

Can We Prove that Jesus was Real Person?

Opinions About Christ's Existence

What do the "Hunger Games," "Twilight," and the Bible all have in common? All three are fiction novels according to the booksellers at Costco. In November 2013 a controversy arose when a Costco store in suburban Los Angeles labeled all the Bibles as fiction. Pastor Caleb Kaltenbach made the discovery on Friday, November 15, 2013 as he was shopping with his wife in Simi Valley California. "All the Bibles were labeled as fiction," the pastor told Fox News. "It seemed bizarre to me." His first thought was that the labels on the Bibles were just a mistake. Every copy of the Bible was had a sticker on them that read "\$14.99 Fiction." ¹

It would be easy for many American's to cry out "persecution" when they hear about Costco's unfounded claims but we aren't living in China or Iran. The persecution we face is not a blunt attack on our beliefs. Rather, we live in a county that subtly stabs out the very fabric of our Bible. Many people assume that Jesus was nothing more than another fantasy figure that various facets and cults in society created 2,000 years ago. Allegedly, His name belongs with the fictional writings that contain such fairy-tail characters as Peter Pan, Hercules, and Cinderella. Leading atheistic thinker of our day Richard Dawkins says this: "We cannot, of course, disprove God, just as we can't disprove Thor, fairies, leprechauns and the Flying Spaghetti Monster." The hypothesis that Jesus never really existed has started to gain more and more credibility in the "scholarly" world. The list of PHD's who claim that the historical Jesus is questionable at best continues to grow longer.

- Elaine Pagels (Professor of Religion at Princeton University) –
 - *"Some hoped to penetrate the various accounts and to discover the "historical Jesus". . . and that sorting out 'authentic' material in the gospels was virtually impossible in the absence of independent evidence."*
- David Noel Freedman, Bible scholar and general editor of the Anchor Bible series (*Bible Review*, December 1993, Vol. IX, Number 6, p. 34) –
 - *"When it comes to the historical question about the Gospels, I adopt a mediating position– that is, these are religious records, close to the sources, but they are not in accordance with modern historiographic requirements or professional standards."*
- C. Dennis McKinsey, Bible Critic (*The Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy*) –
 - *"Jesus is a mythical figure in the tradition of pagan mythology and almost nothing in all of ancient literature would lead one to believe otherwise. Anyone wanting to believe Jesus lived and walked as a real live human being must do so despite the evidence, not because of it."*
- Robert M. Price, professor of biblical criticism at the Center for Inquiry Institute (*Deconstructing Jesus*, p. 260) –
 - *"It is important to recognize the obvious: The gospel story of Jesus is itself apparently mythic from first to last."*

Liberals Belief: There is no valid verifying proof that Jesus actually existed in historical record. Works of fiction, aka the Bible, are not evidence!

How do those of us who believe in a historical Jesus respond to such allegation? The historicity of the man Christ concerns the analysis of the historical evidence to determine whether Jesus of Nazareth existed and whether the major milestones in his life as portrayed in the Gospels can be confirmed as actual historical events.

¹ <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2013/11/18/costco-bible-is-fiction/>

As we can see there are many “scholars” today and a much larger group of internet commenters that maintain that Jesus never existed. Proponents of this position claim that Jesus is purely a mythical figure invented or at the very least copycatted by the New Testament authors. Here are three reasons why I am assured that Jesus of Nazareth was a real person.

1. “JESUS MYTHERS” HAVE NO HISTORICAL BACKING

Explanation: There have been those who claim that most historian, both Christian and secular, do not really believe that Jesus was a historical person. People who hold to this belief could be referred to as “Jesus Mythers.” These small number of researchers have painstakingly attempted to promote the unverified belief that Jesus never existed. These theories are based on an abuse of source documents, an incredible lack of scholarly research, and just in general bad scholarship.

They make some seriously flawed claims:

a. **Claim #1: None of the contemporaries of Jesus confirm the resurrection or wrote about Jesus.**

Explanation of Claim: Jesus Myther claims that the historical sources are secondary at best. They claim that Paul was a contemporary of the Apostles and not of Jesus and he only saw a risen Christ in a vision but not in person.

Refutation: Paul was a high ranking Pharisee before his conversion. He studied at Jerusalem under Gamaliel. It is unlikely that Paul did not debate with Jesus during his earthly ministry. We know Paul’s history from the book of Acts and it would be unreasonable to perport that Paul was not aware of what Christ was doing. Further proof that Paul was a contemporary of Jesus is that Luke, a companion of Paul, records Jesus’ encounter with the Pharisees. Paul never seeks to contradict or correct Luke’s record. The weight of evidence leans toward the belief that Paul was in fact a contemporary of Jesus.

The claim that none of Christ’s contemporaries wrote about Jesus or his resurrection is dubious at best. Consider the following facts and think about that claim:

- Matthew (disciple of Jesus): *eyewitness* account of Jesus
- Mark (follower of Jesus): *eyewitness* account of Jesus
- Luke (follower of Jesus): Interviewed eyewitnesses
- John (disciple of Jesus): Wrote the Gospel of John, 1, 2, 3 John, and Revelation which all affirm the existence of Jesus and were all *eyewitness* accounts
- Peter (disciple of Jesus): Wrote 2 letters about Jesus and preached His death, burial, and resurrection
- Paul (opponent of Jesus converted upon meeting the risen Christ): Wrote 13 books of the NT

b. **Claim #2: Historical evidence is invalid.**

Explanation of Claim: This claim starts with the presupposition that Christ didn’t exist. This presupposition leads them to conclude that any historical documents saying Christ did exist are clearly flawed and should be thrown out.

Refutation: The presupposition that led them to throw out historical records is unfounded. No credible historian would side step such a mountain of evidence. Jesus is probably the most well established figure in the history of mankind. When we look at the documentation of Jesus as a

real historical figure we see that it is far more reliable than just about every other accepted historical work.

Ancient Writing ²	Extant Manuscripts
Homer's <i>Illiad</i>	643
Sophocles (combined writings)	100-193
Aristotle (combined writings)	49
Tacitus (A.D. 56-117)	20
Caesar's <i>Galactic Wars</i>	10
Euripides	9
Herodotus (484-425 B.C.)	8
Thucydides	8
Plato (428-348 B.C.)	7
Catallus (84-54 B.C.)	3
New Testament Greek MSS	5,752 (as of Dec. 2008)
New Testament Latin MSS	10,000+
Quotes from Church father before A.D. 325	32,000 quotations
Quotes from Church fathers in all MSS	Over 1 million quotations

Ancient Writing ³	Earliest Complete Manuscript
Josephus - Antiquities	1,300 years after author died
Tacitus - Annals	800 years after author died
Caesar - Gallic Wars	900 years after author died
New Testament	300 years after author died

While the Jesus Mythers make the claim that the NT is not a good historical source, they will have to forget Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Euripides. They will have to ignore that Josephus, Tacitus, and Caesar's works are all older than the NT works we have available to us. The uncomfortable fact they will have to face is that the NT writers are attributed to real mean who lived, ate and worked. They are all better sources than the other ancient works. The bulk of the evidence weighs heavily in the favor of those who claim that Jesus was a real person.

c. Claim #3: Christianity finds its roots in mythology

Explanation of Claim: Jesus mythers claim that certain gospel stories carry similar attributes to those of dying-and-rising-gods, demi-gods, or other divine men such as Mithra. The key mythicist argument is that Jesus is a loosely based story of Mithraism, an ancient Pagan religion. The claim is basically that Mithra was born of a Virgin on Dec. 25th, he had 12 disciples celebrated Eucharist, was called "Messiah," was crucified then buried in a tomb, and finally rose again on the 3rd day.

Best selling book *The Davinci Code* makes this stunning claim, "*Nothing in Christianity is original. The pre-Christian God Mithras – called the Son of God and the Light of the World – was born on December 25, died, was buried in a rock tomb, and then resurrected in three days.*"⁴

² Statistics on Classical writings from F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 16-17; Bruce Metzger, *The New Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 34.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Dan Brown, *The Davinci Code* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009), 232.

Refutation: These claims are some of the most factually base claims every made. Very little is recorded in history about Mithraism. What we do have recorded makes it clear that Jesus is not a story ripped off from Mithraism. Notice what the Encyclopedia Britannica has to say:

*“There is little notice of the Persian god [Mithra] in the Roman world until the beginning of the 2nd century, but, from the year AD 136 onward, there are hundreds of dedicatory inscriptions to Mithra. This renewal of interest is not easily explained. The most plausible hypothesis seems to be that Roman Mithraism was practically a new creation, wrought by a religious genius who may have lived as late as c. AD 100 and who gave the old traditional Persian ceremonies a new Platonic interpretation that enabled Mithraism to become acceptable to the Roman world.”*⁵

This seems to indicate then that Mithraism has not inspired Christianity. The Gospel accounts of Jesus were written before then.

As for the claim that Mithra was virgin historical evidence suggests that the Roman’s taught that he was born as an adult out of a rock in a cave.

*“Wearing his Phrygian cap, issues forth from the rocky mass. As yet only his bare torso is visible, IN each hand he raises aloft a lighted torch and, as an unusual detail, red flames shoot out all around him from the petra genatrix.”*⁶

Therefore, unless the rocky mass is a human and virgin, and fully grown Mithra is both an adult and a baby, it is quite deceptive to claim that this is a Virgin birth.

There is further no record that Mithra was a great teacher with 12 disciples nor is there evidence to suggest that Mithras bodily rose from the dead. One myth about Mithra is that he was taken to paradise in a chariot alive and well after he finished his mission on earth. Nothing is mentioned about a crucifixion or a resurrection.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ABOUT THE JESUS MYTHS

- Jesus Myths use the Logical fallacy of false cause.
 - This fallacy is when someone reasons that just because 2 things exist side by side one must have caused the other. Mere coincidence does not prove causal connection and similarity does not prove dependence.
- Jesus Myths have a wrong chronology.
 - All the sources used about pagan religions to influence early Christianity are dated very late. Some writers even quote from documents 300 years later than Paul in an effort to produce ideas that allegedly influenced Paul.
- Jesus Myths assume wrongly that Paul would borrow from pagan religions.
 - All of the information we have about Paul indicates that Paul would never allow himself to be influenced by pagan sources.

2. EVEN CRITICS OF THE BIBLE ADMIT THAT JESUS LIVED

Explanation: Even those critical scholars who spend their time ripping the very heart out of the Word of God admit that Christ was in fact a historical person:

- a. Gunther Bornkamm – “To doubt the historical existence of Jesus at all . . . was reserved for an unrestrained tendentious criticism of modern times into which it is not worthwhile to enter here.”⁷

⁵ Encyclopedia Britannica, Article Entry: Mithraism 2004 edition.

⁶ Fran Cumon, “The Dura Mithraeum” in John R Hinnells (ed.), Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First International Congress of Mithraic Studies (Manchester University Press, 1975), 173.

- b. Will Marxsen – “I am of the opinion (and it is an opinion shared by every serious historian) that the theory [‘that Jesus never lived, that he was purely a mythical figure’] is historically untenable.”⁸
- c. Rudolf Bultmann – “Of course the doubt as to whether Jesus really existed is unfounded and not worth refutation. No sane person can doubt that Jesus stands as founder behind the historical movement whose first distinct stage is represented by the oldest Palestinian community.”⁹
- d. Michael Grant – “To sum up, modern critical methods fail to support the Christ-myth theory. It has ‘again and again been answered and annihilated by first-rank scholars.’ In recent years ‘no serious scholar has ventured to postulate the non-historicity of Jesus’ – or at any rate very few, and they have not succeeded in disposing of the much stronger, indeed very abundant, evidence to the contrary.”¹⁰

So why is it that even liberal and critical scholars of the New Testament accept and agree that Jesus was a real historical figure? Because, the facts are just too stacked up to say anything to the contrary. There is no serious debate among the vast majority of scholars in the fields related to the question of the existence of Jesus. The view that Jesus existed is held by virtually every scholarly expert on the planet.

3. ACCEPTED EXTRA-BIBLICAL SOURCES ACKNOWLEDGE JESUS’ EXISTENCE

Explanation: Where is the proof from non-Biblical sources that tells us that Jesus is indeed a real person? Although the NT is full of quotes that claim that Christ is the Son of God who really did live on earth many are still reluctant to believe what it says unless they see some independent testimony. The fact is that there is collateral proof available to us that proves Christ really did exist.

“Religious fanatics want people to switch off their own minds, ignore the evidence, and blindly follow a holy book based upon private ‘revelation’.” – Richard Dawkins

a. Evidence from Tacitus

Historian Edwin Yamauchi calls this “probably the most important reference to Jesus outside of the New Testament.”¹¹ Tacitus in A.D. 64 about the rumors spread about Nero burning Rome makes the report:

- *“Nero fastened the guilt . . . on a class of 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 . . . Pontius Pilot, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome . . .”*¹²

From this we can note a few important things:

- Tacitus reports Christian derived their name from a historical person called Christus (from the Latin) or Christ.
- Christ is said to have “suffered the extreme penalty,” most probably referring to the Roman method of execution known as crucifixion.
- The crucifixion of Christ is said to have been done during the reign of Tiberius and was administered by Pontius Pilot.

⁷ Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Translated by I. and F. McLuskey with J. M. Robinson (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 28.

⁸ Willi Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1970), p. 119.

⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1958), p. 13.

¹⁰ Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian’s Review of the Gospels* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977), p. 200.

¹¹ Edwin Yamauchi, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 82.

¹² Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, cited in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 82.

Conclusion: All of this witness confirms what the Gospels tell us about the death of Christ.

b. Evidence from Josephus

Outside of the Bible there are perhaps no more remarkable references to Jesus than those found in the writings of Josephus. On two occasions in his *Jewish Antiquities*, he mentions Jesus. The authenticity of one (*Testimonium Flavianum*) is debated, but the account of the execution of James is accepted. He calls James, “*the brother of Jesus who was called Christ.*”¹³

The brief reference of James is helpful but is the astonishing statement in *Testimonium Flavianum* that is particularly relevant.

- “*About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he . . . wrought surprising feats. . . . He was the Christ. When Pilate . . . condemned him to be crucified, those who had . . . come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared . . . restored to life . . . And the tribe of Christians . . . has . . . not disappeared.*”¹⁴

The question that arises is whether or not Josephus, who was not a Christian, would write this astonishing passage. It seems likely that a Christian editor came and added a few choice phrases to what Josephus had already said sometime between the 3rd and 4th century A.D. For example, the qualifying phrase, “*if indeed one ought to call him a man*” does not appear to have been written by a careful historian. This phrase implies that Jesus was much more than just a man. It is also unlikely that Josephus would have so clearly stated that Jesus was the Christ or that he resurrected on the third day. But even if we disregard the questionable phrases in this passage we are still left with a great deal of important information about the historical Jesus. We read that he performed amazing feats and that although he was crucified, His followers continued their discipleship and were called Christians.

Conclusion: Very few scholars have questioned that Josephus actually penned these words which so clearly indicate that James had a brother and his name was Jesus. A rather detailed record emerges that harmonizes with the biblical record.

c. Evidence from Pliny the Younger

Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (61A.D. – ca. 112 A.D.) better known as Pliny the Younger was a lawyer, author, and magistrate of Ancient Rome. In one of his letters, dated around A.D. 112, he corresponds with the emperor Trajan and asks advice about the action he should take against the followers of Christ. At one point in the letter he relates this information about the Christians:

- “*They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food--but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.*”¹⁵

This passage gives us some important information to chew on:

¹³ Josephus, *Antiquities* xx. 200, cited in F.F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1974), 36.

¹⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.63-64

¹⁵ Pliny, *Letters*, transl. by William Melmoth, rev. by W.M.L. Hutchinson (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1935), vol. II, X:96, cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 199

- Not only was Pliny aware of Jesus, he also knew of His followers.
- Early church Christians met to worship this Christ.
- Pliny was surprised that they worship Christ “as to a god” which seems to indicate that unlike other gods who were worshipped, Christ was a person who had lived on earth.

Conclusion: Pliny demonstrates that the early Christians so clung to a living Christ that even under the threat of execution they refused to deny their faith in Jesus. This is remarkable evidence of Jesus’ existence outside of the Bible.

Conclusion:

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s and on into the early part of the 21st century a group of about 150 critical scholars and layman met for what they called the “Jesus Seminar.” The seminar was under the auspices of the Westar Institute and was founded in 1985 by Robert Funk. The seminar used votes with colored beads to decide their collective view of the historicity, deeds, and sayings of Jesus of Nazareth. Their eventual reconstruction of Jesus portrayed him as an itinerate Hellenistic Jewish sage and faith healer who preached a gospel of liberation from injustice in startling parables and maxims. The Seminar is well known for placing the burden of proof on those who would advocate for the historicity of Jesus as the Gospel’s described him.

What do we do with such claims? If we carry the burden of proof than what is our proof? The situation at Costco begs the question as to whether or not fiction or non-fiction are appropriate labeling for the Scriptures. The events in the New Testament were not concocted in the minds of the human authors. Instead, they were guided by the Holy Spirit to infallibly record actual historical events. Most of them died a martyr’s death, thereby verifying the veracity of their testimony. There are those who scoff at the notion that the disciples became martyrs for their beliefs. After all, many people have died for a lie. While its true that many people have died believe in a lie many have not been in a position to know the truth about their beliefs. The disciples were in such a position. They knew whether or not Jesus had indeed risen from the dead. They knew whether or not they were making this message up. It smacks of absolutely dubious works to think that the disciples would be willing to become martyrs for a lie they made up. Why would they willingly endure a lifetime of persecution and beatings if their whole message were a farce?

In conclusion, there is clearly many good reasons to think that Jesus really did exist and was the founder of a religious sect in 1st C. Palestine. This includes evidence that we have from extra-Biblical sources, the Church fathers, and the first-hand testimony of the apostles. I understand that there is much more that can be added to this topic but I think these three points that we have covered are a good starting point for those interested in the debate over the historical Jesus.