

## THE CASE FOR JESUS

**By Mark Paynter THD**

Today, the vast majority of people accept the fact that Jesus historically lived. A substantial body of early century historical documentation attests to the fact that Jesus is a historical person. In fact there is much more documentation attesting to the reality of Jesus as a historical person than any other ancient figure. This evidence can be divided into five categories

- 1 Many ancient “non-Christian, non-Jewish and generally anti-Christian”<sup>1</sup> writers refer to Jesus and his followers as an historical reality. For Example, Cornelius Tactitus states “Christ... was put to death by Pontius Pilate”.<sup>2</sup>
- 2 There are many Jewish writings, such as the Babylonian Talmud and the writings of Josephus that confirm the historical reality of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>
- 3 The pages of the New Testament contain many examples of “early Christian creedal confessions”<sup>4</sup> that attest to the fact that Jesus lived, died and rose from the dead. These statements were made at a time when making such confessions could lead to death. (Romans 1:3-4, Romans 4:24-25, 1 Timothy 3:16, 1 Peter 3:18.)
- 4 The apostolic writings themselves confirm the reality of Jesus’ life.
- 5 The writings of post-apostolic writers including Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Barnabas, and Justin Martyr.<sup>5</sup>

### **IF JESUS WAS NOT GOD, HE DESERVES AN OSCAR.**

With this rather strange sounding title, Josh McDowell introduces one of the most important topics in both apologetics and theology, the divinity of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> McDowell page 120

<sup>2</sup> See McDowell page 121 for discussion McDowell cites Cornelius Tactitus Annals XV page 44

<sup>3</sup> See McDowell pages 124-126 for discussion.

<sup>4</sup> McDowell page 126

<sup>5</sup> See McDowell page 130-134 for discussion

The divinity of Christ is the pivotal point of theology. Kreeft and Tacelli point out the divinity of Christ is critically important for six reasons.

- 1 Christ's divinity is the most distinctive feature of Christian doctrine.
- 2 Modernists see "Christ simply as the ideal man, or "the man for others"; as a prophet, rabbi, philosopher, teacher, social worker, psychologist, psychiatrist, reformer, sage or magician – but not God in the flesh."<sup>6</sup>
- 3 Christ's divinity unlocks all other doctrines of Christianity.
- 4 If Christ is divine then His incarnation is the most important event in history.
- 5 If Christ is divine, since He is omnipotent and always present, He can transform my life and your life right here and now.
- 6 "If Christ is divine, He has a right to our entire lives, including our inner life and thoughts."<sup>7</sup>

McDowell points out that Christ's claims to divinity were the reason why He was arrested and put on trial. The trial of Jesus is the only trial in history that was held solely for the purpose of examining the identity of the accused because He was claiming to be divine.<sup>8</sup>

Steve Kumar writes

"What makes Christ so different from all other men of history? Why is he so special to the Christians? What is it about him that is unique? Moses did not claim to be God; Paul was horrified when people tried to worship Him; Confucius was confused about the nature of God;

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<sup>6</sup> Kreeft and Tacelli page 152

<sup>7</sup> Kreeft and Tacelli page 152

<sup>8</sup> McDowell 138-141

Zoroaster was a follower of God, not God; Buddha never identified himself as God; Mohammed did not claim to be Allah, but Jesus Christ did. Jesus claimed to be God in the flesh. This has set him apart from any other man. ...

Most of the world's religious leaders stressed the importance of their teachings, but Christ focused on himself. He made it clear that man's eternal destiny depends on how we regard him. **“I told you, you would die in your sins, if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.”**

The claims of Christ are truly staggering. Very few leaders have made the kinds of claims Christ has made. His claims have dazzled many of his disciples, muddled many religious leaders and puzzled a great number of scholars

Jesus claimed

- 1 To forgive sin Matthew 9:1-8
- 2 To Judge the world John 5:27,30
- 3 To give eternal life John 3:16
- 4 To be sinless John 8:46
- 5 To be the object of faith John 8:24
- 6 To answer prayer John 14:13
- 7 To be worthy of worship Matthew 14:33

8 To be the truth John 14:6

9 To have all authority Matthew 28:18

10 To be one in essence with God John 10:30<sup>9</sup>

All of these claims can only be met if Christ is who he claims to be, countless Christians down the ages have personally experienced how Christ faithfully fulfills these promises.

McDowell points out that Christ's divinity is also observed in the names that he used for himself. These include Lord, Son of God, Son of Man. Jesus prayed to God as his own personal father.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Kumar page 87-89

<sup>10</sup> See McDowell page 150-154 for discussion.

## **THE TRILEMMA – LORD, LIAR OR LUNATIC**

The New Testament books are so reliable and trustworthy that any notion that Jesus is a character of fiction, legend or myth must be unequivocally rejected. “The Gospel accounts preserve an accurate record of the things he did, the places he visited, and the words he spoke.”<sup>11</sup>. Jesus claimed to be God and backed this claim up in word and deed. Therefore every person who ever lives must determine for themselves whether this claim is true or false.

At a time when there was widespread debate about the identity of Jesus. Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say I am?” Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:15-16 NIV) Today Jesus still asks, “Who do you say I am?”

There is no escaping this question and each person must give their own answer, but that answer has eternal consequences. McDowell examines the alternatives.

“Jesus claim to be God must be either true or false. If Jesus’ claims are true, then He is the Lord, and we must accept or reject His Lordship. We are “without excuse.”

If Jesus’ claims to be God were false, then there are just two options: He either knew His claims were false, or He did not know they were false...

If, when Jesus made His claims, He knew He was not God, then He was lying. But if He was a liar, then He was also a hypocrite, because He told others to be honest, whatever the cost, while at the same time, teaching and living a colossal lie.

More than that, He was a demon, because He deliberately told others to trust Him for their eternal destiny. If He could not back up His claims and knew they were false, then he was unspeakable evil.

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<sup>11</sup> McDowell page 158

Last, He would also be a fool, because it was His claims to deity that led to His crucifixion...

But we must remember that for someone to think he was God, especially in a culture that was fiercely monotheistic, and then to tell others that their eternal destiny depends upon believing in him, was no slight of fantasy but the thoughts of a lunatic in the fullest sense.”<sup>12</sup>

McDowell points out that Jesus was not insane as evidenced by His wisdom, His love and compassion and His ability to astound, astonish and delight His audience. In fact Jesus shows us the way to peace in our innermost beings and provides the “most perceptive and effective psychological insights”<sup>13</sup> of all time.

“ If Jesus of Nazareth is not a liar or a lunatic, then He must be Lord.”<sup>14</sup>

Not surprisingly McDowell’s argument has come under severe criticism. J P Holding has written a strong defense of the argument in an article entitled “Jesus – On the trial of the Trilemma.” Holding points out that the methodology and terminology of the argument are not what is important. What is important is the logic of the argument. Therefore let us look at the logic.

1. **Either Jesus claimed to be divine, or He did not.** If He did not, then someone else put these words attributed to Jesus in his mouth. However if Jesus did make such claims, then:
2. **Either Jesus was right about those claims, or He was wrong.** If He was right, Christianity is true. If He was wrong, then -
3. **He either knew He was wrong, or did not know He was wrong.** The first phrase is the "liar" option of the trilemma. Holding examines the evidence for the notion that Jesus was a liar before concluding

“In summary, the whole idea of Jesus as a noble liar is intuitively fishy, highly speculative, and runs against the grain of every social and historical aspect of the situation as we know it... They are purely speculative and totally counter-evidentiary. Indeed, who in history has gone to their death for the sake of something like this that they knew

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<sup>12</sup> McDowell page 158-161

<sup>13</sup> McDowell page 162

<sup>14</sup> McDowell page 162

was a lie? Many have died for principles they believed were true and righteous - Socrates, for example, and the noble souls who hid Jews in their cellars to protect them from the Nazis - but where has there ever been someone so "noble" that they perpetrated the most outrageous possible lie, something they KNEW was a lie, and died for it, even a lie that was beneficial? The "noble liar" assertion is as hollow as it is speculative; it is groundless, baseless, and worthless.”<sup>15</sup>

4. **If He did not know he was wrong, He lacked knowledge because of an error in judgment.** Errors in judgment have only two sources: A properly working mind, or an improperly working mind. The latter is the "lunatic" option. The former is **the "honestly mistaken"** option, the most common skeptical attempt to add to the trilemma.

Therefore, the basic formal logical structure of the argument remains sound - and the trilemma must be reckoned with one way or the other”<sup>16</sup>

In addressing the question of whether Jesus could have been honestly mistaken. Holding writes

“I really doubt that this argument can be made to have any force. If one takes oneself to be messiah, and/or divine, then eventually one must ACT like a messiah - righting wrongs, coming to the rescue the underdog, healing disease, raising the dead... If one fails in said attempts, then eventually the rug is pulled out from underneath, and we must either face facts and find a job sorting laundry, or else drive ourselves to a frenzy trying to make ourselves be the messiah we want to be! I simply see no way for this option to hold water - if Jesus went about doing the things that He did, He would have been VERY lucky to get as far as the Crucifixion; and then we have the Resurrection appearances and the work of the Apostles to explain! Bottom line: The character and nature of the claims of Jesus are such that proof of being mistaken would all too easily come to pass!”<sup>17</sup>

In order to explore the claim that Jesus was a lunatic or deluded. Holding consulted a non-Christian psychiatrist and asked him what are the characteristics of a person who thinks he is the messiah but is not are. This condition is known as the Messiah complex.

“The Messiah complex is consistent, does not lend itself to periods of lucidity, and does not ... develop slowly over time. It is accompanied by other serious behavioural problems, none of which

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> J P Holding Jesus On the Trail of the Trilema [http://www.tektonics.org/tekton\\_01\\_03\\_01.html](http://www.tektonics.org/tekton_01_03_01.html) 23  
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<sup>17</sup> Ibid

we have evidence Jesus exhibited.”<sup>18</sup> Secondly a person suffering from the Messiah complex is not likely to mislead people for very long. Again Jesus does not fit the characteristic, Jesus reputation as the Messiah grew very rapidly and to vast numbers of people. Finally people suffering from the messiah complex make themselves the centre of attention, and display extreme selfishness and engage in every form of self promotion. Jesus showed none of these characteristics.

Having dismissed the Liar and Lunatic options we are faced with the conclusion that Jesus is who claimed to be.

*Jesus Christ is no mere historical figure. When you encounter Him, He gently challenges you, "Who do you say I am?" (Matt 16:15) Is he liar or lunatic (because His claims to be God are so outrageous)? Or could he really be our Lord and our God, as Thomas (the ex-doubter) had declared (John 20:28)? Whatever it is, there is no middle ground, no sitting on the fence": we can never look at Him as just a good man anymore. To the honest inquirer, Jesus invites, "Come and see. (John 1:39) Read My words, find out what My Apostles and My Church say about Me. Test My claims, and see if they are historical, true and valid. And once you have discovered the reason to believe, ask me for the gift of faith<sup>19</sup>*

## **JESUS IS A HISTORICAL PERSON**

Before exploring how well Jesus fits the Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah, we shall see whether we can find information external to the Bible that proves Jesus existed as an historical person. In fact a surprising amount of detail can be gathered from considering the writings of historians who were contemporary with the Apostles and Early Fathers. Consider

### 1. Tacitus, a first century Roman historian wrote

“Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures of 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 Pilatus, 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, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular. [Annals 15.44]<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Kelvin Chia Jesus Christ - The Only Person Ever Pre-Announced  
<http://home2.pacific.net.sg/~exxco/actje02.htm> Chia quotes from Fulton J Sheen Life of Christ Chapter One 23 February 2002

<sup>20</sup> Geisler, N. L. (1999). *Baker encyclopedia of Christian apologetics*. Baker reference library (Page 381). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.

This quotation contains a reference to the fact that Christ had been executed at the hands of Pontius Pilate. Arising out of the event of Christ's execution a "mischeivous superstition" had developed and spread from Judea to Rome. Geisler argues that the term "mischeivous superstition" refers to the proclamation that Christ had risen from the dead.

2. Suetonius, who was the chief secretary to the emperor Hadrian who reigned as Roman emperor from 117 A.D to 138 A.D, recorded the following two important statements.

Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from the city. [*Claudius*, 25]

After the great fire at Rome. . . . Punishments were also inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief. [*Nero*, 16]<sup>21</sup>

From these two statements Geisler makes several observations

"There was a man named *Chrestus* (or Christ) who lived during the first century. Certain Jews caused disturbances relating to this man. Suetonius, writing many years later, was not in a position to know whether the disturbances were instigated by Chrestus or by Jews against his followers. At any rate Claudius became annoyed enough to throw every Jew out of the city (including Paul's associates Aquila and Priscilla) in 49. Also, Christians were persecuted after the Rome fire, and they had professed a new religious belief."<sup>22</sup>

3. Flavius Josephus, the famous Jewish historian (37/38-97A.D) who wrote the *Antiquities of the Jews* towards the end of the first century identified James as the Lord's brother and recorded that James had been put to death by stoning at the hands of the Sanhedrim. Josephus also recorded the following controversial statement

"Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats. . . . He was [the] Christ . . . he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. [*Antiquities* 18:3]"<sup>23</sup>

This passage is controversial in light of the fact that Josephus was a Jew and therefore extremely unlikely to suggest that Jesus was more than a man. Josephus appears to go even further and appears to acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ. On this basis some scholars have refused to accept the statement as genuine. However there is an Arabic version of the *Antiquities* that is in existence today that appears to confirm the above quotation an English translation reads

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<sup>21</sup>Geisler, N. L. (1999). *Baker encyclopedia of Christian apologetics*. Baker reference library (Page 381). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.

<sup>22</sup>Geisler, N. L. (1999) *Baker encyclopedia of Christian apologetics* Baker reference library (page 381) Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.

<sup>23</sup>Geisler, N. L. (1999) *Baker encyclopedia of Christian apologetics* Baker reference library (Page 382) Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books.

“At this time there was a wise man named Jesus. His conduct was good and [he] was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who became his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive; accordingly he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders. [cited in Habermas, 186]”<sup>24</sup>

Even if we conclude that the reference to Jesus being the Christ is a latter insertion, there seems no doubt that Josephus accepted that Jesus was an historical virtuous person who was crucified at the hands of Pontius Pilate.

4. Although there are no copies of Thallus writings in existence today, traces of his writing have been preserved by other ancient writers who quoted from him. An example of this is Julius Africanus who quotes Thallus as writing

“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. [*Extant Writings*, 18 in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*]”<sup>25</sup>

Thallus writing clearly shows that he accepted Jesus as an historical person. What is striking about the above quote is that Thallus appears to be trying to explain the supernatural events that occurred at Jesus’ death with a natural explanation that the events were caused by a solar eclipse. However Africanus refutes that there was a solar eclipse at the time of Jesus death.

5. Pliny the Younger, who was a Roman administrator and author in writing to the emperor Trajan in about 112 A.D stated

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 do 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. [*Letters* 10:96]<sup>26</sup>

Pliny the Younger confirmed that the early Christians worshipped Jesus as God and by centring upon Christ had developed strong ethic and moral standards. Their worship included the singing of songs in the honour of Christ; they participated in some form of assembly that involved food. We presume that this reference is to the Love feast and Lord’s Supper that the early church celebrated.

6. A Talmudic writing, Sanhedrin 43A, written sometime between 70 and 200 A.D. records

On the eve of Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, “He is going

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<sup>24</sup>Geisler, N. L. (1999) *Baker encyclopedia of Christian apologetics*. Baker reference library (Page 382) Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books.

<sup>25</sup>Geisler, N. L. (1999) *Baker encyclopedia of Christian apologetics* Baker reference library (Page 382) Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books.

<sup>26</sup>Geisler, N. L. (1999) *Baker encyclopedia of Christian apologetics* Baker reference library (Page 382) Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books.

forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Any one who can say anything in his favour, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.” But since nothing was brought forward in his favour he was hanged on the eve of the Passover! [*Babylonian Talmud*]<sup>27</sup>

This is a remarkable quotation as Muncaster observes in this passage “the Jewish leaders actually admitted Jesus’ existence, his crucifixion (“hanged” on a tree), the motive for wanting him “stoned” (“having enticed Israel to Apostasy”) – his claim to be God and his miracle working (“sorcery”).”<sup>28</sup> What is also remarkable is that contained in the passage is a report that before Jesus execution the Sanhedrin had set about a campaign and proclamation aimed at putting Jesus to death. The Sanhedrin seems to have been planning on executing Jesus by stoning him and not by crucifixion. Had Jesus been put to death by stoning the Old Testament prophecies concerning His manner of death would not have been fulfilled. This is further evidence that God the Father was superintending the events of Jesus trial, crucifixion and resurrection.

7. Another important early century reference to Jesus and His followers is that of Lucian. Lucian, a second century Greek writer, was somewhat sarcastic towards Christianity and wrote

The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account . . . You see, these misguided creatures start with the general conviction that they are immortal for all time, which explains the contempt of death and voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them; and then it was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws. All this they take quite on faith, with the result that they despise all worldly goods alike, regarding them merely as common property. [*Death of Pelegrine*, 11–13]<sup>29</sup>

Although Lucian himself wrote with a sarcastic tone, found within his writings is one of the most complete records of early Christian practice. Lucian informs the reader that

“Jesus was worshiped by Christians. He had introduced new teachings and had been crucified for his teachings. His teachings included the brotherhood of believers, the importance of conversion, and the importance of denying other gods. Christians lived according to Jesus’ laws. Further, the followers of Jesus believed themselves immortal and were characterized by contempt for death, voluntary self-devotion, and renunciation of material goods.”<sup>30</sup>

When we consider the combined effect of these early century non-Christian writings we can obtain the following picture

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<sup>27</sup>Geisler, N. L. (1999). *Baker encyclopedia of Christian apologetics* Baker reference library (Page 383) Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books.

<sup>28</sup> Muncaster page 220

<sup>29</sup>Geisler, N. L. (1999) *Baker encyclopedia of Christian apologetics* Baker reference library (Page 383). Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books.

<sup>30</sup>Geisler, N. L. (1999) *Baker encyclopedia of Christian apologetics* Baker reference library (Page 383) Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books.

“(1) Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate at Passover time. (2) He was believed by his disciples to have risen from the dead three days later. (3) Jewish leaders charged Christ with sorcery and believed he was born of adultery. (4) The Judean sect of Christianity could not be contained but spread even to Rome. (5) Nero and other Roman rulers bitterly persecuted and martyred early Christians. (6) These early Christians denied polytheism, lived dedicated lives according to Christ’s teachings, and worshiped Christ. This picture is perfectly congruent with that of the New Testament<sup>31</sup>

McDowell has concluded that the testimony

“Both Christian and non-Christian, is more than sufficient to lay to rest any idea that Jesus, in fact, never existed. In light of the evidence, it is absurd to hold such a view. We know more about the life of Jesus than just about any other figure in the ancient world. His birth, life, and death are revealed in much more detail than most ancient figures whose existence is taken for granted by historians.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Geisler, N. L. (1976) *Christian apologetics*. Includes index (Page 325) Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

<sup>32</sup>McDowell, J., & Stewart, D. (1997, c1993). *Answers to tough questions : Skeptics ask about the Christian faith* (electronic ed.). Nashville: Thomas Nelson. Section Jesus Christ Section- Question “A Friend of mind said Jesus never existed? How do you answer something like this?”