

“Why Believe in Jesus?”

A Historical Account Part 1

Note: Why should we believe that God is love? Can a thinking person really believe in God to begin with and then further can a thinking person really believe that God looks like Jesus? Can a thinking person actually believe that Jesus reveals God?

This is the most fundamental question. This question is as foundational as it gets. The answer to this question is everything. My life hangs on the one core conviction that Jesus Christ is the decisive clue as to the fact that there really is a God and to the decisive clue as to what God is like, AND to what I am like. He reveals true God and true Humanity. I wouldn't mind if I was wrong about everything else. I have some passionate convictions about theology and interpretations of certain passages, you will hear about some of them over the next few weeks, and I nothing gets me more excited than getting involved in discussions on some of these topics. But I don't have any source of life in any of that. My sense of worth and self-esteem and fullness of life doesn't depend on any particular opinion that I have. I think that's really an important reality to have because if that's not the case, our theology becomes our god and we begin worshiping our theology instead of God and our theology becomes a source of life to us. And that's when Christians become jerks, because now being right is more important than manifesting God's love.

All our eggs are to be in one basket. And that is the core conviction about who God is like. The core conviction that He is as loving as Jesus reveals Him to be...

The question is, “Is this really true?”

This study shares a little bit of why I am convicted that the Jesus story in the Gospels is true, why I believe that Jesus really is the decisive revelation of God.

Question: Can intelligent, logical, rational, critical thinking adults genuinely embrace a belief in Jesus without committing intellectual suicide?

Today's Academia—belief in the factual story of Jesus is irrational. The evidence for this stance is lacking, however.

We “believe” in things every day, yet we cannot know anything 100% to be able to say so beyond a shadow of a doubt.

-Flying with: Sober Pilot, Mechanics on top of things, TSA
The trajectory of evidence to decide which is most rational

Undisputable Facts: Sometime in the first third of the 1st Century (30, 40, 50 A.D.) there is a band of Jewish folks who went out into the world proclaiming a message. (A lot of different sources.*) That Jesus Christ, who was a contemporary of theirs, lived an extra ordinary life, to the point where he had a reputation of being sinless. They claimed that he did these miracles, they claimed that he made these outrageous claims (especially in a Jewish environment) that he had come down from heaven and that he was the son of God, and most importantly they claimed that he rose from the dead. They went out into a hostile environment, starting in Palestine and then very quickly spread throughout the Roman Empire. They went out and proclaimed that he was the Savior of the World. And they suffered a lot of persecution because of it. We know from Tacitus (Roman Historian) that Christianity had grown so large and so fast that by the year 62, 63,64 A.D., that the Roman Emperor Nero could plausibly blame the burning of Rome on these Christians. And that justified trying to exterminate them on his campaign to try and kill all the Christians. (And it was as brutal as anything in history affords us.) Even the hardened Tacitus comments that Nero's treatment of the Christians was barbaric even according to Roman standards. We find the basic message of the early Christians in the Gospels and Paul's Epistles (the earliest writings). These folks were willing to die for this message that this contemporary of theirs, Jesus, made Divine claims, rose from the dead, and lived an extraordinary life, and did these miracles to verify the claims he was making.

- 3 Theories: 1) Telling Truth
2) Telling a Lie
3) Not Lying-Deceived by a Legend

The Lie Theory

Question 1: Why would these men do this?

Motive? Money? Lives made easier? 11 Killed
Heretical by traditional Jewish Standards w/penalties
Publius (or Gaius) Cornelius Tacitus (AD 56 – AD 117)
Nero's Banquets-Impaled and set on fire
Peter-Crucified upside down with Wife
Families Killed- No one said they made it up?!

“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” – John 14:9

Question 2: Could they have pulled this lie off?

Easily Falsified

Not long, long ago, in a place far, far away.

Local—Events happened in Palestine where they were preaching.
Christ had JUST died!!

Most players still alive. Big names: Pilate, Ananias, Caiaphas

Easy to discover the truth if it had been a lie, yet of all the charges made against Christians, none were made that they made it all up. Even the parts about Jesus doing MIRACLES!

Question 3: Why are there no deserters?

Mormonism

“Watergate involved a conspiracy to cover up, perpetuated by the closest aides to the President of the United States—the most powerful men in America, who were intensely loyal to their president. But one of them, John Dean, turned state’s evidence, that is, testified against Nixon, as he put it, “to save his own skin”—and he did so only two weeks after informing the President about what was really going on—two weeks! The real cover-up, the lie, could only be held together for two weeks, and then everybody else jumped ship in order to save themselves. Now, the fact is that all that those around the President were facing was embarrassment, maybe prison. Nobody’s life as at stake.” Chuck Colson

Question 4: Why do the Gospels read the way they do in regards to their counter cultural dimensions?

Eating with tax collectors and sinners

Treatment of Women – John 4—Samaritan Woman at the well

Luke 10:19—Mary at Jesus’ Feet

Trajectory—Lying or Telling Truth?

Rational or Irrational to believe the Gospel story?

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Jesus existed – Pliny, Tacitus, Josephus

James and Ananias – Josephus

Wonder worker – Josephus, Celsus

Wise man, Teacher – Josephus

Followers regarded as Divine – Pliny

Crucified – Tacitus, Lucian, Josephus

Pilate/Tiberius – Tacitus, Josephus

Darkness of Crucifixion – Thallus

Catalyst for Growth – Tacitus

Claudius in 49 AD – Suetonius

Nero in 60 AD – Tacitus

Governor of Bithynia in 100 AD - Pliny

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A Historical Account Part 2

The Legend Theory:

*1—John 19:7 – The Jews insisted, “We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.”

*2—How could they accept a “Legend” of a Messiah who’s backside was handed to him?

Paul’s first epistles were written in 49 AD – 16 years after Jesus. (Passing on traditional creedal material that Jesus is Divine. It is arguable that Paul received this within 3-4 years of the event, at most 5 or 6. See Galatians 1,2.)

*3—Dating of Luke:

Lawyer/Dr.—Interested in Historical and Political happenings of his day

Evidence from Book of Acts:

Ends Abruptly with Paul being on House arrest (62 AD)

Does not mention the martyrdom of Paul which happened in 64 or 65 AD.

Doesn’t mention the Jewish-Roman War that broke out in 66 AD.

Doesn’t mention the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Doesn’t mention the Persecution under Nero (64 AD)

All of which Luke would have been very interested in!

Places Luke no later than 62 AD (Less than three decades after Jesus lived.)

Paul was originally an enemy of the Christians. (Acts 7, 9)

Question 1: How do orthodox, monotheistic Jewish men go against their most fundamental convictions within their own culture and begin to worship a contemporary Jewish person as the embodiment of Yahweh?

Most heretical act in Jewish culture was for a Human to claim Divinity... (See *1)

Raised to watch for a Messiah who would overthrow the Roman Empire and set up a worldly Kingdom with Jews on top... (See *2)

Question 2: How could you go from an ordinary carpenter, in fundamental Judaism, to the revelation and embodiment of Yahweh Himself on earth over night?

Huge Problem: You don’t have enough time.

(Alexander the Great – 4 Centuries later)

(Buddha – 5 Centuries later – Polytheistic Culture)

(See *3)

Question 3: How does the “Legend” theory hold up when pitted against living eyewitness testimony, both hostile and friendly?

1 Corinthians 15:1-8—Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he appears to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, through some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

Question 4: How does one reconcile the claim that this story is a legend with the claim of these men that they are giving eyewitness testimony?

Testimony: a non-historical or unverifiable story handed down by tradition from earlier times and popularly accepted as historical.

Claim of Disciples:

Wolfgang Schadewaldt, one of the great Homeric scholars of this century, assessment of the historical reliability of the Gospels to Tübingen University Seminary in Germany—
 “As someone who has acquired some knowledge of ‘literature’, I am particularly concerned here to note that when we read the Synoptic Gospels we cannot be other than captivated by the experiential vividness with which we are confronted. The conditions of their time stand before us: nature, the landscape of Palestine, the Sea of Galilee, places from the coast to the far side of the Jordan, and Nazareth with its sheer cliff. If only we read the text simply enough, we can imagine Jesus traveling here and there – a situation which we misunderstand if we miss the repeated ‘other way’ – the most important words are spoken and actions performed ‘on the way’ as no more than literary decoration... I know of no other area of history-writing, biography or poetry where I encounter so great a wealth of material in such a small space.” (W. Schadewaldt in M. Hengel, “Studies in the Gospel of Mark”, p.102)

1 John 1:1-5

... which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched... we have seen it... has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard... This is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you...

Standard Rule of Historical Methodology:

“When you’re dealing with an ancient document that claims to write history and reads like history, treat it like history. If a historian thinks that an ancient document that claims to write history and reads like history is not reporting history, then the burden of proof lies with the historian to prove it wrong, it is not on the document to prove itself right.”

Natural Laws are DESCRIPTION of what we find most often in nature they are not PRESCRIPTION of what we MUST find in nature. The Absolute Rejection of the Miraculous cannot be based on evidence or reason, because we do not have the exhaustive evidence for it to be. Rather it is a conclusion that is based on the presupposition of the Naturalistic world view and therefore a biased belief.

To the extent that one’s research and findings are based in a prior dogmatic assumption, such research cannot be considered critical or scientific research. – R.G. Collingwood (The Idea of History, p.139)

An Open-Minded Scholarly Approach would be that if all available naturalistic explanations become implausible, we should consider explanations that go beyond our known natural laws.

Trajectory—Legend or Historical document?

Rational or Irrational to believe the Gospel story?

I believe in Jesus because: 1) He’s a man worth believing in

2) Trajectory of Evidence points to

Truth