

THE ESSENTIAL JESUS

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

-C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity

The truth about Jesus is that He leaves no room for us to like Him. We must either adore Him or despise Him. Consider some of His teachings:

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.’” (John 14:6)

“For whoever is ashamed of Me and of My words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when He comes in His glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.” (Luke 9:26)

“Whoever loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.” (Matthew 10:37)

If any man were to make these types of statements to you in a coffee shop or while sitting at your dining room table – how would you react? At best, we would quietly try and find a way to disengage from the conversation; at worst, we would throw him out and tell him never to darken our door again!

The only way that these three statements from Jesus are acceptable is if He is indeed the Son of God. Only the Son of God has the right to claim our total allegiance, a glorious command of the angelic armies, and the sacrifice of family relationships.

This is the difficult truth about Jesus – His exclusivity. Jesus leaves no room for Allah, Vishnu, or ancestral worship. He leaves no room for the Jew to remain Jewish and cling to the Old Testament. He systematically eliminates anything that we might choose to follow beside Him. No traditions, personal wisdom, Stoic philosophy, or tribal heritage can dwell beside Jesus of Nazareth.

That is why the apostle Paul would say of Christ's kingdom:

"Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all." (Colossians 3:11)

If the truth about Jesus is what He claims, then there is none like Him. In Him, we become a new people entirely transformed by the teachings and guidance of Jesus, the Son of the Living God.

If Jesus is not what He claims to be, then He is not only not good, He is most definitely evil, and anyone that follows Him is a pathetic, misinformed fool.

Once again, the apostle Paul, a devote follower of Jesus, stated this to be true:

"And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." (1 Cor 15:17-19)

So, how can one know whether or not Jesus truly is who He says He is?

There are a few questions that serve as tests of the Bible's claims regarding Jesus:

- 1) Did Jesus really live? (i.e. does history back up the existence of Jesus as a historical figure)
- 2) Did Jesus perform miracles and show qualities of a divine nature?
- 3) Did Jesus really raise from the dead?

The Historicity Question:

Did Jesus really live?

The first question is the easiest to answer. Beyond the New Testament account, Jesus is cited by numerous non-Christian historians such as Josephus, Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Phlegon, Thallus, Suetonius, Lucian, Celsus, and even the Jewish Talmud. At least ten ancient non-Christian writers cite Jesus within 150 years of His life.¹

Though once a popular objection to the Bible, the premise that Jesus is a mere mythical character is no longer accepted by any major historian. The evidence is far too vast to be ignored. Once the various citations and mentions of Jesus are added up, to disregard them would mean that we would have to disregard almost all the major people of antiquity as "myths" and "fables". The historical evidence of Jesus is just too overwhelming to be denied.

¹ Geisler & Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist*, (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004)
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The Miracle Question:

Did Jesus perform miracles and show qualities of a divine nature?

This question is harder than the history question, but not as hard as you might think. The New Testament is the major document that clearly outlines the miracles of Jesus. Those miracles (feeding of the five thousand, calming storms, specific prophetic knowledge, walking on water, healing visible sicknesses such as leprosy and restoring an amputated ear, etc.) all point to things only a divine being could do. So, if the New Testament is trustworthy (and I think it is), then the miracles really happened.

So, how can we trust the New Testament writers?

The first reason we can believe them is because they wrote their accounts of Jesus' miracles to people who could easily prove them wrong if the miracles hadn't happened. The apostles spoke to people about Jesus who lived in the same town as Him, knew the people He had healed, and were able to confirm Jesus' abilities on their own. If the apostles were lying, the Jewish community would have unmasked them as frauds.

And yet, the opposite happened. The apostles spoke openly and often about Jesus' signs and wonders as established facts that could not be refuted.

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know ...”(Acts 2:22)

In fact, the apostles were so confident concerning the miracles of Jesus that they made it clear they hadn't even recorded all the miracles but were just “hitting the highlights” to make their point.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:30-31)

On top of all that, the New Testament writers show an amazing attention to detail and accuracy. Colin Hemer, a renowned classic scholar and historian, counts 84 facts in the last sixteen chapters of Acts that show a level of acute historical and archaeological precision – precision that modern historians and archaeologists have since confirmed². Details like topography, the names of ports, political terminology, capitols, properly dated rulers and magistrates, etc. Luke, the man who wrote the book of Acts, is also the one who painstakingly wrote of the life of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. It wouldn't make sense for Luke to care so much about accuracy while also bluffing about Jesus' miracles. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark match Luke's account, and the Gospel of John shows similar fastidious attention to detail.³

² Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990)

³ Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001)

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Accurate, careful writers who know they will be fact-checked don't lie. It is outside of their best interest and character.

The Resurrection Question:

Did Jesus really raise from the dead?

This last question is of utmost importance – if Jesus is God, He must be alive to be the Living God that He claimed to be. History tells us that Jesus was crucified on a cross by the Roman Empire outside of the city of Jerusalem sometime around 33 AD. As mentioned before, this is a historically verifiable fact. So what about the empty tomb three days later?

Turns out, the reasons that you should believe the miracles are very similar to why you should believe in the resurrection. The verifiable accuracy of the rest of the New Testament gives strong evidence to the resurrection.

First off, all other competing theories (the apostles hallucinated it, Jesus didn't really die, the apostles lied, they stole the body, etc.) all don't add up. None of the competing theories for why the tomb is empty make any sense.

Hallucination doesn't make sense because the apostles claim to have seen Jesus together multiple times over forty days. If they hallucinated, then they did so all at the same time, multiple times, and saw the exact same hallucination!

The Roman Empire didn't let people survive crucifixion, and they had a handy system in place to make sure it didn't happen – the soldier that crucified the person had to take his place if the crucifixion failed! This Roman punishment is also why it doesn't make sense that the apostles stole the body – a few poor Jewish fishermen versus the Roman army's finest when death is on the line? Not likely.

The apostles didn't lie or steal the body because every liar and thief has something to gain from their deception. What did the apostles gain from their testimony that Jesus rose from the dead? A life of banishment, persecution, poverty, and eventual martyrdom. Liars lie to benefit themselves – there was no benefit for the apostles, only suffering.

Secondly, Jesus was crucified just outside of Jerusalem. Only fifty days later, the apostles would begin preaching that Jesus was raised from the dead to the citizens of that same city. The people knew who Jesus was, they knew He had been crucified, and they knew where the tomb was. If Jesus was still dead, they could quickly uncover the apostles' lies with a five-minute stroll outside the city gates to the tomb. The resurrection of Jesus was preached to a knowledgeable audience that would have been naturally skeptical of any religious teachings that were contrary to their established Jewish lifestyle. And yet, these same Jerusalemites that witnessed the crucifixion were the first to convert to Christianity.

“Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified... So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” (Acts 2:36,41)

Jesus' death and resurrection were public events that occurred on the open stage of Jewish life in the capital of Israel. Naysayers and critics would have ample evidence to contradict the message of the resurrection. And yet, the message spread and could not be stifled.

The Conclusion of the Matter

Considering the impressive evidence of Jesus' divine nature and the truth that He is the Son of God (evidence that goes far beyond any this article has had the space offer up), what are we to do?

The honest skeptic must struggle with the evidences of Christ and the truths that they present. Jesus is not easily dismissed. The Bible does not fear reasonable inquiry; after all, the Bible says things like, "Come let us reason together" (Isa 1:18) and "Know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" (Jhn 8:32). Certainly, honest investigation of truth is a reasonable thing that the Bible encourages.

Yet, skepticism for skepticism's sake is no good. When presented with evidences, we should struggle with the new information, but ultimately, the goal is to bring about a conclusion. Is Jesus God's Son? Or is He a fraud?

If He is the Son, then He expects and rightfully deserves our all.