3]

Tacitus goes on to document some of the things Nero did to Christians and they aren't pretty. But, here we have a Roman historian who is clearly a hostile witness (he said Christians "were infamous for their abominations"). And, he records that Jesus was executed as a criminal under Pilate.

Mara Bar-Serapion

Next, we have Mara Bar-Serapion, who was a Syrian Stoic philosopher. In a letter he wrote to his son sometime around 73 AD, he writes

What else can we say, when the wise are forcibly dragged off by tyrants, their wisdom is captured by insults, and their minds are oppressed and without defense? What advantage did the Athenians gain from murdering Socrates? Famine and plague came upon them as a punishment for their crime. What advantage did the men of Samos gain from burning Pythagoras? In a moment their land was covered with sand. What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise king? It was just after that their kingdom was abolished. God justly avenged these three wise men: the Athenians died of hunger; the Samians were overwhelmed by the sea and the Jews, desolate and driven from their own kingdom, live in complete dispersion. But Socrates is not dead, because of Plato; neither is Pythagoras, because of the statue of Juno; nor is the wise king, because of the "new law" he laid down.^[4]

So, Mara writes to his son about how certain ancient cities faced calamity after they persecuted a major figurehead of the day. One of those cities he refers to is Jerusalem and how the Jews were dispersed after Jesus was executed.

Pliny, The Younger

Next, we have Pliny, The Younger who lived between 98-117 AD. He was a magistrate in the Roman Empire and wrote several letters back and forth with Emperor Trajan. In one of his letters written in 113 AD, he describes putting Christians on trial and some of the things he discovered. He writes:

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to *Christ as to a god*, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food—but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but *depraved, excessive superstition*.
(emphasis mine)^[5]

So, in this letter written in 113 AD We have a hostile witness recording that Christians were worshipping Christ as a god and that they held to superstitions. Like that he rose from the

grave. So, for Christians to have existed this early on means that Christ had to have existed this early on.

Josephus

Finally, we have Flavius Josephus. Josephus was an ancient Jewish historian who was quite prolific. A great deal of what we know about the ancient world comes from Josephus. He lived between 37 – 100 AD. One of his major works is known as *Antiquities*. There is a passage in it where he writes about Jesus and his execution. This passage is so famous to historians, it's been given a specific name; *The Testimonium Flavianum*. It reads:

“About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, **if indeed one ought to call him a man**. For he was one who performed surprising deeds and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. **He was the Messiah**. And when, upon the accusation of the principal men among us, Pilate had condemned him to a cross, those who had first come to love him did not cease. **He appeared to them spending a third day restored to life, for the prophets of God had foretold these things and a thousand other marvels about him**. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.”^[6] (Translation from Loeb Classical Library, emphasis mine)

Now, many people will object to this passage. Can you see why? Josephus was a Jew. But, the author of this passage holds some very Christian beliefs. So, more than likely, a scribe who was a Christian embellished some of the passage and added in things Josephus didn't really say. But, for us, that's OK. Because here's what we get if we remove the questionable passages:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man,[...]. For he was one who performed surprising deeds and was a teacher [...]. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. [...]. And when, upon the accusation of the principal men among us, Pilate had condemned him to a cross, those who had first come to love him did not cease.[...] And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.

So, even in this much more neutral version, we get a number of important pieces of evidence; Jesus lived, he won over many Jews and Greeks, the “principled men” among the Jews had him crucified, Pilate oversaw the execution via crucifixion, his followers claimed to have seen him after he died and they still persist throughout Rome to this day.

The Hostile Eyewitnesses Testify To The Life Of Jesus

So. Without even cracking open the Bible and only interviewing non-Christian eyewitnesses, we get the following information about Jesus:

1. Jesus existed
2. Jesus was crucified
3. On the day of his crucifixion, the sky was darkened
4. There were a group of people called Christians in Rome during Nero's reign
5. They got their name from someone called Christ
6. Christ was executed by torture under the reign of Tiberius
7. The person who oversaw the execution was Pontius Pilate
8. A "most mischevious superstition" broke out in Judea and spread to Rome. Likely that Jesus had come back from the dead

Based SOLELY on the eyewitness testimony of people who WEREN'T Christians, we can clearly see that Jesus was a real person who was executed like the Bible says he was and had many followers almost immediately after his execution.

Did The "Jesus Legend" Develop Over Time?

The next challenge comes from those who believe that Jesus existed – even that he was a wise teacher – but think all the supernatural stuff – like Jesus rising from the dead and the Apostles believing he was God – was added hundreds of years later. The claim is that the Apostles didn't really believe Jesus was God – just that he was a wise teacher – so we shouldn't believe he was God either.

This is actually a pretty popular view by many non-believers. It's pretty safe, if you think about it. It's pretty obvious to see how wise Jesus was.

Let's start off by asking what it is that Christians believe about Jesus? The core doctrines of Christianity include that Jesus existed, that he was both fully God and fully man, that he rose from the dead, that he appeared to his followers after his resurrection, that he led a perfect sinless life, that he paid the debt for our sins, and that he's coming back.

The claim here is that all of the things *after* the "he existed" part were added in much later as Jesus became a legendary figure.

Chain of Custody

What we need here is a way to know that what we believe today is the same thing that the apostles taught 2000 years ago. We need something like you have when you order a package

from Amazon. We need what is known as a chain of custody as a way to see if something has changed over time.

For example, with Amazon. If we order something, we want to make sure that what we ordered is what was delivered. And, if something went wrong – like we didn't receive our package or we received it damaged – we want to know where it got lost or when it got damaged. Amazon gives us constant updates as to the location of our package so we can track it. They even take a picture of it when it gets placed on our doorstep. So, if they take a picture of it on my patio, and it's not there when I get home, that means someone took it.

Similarly, evidence that ends up in a trial has a documented chain of custody. The prosecution wants to give the jury confidence that the evidence hasn't been tampered with from the time it was discovered to the time it is presented in trial. So, when a piece of evidence is discovered at a crime scene – say, a bloody shirt – it starts with photographing that piece of evidence at the crime scene. Then it gets recorded into a log book. Then, when it gets turned in to the evidence department at the police station, it gets logged. Every time someone takes it out to be further analyzed, it gets logged. It gets logged when it gets transported to the courtroom, etc. This is so that when a piece of evidence is presented in a trial, you can see if it has been tampered with or not. Just follow the chain of custody.

The good news is that we have a clear chain of custody from the original writing found in the New Testament to what it is we believe about Jesus today. The early church fathers were nothing if not prolific writers. We have a *lot* of their letters, commentaries and other misc writings.

The Creeds

Another thing we have are a lot of creeds. One complaint I have against the evangelical/nondenominational traditions (of which I am now a part) is in our desire to get back to the simple, stripped down, core teachings of who Jesus was and what he taught, we've tossed a lot of the high churchiness to the wind and have abandoned almost 2000 years of church history and writings outside of the Bible. For example, we don't read the creeds very much. If you grew up in a mainline denomination like I did, we recited parts of the creeds every other week it seemed. I never knew *why* though. And, it all seemed very mechanical and repetitive. Stand up, say the creed, sit down, hear the Bible, stand up sing a song, etc, etc. There was never any explanation as to *WHY* we were reading the creeds and why they are so valuable.

The word "creed" comes from the Latin word *credo* which means "I believe". The historic creeds were created for one purpose – to give Christians a way to clearly articulate what it is they believed. They are summary documents of theological positions. Frankly, for most of the big questions we may have about God these days, a lot of really smart guys got together

thousands of years ago and already came up with the answer. And, we'd find it if we'd only turn to the creeds.

For us in this class, they also serve a secondary purpose. Not only do they show *what* the writers of the creed believed, but *when* they believed it. We can show at what points in time Christians held to certain doctrines.

Whenever you hear of a creed being written or a council being held in early church history, it was usually because there was some sort of heresy or major theological disagreement that the churches wanted to get sorted out. And, most of these creeds have to do with heresies regarding the nature of Jesus.

I'm going to briefly mention 6 creeds. We could do a whole hour on just the history of the creeds. And another hour on each of their contents. Individually. So, all I have time to do here is touch on them as evidence to make our case. But, you should go read them.

Athanasian Creed

First, we have the Athanasian Creed. It was composed in 500 AD and contains a widely held description of what we believe about the Trinity and the nature of Jesus. For our purposes, I'm going to skip over the part about the Trinity and go to the lines about who Jesus is and what he did:

Furthermore, it is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also believe rightly the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess, that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man;

God, of the Substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and Man, of the Substance of his Mother, born in the world;

Perfect God and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting;

Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead; and inferior to the Father, as touching his Manhood.

Who although he be God and Man, yet he is not two, but one Christ;

One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God;

One altogether; not by confusion of Substance, but by unity of Person.

For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and Man is one Christ;

Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead.

He ascended into heaven, he sitteth on the right hand of the Father, God Almighty, from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies and shall give account for their own works.

And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.

This is the Catholic Faith, which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved.

So, in 500 AD, we have a document that gives the general consensus on who Jesus was. Sound like what we believe today, right? So, if we stopped right here, we could say that Christians have believed the same thing for the past 1500 years. That's pretty good.

It's still over 450 years from when the reported events occurred, though. That's a long time. There's plenty of opportunity for legends to develop in 450 years. 450 years is almost twice as long as the United States has been a country.

Chalcedonian Creed

About 50 years before the Athanasian Creed, we have the Chalcedonian Creed which was composed at the Council of Chalcedon. The council was called in order to deal with a heresy of the time, so they wanted to gather and put out a statement on the nature of Christ.

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with us according to the manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the virgin Mary, the mother of God, according to the manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets from the beginning have declared concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.

Now, I'm not going to get into the nitty gritty of how this definition of fully God and fully Man works out here. For the sake of this class, I'm simply using it to show that in 451 AD, people are affirming that Jesus was more than just a wise teacher; the church believed that he was fully God and fully man just as we teach today.

What we're doing here is establishing a timeline (I'm doing it in reverse order because I think it's more dramatic that way). We're starting with us and following the trail alllllll the way back to the source. Now, we're still a ways off at this point. We're still almost 400 years from when Jesus was alive. And a lot of things in the story could have changed from 36 AD to 450 AD. So, let's keep going backwards and see what happens.

Nicene Creed

One of the most popular creeds that we still recite today is the Nicene Creed. It was written in 325 AD – so over 125 years *before* the Chalcedonian Creed. Again, in this creed, they spell out what the belief is regarding the Trinity. In regards to the Son it says this:

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary,
and became man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,
he suffered death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead
and his kingdom will have no end.

So, here we are at 325 AD. Clearly, the church believed that Jesus was fully God and fully man at this time as well.

Apostles' Creed

The final creed written outside of the Bible that I want to bring up is what is known as the Apostles' Creed. It's been dated to 140-150 AD. So, now, we're about 100 years after Jesus'

death. It's said in Roman Catholic and Protestant churches alike to this day. It states:

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary, Suffered under Pontius Pilate, Was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell; The third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; The Holy catholic Church, the Communion of Saints; The Forgiveness of sins; The Resurrection of the body, And the Life everlasting. Amen.

So, as you can see here, as early at 100 years after Jesus' death, we already have sources outside of the Bible establishing the core teaching about his life; that he is the Son of God, born to a virgin, was crucified, died, was buried, and rose from the dead – all under the rule of Pontius Pilate.

What the Apostles' Creed says about Jesus is the same thing we believe about him today. So, at a minimum, at this point we could say that Christianity has taught the *same thing* about Jesus for the past 1900 years. And it's never changed. Nothing's been added. Nothing's been embellished. No more fantastical elements have been added. It's still the same for the past 19 hundred years.

Now, if this creed was written in 150 AD, that's *still* over 100 years after the original events they are based on. That's a generation or two of people. IN other words, at least one and possibly two generations of people could have lived and died between when Jesus lived and when this was written. That's a lot of opportunity for things to be forgotten and to be embellished on. So, we have to see if there is anything further back.

Paul's Creed in 1 Corinthians

To go back to our analogy of evidence in a courtroom, now we've got a log of the evidence alllll the way back to the police cruiser leaving the scene of the crime with the evidence in the trunk. But, we haven't seen any documentation of the evidence actually *in* the crime scene. To use the Amazon shipment analogy, our package is out for delivery, but the picture hasn't been snapped of it sitting in front of my door yet.

For us, the crime scene is the New Testament. It's the original eyewitness testimony of those who were there when Jesus lived and taught. We need to see that what these creeds say is a reflection of what the eyewitnesses reported. Because, as Johnny Cochran taught us during the OJ trial "if the glove doesn't fit, you must acquit".

Well, I have good news. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we have what most consider the first creed of the Christian faith.

Paul wrote this in 1 Corinthians 15:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, **2** and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, **4** that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, **5** and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. **6** Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. **7** Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. **8** Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

This passage reads just like a creed; it's a short summary of the core doctrines and beliefs of the church. It's even got that rhythmic patten to it present in most of the creeds that's used to help with memorization. But, more importantly, look what it says: Jesus died, was buried, rose again, and appeared to the eyewitnesses.

Remember, creeds are summaries of things that have already been taught. Paul even says this in v1 where he says "Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you". Historians date 1 Corinthians to somewhere between 63 and 65 AD. But, notice what Paul is saying here. This is a *reminder* – which means this isn't the first time they have heard it. Or that Paul has said it. Paul's first visit to Corinth was in 51 AD. So, about 15 years after Jesus' resurrection, people are already proclaiming the basic doctrine of Christianity.

Just in case 15 years still seems too far away think of it like this. It's 2024 as I write this. The events of 9/11 happened over 23 years ago. And, I can still remember what happened that morning. And, I wasn't even in New York. I was in Los Angeles. Can you imagine the impact something like that has on the memories of people who were actually there? 15 years is nothing.

What we have here is a clear chain of custody from the crime scene to the court room. It wasn't added hundreds of years later. It has been proclaimed from the beginning. There are no legends here.

Who Did The Eyewitnesses Say That He Was?

We looked at Paul's statement to the Corinthians. But, what about any of the other people who worked and traveled with Jesus? Who did they think Jesus was? Remember, part of that previous challenge was that Jesus' followers didn't think he was any more than just a wise teacher. But, if we review their eyewitness testimony, we can see exactly who they thought he was.

1. "Doubting" Thomas calls him "my Lord and My God" in John 20:28
2. Paul writes "To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen." (Romans 9:5)
3. "waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great *God and Savior Jesus Christ*," (Titus 2:13)
4. To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: (2 Peter 1:1)

Something that the New Testament writers said that's harder for us to pick up on in the 21st century is one of the titles they gave to Jesus and that is the title of Lord. Now, when we hear that word today, we think of it like someone who has a big manor and is in high society. Or maybe it's a polite way of saying "sir". So, when we read "Lord" in the New Testament it may not strike us the way the authors intended.

Remember, the New Testament was written in Greek. The Greek word that is translated as Lord is the word *kyrios* ("aws"). In the Septuagint – which was the Greek version of the Old Testament circulating around much of the Jewish population in Jesus' day – whenever you see the name "Yahweh" or "The LORD", that's the word *kyrios*. It's used 6814 times for the name of the Lord in the Old Testament. So, when Jews of the New Testament era saw the word *kyrios*, they would have taken that as the Creator of Heaven and Earth. God. Not just some respectful way to say "sir" or refer to some local noble.

Here are some examples in the New Testament.

1. Angel to the shepherds in Bethlehem

Luk 2.11 11For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

2. Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, to Mary

Luk 1.43 43And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

3. John the Baptist

Mat 3.3 **3**For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight."

In the NT Epistles, Jesus is referred to as "The Lord" over *400 times* as a way to affirm his deity.

Clearly, after being witness to the miracles of Jesus, the eyewitnesses thought he as more than just "a really good dude".

Who Did Jesus Say That He Was?

"OK, OK. Jesus' followers thought he was God. But *Jesus* never said 'I am God'. I know, I've read my Bible. I just follow Jesus because he was a wise teacher. "

One time in a conversation I was told "I only believe the Red Letter parts. Because that's what Jesus said. None of that other stuff matters". OK, fine. Let's have a look at what Jesus said about himself. Anyone who wants to say that they follow Jesus because he was a wise teacher has to seriously consider who Jesus said he was. In our 21st century way, we want Jesus to have said specifically "I am God". But, let's have a look at the words of Jesus to see who *he* said he was.

"I'm Not From Around Here"

First off, Jesus didn't think he was from around here. And by "here" I don't me Jerusalem. I also don't mean anywhere on this planet. I mean, Jesus thought he was from another plane of existence entirely.

Joh 8,22-24 **22**So the Jews said, "Will he kill himself, since he says, 'Where I am going, you cannot come'?" **23**He said to them, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. **24**I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins."

Joh 18,36-37 **36**Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." **37**Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for

this purpose I have come into the world- to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice."

Jesus Thought Pretty Highly Of Himself

Second, Jesus thought pretty highly of himself.

Luk 12,8-9 8"And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, **9**but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God.

Joh 14,6-9 6Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. **7**If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." **8**Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." **9**Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

Joh 14.23 23Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

In other words "you want to know what God is like? ME. 'Cause I AM God"

Jesus Spoke Like He Was God

I remember when I was just getting into Bible study, and I would come across these statements where Jesus' audience was bewildered by the authority he spoke with. And I thought "what's the big deal? People speak powerfully all the time with confidence". But, what that phrase means is that Jesus spoke as if he had the authority of God. Even with more authority than the Old Testament prophets – who the Jews saw as the mouthpiece of God.

When the prophets would speak, they would make some sort of proclamation and say "thus says the Lord" or "hear the words of the Lord" or something similar. In Jesus' day, there were plenty of other works written outside of the Old Testament canon. And, whenever one of the rabbis would cite the work of another rabbi they would say "hear the words of Rabbi Tuckman" or something like that. Jesus, on the other hand, would say "you have heard it said... but I say to you...". He uses the phrase "I say to you" 9 times in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5.

Mat 5.18 18For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

Mat 5.20 20For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Mat 5,21-22 21"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' **22**But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

Mat 5.26 26Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Mat 5,27-28 27"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' **28**But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Mat 5,31-32 31"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' **32**But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Mat 5,33-34 33"Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' **34**But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,

Mat 5,38-39 38"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' **39**But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Mat 5,43-44 43"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' **44**But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

Not the Lord. I. Jesus never spoke on behalf of God. Jesus always spoke as God.

Jesus Said “I Am God”

In the 21st century, we’re looking for the words in English where Jesus said “I am God”. Well, you’re not going to find Jesus saying the words “I am God” in the New Testament. But, you will find him saying it (in red letters, I might add) in a way that the Jews of the day would see it that way.

[Joh 10,25-30](#) **25**Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, **26**but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. **27**My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. **28**I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. **29**My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. **30**I and the Father are one."

Now, here’s the kicker. Here’s the part where Jesus says “I am God” in a way that would be crystal clear to his Jewish audience. John 8:57-58 records an interaction between Jesus and the Jews.

[Joh 8,57-58](#) **57**So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" **58**Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."

We may not see it at first. But, the Jews of the day certain got it. Just look at their reaction. they tore their clothes, got angry, tried to stone him in the next verse, sought to arrest him, and ultimately sought to have him executed. When Jesus called himself the I AM, he was calling himself God. The I AM is how God referred to himself to Moses in the burning bush.

Jesus also uses this name for himself in the gospel of Mark. With a similar reaction to the other use in John.

[Mar 14,62-64](#) **62**And Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." **63**And the high priest tore his garments and said, "What further witnesses do we need? **64**You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?" And they all condemned him as deserving death.

What Evidence Did Jesus Give For His Claims?

At this point, we've just discussed the words that Jesus said about himself and the things others said about him. So, all we've really done at this point is show one of three things; 1. Jesus said some crazy stuff and was certifiably insane. 2. Jesus was a liar. Or 3. Jesus really was who he said he was. To move past the first two possibilities and land on the 3rd one, what we need is evidence. So, do we have any evidence that Jesus was more than just a man who said some unbelievable things?

The Evidence

Again, we turn to the eyewitness testimony. Now, I know, we've all heard numerous sermons regarding the passage in Matthew when Jesus calms the sea, and that's a symbol of how Jesus calms the storms in our lives. Or how Jesus feeds the 5000 and we should want to give to the needs of others. These kinds of sermons, while helpful on some level, completely miss the point of Jesus' miracles. Yes, the miracles served an immediate need for those present. But, the main purpose of the miracles are to be *evidence* to back up the claims that Jesus was making about himself. He had the supernatural ability to control the weather, to multiply physical resources, to cast out demons, to heal the sick and to raise the dead. Yes, Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from the dead and was really sad that he had died. But, he didn't raise Lazarus from the dead because Lazarus deserved it anymore than you or I do. He raised Lazarus from the dead as evidence that he was God in the flesh.

The Resurrection

If you ask most people, they'll agree with you that Jesus was a real person. And that he had a lot of great wisdom. Just like Buddha, just like Mohammad, and just like any number of historical wise figures who have lived throughout time. But, there is one action, one piece of evidence – one highly documented historical event – that holds the whole house of cards together and separates Jesus from anyone else who had come before him and who has come since. The resurrection. If Jesus didn't rise from the grave, then like Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:16-20 we've been living a lie and we are all to be pitied.

If Jesus didn't come back from the dead, then he wasn't the God Man, we are all still living in sin, and doomed to an eternity of torment after we die. Or it's just *The End*.

The Evidence For The Resurrection

Gary Habermas is considered a subject matter expert in the resurrection. He has reviewed over 3500 academic articles on the resurrection (not internet posts – but articles that have been peer reviewed) and has developed what is known as the Minimal Facts Theory. These are facts that even atheists, agnostics and the biggest critics will agree to. He has a list of 5 or 6. Today, we are going to focus on 3 and those are; the cross contained a dead body, the tomb contained no body and the disciples saw some body.

The Cross Contained A Dead Body

Let's get one thing clear; the Romans knew how to kill people. The crucifixion process was designed to do that slowly. First, the accused would be beaten within an inch of their life with a flagrum or scourge. Next, Jesus had to carry the beam of his cross to the execution site. Once to the site of the crucifixion, nails were driven into the wrists and feet. The body's weight was supported entirely by these spikes once you were hoisted up into the air.

The way one died due to crucifixion was via suffocation. The person was hung in such a way that it was hard to draw a breath unless you pushed up via the nails driven into your feet. Eventually, the victim becomes so exhausted they couldn't push up any more and they suffocated to death.

Now, remember, at one point the centurions come along to inspect the bodies and they find Jesus dead already. Just to be sure, they jabbed a spear into his side. John records an interesting piece of evidence when this was done.

Joh 19.34 34But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.

Now, John had no idea what the presence of blood and water meant, but he recorded it anyway. The church sure has turned it into a major point of symbolism in its teachings for hundreds of years, though. Many sermons have been preached on what John meant – on whether there was actually water or whether it was just some sort of rhetorical flourish for Jesus being the water of life.

But, if you ask a doctor, they will tell you exactly what the water was. It has to do with a condition the body goes into in moments of extreme shock. When you go through something extreme (like being crucified) the membranes around your heart and lungs fill up with fluid. When this happened around the heart it is known as pericardial effusion and pleural effusion for the membrane around the lungs. So, when the centurion pierced Jesus' side, he pierced one of these areas that was full of fluid due to the shock Jesus' body was under. The presence of this fluid when Jesus' side was pierced is evidence for the state his body was in.

But, the motivation for poking Jesus in the side wasn't to see if this fluid was going to come out. The soldiers wanted to make sure Jesus was dead. Because, they all knew that if they took someone off of a cross that *wasn't* dead, they were going to be next. So, they were going to make doubly sure the job was done.

Based on these documented observations, we can safely conclude that Jesus died on the cross.

The Tomb Contained No Body

The Burial

Next comes the burial. Jesus' body was taken by Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin and man named Nicodemus. They prepared the body with spices, wrapped it in linen and placed it in a tomb owned by Joseph. After Jesus' body was placed in the tomb, they rolled a stone in front of it.

The Guards

The next day, the Jewish high priests went to Pilate and asked for the tomb to be secured because Jesus had been predicting his resurrection before he died.

This was not an uncommon thing in ancient times. Alexander The Great "predicted" he would rise from the dead, thus proving his godliness. He plotted with his friends to have his body removed from his tomb after he died to make this prediction come true.

Pilate told the priests to have the tomb sealed, to take a guard and place them in front of the tomb.

The term "guard" doesn't mean a single person – it was 16 soldiers. They took their job very seriously. If the guard fell asleep while on duty he – and the rest of his guard buddies – risked execution. So, besides guarding the thing they were guarding, their job was to keep each other awake.

Women Reported The Tomb Empty

So, how can we know that the tomb was empty? The first reason is that it was reported by women. The fact that it was women who are recorded as the eyewitnesses is even more powerful given the culture of the time. They didn't trust the testimony of women.

This comes from the Talmud:

These are considered unfit [witnesses]: gamblers with dice, those that lend with interest, pigeon racers, those who trade in the produce of the Sabbatical year, and slaves. This is the rule: all testimony that a woman is not fit to give, these [above] are also not fit to give. (Rosh Hashanah 1:8)

Women were only permitted to testify to things “they knew about” – like cultural practices, places only women frequented, to the purity of themselves or another woman. But, when it came to public things, or things observed, not so much. This passage says that their testimony is on the same level as gamblers, dishonest men and slaves.

Josephus reflects this sentiment in *Antiquities*

But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex ^[7]

For a woman to make this report about an empty tomb, and for it to be trusted, is pretty powerful for that time. People of the day who heard this told back to them would have said “wait... you heard this from a woman? And you believed it?!”

If the Gospel writers wanted their story to be easier to believe, they would have said one of the men found the empty tomb. But, they wouldn't have made up that women found the empty tomb. It would have put up a big barrier for people to believe them. But, the Gospel writers recorded that women found the tomb empty before the men did. And you wouldn't make that up.

Christianity Started In Jerusalem

A second reason we can believe that the tomb was empty is due to where Christianity started. In Jerusalem. Where Jesus had been executed and buried. If a bunch of people started running around the streets saying Jesus was alive, it would have been really easy for people to go to the tomb and point to the body inside of it to show they were making stuff up.

The high priests would have been *extremely* happy to make this point. But they didn't. Instead, according to the account in Matthew 28:11-15, some of the guard came back to the priests and told them what had happened. The priests told the guards that if anyone asks “tell them you fell asleep and his followers came and stole the body”. Which is an admission of what? That the tomb was empty!

If the tomb wasn't empty, the priests would have been all too happy to parade Jesus' dead body around the streets to shut these troublemakers up. But, that didn't happen, Christianity took root

in Jerusalem and spread - the one place where it would have been hardest to make up something like this.

The Apostles Saw Somebody

In the time following the discovery of the empty tomb, people close to Jesus report seeing him in the flesh. The way these peoples' lives changed after this event is extremely compelling. Their actions point to them believing that it was in fact, Jesus, whom they thought to have died, that they saw shortly after his crucifixion.

When Jesus was arrested, Peter was so afraid to let people know he knew Jesus that he denied their association. But, then he goes on to spread the Gospel to Rome and be executed for his beliefs

The rest of the apostles had scurried like rats when Jesus was arrested. They all end up like Peter – spreading the Gospel, doing prison time and eventually being executed (except for John)

According to Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:5-8 Jesus appeared to the following people; first Peter (called Cephas), then The Twelve, then more than 500 of the brothers and sisters, then to his brother James, then to the rest of the apostles, and finally to Paul.

Paul mentions the 500 like “hey, if you don't believe me, there are 500 other witnesses you can go ask”

James, the brother of Jesus, was not one of his followers initially. He thought Jesus was crazy. But, after Jesus' death, he became one of the pillars of the church in Jerusalem. He also got executed for preaching that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Finally Paul, who was in the business of persecuting Christians, saw something that turned him into Christianity's most prolific writer. And got him executed as well.

Possible vs Reasonable

Now, if we think of what we are doing here like a case that ends up in a courtroom, what we've just done is present the evidence to the jury. These are the facts of the case. Both the prosecuting attorney and the defense attorney look at the same evidence, and try to come up with an explanation for what it means. The evidence itself doesn't tell you anything. It's up to the jury to decide what the evidence shows. And the jury instruction isn't to make sure you have all of your questions answered. It's also not to eliminate every single possibility nor to go with a story that is merely possible. The instruction is to convict beyond *reasonable* doubt. This means you may not get all your questions answered. But, you are to go with the most reasonable conclusion that the evidence presents.

This is how we should live our lives. Yes, we all have moments where we have to reach for what seems impossible and be inspired and all of that. But, we live our lives based on the most reasonable conclusions – not on what is merely possible.

For example, is it possible that tomorrow I'll wake up and there will be a shiny, red 1969 Camero SS in mint condition parked in my garage? Sure, it's possible. I can even come up with a number of possible stories on how it might get there. Maybe my wife has been secretly stashing money away to buy me one. Maybe my son traded his Honda Fit to a friend who owned one and wanted to save on gas. Maybe a thief stole it, cracked the code to my garage door, and stashed it there. All of those are *possible* events. But, none of them are reasonable.

The facts of our case – of the resurrection – are no different. We have several facts in front of us. Now, we have to come up with the most reasonable conclusion as to what they mean.

The Theories

Late Legend

The first theory we will look at is the theory that all of the supernatural stuff – like Jesus rising from the dead – was a late edition. And that the first followers didn't *actually believe* that Jesus rose from the dead. We already hit on this earlier when we talked about the creeds, so the same logic applies. It is clear based off of passages like in 1 Corinthians 15 that the earliest followers of Jesus clearly believed that he had risen from the dead. This short time window is important because 15 years isn't enough of a gap for legends to start being added. Lots of people were still alive from when the events of Jesus' execution took place. People could have come forward and easily refuted it, but we have no evidence that anyone ever did. Nobody ever went to Jesus' tomb and produced a body. Because it wasn't there.

The Swoon Theory

The swoon theory proposes that Jesus didn't really die on the cross. Somehow, he survived the execution, was taken down from the cross while unconscious, and was still alive when he was placed in the tomb. The coolness of the tomb, and the spices his body was prepared with, revived him. He left the tomb and found his disciples, thus appearing to them after his supposed death.

Problem 1: The Romans Knew How To Kill People

Remember, the Romans were trained killers. They knew how to kill people, and they knew what a dead body looked like. That's why they jabbed him in the side with a spear - to make sure he was dead before they took him down.

Problem 2: The Jews Knew What Dead People Looked Like

After Jesus is declared dead, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took Jesus' body down from the cross and made it ready for burial.

As soon as someone dies, their body begins a certain process. When the heart stops pumping blood throughout the body, it immediately starts to experience temperature loss. When you touch a dead body, it no longer has that warmth you are familiar with when you shake someone's hand. They are cold to the touch. Also at this time, the body begins to stiffen and lose its flexibility, until it is finally becomes locked into position a few hours later. And, since the heart is no longer pumping blood around the body, the blood goes where gravity pulls it. So, if a body is found lying on its back, when you roll the body over, there will be discoloration on the back from the pooling of blood.

In modern society, we usually have an ambulance pick up the deceased, a coroner to determine cause of death, a mortician to prepare the body for burial and a funeral home to place the body in the casket and prepare it for viewing. We are so far removed from the process of death that most people don't know all of the signs.

In first century Jewish society, it was family and friends who prepared a body for burial. They handled all aspects. They discovered the body, they prepared the body for burial, and they buried it. So, they knew the signs of death. They knew what a dead body felt like and how it looked. Dead bodies look and feel differently than live ones do.

Based on these details, it's safe to say that Joseph and Nicodemus would have known if Jesus was still alive or not when they were preparing the body for burial.

Problem 3: Getting Out of The Tomb

Let's entertain the notion that Jesus was still alive when he was placed in the tomb. And somehow, he was able to regain consciousness. Remember his condition; severely beaten. holes all the way through his wrists and feet, and a large wound in his side where the spear had pierced him likely damaging some major organs on the way through.

In this condition, his first obstacle would have been the stone covering the tomb's entrance. Tomb entrances were typically 2-3 feet wide, and the stones that covered them were a 1' thick and over a ton. For a single healthy man to move this stone would have been almost impossible. For a man who had just been beaten nearly to death and survived an execution... not gonna happen.

Problem 4: The Guards

OK, so let's say that in his extremely weakened state, Jesus was able to get the stone away from the entrance to his tomb. He still would have had to deal with the group of guards on the other side of the door. A single, well-trained soldier could not fight off as many Roman guards as were likely there – let alone someone in Jesus' condition.

Problem 5: He Was Seen By The Apostles

It may sound strange than Jesus being seen by the apostles would have been a problem. This is what solidified their belief that he was who he said he was after all. But, think of all Jesus had just been through. He would have shown up looking like a mess. And the first thing that the apostles would have said wouldn't have been "he has risen!"; it would have been "get him a doctor!".

You may think to yourself with Jesus still alive, this would be the perfect opportunity for the apostles to be able to "claim" he had risen from the dead even if they realized he had not. As if some sort of conspiracy was hatched. We are going to look at the conspiracy theory a little later..

More Problems Than Answers

When you look at the problems – surviving a Roman crucifixion, appearing "dead enough" to be prepared for burial, opening the tomb by yourself, getting past the guards, and convincing people who saw you that you had risen from the dead and not simply survived the execution – this theory seems highly suspect. In fact, it has more problems than solutions.

Hallucinations

The next theory we will address is the theory that Jesus' followers experienced hallucinations of Jesus after he died. On the surface, this theory may sound possible because we've all been through grief when we lost a loved one. We know how badly we wish we could see that loved one again.

Sometimes, family members will report smelling their loved one's perfume, or cologne, or the cigars they used to smoke. Some will even report seeing their loved one out of the corner of their eye. Or maybe they see the deceased in the face of some random stranger on the street.

What Is A Hallucination?

A hallucination is the perception of something that isn't there. It's your mind playing tricks on you. Notice that it's **your** mind. It's a personal experience. Because it takes place in your mind it cannot be shared by anyone else.

There are *no* documented cases of group hallucinations. Groups of people may be tricked into seeing something that isn't there; like when a magician performs an illusion. But illusions require manipulating something that is there (like with mirrors or projectors) and making it look like something else.

Were The Sighting Of Jesus After His Death Merely Hallucinations?

After Jesus was put to death, his disciples certainly would have been downtrodden and possibly feeling misled. The good news for us is there are reliable eyewitness testimonies of the appearances of Jesus after his death.

In the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 28:9), the women who he appeared to “took hold of his feet”. Matthew records that the women physically touched him. Remember, the testimony of women in 1st Century Jewish culture was less valuable in court than a thief or criminal. If women touched the feet of the risen Jesus, the Gospel writers wouldn’t have lied about it. If they were making it up, the Gospel authors wouldn’t have mentioned it at all! Or they would have said one of the men touched his feet.

Next, Jesus appeared to Cleopas and another disciple on the road to Emmaus. (Luke 24:13-35 and Mark 16:12-13). These three had conversations about how Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of the Old Testament. *They* is the operative word here. Both of the disciples had the same encounter. At the same time. Then, to literally solidify that this was a physical appearance, Jesus broke bread with the two disciples and ate.

Remember, people who have grief based hallucinations usually have them for a fleeting moment. This interaction went from both men seeing the same thing, holding a conversation with it, to them traveling with it, to them sitting at a table and breaking bread with it.


After Jesus left them, these two men ran to tell “the eleven and those who were with them” what had just happened (Luke 24:33-35). As they are talking about these things, Jesus appears again. Everyone sees him. At the same time. And, because they were still afraid, he ate with them to show that he was real. Spirits don’t eat fish. Jesus did when he appeared to his disciples.

Thomas, one of the Twelve Apostles, was not present at this group meeting. He didn’t believe when they told him Jesus has visited them. So, Jesus returned to the disciples again and showed Thomas his wounds. It’s unclear if Thomas actually touched the wounds or not, but he saw enough to be convinced in his doubting heart that what he saw was a risen Jesus who was in physical form.

Some days later, seven of the disciples were fishing. Jesus shows up, but they don’t recognize him at first. They all see him. And, while they are out fishing, what does he do? He builds a fire and makes them breakfast. It would be one thing for you to see a figure on the shore while you were out to sea. But, for this “hallucination” to then cook you breakfast...

The Problem With James and Paul

Two other people who Jesus appeared to were James, his half-brother, and Paul, still known as Saul of Tarsus at this point. Remember the transformative experiences both men had. Even though Jesus was his brother, James was a skeptic (John 7:5). He thought Jesus was crazy

([Mark 3:21](#) ). But, Jesus appeared to him and he went from skeptic to one of the heads of the church in Jerusalem.

Paul is a completely different story. With James, at least you had that familial relationship, and the possibility of grief. But, before he became the most prolific writer of the New Testament, Paul was in the business of hunting and persecuting Christians. Saul hated the Christians. Why would he be experiencing grief at the death of Jesus? Yet he had an encounter that altered his life more than anyone else in the early church history.

One Final Problem

OK, let's entertain the idea that all of these people hallucinated something, involving the same person, multiple times, and in groups. There is still one problem; where was the body?

If Jesus were still dead, and his followers were merely hallucinating, his body would still be in the tomb. If the Jewish High council wanted to put a stop to this fledgling band of miscreants the first thing they would do is go get the body from the tomb and show everyone in the city that Jesus' followers were wrong. In fact, there was a cover up to try to explain why the body was missing (Matthew 28:11-15). Had the Jewish leaders been able to produce a body, then the stories of a bodily resurrection would have been proven false from the very beginning.

So, if we study the events of the Resurrection, we will see that the people Jesus appeared to witnessed the same things at the same time, saw Jesus interact with the physical world (eating, cooking, etc), and were so convinced by what they saw that their lives were changed dramatically. They were so sure that what they experienced was a physically resurrected Jesus, they were willing to die for it.

Based on these reactions, it isn't reasonable to believe that events Jesus' disciples experienced were merely hallucinations.

The Conspiracy Theory

Let me start off by admitting that before I found Christianity to be true, I believed that the men who started the church probably had some sort of hidden agenda, and it wasn't all good.

Why did I think this? Because I grew up in the 80s and 90s, where the X-Files was one of my favorite TV shows, secret military bases like Area 51 and government cover ups over Roswell were really exciting to think about. I was pretty sure that any organization that was large and influential (like the church is) got their power and influence through shady shenanigans. I wasn't a tin-foil hat wearing kind of kid, but I acknowledged that men with power seek to hold onto that power as well as gain more of it.

At the time, my impression of the early church fathers was that they were high society men of high education and political influence. So, of course they would have an agenda that wasn't as clear as they would like us to think it was.

Dan Brown pretty much played into my ignorance in *The DaVinci Code*. He bases his plot on some things that are very difficult to verify, but are just believable enough that they could be true.

What Makes A Good Conspiracy?

In his book *Cold Case Christianity*, J. Warner Wallace outlines several key things that make a conspiracy more likely to succeed. First is the amount of people involved. The more people involved, the greater chance someone is going to crack and give up the lie, or turn everyone else in. The smaller the number of conspirators, the better. It's simple math.

Next is the ability to maintain thorough and up to date communication. This is why suspects are questioned in separate rooms individually; so they can't hear the conversation going on between the investigators and their co-conspirators.

Another important element is time. The longer someone has to maintain a lie, the harder it is for that person to keep telling the same lie.

We also have to consider the closeness of the relation between the conspirators. If one of your partners is just some guy you are doing a job with, you're unlikely to risk your own skin for his. But, if it's your brother, or mother, or life long friend, you're more likely to "take one for the team" – even do hard time for them in prison to make sure they don't have to.

Finally, we have to look at how much pressure the members of the conspiracy are under. If there is no pressure from investigation, then there is no reason to confess (unless your conscious gets the better of you). If you were an accessory to murder, you may be able to keep up the cover during investigation until the moment the cops say you could be sentenced to death. For something you didn't actually do but covered up the lie regarding who did. Then you have a big decision to make,

Why Do People Commit Crimes?

Cops like Jim Wallace will tell you that all motivations for committing a crime can be boiled down to 3 general reasons – greed, passion or power.

Greed: People desire something (money, property, someone else's possessions) and are willing to steal it from their owner; many times including murdering someone in the process.

Passion: We've all heard about crimes of passion. Someone murders a cheating spouse and/or their flame. Someone murders someone else to keep them quiet. Someone has their

spouse knocked off so they can be with someone else.

Power: And, as for power, people are often driven to better their position in life by taking shortcuts at the expense of those around them.

The Christian Conspiracy

Many people attempt to explain the resurrection events as part of a conspiracy. The theory goes something like this. Jesus died on the cross; you can accept this fact for the conspiracy to work. Conspiracy theorists can also hold that the tomb was empty. It's how the tomb *became* empty where the conspiracy starts. In order to make it look like Jesus came back to life, his followers stole his body from the tomb.

Think back on what we said about possible vs. reasonable. And let's consider a few things the "conspirators" would have had to address to pull this off. First, remember those pesky guards? Now, these aren't like security guards you see at the mall. These are highly trained soldiers. As much as Hollywood invites us to imagine a group of untrained fishermen could overcome a group of highly trained, well-armed soldiers, the chances of this happening would require actual divine intervention.

We also have to address is the way the lives of Jesus' followers changed so dramatically after they reported seeing him after his death. When Jesus was arrested and then sentenced to death, his apostles scurried and hid like rats. They were afraid. Yet they suddenly became brave and courageous, willing to die for what they taught. You might be willing to die for something you believe to be true. But, people won't die for something they know is a lie

What could they possibly hope to gain by making up a story that Jesus had come back from the dead? What would their motive have been? They were already God's chosen people.

A Conspiracy Would Never Have Worked

Let's look at our keys to a good conspiracy and see how they apply to the idea that the apostles stole the body and then started Christianity based on a lie. First off, there were too many people involved. Remember, the fewer people involved the better the chance of success.

Within a few years, the apostles start traveling all over the area. Some are in Egypt, some are in Turkey, some are in Rome, and one (Thomas) ended up in what is now India. In order to keep the conspiracy going, they would have had to keep communication going over vast amounts of territory. There was no texting, no email, no telephones. Communication would have had to come on horseback or camelback. There would have been too big of a time gap between when Rome sent the update and when Thomas got it.

How about the test of time? The shorter a conspiracy has to be maintained, the better. The longer you have to maintain a lie, the more time you have to forget details, and the more your

story changes. You have a longer time to slip up and get caught in a lie. Yet, the apostles maintained their story for over 40 years after they report seeing Jesus back from the dead. The Apostle John lived until somewhere around 100 A.D. And he never changed his story for 70 years. That's an awful long time to keep track of details of a lie and not get tripped up.

How about the closeness in connection to the conspirators? Some of the apostles were related, but most were not. These men had only known each other for about 3 years. So, after Jesus' death, these twelve men would have had to agree on a single story somehow. What we have here are about 3-4 different groups of relatives and many who had no connection at all. If one family wants to go one way, and another family wants to go another way, separate groups within the group are going to form up pretty quickly. There will be infighting – especially if your life is on the line.

What about James, the brother of Jesus? He was a skeptic and not even a follower. Yet, he becomes one of the pillars of early Christianity and heads the church in Jerusalem.

And what about Paul? He *hated* Christians in the beginning. What could possibly have convinced him to join in the conspiracy? He was the Jewish Golden Boy – destined for a high seat on the council and a very cushy lifestyle. The only thing that changes a life so dramatically is a story that is true, and not a made up lie.

The final test is the amount of pressure the apostles were under after the conspiracy would have formed. Almost immediately, Jesus' followers were being hunted and persecuted. Before Paul became the most prolific writer of the New Testament, he was hunting Christians and taking part in their execution. So, you had to fear for your life if you wanted to count yourself one of Christ's followers. The book of Acts is full of documented incidents where the apostles were jailed, beaten, stoned to death, and left for dead. Maybe a few of them men could hold up to that kind of pressure. But, all of them? If it's a lie, someone is eventually going to crack.

Most of the apostles ended up being killed for what they were saying. Most of them were either crucified, beheaded, stoned to death, tossed off of buildings, or speared. Most were also put in prison at one time or another. Yet, after all that, their story never changed. No one cracked. No one turned on anyone else. These men died still proclaiming Jesus Christ had risen.

What Was The Motive?

Now we come to what I feel like is the strongest blow against the conspiracy theory. That is the question of why. What was the point? Why would these men concoct this story? What did they hope to gain?

Money? Jesus taught them to live almost like beggars. If it was money they were after, they should have stayed where they were in life. Matthew was a tax collector. Many were fishermen

and had a steady source of income. Paul was destined for the good life, but gave that all up. Financial stability was in their past lives - not in the new lives they entered into.

Paul also discouraged people from paying him for preaching because he wanted them to know his motives were NOT financial. He worked as a tentmaker while he was living and preaching in various areas. In fact, Paul frequently warned people in his letters to be on the lookout for people who were asking to get paid for preaching.

What about for sexual or relational desires? Some of the apostles were married. Some weren't. And, of those that were, many of them reported giving up sexual relations with their wives to remain more focused on the mission at hand. One of the main messages of the Gospel is sexual purity and remaining faithful to one spouse. Not how to pick up the ladies.

What about power? It's undeniable that a few hundred years later, and for much of the rest of Western history, the church can be linked with kings, queens, and men of power. This was where my mind went before I took the time to study early church history and what really happened. I thought that men of power with an agenda founded the church, and set down it's doctrines.

Then I started reading the Bible, studying history, and learned that what happened to these guys was the exact opposite. The apostles, and the early followers whom they preached to, didn't come into power, they gave it up! They had nothing to gain and everything to lose. Christianity wasn't the road to political power and social prominence when it first started. They were hunted and executed.

One of Emperor Nero's favorite pastimes was torturing and burning Christians to death. In the first couple centuries, Christianity wasn't going to get you to any place of power in this life; it was likely to get you killed.

Why did they give up a normal, safe life and risk everything to spread a message that would get them killed if they were caught? It wasn't for money or power. They didn't meet in secret and concoct a plot that would see them poor and hunted. It was because they knew the message they were preaching was true.

The apostles encountered the risen Jesus – just like they said they did – and preached the message he taught them until they died.

The Final Theory

There's one more theory we haven't talked about. It's the one to me that, given the facts and the evidence, makes the most sense. It's the most reasonable conclusion. But, it isn't without its own set of problems. Namely, you have to be open to the fact that things that defy the laws of nature are possible. The supernatural forces exist. And that man from Nazareth named Jesus

was executed on a cross, died, was placed in a tomb, defeated death and appeared to his apostles a few days later

This is why I am a Christian. It certainly isn't because it makes my life easier. Sure, I've found lots of great people in the church. But, I can find lots of great atheist friends, too. No, I'm a Christian because I examined the evidence and came to the conclusion that the Bible is trustworthy and that Jesus rose from the grave – just like he said he would. And, if someone can predict his death, predict his coming back a few days later and pull it off... I'm following *that* guy.



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