



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on December 18, 2017

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Jesus: A Man of History

Josh McDowell, a well-known Christian apologist (a person who defends the truth of the Christian faith), titled chapter five in his best-selling *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* “Jesus — a man of history.”

Christians, of course, believe Jesus is the Man who made history, while non-believers hold to a wide variety of beliefs about Him, ranging from “great teacher” to saying Jesus never even existed. Yet even those who deny His existence cannot deny that belief in Him has profoundly influenced the last 20 centuries of history.



It is untenable to believe that Jesus, considered by millions of individuals worldwide as the Second Person of the Trinity, is fictitious. If the historical evidence documenting His existence were to be dismissed, then weaker evidence supporting the existence of historical figures such as Alexander the Great would have to be dismissed as well. Yet no one claims Alexander the Great never existed.

Even Rudolf Bultmann, a noted liberal theologian, had no patience with the view that Jesus did not even exist, writing, “The doubt as to whether Jesus really existed is unfounded and not worth refutation. No sane person can doubt that Jesus stands as the founder behind the historical movement” that evolved into the world’s largest religion.

As Everett Harrison puts it in *A Short Life of Christ*, “Jesus walked the earth a flesh-and-blood individual.”

And because “Jesus walked the earth,” we can find a great deal of material that historians can use to reconstruct His life. First, we have the gospels, and the rest of the New Testament, with multiple references to Him. The gospels were, of course, written for an evangelistic purpose — to persuade the reader to accept Jesus as more than just an historical figure, but rather God in the flesh.

While the gospels would ordinarily be accepted as valuable source material for historians, an anti-supernatural bias causes secular historians to reject the miracles in the gospels and some of the other claims about Jesus found therein. Still, when we take the gospel accounts and compare them with other historical accounts, we can recreate much of the life and times of the Man that millions of people around the globe consider the Christ, the Son of God.

The Birth of Jesus Christ

One would think that, considering Jesus was regarded as so significant as to date history from the time of His birth, assigning a specific date to His birth would be quite easy. Everything before His birth was considered as B.C., or Before Christ, and everything since His birth was referred to as *Anno Domini* (A.D.), or in English, “In the year of our Lord.”

Pope John the First asked Dionysius, a monk, to prepare a standard calendar for the Roman Catholic



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Church. The birth of Christ would be 1 A.D. (there is no such thing as “the year zero”). Unfortunately, Dionysius’ calculations were off by a few years, meaning that Jesus was born during the time designated as B.C. Through reading the gospels of Matthew and Luke, we find that Jesus was born before the death of Herod, designated king of the Jews by the Roman Senate, which gives a good starting point for making some educated guesses about the general time period of His birth in a Bethlehem stable.

The timing of Herod’s death can be ascertained with some certainty because the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus noted that Herod died shortly after an eclipse of the moon — which occurred on the night of March 12-13, 4 B.C. And since a Passover celebration occurred (April 11, 4 B.C.) shortly after his death, it is safe to say Herod died within that time frame.

The biblical account states that Herod ordered the slaughter of babies in and around Bethlehem because he was told by the Wise Men that a new king of the Jews had been born there, so it is logical to presume that Jesus was born sometime before March of 4 B.C.

While there are no existing extra-biblical accounts of this atrocity, it does fit well with what we know about Herod. In his book *The Case for Christ*, Lee Strobel recounted his interview with John McRay, author of *Archaeology and the New Testament*. McRay said, “Herod the Great was a bloodthirsty king: he killed members of his own family; he executed lots of people who he thought might challenge him.”

In his book *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, J. Gresham Machen, a noted professor at Princeton Theological Seminary for almost a quarter century, addressed the question as to why this particular incident is not found in other historical accounts of Herod. “No doubt, from our point of view, the massacre of young children would be a particularly atrocious form of murder.... But in ancient times, when the exposure of infants [abandoning them to die] was a common practice ... the murder of children would probably not be regarded with any special horror.”

The slaughter probably involved a relatively small number of boys, under the age of two. “If Bethlehem was a small village, as it probably was, then the number of male children in it under two years of age would not exceed perhaps twenty or thirty,” Machen added.

The accounts of Jesus’ birth are grounded in history. Here, we have reference to a historical figure, Herod. But the gospel account of Luke also tells us why Jesus was born in Bethlehem, rather than in Nazareth, where his mother, Mary, and her husband, Joseph, had been living. Caesar Augustus had proclaimed a census was to be taken (for purposes of taxation) in the Roman world.

Josephus also mentions a census that took place in 6 A.D., and Luke makes reference to the same census in the New Testament Book of Acts. But since Jesus was born sometime around 5 B.C., or even earlier, this cannot be the same census. Machen notes, “In Egypt, where, because of the discovery of the non-literary papyri, our information is particularly abundant, we find a census being taken under a regular fourteen-year cycle.” If this 14-year cycle was also used in Palestine, then a previous census’ proclamation could be dated at 8 B.C. Allowing for a certain amount of time between the proclamation of the census, and its actual implementation in Palestine, it is logical to date the arrival of Jesus with his mother and Joseph in Bethlehem at about 6 or 5 B.C.

Not surprisingly, such census records could not be expected to still exist today. But North African theologian Tertullian did mention them in 197 A.D., in his book *Against Marcion*. In it, he noted that the “enrollment in the census of Augustus” was “kept in the archives of Rome.” In another writing, Tertullian mentioned that “Mary is described in the census.” What is striking about this is that



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Tertullian made his remarks in a straightforward, confident way, with no weasel words such as “those records are probably there.” It is doubtful that he would make up something so easily disproved.

Several questions have been raised about this census. For example, why did Joseph have to travel to Bethlehem? Harold Hoehner, writing in *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, cited the existence of a papyrus from 104 A.D. that records the prefect of Egypt ordering Egyptians to return to their “home” so that the census might be carried out. “Since the Jews’ property was the property of the fathers’ estates the Romans would comply to the custom of laying claim to one’s family estate in order to assess it for taxation,” Hoehner explained. There has been speculation that Joseph had recently moved to Nazareth from Bethlehem, and had recently inherited land in or near the city from his father.

Perhaps the most serious objection to the historicity of the biblical account of the census is that Luke’s account has been translated as follows: “This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria.” Considering that Quirinius was not governor until after the death of Herod, this appears to be an “historical blunder,” as Hoehner put it.

“But certainly Luke was conscious of chronology in his works,” Hoehner continued. “Luke was not ignorant of the census mentioned by Josephus which was conducted by Quirinius in A.D. 6-7 since he mentions it in Acts 5:37. He knew that Jesus was not born that late.” Therefore, there must be an explanation.

Several have been offered. One that has been suggested is that the verse is better translated, “This census was before that [census] when Quirinius was governor of Syria.” The census of 6 A.D. was well known (as has been said, Luke mentions it himself in the Book of Acts, which he also wrote) because of all the resistance to it. Hoehner believes that the best explanation is that the verse should have been translated as, “This census took place before Quirinius was governor of Syria.”

Mentions of Jesus by Non-Christians in First Century

It is not surprising that nothing is said directly in non-Christian sources about the birth of one who was believed to be the son of two Jews from a little village. But the life, death, and especially the resurrection of Christ would be expected to at least be referred to, even if Jesus’ deity was not accepted by Roman and Jewish writers.

Perhaps the most famous first-century reference to Jesus was the one made by Josephus. Writing in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus said, “Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was the Christ, and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians so named from him are not extinct at this day.”

Josephus also made a reference to Jesus’ brother James, the leader of the early church in Jerusalem. He stated that the Jewish high priest had “a council of judges, and brought before it the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ, whose name was James, together with some others, and having accused them as law-breakers, he delivered them over to be stoned.”

The apparent contradiction of these two passages, one in which Josephus unequivocally calls Jesus the



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Christ, and the second one in which he calls Jesus “the so-called Christ,” leads one to the logical conclusion that one of them has been altered.

In *The Case for Christ*, Strobel asked Miami University professor Edwin Yamauchi about these two passages. Yamauchi said, “I know of no scholar who has successfully disputed” the passage referencing James. Concerning the other passage which appears to accept the Messiahship of Jesus, Yamauchi said, “Today there’s a remarkable consensus among both Jewish and Christian scholars that the passage as a whole is authentic, although there may be some interpolations.”

Yamauchi explained that it is believed that “early Christian copyists inserted some phrases that a Jewish writer like Josephus would not have written.” He offered that the first line, “Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man,” as authentic, but that “if it be lawful to call him a man,” as most likely a later addition.

Despite this, Yamauchi considered the Josephus passages very important because Josephus “corroborates important information about Jesus: that he was the martyred leader of the church in Jerusalem and that he was a wise teacher who had established a wide and lasting following, despite the fact that he had been crucified under Pilate at the instigation of some of the Jewish leaders.”

In other words, certain important historical facts about Jesus were widely accepted in the first century, even by those who were not Christians.

We certainly have no record of any history from the first century arguing that Jesus did not even exist. But what of the miracles attributed to Jesus in the gospels? It is quite interesting that in the biblical accounts, Jesus is opposed by many in the Pharisee sect of the Jews who did not dispute that he performed supernatural acts, including giving sight to the blind, healing the lame, and the like. They simply accused Him of having the ability to do such acts by the power of Satan.

In the Jewish Talmud, much the same explanation was given for Jesus’ miracles. It noted that Jesus “practiced magic,” which enabled Him to lead many Jews “astray.” (Most of the early Christians were Jews.) Finally, it concludes that He “was hung on the eve of the Passover.” (This is a reference to crucifixion — the Apostle Paul calls crucifixion “hanging” in his letter to the churches in Galatia.) Again, while these statements are rejections of His deity, they are not a denial that He performed miracles. Denials that Jesus performed miracles would only come later, by “learned” scholars writing centuries after the fact.

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Roman References to Jesus

It was not just the Jews who considered Jesus a historical person. So did the Roman historian Tacitus. He said that the Emperor Nero blamed the sect of Christians for the great fire of Rome of 64 A.D. And he tied the Christians to their founder: “Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome.”

This is an unmistakable corroboration of the facts found in the gospel accounts, even naming the Roman governor who ordered the execution of Jesus.



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Another Roman reference to Jesus was made by Pliny the Younger, the governor of Bithynia in what is now Turkey. Writing to the Emperor Trajan, Pliny spoke of difficulties he had experienced with Christians, and their willingness to die for their beliefs. "I have asked them if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution."

Pliny added that the Christians told him that their only "guilt" was "they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery, and adultery."

Written very early in the second century, this letter makes very clear that the Christians considered Jesus not only a very real historical figure, but they worshipped Him as God.

At the crucifixion of Christ, the gospel accounts state that darkness covered the Earth. In his book *Pontius Pilate*, Paul Maier cited historical references to this event. "This phenomenon, evidently, was visible in Rome, Athens, and other Mediterranean cities. According to Tertullian ... it was a cosmic or world event. Phlegon, a Greek author from Caria writing a chronology soon after 137 A.D., reported that in the fourth year of the 202nd Olympiad (i.e., 33 A.D.) there was 'the greatest eclipse of the sun' and that 'it became night in the sixth hour of the day [i.e., noon] so that stars even appeared in the heavens. There was a great earthquake in Bithynia, and many things were overturned in Nicaea.'"

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

Despite all of this historical evidence, Jesus would have been a mere footnote in history, if that, had the early Christians not believed that Jesus had risen from the dead on the Sunday following His crucifixion. This is the principal belief that propelled the spread of the Christian faith across the Roman Empire, inspiring thousands who persisted in that belief in the face of either a martyr's death or loss of fortune or even family. That faith was so strong and persistent, in fact, that instead of the mighty Roman Empire stamping out Christianity in its infancy, Christianity subsumed the empire. Had these early Christians not believed in the resurrection of Jesus, it is certain that Christianity would not exist today, because it would never have existed at all.

Christian apologist Wilbur Smith, author of *Therefore Stand*, wrote, "The *meaning* of the resurrection is a theological matter, but the fact of the resurrection is a historical matter."

So why did the early disciples of Jesus believe in His resurrection? Is the resurrection of Jesus historical?

When historians attempt to determine what happened in the ancient world, they must rely on what we call legal-historical proof. In the study of history and in the courtroom, we examine evidence and draw conclusions. While we can no longer cross-examine the eyewitnesses who assert they saw the resurrected Christ, we can look at the character of those witnesses. Based upon the evidence that is available, we can certainly draw some reasonable conclusions.

In First Corinthians, chapter 15, verses 3-7, the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth what was apparently an early creed, or statement of belief, on this very subject: "For first of all, I delivered to you that which I received." Received from whom? After Paul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, he made his way to the leaders of the early church in Jerusalem and spoke to some of them,



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such as the Apostle Peter, and heard their first-hand accounts of the risen Christ.

He told the Corinthians that he was told “how Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He arose the third day, according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen of Cephas [Peter], then of the twelve. After that, He was seen of more than five hundred brethren at once, whereof many remain unto this present, and some also were asleep. After that, He was seen of James [the half-brother of Jesus, who became the leader of the Jerusalem church].”

“Last of all, he was seen also of me,” Paul concluded, recalling his own encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

This establishes there was a multitude of witnesses who claimed they saw Jesus alive, risen from the dead, after His brutal death on a Roman cross. If this were a reference to any other event in the ancient world, historians most likely would not even question its historicity.

Certainly, a resurrection is an unusual event. By nature, a resurrection is very much out of the ordinary. If resurrections happened all the time, then one resurrection of one man — Jesus — would be, simply put, no big deal. But of course, it is a very big deal. One does not expect to see someone at the shopping mall one week after you have been to his funeral. Dead people tend to stay dead.

But we cannot conclude simply from what is the ordinary that the resurrection of Jesus Christ did not happen.

The question, then, is simple: What did happen on that first Easter Sunday?

First of all, we can assume that the tomb where the dead body of Jesus was placed on Good Friday was empty on Sunday morning. Clearly, if Jesus was in the tomb — dead — that would have been the end of it. But, of course, the tomb was empty.

Why was the tomb empty?

Those who reject the resurrection of Christ cite one of the following alternative scenarios: (1) the disciples stole the body; (2) the enemies of Jesus stole the body; (3) everyone went to the wrong tomb; (4) the Swoon Theory, i.e., Jesus really did not die on the cross; and (5) The Myth Theory — which asserts that the disciples of Jesus never believed or taught that Jesus rose from the dead.

What possible motivation would the disciples of Jesus have had for stealing His body from the tomb? Clearly, they gained no wealth or immediate power from such a claim, but rather faced persecution instead. While some might die for a lie, no one has presented a logical explanation for why the disciples would not only lie about the resurrection, but that they would lie about it for the rest of their lives.

There is no record that any person who ever said that he saw Jesus alive again after His resurrection ever recanted — not one.

The argument that the enemies of Jesus stole the body is no better. Why would they want to create a resurrection myth of a man and a movement they despised? When the disciples went public with their testimonies that they had not only seen, but had even touched and spoken with the resurrected Jesus, if His enemies really did have His body, all they would have needed to do to snuff out the movement was to produce His body. But, they did not — because they could not. They did not have His body.

Then, there is the proposition that the tomb was just thought to be empty because everyone — the Roman guards, the women disciples, the apostles Peter and John — all just forgot where Jesus was



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buried, and all went to the wrong tomb. Under this reasoning, the body of Jesus has been in some unknown tomb for over two millennia. This simply defies credibility — maybe one person could lose his way, but not all of them. (Under the Wrong Tomb Theory, even Joseph of Arimathea, the owner of the tomb, forgot where the tomb was located.)

Another theory is the so-called Swoon Theory. This is the belief that Jesus did not die on the cross, but just passed out. Under this theory, the Roman authorities allowed a still-living Jesus to be removed from the cross, and placed in a tomb of a man named Joseph. There, in the cool of the tomb, He revived, had enough strength after having been flogged and crucified to push away the stone, and then appear to His disciples as having “risen from the dead.” Exactly what happened after that, the proponents of the theory are not quite sure.

There is also the Myth Theory. Under this belief, Jesus’ followers never really believed that Jesus rose from the dead. As Denny Kuhn, apologetics professor at Randall University, said of this belief: “These stories of Jesus’ Resurrection represent mythological or legendary developments by later Christians long after the earlier eyewitnesses had already fallen off the scene. Accordingly, the claim is that the early followers of Jesus only believed Him to be a wise spiritual and moral teacher, not the Resurrected Lord. After the death of the eyewitnesses, mythical accounts of a divine Jesus who resurrected from the dead gradually crept into Christian belief at a much later date.” However, just like the previous theories, the Myth Theory cannot be reconciled with the historical evidence.

Indeed it cannot. This is why Paul’s letter to the Corinthians is so relevant to this discussion. He specifically cited the resurrection of Jesus as a belief he had “received” from men who had personally witnessed the risen Lord, which takes the belief back to a very short time after the actual historical event.

Why did they believe they had seen Jesus? It wasn’t just an empty tomb. They saw Jesus. They heard Him speak. They witnessed Him eating a broiled fish. They touched Him. He was not just a disembodied spirit. He was flesh and bones. And, as Paul told the Corinthians, more than 500 people testified that they had seen the resurrected Jesus — and most were still alive.

Some have argued that this was a case of “mass hallucination.” According to this theory, the disciples only thought they saw Jesus. Again, it is simply not credible to believe that more than 500 people were all hallucinating, all at the same time. Moreover, these disciples believed strongly that they had seen a risen Jesus, and all but one endured martyrdom in the name of Jesus.

From these early witnesses, we can also create a “chain of evidence,” which is similar to what we do with other historical events. After all, there is not one person living today who could testify to having seen George Washington cross the Delaware River, but no one doubts that he did. It is considered a historical event. If anyone were to posit the thesis that all of those Hessians just hallucinated that Washington’s Continental Army defeated them at the Battle of Trenton, that person would — rightly — be laughed at.

And just so with the resurrection. There were, simply put, just too many witnesses. In this case, the Apostle John had his own disciples, prominent among them Ignatius and Polycarp. Ignatius (A.D. 35-117) was the bishop at Antioch, and he wrote letters about John’s recollections of the resurrection of Jesus with a physical body and His appearances to many. Likewise, Ignatius’ friend Polycarp (A.D. 69-155) also wrote of John’s remembrances of the resurrection of Jesus.



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These two men taught Irenaeus (120-202). Irenaeus wrote of Polycarp's personal conversations with John in which they discussed the bodily resurrection of Jesus. And Irenaeus passed this on to his disciple, Hippolytus (170-236).

John was exiled as an old man to the island of Patmos, off the coast of present-day Turkey. There he wrote the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, in which he continued in his belief not only that Jesus rose from the dead, but that He would one day return physically, in that resurrected body, to the Earth.

Why would John persist in his belief that Jesus rose from the dead, several decades after the event? Why did all of the other disciples likewise persist in their belief that Jesus rose from the dead?

The most logical conclusion is that Jesus did, indeed, rise from death. It is clearly a historical event, with overwhelming evidence to support this conclusion.

We are uncertain about some aspects of the life of Jesus Christ, but from what we do know, we can safely say that not only is Jesus a man of history — He is *the* Man of history.



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