

A) INTRODUCTION:

- a. The historicity of Jesus of Nazareth is a question that has both captivated and plagued scholars through the ages. Did this Jesus actually live? Was He who He claimed to be... the Messiah and Son of God? Was he merely a man? Was he a myth or merely an ideal of what humanity could ascribe to become? The problem is that if He is who He claims to be, then all of history and eternity find meaning in His life and teachings. If He can be reduced to merely an ideal or anything less than God in the Flesh Messiah, then humanity is free to do what we please without constraint or consequence. What is “the TRUTH?” In this argument two distinct camps form – those who believe, and those for any number of reasons don’t want to believe. For much of my life I was in the latter camp... I didn’t want to believe. But God has a great sense of humor, and through a number of experiences both natural and supernatural... I found myself convinced and in the former camp. If Jesus was mere man, I am free to do as I choose. When Jesus became God in the flesh, I am constrained to reorder my life to obey and serve Him. I have to say, believing is a much better alternative that not... I gain peace and contentment now, and eternity with God ever after.
- b. Prophecy throughout Biblical literature [Judeo-Christian Scripture] clearly points to a Messiah who will come, One who would be called the “Son of Man” meaning of the same substance and nature of being human; and the “Son of God” meaning of the same substance and nature of being God. We will explore the historical evidence to gain perspective on who Jesus is... God, man, or myth. This article will begin with a brief review of a few Old Covenant Scriptures [Old Testament] that point to the Messiah who was to come, then move to the New Covenant [New Testament] Scriptures written by those who by all accounts knew Jesus best, His disciples. Then we will move to the extra-Biblical historical records for validation of his existence and identity.
 - i. This Messiah is first introduced in Genesis 3:15... being the One who would be wounded by the serpent [Satan striking Messiah’s heel], and who would then deal the Serpent a death blow [crushing the Serpent’s head]. This prophetically spoke of Jesus’ ministry comprised of His Advent [coming to earth as human], His teaching the Way to know and experience God, His atoning death on the cross, and His resurrection and ascent back into heaven.
 - ii. The “Suffering Servant Songs” of Isaiah speak directly of the Messiah who would suffer and yet fulfill God’s redemptive plan to reconcile humanity relationally with God. Isaiah prophetically saw “A New Covenant, a New Servant, and a New Age” – 40:1-55:13 – This is a prophetic view of healing and consolation in a hopeful future that is clarified in the Christian New Testament. Here is a short piece of the structure of Isaiah presented on the AD website under the Biblical Literacy/Prophetic Writings section:
 - A) The Consolation of the World – 40:1-42:17
 1. FIRST SERVANT SONG – 42:1-4 -
 - a. The consolation of the Jews [Zion] – 40:1-41:20
 - b. The consolation of the Gentiles [Nations] – 41:21-42:17
 - c. The Redemption of Israel – 42:18-44:23

i. Release from bondage – 42:18-43:21

ii. Release from Sin – 43:22-44:23

iii. Political Deliverance [Cyrus – temporary] – 44:24-48:22

B) Spiritual Deliverance – the Servant delivering Permanent [Eternal] Grace – 49:1-55:13

2. SECOND SERVANT SONG –

a. The Servant's double task – 49:1-13

b. Israel's unresponsiveness – 49:14-50:3

3. THIRD SERVANT SONG –

a. the Servant's responsiveness – 50:4-11

b. Yahweh's deliverance of Israel – 51:1-52:12

4. FOURTH SERVANT SONG – 52:13-53:12

a. A new Covenant and a New Age – 54:1-17

b. A Call to repentance and Invitation to a New Age Feast – 55:1-13

iii. Jesus inaugurated his ministry in this passage from Luke 4:14-21

"Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

As we shall see, Luke clearly wrote this Gospel and the Book of Acts from a classical Greco-Roman perspective. He clearly presented his writings as unquestionable historical facts.

iv. In the New Testament, Jesus clearly spoke of Himself both as "Son of Man" and "Son of God" ... thereby presenting Himself as the only One who could fulfill God's plan of redeeming humanity. The Apostle John taught repeatedly that Jesus was the God/man Messiah who would save the world. John wrote convincingly of Jesus' Resurrection in John 20:27-31

Then Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me [resurrected], you have believed; but blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

- c. **Jesus and his earliest followers clearly identified that he was both the Son of God and Son of Man, clearly meaning that He was both human and divine, whose mission was the redemption of humanity. For more on this topic, please go to the AD article in Leadership Development/Discipleship Studies/6.2 – Jesus Mission of Redemption.**
- d. **In this AD article “In Search of the Historical Jesus” we will look at the Hebrew, Greco-Roman and Christian historical record confirming that Jesus truly lived during a specific part of the Redemptive Historical Timeline, that he was human, and that his mission was fulfilling God’s Will and Purpose to redeem humanity, that He is who He claimed to be. Three articles will be presented below that help validate Jesus as God’s historical redemptive agent.**

B) “What is the Historical Evidence that Jesus Christ Lived and Died” – from The Guardian, written by *Simon Gathercole*, *Reader in New Testament Studies at the University of Cambridge*, edited by AD for content and clarity. Quick Link to *The Guardian* website and the unedited original form of this article is – <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/14/what-is-the-historical-evidence-that-jesus-christ-lived-and-died> .

a. How confident can we be that Jesus Christ actually lived?

The historical evidence for Jesus of Nazareth is both long-established and widespread. Within a few decades of his lifetime, he is mentioned both by Jewish and Roman historians, as well as by dozens of Christian writings. Compare that with, for example the legendary King Arthur, who is thought to have lived around AD 500. The major historical sources for events of that time does not even mention Arthur, and he is first referred to 300 or 400 years after he is supposed to have lived. Instead the evidence for Jesus is verified by numerous current historical writers and not limited to later folklore, as are the legendary accounts of Arthur.

b. What did Christian authors tell us about Jesus?

The value of this evidence is that it is both early and detailed. The first Christian writings to talk about Jesus are the epistles of James and Paul, and scholars agree that James being the earliest of these letters was written within 15 years or so of Jesus’s death [30 AD]. Paul’s epistles would have been written 5-10 years after James at the very latest, followed by the detailed biographical accounts of Jesus in the New Testament gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke dated from around 40 years after he died. These all appeared within the lifetimes of numerous eye witnesses, and provide descriptions that comport with the culture and geography of first-century Palestine. It is also difficult to imagine why Christian writers would invent such a thoroughly Jewish savior figure in such a time and place under the aegis of the Roman empire where there was strong suspicion [and even animosity] of Judaism. These early Christian writers uniformly report that 1) Jesus was truly human. 2) Jesus had a miraculous conception and birth. 3) Jesus performed numerous supernatural miracles and signs of wonder validating his divine nature. 4) Jesus ministered in the general region of Palestine. 5) Jesus was executed by Pontius Pilate, and miraculous events accompanied his death. 6) Jesus was physically resurrected and was seen by a great many people who confirmed this fact. 7) Jesus ascended back into heaven and will return for his followers at the end of times.

c. What did non-Christian authors say about Jesus?

As far as we know, the first author outside the church to mention Jesus is the Jewish historian *Flavius Josephus* who wrote a detailed history of Judaism. Josephus made two references to the historical Jesus. One of these is controversial because some think it may have been corrupted by Christian scribes (possibly turning Josephus's more negative account into a more positive one), but the other is not suspicious... it is a reference to James, the brother of "Jesus, the so-called Christ". About 20 years after Josephus we have the Roman politicians Pliny and Tacitus who held some of the highest offices of state at the beginning of the second century AD. From Tacitus we learn that Jesus was executed while Pontius Pilate was the Roman prefect in charge of Judaea (AD 26-36) and Tiberius was emperor (AD 14-37), this report fits well with the timeframe of the gospels. Pliny contributes the information that, where he was governor in northern Turkey, Christians worshipped Jesus Christ as God. Neither of these Roman leaders particularly liked Christians. Pliny writes of their "pig-headed obstinacy" and Tacitus calls their religion a [socially] destructive superstition. [Probably because Christians refused to worship Roman gods or the Emperor, and preferred death to renouncing Jesus because of their certainty of His claims as being God in the flesh].

d. Did other ancient writers discuss the existence of Jesus other than the Bible? Zondervan's Archaeological Study Bible, references several ancient sources on page 1751 in commenting on John 15:

- i. A Jewish Rabbinical text from the Babylonian Talmud: This passage, called b. Sanhedrin 43a asserts that Jesus was "hanged [on a tree- crucified] on Passover eve for being a sorcerer and enticer to apostasy.
- ii. Josephus in his "Testimonium Flavianum" [Antiquities 18.63-64] describing the days of Pontius Pilate states: At this time Jesus, a wise man (if it is appropriate to call him a man), appeared. For he was a worker of incredible deeds, a teacher of men who happily receive the truth, and he drew to himself many Jews – and many Greeks too. This man was the Christ. And when Pilate had executed him at the instigation of the leading men among us, those who at first loved him did not give up. For he appeared to them on the third day alive again (the divine prophets had spoken concerning him of these and countless other wonders [he performed]. And to this day the tribe of "Christians" (named after him) has not vanished.
- iii. [Another reference is] Suetonius in Claudius 25.4 of the Lives of Caesars AD 120, describes riots among the Jews at Rome during the reign of Claudius in AD 49. He states that these riots were instigated by "Chrestus," which numerous scholars suggest to be a garbled version of "Christ." The Roman authorities in 49 AD could easily have misunderstood the cause of the Jewish upheavals in their city. Jews rioting because of the presence of Christians among them... Romans seeking to make sense of the troubles could have jumped to the conclusion that someone named "Chrestus" was at the center of it. Local authorities in Rome at this early stage of Christian history would have possessed little knowledge of this new religion or the degree of discord it had already created among the Jews. It is worth noting that this expulsion of Jews from Rome is also mentioned in Acts 18:2.
- iv. The Roman historian Tacitus, writing in approximately 115 AD, mentioned Christians in

Annals, 15.44. Although he regarded Christianity as a superstition, he nevertheless made clear that Nero had wrongly implicated church, is ample. as scapegoats for the fires at Rome in 64 AD. Of the term “Christian,” he stated, “The author of this name, Christ, suffered the ultimate penalty at the hands of the procurator Pontius Pilate during the imperium of Tiberius.” That Jesus was crucified during the reign of Tiberius (14-37 AD) is also indicated in the New Testament.

- v. [Finally,] to put the issue in perspective, it is important to realize in general scanty evidence of any kind from the ancient world actually is. Many persons from ancient history would be unknown to us except for mention in a single historical document or inscription, and there are significant gaps in our knowledge. All things considered, the evidence for the historical Jesus in ancient sources, to say nothing of the New Testament and the Christian

Strikingly, there was never any debate in the ancient world about whether Jesus of Nazareth was a historical figure. In the earliest literature of the Jewish Rabbis, Jesus was denounced as the illegitimate child of Mary and considered to be a sorcerer [probably because of the many supernatural events associated with him]. Among pagans, the satirist Lucian and philosopher Celsus dismissed Jesus as a scoundrel, but we know of no one in the ancient world who questioned whether Jesus lived.

e. How controversial is the existence of Jesus now?

In a recent book, the French philosopher Michel Onfray talks of Jesus as a mere hypothesis with his existence more as an idea rather than as a historical figure. Unfortunately, there are always those who re-write or reinterpret history in a manner suitable to their own philosophical or social interests, that is why the earliest references hold the greater weight of truth. About ten years ago, The Jesus Project was set up in the United States with one of its main questions for discussion being whether or not Jesus truly existed. Some authors have even argued that Jesus of Nazareth was doubly non-existent, contending that both Jesus and Nazareth are Christian inventions. It is worth noting, though, that the two mainstream historians who have written most against these hyper-skeptical arguments are atheists... having an interest not necessarily served by historical accuracy. They are Maurice Casey (formerly of Nottingham University) and Bart Ehrman (University of North Carolina). They have both issued stinging criticisms of the “Jesus-myth” approach, branding it “pseudo-scholarship” [pseudo-scholarship is ignoring what is known to be true in favor of what you prefer to be true.] Nevertheless, a recent survey discovered that 40% of adults in England did not believe that Jesus was a real historical figure.

f. Is there any archaeological evidence for Jesus?

Part of the popular confusion around the historicity of Jesus may be caused by peculiar archaeological arguments raised in relation to him. Recently there have been claims that Jesus was a great-grandson of Cleopatra, complete with ancient coins allegedly showing Jesus wearing his crown of thorns. In some circles, there is still great interest in the Shroud of Turin, supposedly Jesus’s burial shroud. Pope Benedict XVI stated that it was something that “no human artistry was capable of producing” [especially at the time] and an “icon of Holy Saturday”.

A number of Christian home-churches that date to the first and second century AD have been found in the Middle-East validating the presence of the early church movement. Christianity

ultimately became the official religion of the Roman Empire ushered in by stages under Emperor Constantine beginning in 313 AD. Since that time churches, monasteries and cathedrals commemorating sacred Christian history have been constructed throughout the region.

- g. **Conclusion:** While Christian archaeologists regard this material as serious factual proof, others refute it because the archaeology itself like history is open to interpretation. However, the documents produced by numerous Christian, Jewish, and Roman writers in the first century AD form the most significant evidence validating that Jesus truly existed as a real person of historical significance. The abundant historical and archaeological references leave us with little reasonable doubt that Jesus actually lived and died. The more interesting question, which goes beyond history and objective fact into the field of theology, is whether Jesus died and lived again. The most compelling evidence supporting Jesus resurrection is the observable objective transformation of Jesus' disciples from simple fishermen into men and women who stood their ground before the Roman magistrates and changed the world. Another is the historical fact that the Roman Empire undertook an extensive persecution of Christians beginning with Nero in AD 70. Many of these early believers were eye witnesses to Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection... who willingly went to their death rather than recant their faith. It was reported that nearly a million Christians were martyred for their faith in the first century alone. Then as now, few people will knowingly die for what they know to be a lie. The fact that these martyrs, many of whom were eye-witnesses to the events depicted in the New Testament Scriptures, preferred to accept death because of Jesus' promise of eternal life. I find the evidence of the Apostles' and a host of courageous Christ-followers stance against the empire including torture and death to be the most compelling fact from this historical period validating Jesus life, death, and resurrection. The more the authoritative state tried to stamp out Christ-followers, the more they spread. One writer remarked that Christians were singing hymns as they awaited their death. Compelling.

- C) **"The Reality of the Historical Jesus"** – From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. The original article may be found at - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_Jesus . As a student of antiquity and a Christian Anthropologist, I enjoyed the structure and scholastic detail of the Wikipedia article. However, as a pastor and Christian scholar I found many errors where the authors had read their own theology or intellectual philosophy into the history they presented which distorted rather than clarified the truth. Rather than being neutral and presenting the facts as they are, they presented an argument that is actually hostile to faith. To remedy this one-sided matter, I kept the structure of the material and most of the content, but removed the overly editorialized thoughts. Also, I found the excessive use of references made the article unnecessarily tough to read. It was my assessment that the authors' over use of various references was a tacit editorialization of the material. This material has been edited for content and clarity by AD.

- a. **Historical Jesus** – this term refers to attempts to "reconstruct the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth by critical historical methods," in "contrast to Christological definitions ('the church's theology of Christ') and other Christian accounts of Jesus ('the Christ of faith and practice')." This approach considers both the known historical and the reconstructed cultural context in which Jesus lived.
- i. Virtually all scholars who write on the subject agree that Jesus [Christ] existed as a real

historical person, although scholars differ about the nature of the Christian belief system and the interpretation of the various teachings of Jesus. Since there are scholars of liberal or moderate or conservative interpretation of these texts, it is understandable that some scholars would be known to question the accuracy of the Biblical accounts as well as their application.

1. The only two events received with "almost universal assent" are that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist and was crucified by the order of the Roman Prefect Pontius Pilate.
 2. Historical scholars typically contend that Jesus was a Galilean Jew living in a time of high Messianic and Apocalyptic expectations.
 3. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist [his cousin], whose example he may have followed.
 4. After John was executed, Jesus began his own preaching in Galilee for about three years prior to his execution. Jesus preached salvation [atonement], personal cleansing [freedom] from sin and death, and the Kingdom of God [eternal life], using parables with startling imagery and Hebrew prophetic similes.
 5. Some scholars credit the apocalyptic declarations of the Gospels to Jesus, while others portray his concept of the Kingdom of God as a moral one, and not apocalyptic in nature. Evangelical scholars accept it as being both.
 6. Jesus sent his disciples and later his apostles out to heal the oppressed and to preach the Kingdom of God.
 7. At the end of his teaching ministry, he traveled to Jerusalem in Judea, where he caused a major disturbance at the Temple. This was the time of Passover, when political and religious tensions were high in Jerusalem. The Gospels say that the *temple guards* (believed to be Sadducees) arrested him and turned him over to Pontius Pilate for execution.
 8. Evangelical Christians understand that the land-rich Sadducees preferred the status quo to the revolutionary "faith first" approach Jesus taught.
 9. The reform movement Jesus had started survived his death and was carried on by his half-brother James the Just and the apostles who had each witnessed and proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus. These actions developed into Early Christianity as documented in the New Testament... especially in the Book of Acts.
- ii. A number of scholars have criticized the various approaches used in the study of the historical Jesus... on one hand, for the lack of a consistent rigor in research methods; on the other, for being driven by "specific agendas" that interpret ancient sources to fit specific theological and interpretative goals. By the 21st century, the "maximalist" approaches of the 19th century which accepted all the Gospels and the "minimalist" trends of the early 20th century which totally rejected them were abandoned, and scholars began to focus on what is both "historically probable and plausible" about Jesus... who was obviously one of the most pivotal and polarizing individuals in history.
- iii. **For more on the value and use of the Gospels, please refer to the Introduction to the Gospels available on the AD website, here is a quick link –**

<http://authenticdiscipleship.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Bible-Survey-NT-1.1-Intro-to-Gospels.pdf>

b. Historical Elements:

- i. **Existence** – Most contemporary scholars of antiquity agree that Jesus existed, and most Biblical scholars and classical historians see the theories of his nonexistence as having been effectively refuted. There is no indication that writers in antiquity who opposed Christianity questioned the existence of Jesus. However, there is widespread disagreement among scholars on some of the details of the life of Jesus mentioned in the gospel narratives, and on the meaning and application of his teachings. Some scholars differ on the historicity of specific episodes described in the biblical accounts of Jesus, and some historians tend to look upon the supernatural or miraculous claims about Jesus as questions of faith, rather than historical fact.
- ii. **Evidence of Jesus** – There is really no significant physical or archaeological evidence for Jesus' specific ministry. All historical sources are primarily documentary and mainly Christian writings, such as the gospels and the letters of the apostles. The archaeological evidence is limited primarily to the Church founded in Jesus' name. There have been questions regarding the authenticity and reliability of some of these written sources, which have been questioned by scholars through the ages. Recent archaeological developments such as the discovery and interpretation of the "Dead Sea Scrolls" has validated a great many ancient Scriptures. However, not all events mentioned in the gospels are universally accepted. In conjunction with biblical sources, three mentions of Jesus in non-Christian sources have been well used in the historical analyses of the existence of Jesus. These are two passages in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus and one from the Roman historian Tacitus:
 1. Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*, written around 93–94 AD, includes two references to the biblical Jesus Christ in Books 18 and 20. The general scholarly view is that the longer passage, known as the Testimonium Flavianum, is most likely not authentic in its entirety. It is agreed by many that it probably originally consisted of an authentic nucleus, which was later subject to Christian interpolation. Of the other mention in Josephus, scholar Louis H. Feldman has stated that "few have doubted the genuineness" of Josephus' reference to Jesus in *Antiquities* 20, 9, 1 and it is only disputed by a small number of scholars. Thus, if not conclusive of his claim to deity, these serve as substantial evidence of his historical existence.
 2. Roman historian Tacitus referred to Jesus as "Christus" and confirmed his execution by Pontius Pilate in his *Annals* (written c. AD 116), book 15, chapter 44. Robert E. Van Voorst states that the very negative tone of Tacitus' comments on Christians make the passage extremely unlikely to have been forged by a Christian scribe who most certainly would have been more gracious to Christians. Christian scholars Boyd and Eddy state that the Tacitus reference is now widely accepted as an independent confirmation of Christ's crucifixion.
 3. Other considerations outside Christendom are the possible mentions of Jesus in the

Jewish Talmud. The Talmud speaks in some detail of the conduct of criminal cases of Israel, and these were gathered in one place from 200-500 AD [C.E.]. One entry states, "On the eve of the Passover Yeshua [Jesus] was hanged [crucified on a cross]. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, "He is going forth to be executed because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy." The first date of the Sanhedrin judiciary council being recorded as functioning is 57 BC [B.C.E.]. This entry is certainly less critical of the Jewish role in Jesus' execution, but none-the less confirm it occurred.

iii. Two Widely Accepted Historical Facts – Almost all modern scholars consider Jesus' baptism and crucifixion to be historical facts.

1. John P. Meier views the crucifixion of Jesus as historical fact and states that, based on the *criterion of embarrassment*, Christians would not have invented the painful death of their leader had it not actually happened. Meier states that a number of other criteria — 1) the *criterion of multiple attestation* (i.e., confirmation by more than one source), 2) the *criterion of coherence* (i.e., that it fits with other historical elements) and 3) the *criterion of rejection* (i.e., that it is not disputed by ancient sources) — all help establish the crucifixion of Jesus as a valid historical event. Christian scholars Eddy and Boyd state that it is now firmly established that there is non-Christian confirmation of the crucifixion of Jesus – referring to the sources mentioned both in Josephus and Tacitus.
2. Most scholars in the quest for the historical Jesus consider the crucifixion to be indisputable, as do Bart Ehrman, John Dominic Crossan and James Dunn. Although most scholars agree on the historicity of the crucifixion, some differ on the purpose and context for it. E. P. Sanders and Paula Fredriksen support the historicity of the crucifixion, but contend that Jesus did not foretell his own crucifixion, and that his prediction of the crucifixion is a Christian story. Geza Vermes also views the crucifixion as a historical event but believes this was due to Jesus' challenging of Roman authority not due to the duplicity of the Jewish leaders. In any event, the purpose for Jesus' crucifixion can best be stated that the Hebrew and Christian groups had significantly different interpretations:
 - a. Hebrew Scriptures long prophesied of a Messianic deliverer who would save the Jews. The Jewish leaders interpreted this deliverance in terms of a political leader who would overthrow the occupation of the Roman Empire. This was not Jesus' message, and he was rejected by the Jewish leadership.
 - b. Christian Scriptures explained that Jesus repeatedly stated that His Kingdom was not of this world... instead of the political leader the Jews wanted, Jesus was the Spiritual deliverer the world needed. This is the "Good News" of the Gospel message and the basis of the hope Christian hold onto.
3. The existence of John the Baptist within the same time frame as Jesus, and his eventual execution by Herod Antipas is attested to by first century historian Josephus and the overwhelming majority of modern scholars view Josephus' accounts of the activities of John the Baptist as authentic. One of the arguments in

favor of the historicity of the Baptism¹ of Jesus by John is the criterion of embarrassment, meaning that it is a story which the early Christian Church would have never wanted to invent. Another argument used in favor of the historicity of the baptism is that multiple accounts refer to it, usually called the criterion of multiple attestation. Technically, multiple attestation does not guarantee authenticity, but rightly determines antiquity; and for most scholars, together with the criterion of embarrassment, it lends credibility for the Baptism of Jesus by John being a historical event.

- iv. Other possibly historical elements** – In addition to the two historical elements of Baptism and Crucifixion, scholars attribute varying levels of certainty to various other aspects of the life of Jesus, although there is no universal agreement among scholars on these items... again mainly upon either theological or philosophical grounds. Amy-Jill Levine has stated that "there is a consensus of sorts on the basic outline of Jesus' life. Most scholars agree that Jesus was baptized by John, debated with fellow Jews on how best to live according to God's will, engaged in healings and exorcisms, taught in parables, gathered male and female followers throughout Galilee, went to Jerusalem, and was crucified by Roman soldiers during the governorship of Pontius Pilate (26-36 CE)."

In addition, various scholars have proposed that an approximate chronology of Jesus can be estimated from non-Christian sources, and confirmed by correlating them with New Testament accounts:

1. John the Baptist [Jesus' cousin] was born between 7-5 BC.
2. Jesus was a Galilean Jew who was likely born between 4 and 2 BC and died between 30 and 32 AD. Herod is believed to have died in 1 BC, so he would have sought out baby Jesus somewhere between 3-2 BC. [View this quick link to a very interesting documentary on the birth of Jesus available for free on You Tube - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7YTE7WFB6Y>]
3. Jesus lived only in Galilee and Judea, and never travelled or studied outside of the general region of Galilee, Samaria and Judea.
4. Jesus spoke Aramaic and may have also spoken Hebrew and Greek. James D. G. Dunn states that there is "substantial consensus" that Jesus gave his teachings in Aramaic, although the Galilean dialect of Aramaic was clearly distinguishable from the Judean dialect, thus the dialect would have identified Jesus and His disciple's upbringing.
5. Claims about the appearance or ethnicity of Jesus are mostly subjective, based on cultural stereotypes and societal trends rather than on scientific analysis. Hence, it is most likely that he looked like a typical Jew of that era... dark complexion and stoutly built, and not the blonde haired-blue eyed stereo-type portrayed in many movies.
6. The Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist can be dated approximately from Josephus'

¹ Note – as a rule we will capitalize the noun form of the term used for the Sacrament, and leave the verb form of the action in lower case.

references (Antiquities 18.5.2)... Jesus is baptized by John in 28 AD, and his ministry begins. John the Baptist was executed in 29 AD. Roman Emperor Tiberius ruled from 14-37 AD.

7. The main topic of Jesus teaching was relieving the oppression and suffering of the poor and disenfranchised, and the advancement of the Kingdom of God. Jesus typically presented this teaching in parables that were surprising and sometimes confounding for his listeners.
8. Jesus taught an ethic of love expressed in kindness and forgiveness, as demonstrated in aphorisms such as "love your enemy," "turn the other cheek," or "go the extra mile."
9. Jesus caused a controversy at the Temple calling out the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders. This should be understood in terms of the Hebrew prophesies especially of Ezekiel 34 where the prophet criticized the self-centered Jewish leadership.
10. The date of the Crucifixion of Jesus had to have been earlier than 36 AD, based on the known dates of the prefecture of Pontius Pilate who sentenced Jesus to death and was governor of Roman Judea from 26 AD until 36 AD. Most scholars hold to a date in the Spring of 30-32 AD for Jesus' execution, burial, Resurrection, and Ascension.

- c. **Portraits of the Historical Jesus** – Since the 18th century, three separate scholarly quests for the historical Jesus have taken place, each with distinct characteristics and developing new and different research criteria. This has resulted in distinct "portraits of Jesus" that have been constructed in these processes which have often differed from each other, and from the theological/philosophical images portrayed in the gospel accounts... and reflective of the philosophical/theological approaches in vogue at the time.
- i. These portraits include that of Jesus portrayed as 1) *Apocalyptic prophet*, 2) *Charismatic healer*, 3) *Cynic philosopher*, 4) *Jewish Messiah* and 5) *Prophet of social change*. However, there is little scholarly agreement on a single portrait, or the methods needed or employed to construct it. There are, however, overlapping attributes among the various portraits, and scholars who differ on some attributes may agree on others.
 - ii. Contemporary scholarship places Jesus firmly within the Jewish tradition, and many scholars see Jesus as the founder of a "'renewal movement within Judaism.'" This approach to scholarship suggests a continuity between Jesus' life as a wandering charismatic and the same lifestyle carried forward by his followers after his death. In other words, Jesus wasn't trying to introduce a new faith [Christianity], but to reform Judaism that had gone awry... consistent with Jesus' condemnation of the Jewish leadership and Ezekiel 34.
 - iii. The main criterion used to discern these contemporary historical details is that of plausibility, relative to Jesus' Jewish context and to his subsequent influence on Christianity. Some scholars in this contemporary research, question whether Jesus was apocalyptic. However, most scholars conclude that Jesus was certainly an apocalyptic preacher, not unlike John the Baptist, the apostle Paul, and the apostle John.
 - iv. Jesus certainly seemed like a cynic especially in his condemnation of the rich and oppressive Jewish leaders, but to brand him a cynic is to remove him from the faith context in which he

- taught. Jesus was sure of the results his ministry would achieve in his “eternal life” perspective in John 12:25, and his “overcome of the world” assertion in John 16:33.
- v. The social change view has led to the development of what is known as the “prosperity gospel.” Prosperity gospel advocates argue that “health, wealth, and happiness” are the birthright of all born-again followers of Jesus. They encourage a “name it and claim it” approach to secure these blessings, although this runs afoul of Jesus’ teaching that “you will always have the poor with you” – John 12:8, and “in this world you will have trouble” – John 16:33.
- d. **The Ministry of Jesus** – Jesus’ public ministry lasted about three-four years before he was executed. His ministry included 1) teaching and preaching, 2) miraculous signs and 3) miracles of healing and deliverance:
- i. Jesus’ preaching and teaching were understood to be Messianic in the sense that the entirety of his ministry demonstrated that he had supernaturally empowered knowledge, and as the Messianic King/Priest he had the right and authority to deliver God’s message to humanity. His message was delivered first to the Jews who had been the custodians of God’s Specific Revelation in the Scriptures. However, the Jews had gone astray and refused Jesus’ attempts of realigning them with God’s purpose – See Ezekiel chapter 34. With the Jewish leaderships’ refusal to accept God’s appointed messengers including John the Baptist and Jesus, and their refusal to repent of their wickedness, the way had now been opened for the Nations [Gentiles] to come to God.
 - ii. Jesus performed various miraculous signs and these events powerfully demonstrated that He was who he claimed to be, namely the Messiah. Son of Man and Son of God were two prophetic names He preferred to call himself, again identifying that He was the Messiah. These miracles were primarily documented in Scripture in the course of his ministry, and referenced in extra-Biblical writings as Jesus being a “sorcerer” [see section B-d on page 4 of this article]. These miracles included turning the water to wine, healing of those born blind or lame, powerfully exorcising demons, raising the dead-man Lazarus, calming the storm, his own remarkable death and resurrection... all of which demonstrated Jesus’ authority over creation, demonstrating his divinity.
 - iii. The healings, and exorcisms are super-natural events understood as Jesus setting the oppressed and the captives free – Isaiah 42:7, 49:9, 61:1. The majority of Biblical scholars agree that Jesus was both a healer and an exorcist. In Mark 3:22, Jesus’ opponents accuse him of being possessed by Beelzebub, which they claimed gave him the power to exorcise demons... Jesus refuted their insult. These supernatural works were intended to demonstrate that he was who he said he was... God in the flesh divinity. Extrabiblical sources for Jesus performing miracles include Josephus, Celsus, and the Jewish Talmud.
- e. **Crucifixion** – Jesus was crucified by Pontius Pilate, who was the Prefect of Judaea province in the years 26 to 36 AD. Many Biblical scholars suggest that Pilate executed Jesus for sedition against the Roman Emperor, and that this was no doubt Pilate’s rationale for labeling Jesus’ cross for the reason for his condemnation – “King of the Jews.” It seems clear that this judgment recognized it was expedient for Pilate to execute Jesus than confront the Jews during the high-holy days of

Passover. Pilate's execution order occurred with the cooperation of the Jewish authorities, and the Biblical account says they initiated it and pursued it over Pilate's protestations. It seems obvious that Pilate did not want to foment a public confrontation with the Jewish leaders during the high-holy week of Passover with the city swelled with out of town worshippers. It is understood that Jesus' "Cleansing of the Temple" accompanied with his condemnations of the Jewish establishment's self-serving hypocrisy certainly offended this segment of the Jewish audience, while it no doubt delighted the working-class poor who struggled under both Roman and Jewish Taxes. Bart Ehrman argued that Jesus' actions would have been considered treasonous and thus a capital offense by the Romans would have been reasonable.

- f. **Burial and Empty Tomb** – Craig A. Evans contends that, "the literary, historical and archaeological evidence points in one direction – that the body of Jesus was placed in a tomb, according to Jewish custom." Habermas argued that the response of Jewish authorities against Christian claims for the Resurrection presupposed a burial and empty tomb. First century burial customs included collecting the bones after an appropriate time of decomposition and placing them in an ossuary [a sort of stone box meant to hold the bones of the deceased]. The ossuary would be labeled with the name of the person it contained. Christian scholars consider the burial by Joseph of Arimathea found in Mark 15 to be historically probable. The detailed story of posting a Roman guard as detailed in the New Testament Gospel account, along with the hurried nature of the burial... Pilate likely would not want the body remaining publicly exposed on the cross serving as a reminder of the event during the Passover, hence his assent to release the body to Jesus' friends seems plausible. That Jesus' closest friends would come immediately after the Passover to complete the burial arrangements is also plausible. Some secular scholars and most Christian scholars have gone on to argue that the tomb was discovered empty. More positively, Mark Waterman maintains the Empty Tomb is a priority over the Appearances that followed. Michael Grant wrote: "If we apply the same sort of criteria that we would apply to any other ancient literary sources, then the evidence is firm and plausible enough to necessitate the conclusion that the tomb was indeed found empty." Scholars Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz conclude that "the empty tomb is illuminated by the Easter faith which is based on appearances; the Easter faith cannot be illuminated by the empty tomb alone." Ancient historian Gaetano De Sanctis and legal historian Leopold Wenger, writing in the early 20th century, stated that the empty tomb of Jesus was historically real because of evidence from a Nazareth Inscription discovered.
- g. **Resurrection Appearances:** Peter, John, Mary Magdalene, the Apostles, and many others are recorded in Scripture that they believed they had seen the risen Jesus. Luke recorded the experiences of these early believers in his Gospel and in the Book of Acts that he authored. The epistles of Peter, Paul and James clearly list their own super-natural experiences with the Risen Jesus, and list other reported appearances. The original Gospel of Mark reports Jesus' empty tomb, and the later Gospels and later endings to Mark narrate various post-Resurrection appearances. Scholars have through the centuries put forth a number of theories concerning the Resurrection appearances of Jesus. Modern scholars such as Dale Allison, William Lane Craig, Gary Habermas, and N. T. Wright conclude that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead. Dr Craig is one of Christianity's foremost apologists, and his website <http://www.reasonablefaith.org> contains a compendium of scholarly documents that argue well for the reality of God and the validity of the Scriptural

accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Some scholars believe supernatural events cannot be reconstructed using empirical methods, and thus consider the resurrection a non-historical question of a philosophical or theological nature. However, the Bible while not attempting to be historical, does have a vast content of historical and cultural information as well as its theological and philosophical material. Thus, the witness of the Bible and the scholarship it represents should not be underestimated. One of the best Bibles I have found is Zondervan's Archaeological Study Bible that combines history, archaeology, and cultural insights that bring the Biblical text alive.

D) CONCLUSION – I can't think of a better conclusion than the following Question and Answer article The Challenge of History: An Interview with William Lane Craig. Dr. Craig is a noted scholar and Christian Apologist, a brand of theology arguing for the validity of the Christian faith.

The most distinctive claim about Christianity in relation to other world religions is that Christianity says that God has revealed himself in history. As British theologian, Alan Richardson, has stated: "The Christian faith...is bound up with certain happenings in the past, and if these happenings could be shown never to have occurred, or to have been quite different from the biblical-Christian account of them, then the whole edifice of Christian faith, life and worship would be found to have been built on sand."

At the time of Christmas Advent, we celebrate the central event in world-history that God became man in Jesus Christ. Today this claim is under assault in a variety of ways. Some claim it's a myth; others assert that it's a meaningless statement because it is impossible to really know the past. AP asked William Lane Craig, Research Professor in Philosophy at Talbot Theological Seminary, Los Angeles, what he thought about these views.

- a. **Q1 - Why is history so important to the Christian faith?** History is crucial to Christianity because it keeps the Christian faith from degenerating into mythology. Unless the Bible is rooted in actual historical events, there is no reason to think that Jesus of Nazareth should be any more determinative for my life today than so-called gods like Thor, Odin or Zeus or any other mythological deity. History is the vital component in Christianity because it grounds faith in fact and keeps it from being mere myth.
- b. **Q2 - Do other religions have a similar interest in history?** Yes, but only in a relative sense. Other religions certainly have an historical component. One thinks of Judaism, for example, where at least among orthodox Jews, God's acts in history like the Exodus are very important. God's rescue of the Israelites from Egypt is the central miracle of the Old Testament. Again, history plays some role in Islam. For instance, the coming down of the Qur'an out of heaven to Muhammad is purported to be an historical event and is believed by Muslims to be God's revelation to him.

So there are historical elements in these faiths, but they don't have the same significance as historical events in Christianity. The reason for this is that one's salvation in Judaism and in Islam is not a matter of historical facts; it's a matter of being obedient to certain sorts of prescribed activities or regulations. Although these regulations arose in a certain historical context, that context doesn't really affect the practice of the piety of those religions in any way. However, in Christianity it's entirely different. In Christianity the saving acts of God are themselves historical acts. So if you were to remove the historicity of Jesus or the historicity of the Cross, the whole basis for atonement and salvation would be removed.

So, in one sense, it's true that history is important to these other faiths, but historical facts do not occupy the central role that the saving acts of God do in Christianity.

- c. **Q3 - GE Ladd has said : “The uniqueness and the scandal of the Christian religion rests in the mediation of revelation through historical events.” What does he mean by that?** Ladd is right, of course. Christianity is not a code for living or a philosophy of religion; rather, it is rooted in real events of history. The reason it's scandalous is because it ties up the truth of Christianity with the truth of those historical facts. This means that if these historical events are shown to be fraudulent or fictional, then the whole basis of Christianity is removed. To put it as simply as possible: the truth or falsity of Christianity stands or falls with individual events within history.

Islam, on the other hand, is not nearly as dependent on history. For instance, you can follow the “Five Pillars of Islam,” meaning to make the confession, say the prayers, give the alms, go to Mecca and so forth, but none of these things is directly dependent upon historical events. However, Christianity is quite different. The offer of salvation that we receive in the Gospel is real only if the specific events upon which the offer is based are real. And that's scandalous in a sense because, as I said, if, those events are shown to be fictional, then the whole religion collapses.

On the other hand, I think this makes Christianity a truly great religion because it gives us a means of verifying the truth of the Christian faith. We can actually investigate history to see whether Jesus of Nazareth lived, died and rose again and made the claims that we find in the New Testament. So the Christian faith provides a touchstone for the assessment of its claims that isn't present in most other religions of the world.

- d. **Q4 - Has the historical element of the Christian faith always been considered important in the Church?** Traditionally, it has. Right from the beginning, Christianity's earliest creeds are affirmations of historical events. For instance, the Apostles' Creed says of Jesus “He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and buried...on the third day He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.” These historical events are important elements in the early creeds.

Tragically, with the rise of liberal theology in the 19th century, the importance of history for Christian faith was depreciated if not lost. Liberal scholars no longer believed that Jesus was really central to the heart of the Christian faith. They looked elsewhere for the central core: the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. They believed that this was the one doctrine that was fundamental to Christianity. Everything else was secondary, including historical events.

Thankfully, liberal theology has come and gone. I think the 20th century has been characterized by a strong appreciation of the centrality of history for the Christian faith. And we should be really grateful for that.

- e. **Q5 - Didn't the church in the Middle Ages also lose contact with history through its preoccupation with philosophical theology?** In one sense it did. But that shouldn't lead us to think that people in

the medieval period didn't sense the importance of history. They believed that events like the resurrection of Jesus really occurred; they understood that these were not just fictions or myths. For them, Jesus of Nazareth really lived, died and did these things.

The difficulty was that they didn't have any way of demonstrating that this had happened. The most that they could do was to appeal to the miracle of the church itself. To them, it seemed incredible that this universal edifice, now spread throughout all of known civilization, could have been predicated upon a falsehood. So the living miracle of the church itself was the best proof they could give that these events actually did happen. But medieval scholars certainly did believe that these historical events occurred. They were in no doubt whatsoever that the historicity of these events was crucial and not to be compromised.

- f. **Q6 - What impact did this renewed interest in history have on apologetics in the period after the Reformation?** At the time of the Renaissance scholars developed a new consciousness of history. They became intensely interested in rediscovering the past. This desire to develop an historical understanding expressed itself in the love and search for documents of antiquity. There was a great interest in recovering Greek documents and in mastering the ability to read Greek once again.

This interest in the classics had a flow-on effect for New Testament studies. Scholars became interested in the historical roots of Christianity and began the task of establishing the text of the New Testament as reliably as they could. As a result, the first glimmerings of an interest in a historically-oriented apologetic for the Christian faith began to appear. Scholars such as Philippe de Mornay and Hugo Grotius soon began to use historical arguments to defend the truth of the Gospels and Christianity.

- g. **Q7 - Why are people so skeptical today of the idea that history is an objective reality?** I think that some people are skeptical about this because of the popularity of relativistic views of truth. Post-modernism denies the existence of objective truth. Post-modernists believe that the past is merely the construction of the present. They believe that since the events of the past are gone, they are lost—they're no longer accessible. Therefore, history is what we make it. And, moreover, since they claim that no historian is a neutral observer, but is inevitably caught up in the historical process, he cannot reconstruct the past objectively as it really was. This has led some thinkers to a relativistic view of history according to which, as one person put it, "History is a series of lies that everyone has decided to agree upon."
- h. **Q8 - Is there any point in trying to discover the historical facts about Jesus, when so many people have tried to do it and have come up with different assessments of them?** Yes, I believe there is. I think that the diversity of opinions about the historical Jesus can be largely tied to the sort of philosophical presuppositions that critics bring to the table. Their conclusions are not really being determined by the evidence so much as by the presuppositions that they bring to it. You see this clearly in their published works.

For instance, the members of the Jesus Seminar explicitly state what their presuppositions are in their introduction to their edition of *Five Gospels*. For them, the number one pillar of scholarly wisdom is the presupposition of scientific naturalism. In other words, they don't believe that there are supernatural events in history. They think that whenever you find a miraculous event in the narrative, this is an automatic sign that you're in the presence of either legend or mythology. They simply begin with the assumption that miracles are fictional in character. Extraordinarily, they make no attempt to justify this presupposition. If you begin with the assumption of scientific naturalism, then of course events like the virgin birth, the incarnation, the miracles of Jesus and his resurrection will have to be assessed as non-historical.

Again, some critics like Marcus Borg make it very clear that what he's looking for is a Jesus who will be religiously available to people in the contemporary scene. Borg deliberately sets out to re-interpret Jesus to be a sort of cross-cultural, spiritual person—a kind of mystic—who will appeal to persons in all cultures and in all religions. That's why he comes up with a very politically-correct Jesus—a Jesus who is not offensive or jarring to the modern mind. Borg's reconstructed Jesus is a good example of how some scholars' conclusions are deeply shaped by their presuppositions.

However, if you do not force these critical presuppositions upon the Gospels, then there is quite a remarkable consensus emerging amongst scholars about the person of the historical Jesus, what He taught, and about events in his life surrounding his death and resurrection. So I think we need to be careful not to exaggerate the diversity of views amongst scholars today. Certainly there has been a diversity of views in past quests to recover the historical Jesus—but contemporary scholarship has actually recovered, I think, the broad outlines of a portrait of Jesus that can be largely agreed upon.

- i. **Q9 - Since we cannot directly observe the past, can we know anything about it as it actually happened? Could our ideas of the past be an elaborate fabrication, as untrustworthy as a dream?** Well, the difference between a dream and history, of course, is that history leaves a residue and a dream does not. And it's through this residue, whether in the form of literary documents or archaeological debris, that historians are able to reconstruct the past. True historians work within the constraints of the remaining evidence. And that's the difference between actual history and a dream. It is only on the basis of the evidence that we can reconstruct the past; we are certainly never justified in going against that evidence.

Interestingly, the historian follows the same method as the historical scientist in sciences such as geology, paleontology or cosmology. There the scientist is also involved in reconstructing the past, either the past history of the universe or the earth's past. The only real difference between the scientist and the historian is that the historian studies human history rather than earth history or cosmic history. But in terms of method, they're doing exactly the same. The historian's history is on the same level as the geologist's history or the cosmologist's history. When people try to play off history against science, they're making an illegitimate move because history is on "all-fours" with the historical sciences. As long as we proceed within the constraints of the evidence, there's no reason to think that we can't reconstruct the past as it actually happened.

- j. **Q10 - How do we know that historical facts are real? The events themselves have gone and all we're left with is an historian's statement. For instance, with respect to the Christmas story, all we have is Matthew and Luke's historical statements that they took place.** In the first place, it's important to notice that the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. When you think about it, we have no evidence at all for most historical events—yet they really happened. For example, we have no evidence that on April 2nd, 1802, Napoleon spat in a puddle. Perhaps he did, but we have no way of knowing.

Most historical events don't leave sufficient evidence to reconstruct them, so the absence of evidence isn't itself proof that an event didn't occur. In the case of the gospels, I find it extraordinary that we have any evidence at all for some of these events. For instance, consider the events of the Virgin Birth or the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. In this case, we have evidence from a variety of sources. This is very interesting when we compare it with the evidence that we have for other persons in antiquity. In their case, we have almost no evidence at all. So, it's clearly wrong to say that the mere absence of evidence is evidence of absence.

In cases where we do have evidence, historians have worked out a number of objective rules that we can apply to the sources so as to establish whether they are historically credible accounts as opposed to mere fiction. We call these criteria "the criteria of authenticity."

For instance, let's consider the "*criterion of multiple attestation*." If we have independent accounts of the same event, this rule says it's more likely to be historical than fictional because it would be most unusual if two authors independently made up the same story about the same event. Isn't it remarkable that we should have two, independent virgin birth narratives about Jesus? If you apply this rule of multiple attestation to Jesus' birth narratives, then we have good grounds for believing that he was born in Bethlehem and born of a virgin. Why? Because we have it attested in independent narratives—Matthew and Luke are independent of one another in their sources at least.

Another rule for establishing the historical nature of an event is the "*principle of dissimilarity*." This rule says that if you can show that an event or saying of Jesus' life is unlike anything in prior Judaism and also unlike anything in the Church that followed him, then it's highly probable that it belongs to the historical Jesus himself. So this criterion of dissimilarity can be a very positive help in establishing events as historical. Incidentally, this rule doesn't mean that if some of Jesus' statements are similar to those found in Judaism or the early church, then this indicates that they've been borrowed from these sources. Critics misapply the rule when they do that.

Another rule is the "*criterion of embarrassment*." This rule says that if you find elements in the narratives that are awkward for the early Christian Church, or perhaps even embarrassing, then these too are most likely to be historical rather than to have been invented by the Church.

A further application of this criterion would be the execution of Jesus. His crucifixion is such a firmly fixed anchor point in history that events in the Gospels can be assessed by their likelihood of leading up to Jesus' execution/crucifixion. For example, Marcus Borg's portrait of him as gentle Jesus, meek and mild, is incompatible with his crucifixion for being the king of the Jews. On this view, he did nothing that would have led to his crucifixion. So we can conclude that this view probably doesn't give us an accurate portrait of Jesus as he really was.

There are other criteria as well. In fact, there's a long list of them, but these are just a few. Historians apply them all the time to secular narratives with a view towards establishing their historical credibility. I find these criteria to be very helpful. When critics like those in the Jesus Seminar use these criteria to come up with skeptical portraits of Jesus, the reason is, I think, because of their presuppositions and not because of the criteria. They apply these criteria falsely because they're skewed by their naturalistic presuppositions.

- k. **Q11 - Some people say that history is unscientific because with science, at least, you have the evidence in front of you, and you can experiment on it and repeat the experiment; obviously you can't reconstruct a historical event—what do you say to that? Is science therefore more objective than history?** No, I don't think so. Let's take geology, for instance. Now a geologist assumes that certain theoretical entities, like dinosaurs, once existed. He observes fossil bones and he hypothesizes that these are the remains of living creatures that actually once roamed the earth. But he's never seen one. In a sense, a dinosaur is a theoretical entity similar to a quark. But the difference is that the quark involves, obviously, such a high level of theoretical abstraction that we're not sure that quarks are really there. However, nobody really doubts that dinosaurs once existed. And yet, as I say, the subjects of this science are just as removed from the geologist as are the events of history from the historian.

Moreover, the historian operates with just as much residue of the past as the geologist does. He can rely on archaeology and other sciences like numismatics (the study of coins) or papyrology (the study of ancient literature). All of these sciences explore the past, just as geology or paleontology does. They are disciplines designed to reconstruct the past within the constraints of the evidence. So I don't think you can draw a demarcation between science and history in such a way as to say, well, science is objective but history is a bog of subjectivity.

- l. **Q12 - Some historians, especially revisionists like neo-Nazis, are very selective in their use of facts. They write histories that are more a reflection of their prejudices than actually what took place. To what extent can we be assured that the gospel writers were not revisionists themselves?** It's important to understand that all ancient historians wrote from a point of view. Herodotus, Thucydides, Josephus, Tacitus—all of them had a case to make. For them, history was a means of defending their understanding or position. So in that sense, all of Greco-Roman history is based upon documents that reflect a certain bias. However, that does not prevent the classical Greco-Roman historian from reconstructing the past as it actually happened.

Similarly, when Jewish historians write about the Holocaust, they clearly have a point of view and are as passionately committed to it as the neo-Nazis. Nevertheless, we don't write off their work as unhistorical because of their bias or put it on a par with that of the neo-Nazis. Rather, we assess both versions of the Holocaust by the evidence. If the Jewish account falls within the constraints of the evidence, then their point of view doesn't necessarily falsify what they write.

Now the gospels are written from a certain point of view as well, they have a story to tell—the story of Jesus. They are proclamations which have an intense interest in certain events of history. But that doesn't mean that they cannot tell the truth about the past, or that we cannot assess their credibility.

The “criteria of authenticity” that I've already mentioned are aimed precisely at getting past the sort of bias that may influence historians as they write the story of the past. These rules are designed to assist us in establishing what really happened. They help us to see if a historian is telling the truth.

In short, if a historian's understanding of the past is wrong, the reason it's wrong is because it doesn't fit the evidence; it's not wrong because he has a point of view. So, it all goes back to what the evidence indicates.

- m. **Q13 - Every new generation has its own slant on history. Karl Popper, the philosopher, has said, “There can be no history of the past as it actually did happen, there can only be historical interpretations and none of them is final. Every generation has a right to frame its own.” Is this true? Is it possible to come to a really objective understanding of history?** I think the reason historians are often rewriting the past stems from a couple of factors. One of them is the discovery of “New Evidence.” When we discover new evidence, this can revise our picture of the past. So we need to rewrite the history to bring it into conformity with the new evidence. Now, far from undermining the objectivity of history, this is actually evidence for it. If the discovery of new information means that we have to readjust our view of the past to bring it into line with the wider body of evidence, I should have thought that that was powerful testimony for the objectivity of history, not against it.

The other reason why historians revise their earlier understandings is that with increasing distance, or with new perspectives, we often acquire a different view of the past and its significance. Sometimes we see events in a new light. We see how certain events have shaped history in ways that we didn't appreciate before. And again, I think, these perspectives do not falsify the past; rather, they help us to see the significance of these events from a new vantage-point. The important point to note is this: our expanded understanding of the past doesn't lead us to think that these events never occurred, or that past histories are necessarily false. Usually, it's more a matter of reassessing the motives of the key figures or the significance of the events themselves for the course of subsequent history and how they've shaped and affected things.

So I don't think that the need to re-write history undermines the objectivity of the discipline at all. Actually, I think it's quite the reverse. It's really testimony to the objectivity of history.

- n. **Q14 - What other problems are there with the view that says that we can never know the past as it really was?** I can think of at least three significant problems that historians face if they take the view that we can't know the past as it is. The first difficulty they face is that there is a common core of historical events that is accepted by all historians, whether Catholic or Protestant, Marxist or capitalist, 19th century liberal or 20th century revisionist. For instance, I don't know of any historian who would deny things like the date of the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln's assassination, Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and so forth. These form a sort of back-bone of history, upon which all historians are agreed. I think it was Isaiah Berlin who said, "If some one were to claim that the plays of William Shakespeare were actually written in the Court of Ghengis Khan, we wouldn't say that he was merely mistaken, but that he was out of his mind." So there is this common core of historical events that everyone agrees upon. I think this is a powerful argument which simply overwhelms the relativist claim that there is no objective history.

The second difficulty that relativists face is that there's a difference between history and propaganda. Historians insist on this difference. When the Soviet Union, in the aftermath of the Stalinist takeover, began to rewrite history, vast amounts of material—newspapers and all sorts of documents—were mashed to pulp. Stalin did this so that he could rewrite the history books. Quite naturally, he wanted people to think that he was at the forefront of the Bolshevik revolution. I guess we shouldn't be surprised that everybody recognizes that this sort of Soviet rewriting of history was pure propaganda. It had no basis whatsoever in fact. Historians understand that when they do their work they must do so within the constraints of the evidence; they are not allowed to propagandize. However, such a distinction becomes meaningless if relativism is true. If relativism is valid, we need to face the fact that we cannot insist on the distinction between history and propaganda upon which all reputable historians insist.

Finally, the third problem with the view that says that we can't know the past objectively is that on this basis it becomes impossible to criticize bad history. Take Immanuel Velikovsky, a popular author, as a prime example. He attempts to rewrite ancient history entirely by denying whole civilizations and linguistic groups on the basis of astronomical catastrophes in the earth's history. Now Velikovsky's views have been rejected across the board by historians as being utterly fanciful. His books have received very negative reviews in the historical community. And yet, if relativism were true, it would be impossible to criticize this sort of work. In fact, if Velikovsky's work were allowed to stand, any view of the past would be possible.

I believe that those who deny the possibility of objective history haven't faced the fact seriously that a common core of historical events accepted by all historians exists. Nor have they taken seriously enough the truth that there is a distinction between history and propaganda. Again, the fact that all historians are quick to criticize bad history provides powerful evidence that it is quite possible to do an objective history of the past.

- o. Q15 - One New Testament critic has said: “Since the disciples were close followers of Jesus they would have been less accurate observers and recorders of what actually happened.” Is there any truth in this with regards to the birth narratives of Jesus?** With respect to the birth narratives of Jesus, we don’t have eye-witness testimony from Jesus’ disciples to this event, but it’s very interesting to ask about the sources of the birth narratives. Colin Hemer, in his book, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* goes through Acts with a fine-toothed comb with a view toward assessing Luke’s credibility as an ancient historian. He pulls out a wealth of historical detail from the book. He assesses the historical information that he finds in terms of facts that would have been the general knowledge of anybody living at the time down to details so specific that only an eyewitness could have known about them. And he establishes convincingly the historical credibility of Luke as an historical author.

Further, Hemer argues that this assessment of Luke’s reliability in Acts ought to be extended to Luke’s Gospel as well. He asks the interesting question: “What sources might there have been for the Gospel of Luke?” Well, one way of determining this is to subtract from Luke’s Gospel anything that we find in the other Gospels and see what’s left over. When you do that, it’s interesting that the uniquely Lucan material tends to be associated with women who are mainly mentioned in his Gospel—people like Joanna and, interestingly enough, Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Now Luke says that he accompanied Paul on his missionary journey back to Jerusalem where he interviewed eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus’ life and ministry. And I think that it’s not unlikely that Luke may have interviewed Mary as his source for the virgin birth story. It’s interesting to note that Luke’s account is told from Mary’s perspective, whereas Matthew’s narrative is more from Joseph’s perspective. It’s not implausible, therefore, to believe that we may have a direct source in Mary herself for Luke’s birth narrative of Jesus.

- p. Q-16 - Numbers of historians have suggested that the birth narratives of Jesus are implausible because it seems almost fanciful that people like the Magi would have appeared. What do you think?** When people say things like this, it’s probably due to the fact that they have great difficulty accepting the supernatural elements of the narrative. They find it too hard to swallow the idea that a star appeared in the East that led the Magi to Jesus. Again, I think this is going depend largely upon your openness to a supernatural view. I mean, there have been attempts to show that this could have been a providential coincidence of certain planets that produced a bright light in the sky. Some argue that such an event was astronomically plausible. But as I read the narrative, it seems to me that Luke describes this as a supernatural event. If you believe in the existence of God, I don’t see any reason to think that he couldn’t have drawn Zoroastrian priests to come from the East to find Jesus and worship him in that way.

Of course, there is also the dispute about the slaughter of the children by Herod, but that’s really, again, an argument from silence. Those who claim that it couldn’t have happened do so on the basis that it’s not mentioned in Josephus. But remember what we said before: absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence.

- q. **Q17 - Would the murder of these children have been consistent with Herod's character?** I don't think there's any doubt about that! It certainly fits right into Herod's character that he should do such a thing. Actually, Josephus tells that before he died Herod had given commands that upon his death all the notables in the area were to be rounded up in a stadium and slaughtered because he feared the people would not lament his passing and in this fashion he could ensure that there would be lamentation upon his death! Thankfully, this order wasn't carried out, but it shows us something of his brutal character. If he had ordered the slaughter of children around Bethlehem, there wouldn't necessarily have been great numbers of male babies that were killed—it might have been a couple of dozen at the most—so I don't think much can be inferred from Josephus' silence about the incident. I really think that people need to come up with better arguments if they're going to say that the birth narratives are non-historical.
- r. **Q18 - What about the claim by some scholars that Luke is mistaken in his view that there was a census that was taken throughout the known world at the time of Jesus' birth?** That's more of a problem, I think, because we do have positive evidence that there was a census taken by Quirinius around AD 6 or 7. But it's very interesting that Luke refers to this census when he talks about the revolt of Judas the Galilean. But when he talks about the census that drew Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem he says this was the first census which suggests that Luke is differentiating this census from the later one taken by Quirinius. So he doesn't seem to be confusing the two; he's aware of the latter one, and he's saying this is an earlier one. So once again it does become an argument from silence, namely, that since we don't have any independent attestation of this earlier census, Luke must be wrong. Well, he could be, but then again these arguments from silence are very tenuous. We should note that he doesn't actually say that Quirinius was the governor at this time. The word he uses in the Greek is not the Greek word for "governor", and it could have been that Quirinius, as a military commander, directed this census at the behest of the authority in power. So again, it's really an argument from silence which proves nothing.
- Again, I need to say again in favor of Luke, that his accuracy on other matters is just impeccable. He gets it right over and over again in so many other cases that this gives him a certain credibility that makes us reluctant to say, "He's made a major *faux pas* here."
- s. **Q19 - Luke claims in his introduction (1:1-4) to be writing something similar to a Greek scientific treatise. Is that right?** Yes. His preface is written in the Greek of the classical Greek historian. But after the preface, he reverts to the more common, vulgar Greek. It's as though he's put the reader on notice in the preface, saying: "I, too, if I choose, can write in the classical Greek of the great Greek historians." And he speaks there of using the methodology of the Greek historian, namely, interviewing witnesses to the events in order to lay out an orderly narrative of what's actually happened. In other words, his aim is to establish the truth of the Gospel events. So his project is clearly to write history. Further, the book of Acts demonstrates his historical reliability abundantly. And so in the case of the Gospel, where we do not have the benefit of secular confirmation, we ought to extend to Luke the credibility as a historian which he has earned in the book of Acts.

Article by [William Lane Craig](#)

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