

Nailed

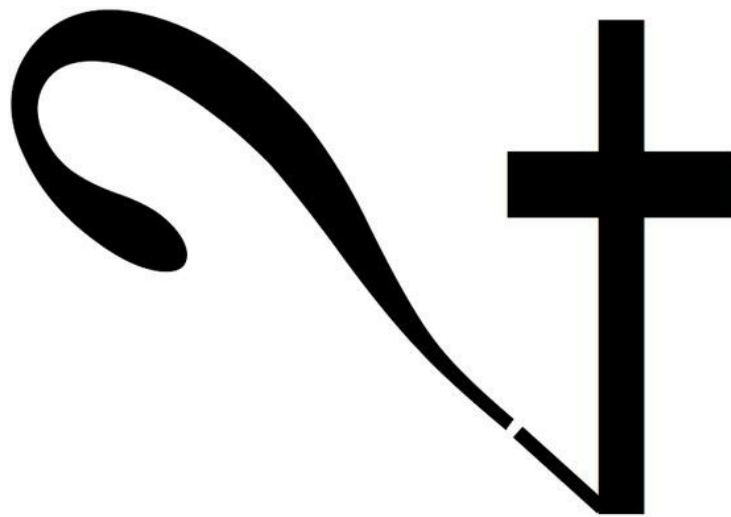
**Ten Christian Myths
That Show Jesus Never
Existed at All**



David Fitzgerald

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**NAILED:
Ten Christian Myths That Show**

Jesus Never Existed At All

David Fitzgerald
Smashwords Edition
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Praise for *Nailed*

“Fitzgerald’s is possibly the best ‘capsule summary’ of the mythicist case I’ve ever encountered ...with an interesting and accessible approach.”

—Earl Doherty, author of *The Jesus Puzzle*

“Fitzgerald summarizes a great number of key arguments concisely and with new power and original spin. I really learned something from him. Recalls classical skeptics and biblical critics. A surprising amount of new material.”

—Robert M. Price, author of *Deconstructing Jesus* and *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man*

“David Fitzgerald reveals himself to be the brightest new star in the firmament of scholars who deny historical reality to “Jesus of Nazareth.” His brilliance would have been sufficiently established had he done nothing more than illustrate and explain traditional arguments with a clarity and transparency never achieved by us old-timers. But he has done more. He has

developed new arguments and insights as well that will help any honest seeker after truth understand how a fictional character — perhaps the hero of a mystery play or liturgy — could come to acquire a biography. Thanks to Fitzgerald, we can see more clearly now how Jesus got a life.”

—Frank R. Zindler, editor of American Atheist Press and author of *The Jesus the Jews Never Knew: Sepher Toldoth Yeshu and the quest for the Historical Jesus in Jewish Sources*

“Say what you will about the overall conclusion that Jesus never existed, but you can't deny that when it comes to the ten modern myths about Jesus dissected here, Fitzgerald has hit the nail on the head. All ten points are succinct and correct. A nice, readable introduction to the top ten problems typically swept under the rug by anyone insisting it's crazy even to *suspect* Jesus might not have existed.”

—Richard C. Carrier, Ph.D., author of *Not the Impossible Faith: Why Christianity Didn't Need a Miracle to Succeed* and the forthcoming book *On the Historicity of Jesus Christ* (www.richardcarrier.info)

Parts of this book previously appeared in the online essay “Ten Beautiful Lies about Jesus,” which took Honorable Mention for the 2010 Mythicist Prize offered by the Mythicists' Forum, a consortium of secular New Testament scholars. The information in that essay has been updated and corrected where necessary for this book.

For everyone who ever thought to themselves:

“I wonder what Jesus was *really* like?”

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“Facts are sometimes the most radical critics of all.”

-Theologian Wilhelm Wrede

Myth No. 1:

The idea that Jesus was a myth is ridiculous!

“In matters of religion it is very easy to deceive a man, and very hard to undeceive him.”

-Pierre Bayle

Didn't There *Have* to Have Been a Jesus?

Most people have never heard of the ancient Greek mythographer Euhemerus, who first theorized that the gods of mythology were deified human beings, and their myths based on legends sprung from accounts of real people and events. So many might be surprised to find that they are Euhemerists on the subject of Jesus. That is to say, though they may not

believe Jesus was the divine Christ that Christianity venerates as the Son of God and savior of the world, and may regard accounts of the miracles and wonders attending him as mere legendary accretion, nevertheless they certainly believe there had to have been a central figure that began Christianity.

Perhaps he was just a wandering teacher or an exorcist, an apocalyptic prophet or a zealot who opposed the Romans. Perhaps he was all these things, or even a composite of several such early first-century figures; but at any rate, surely there had to be *somebody* at the original core of Christianity, arguably the most famous individual in human history. All this seems to be a perfectly reasonable, completely natural assumption to make – so why would anyone be so foolish as to propose that Jesus never existed?

Doesn't it just make more sense to assume that there was a historical Jesus, even if we are unable to recover the real facts about his life and death? As it turns out, no. The opposite is true: the closer we look at the evidence for Jesus, the less solid evidence we find; and the more we find suspicious silences and curious resemblances to the pagan and Jewish religious ideas and philosophies that preceded Christianity. And once you begins to parse out the origins of this tradition or that teaching from their various sources, the sweater begins unraveling quickly until it becomes very difficult to buy that there ever was – or even could have been – any historical figure at the center.

Ten Beautiful Lies About Jesus

Christianity, like all religious movements, was born from mythmaking; and nowhere is this clearer than when we examine the context from which Jesus sprang. The supposed historical underpinning of Jesus, which apologists insist differentiates their Christ from the myriad other savior gods and divine sons of the ancient pagan world, simply does not hold up to investigation.

On the contrary, the closer we examine the official story, or rather stories, of Christianity (or Christianities!), the quicker it becomes apparent that the figure of the historical Jesus has traveled with a bodyguard of widely accepted, seldom examined untruths for over two millennia.

The purpose of this all-too-brief examination is to shed light on ten of these beloved Christian myths, ten beautiful lies about Jesus:

1. The idea that Jesus was a myth is ridiculous!
2. Jesus was wildly famous – but there was no reason for contemporary historians to notice him...
3. Ancient historian Josephus wrote about Jesus
4. Eyewitnesses wrote the Gospels
5. The Gospels give a consistent picture of Jesus
6. History confirms the Gospels
7. Archeology confirms the Gospels
8. Paul and the Epistles corroborate the Gospels
9. Christianity began with Jesus and his apostles
10. Christianity was a totally new and different miraculous overnight success that changed the world!

I also want to give a thumbnail sketch of how the evidence gathered from historians all across the theological spectrum not only debunks these long-cherished myths, but points to a Jesus Christ created solely through the alchemy of hope and imagination; a messiah transformed from a purely literary, theological construct into the familiar figure (or more truthfully, figures) of Jesus – in short, a mythic Christ. And finally, I want to briefly discuss how very different things would be if there *had* been a historical Jesus.

Who Says There's No Jesus?

We've already begun. Our first Christian myth is the knee-jerk dismissal of the idea that Jesus may have only been a figure of legend. Unsurprisingly, apologists take umbrage at the very notion and declare that historians have always overwhelmingly agreed that Jesus was real. Campus Crusade for Christ Minister Josh McDowell gives prime examples of these sorts of dismissive pronouncements in his book *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (p. 120):

“No serious scholar has ventured to postulate the non-historicity of Jesus.”
(Otto Betz, *What Do We Know About Jesus?*)

“Some writers may toy with the fancy of a ‘Christ-myth,’ but they do not do so on the ground of historical evidence. The historicity of Christ is as

axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar. It is not historians who propagate the ‘Christ-myth’ theories.”

(F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*)

It’s true enough that the majority of Biblical historians do not question the historicity of Jesus – but then again, the majority of Biblical historians have always been Christian preachers, so what else could we expect them to say? For all their bluster, the truth is that for as long as there have been Christian writings, there have been critics who have disputed Christian claims and called events from the Gospel stories into question. And since at least the 18th century a growing number of historians have raised serious problems that cast Jesus’ historicity into outright doubt, as we’ll see.

Jesus vs. Julius Caesar

For instance, historian Richard Carrier has pointed out the problems with Christian apologist Douglas Geivett’s claim that the evidence for Jesus’ resurrection meets “the highest standards of historical inquiry,” and is as certain as Julius Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon in 49 B.C.E. Carrier notes, “Well, it is common in Christian apologetics, throughout history, to make absurdly exaggerated claims, and this is no exception.” Then he compares the evidence for both events:

First of all, we have Caesar’s own account. In contrast, we have nothing written by Jesus, and we do not know who really wrote any of the Gospels. Second, many of Caesar’s enemies reported the crossing of the Rubicon. But we have no hostile or even neutral records of the resurrection until over a hundred years after the supposed event, fifty years after Christian beliefs had become widely known. Third, there are numerous inscriptions, coins, mentions of battles, conscriptions and judgments, which form an almost continuous chain of evidence for Caesar’s entire march. But there is no physical evidence of any kind in the case of Jesus.

Fourth, almost every historian of the period reports the Rubicon crossing, including the most prominent of the Roman age: Suetonius, Appian, Cassius Dio and Plutarch. Moreover, these scholars have shown proven reliability, since a great many of their reports on other matters have been confirmed with material evidence and in other sources. In addition, they all quote and name many different sources, showing a wide reading of the witnesses and

documents, and they consistently show a desire to critically examine claims for which there is any dispute. If that wasn't enough, all of them cite or quote sources written by witnesses, hostile and friendly, of the Rubicon crossing and its repercussions.

But not a single historian mentions the resurrection until the 3rd and 4th centuries, and then only Christian historians. Of the anonymous Gospel authors, only “Luke” even *claims* to be writing history, but neither Luke nor any of the others ever cite any other sources or show signs of a skilled or critical examination of conflicting claims. None have any other literature or scholarship to their credit that we can test for their skill and accuracy. Their actual identities are completely unknown, and all overtly declare their bias towards persuading new converts.

Finally, the Roman Civil War could not have proceeded as it did if Caesar had not physically crossed the Rubicon with his army into Italy and captured Rome. Yet the only thing necessary to explain the rise of Christianity is a belief — a belief that the resurrection happened. There is nothing that an actual resurrection would have caused that could not have been caused by a mere belief in that resurrection. Thus, an actual resurrection is not necessary to explain all subsequent history, unlike Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon. Carrier concludes that while we have many reasons to believe that Caesar crossed the Rubicon, all of them are lacking in the case of the resurrection:

“In fact, when we compare all five points, we see that in four of the five proofs of an event's historicity, the resurrection has no evidence at all, and in the one proof that it does have, it has not the best, but the very worst kind of evidence — a handful of biased, uncritical, unscholarly, unknown, second-hand witnesses. Indeed, you really have to look hard to find another event that is in a worse condition than this as far as evidence goes.”¹

So even before we begin to examine Jesus' resurrection, we are forced to recognize that the historical evidence for it, and all the other extraordinary events of Jesus' career, is not only far from ironclad, but already suspect. So there is nothing unreasonable about taking a skeptical approach to the Gospels' image of Jesus in the first place. And it's important to note that we are not just talking about the divine man-god Jesus coming under fire, because it is not just the supernatural aspects of Jesus that have come under suspicion. Even the mundane and perfectly plausible-sounding aspects of

Jesus' life have proved to be problematic, as we'll see with our next myth.

For further reading:

Charles Talbot, *What is a Gospel?* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press 1977)

Richard Carrier, *Sense and Goodness Without God*, particularly section 1.2.5

Robert Price, "Jesus: Myth and Method" in *The Christian Delusion*, pp. 273-90

Note: Most historians no longer use the terms B.C. (*Before Christ*) and A.D. (*Anno Domini*) to label years; instead they (and this book, except when quoting from other sources) use B.C.E. (*Before Common Era*) and C.E. (*Common Era*).

Myth No. 2:

Jesus was wildly famous – but there was no reason for contemporary historians to notice him...

"A truth is not hard to kill, and a lie well told is immortal."

- Mark Twain

Was there really any reason for Jesus to be noticed by his contemporaries? Christians are split on the matter. Many assume news of their savior must have become just as widespread in the first century as it is now. But there is no evidence that this was the case. Increasingly, Christian commentators have noticed this shortage of historical corroboration for the Gospels and taken a very different tack. They like to claim that this is not surprising at all. After all, they say, these were ancient times. Most people were illiterate. Judea was out in the boonies of the Roman Empire. Besides, historians back then wrote little about religious figures anyway, and Jesus'

ministry only lasted three years (or maybe just one year). And finally, they insist almost no first century texts of any kind survive at all.

All in all, there simply was little reason for most historians of the time to take notice of this humble carpenter from Nazareth – isn't that right?

Lord, When Did We See You?

No. The truth is something quite different: the first century is actually considered one of the best-documented periods in ancient history, and Judea, far from being a forgotten backwater, was a turbulent province of vital strategic importance to the Romans. There were plenty of writers, both Roman and Jewish, who had great interest in and much to say about the region and its happenings during Jesus' time. We still have many of their writings today: volumes and volumes from scores of writers detailing humdrum events and lesser exploits of much more mundane figures in Roman Palestine, including several failed Jewish messiahs. If the Gospels were true, or even preserved a kernel of truth at their cores, they certainly had plenty of much more exciting material to catch the eye of contemporary writers and historians.

For instance, here's a brief sampling of some of the more spectacular highlights from the story of Jesus that don't appear to be merely legendary accretion. We have every reason to expect that any and all of these should have been noted by somebody. But curiously, none of them were.

A Brief Sampling of Gospel Events That Should Have Made History – But Didn't:

1. Caesar Taxes the World

Luke (2:1-4) claims Jesus was born in the year of a universal tax census under Augustus Caesar, while Cyrenius (a.k.a. Quirinius) was governor of Syria. To start with, Luke's census is rather suspiciously convenient and looks more like a clever plot device than a genuine historical fact. And actually, it creates more problems than it solves: why don't Mathew, Mark and John – or anyone else – know about this census?

What's more, Matthew's nativity story rules out Luke's completely: since Cyrenius' reign started 10 years after Herod's death, the two nativity dates

are irreconcilable (not that there haven't been many creative attempts to fix the problem). And even if Joseph had actually been required to go from Nazareth to Bethlehem, it makes no sense that he would also drag along his 9-months-pregnant wife. The trip was about 70 miles, a dangerous and exhausting five-day journey on donkey-back – even if you weren't a woman about to give birth.

But the fact that settles the matter is that Roman records show the first such universal census didn't occur until decades after this, during the reign of the emperor Vespasian in 74 C.E.

2. Herod's Slaughter of the Innocents

In contrast to Luke, Matthew claims Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great – but Herod's reign ended in 4 B.C.E. and the census mentioned by Luke couldn't have happened before 6 C.E., a gap of 10 years at the very least. And there is another problem. Herod made plenty of enemies by dispatching his real or imagined political enemies in great numbers, and vehemently anti-Herodian historians like Flavius Josephus took meticulous pleasure in cataloging his misdeeds in loving detail, such as when Herod notoriously had two of his own sons strangled – an incident which heavily displeased Herod's patrons in Rome.

It beggars belief to think anyone would have missed an outrage as big as the massacre of every infant boy in the area around a town just 6 miles from Jerusalem – and yet there is no corroboration for it in any account, Jewish, Greek or Roman. It's not even found in any of the other Gospels – only Matthew's.

3. Jesus' Famous Ministry

The Gospels make it clear that throughout his career Jesus was the rock star of first century Judea, even if we disregard the miraculous star, a multitude of heavenly angels and gift-bearing wise men from afar attending his birth. In Matthew (4:24-25) we are told that his fame “went throughout all Syria” and that as he traveled throughout the region doing miracles, healing the sick and casting out devils, he and his entourage were followed by “great multitudes” of people from Galilee, and from the Decapolis (a Greco-Roman federation of ten cities southeast of the Sea of Galilee), and from Jerusalem,

and from Judea, and from beyond Jordan. Mark 5:20 says one man even began to publish (or proclaim) in the Decapolis the great things Jesus had done for him.

A few of his more high-profile healings: raising the daughter of Jairus, one of the synagogue officials, from the dead (Matt. 9:18, Luke 8:41-42); healing the servant of a Roman Centurion in Capernaum (Matt. 8:5-13) and the son of a royal official (John 4:46-53). In addition, he delivered many sermons to great multitudes of people up and down the region of Judea, amazing all with his teachings.

So with all this attention focused on him and his incredible achievements from cradle to grave, how is it that we have no contemporary record of any of this? After having won the admiration of royal officials, Roman leaders and Synagogue officials, how is it that he wasn't whisked off to the royal court, or even Rome itself? How is it that none of his astounding new teachings were recorded by anyone at the time?

We have no trace or mention of Jesus' exploits anywhere until the New Testament Gospels are written decades later. And outside of them, there is no mention of Jesus whatsoever for nearly a century after Jesus' alleged death. This is a staggering omission, and totally at odds with the picture given to us by the Gospels.

4. Jesus' Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem

According to Mark, in the weeks before his death, Jesus has been making his way towards Jerusalem (10:32 - 33), followed by multitudes of people (10:1). He travels from the Galilee (9:30) to Capernaum (9:33), crosses the Jordan into Judea (10:1), then goes to Jericho (10:46), Bethphage and Bethany (11:1) before coming to Jerusalem. Later, at Passover (14:1), in Bethany again, at the house of Simon the leper an unnamed woman anoints his head with costly oil (14:3).

However, John tells a different story: Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, which causes a huge sensation (11:45-48; 12:9-11) and enrages the Chief Priests and Pharisees, who plot to kill him "From this day on" (11:53). He stops traveling openly and goes into hiding, holing up with his disciples in the Judean wilderness, in a hill town called Ephraim (11:54) before coming to Lazarus' house in Bethany six days before Passover (12:1), where Lazarus' sister Mary anoints his feet with costly oil (12:3).

Jesus' tremendous popularity peaks and then, completely inexplicably, immediately fizzles out, crashes and burns after his triumphant – albeit short-lived – entry into Jerusalem, when the whole town turns out for the miracle-working prophet from Nazareth (and then promptly turns on him without explanation). Yet the writers who chronicled all the historical events of Judea ignore this momentous occasion too – even those who we know were actually in Jerusalem around this time.

Compounding the problem is the presence of the Romans, who would've looked very dimly on any figures coming to town and being hailed as the new King of the Jews... Yet according to the Gospels they hardly notice him at all until he is brought before Pilate, and even then there is much Roman head scratching over what to make of him.

5. The Trial of Jesus

Make that the *trials* of Jesus, since the Gospels, depending on which you are reading, claim that Jesus was questioned by the Jewish Sanhedrin High Court, by Annas the father-in-law of the High Priest, by the High Priest himself, by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, by the King (technically Tetrarch) Herod Antipas, and by Pontius Pilate once again. And not only were all these prominent local celebrities directly involved, the star of the show had entered Jerusalem in a parade that sparked citywide celebration just days before. What a dramatic upset! And the circumstances of the multi-part trial were so outrageous: first a dramatic arrest, then an illegal trial by night, rampant legal misconduct, and to make the whole thing an absolute media circus, a gripping finale that played out before the multitudes of Jerusalem. Who could ever forget such a thing? Everyone, apparently.

6. Jesus' Crucifixion

Readers who are impressed by the level of detail in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' execution should take a few moments to actually compare them. First, Jesus is portrayed dramatically differently in each: anguished and miserable in Mark, surrounded by special effects in Matthew, serene in Luke, large and in charge in John. The details only make matters worse when you compare the timelines of the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) with John's; they are completely incompatible.

According to Mark (and Matthew and Luke, whose gospels are based on his) Jesus dies “at the ninth hour” (3 pm) on the afternoon of Passover, the 15th of Nisan by the Jewish calendar. But John *does not even have Jesus die on the same day*. Instead, John tells us (three times) that Jesus is tried and executed the day before, on the Preparation Day for the Passover, the 14th of Nisan (19:14, 31, 42). To make matters still worse, all four Gospels insist this happened on a Friday. But was it Friday the 14th or Friday the 15th?

These are just a handful of the more conspicuous examples of Gospel events for which we have no corroborating evidence. But as we’ll see later, there are even more questionable New Testament examples to discuss in the accounts of Paul and the early Christians.

What About His Miracles?

Of course, most Christians also accept that Jesus’ birth and death were accompanied by still more phenomenally news-worthy events; like a 3-hour **supernatural darkness** over “all the land” – an unprecedented solar phenomenon that the whole ancient world would have noticed. But like the miraculous **Star of Bethlehem**, no one recorded any such thing at this time. And yet they had plenty of opportunities to appear in print. Astronomical marvels like these would not have been ignored in works like Pliny’s *Natural History*, Seneca’s *Natural Questions*, Ptolemy’s *Almagest*, the works of Tacitus or Suetonius, or by any number of other authors whose works no longer survive but would have been sought out by those later Christian writers eagerly looking for historical confirmation of Jesus.

We are also told that **the veil of the temple** was ripped in half from top to bottom, Jerusalem was rocked by not one but two **earthquakes**, strong enough to split rocks open, and perhaps my own favorite overlooked historical detail, the **mass resurrection of many dead Jewish saints**, who emerge from their graves and “appeared to many” in Jerusalem.

Is it really plausible that everyone in history but Matthew simply forgot about an incident like this? Of course, the icing on the cake is his **resurrection and ascension into Heaven** in front of many witnesses. It’s difficult to accept that such a world-altering supernatural event like the ascension – if true arguably one of the most significant and influential moments in history – seen by scores of eyewitnesses, would not have been an immediate bombshell on the consciousness of the first-century world.

See No Jesus, Hear No Jesus, Speak No Jesus

But it leaves no trace in the historical record for nearly a century. Only one of the four Gospel writers even mentions it. Matthew's and John's Gospels end with Jesus still on Earth. Mark's Gospel originally ended at chapter 16, verse 8, with the terrified women fleeing the empty tomb, with no ascension story at all. Verses 9-20 with the ascension account were added much later. So we are dependent on the author of Acts and Luke – who is the same person. Incredibly, the account of the ascension ultimately boils down to just one person – who by his own admission (Luke 1:1-2) wasn't even there.

Spoilsport skeptics are often accused of unfairly rejecting the miracles in the Gospels out of hand due to their so-called “Naturalist” or “Materialist” bias. Of course, the same ones who make this objection have no qualms about freely employing their own “naturalistic bias” to dismiss the miracles of other religions... But we don't have to rule out miracles a priori, or even make demands such as “extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof.” We can simply observe that extraordinary events tend to have extraordinary reactions – or indeed, *any* reaction. Was there any reaction to Jesus to be found?

Call in the Eyewitnesses

Many people assume there were scores of contemporary historical witnesses who mentioned Jesus, and this assumption is both encouraged and trumpeted by apologists.

The real number is much smaller. Here are the ones cited most often:

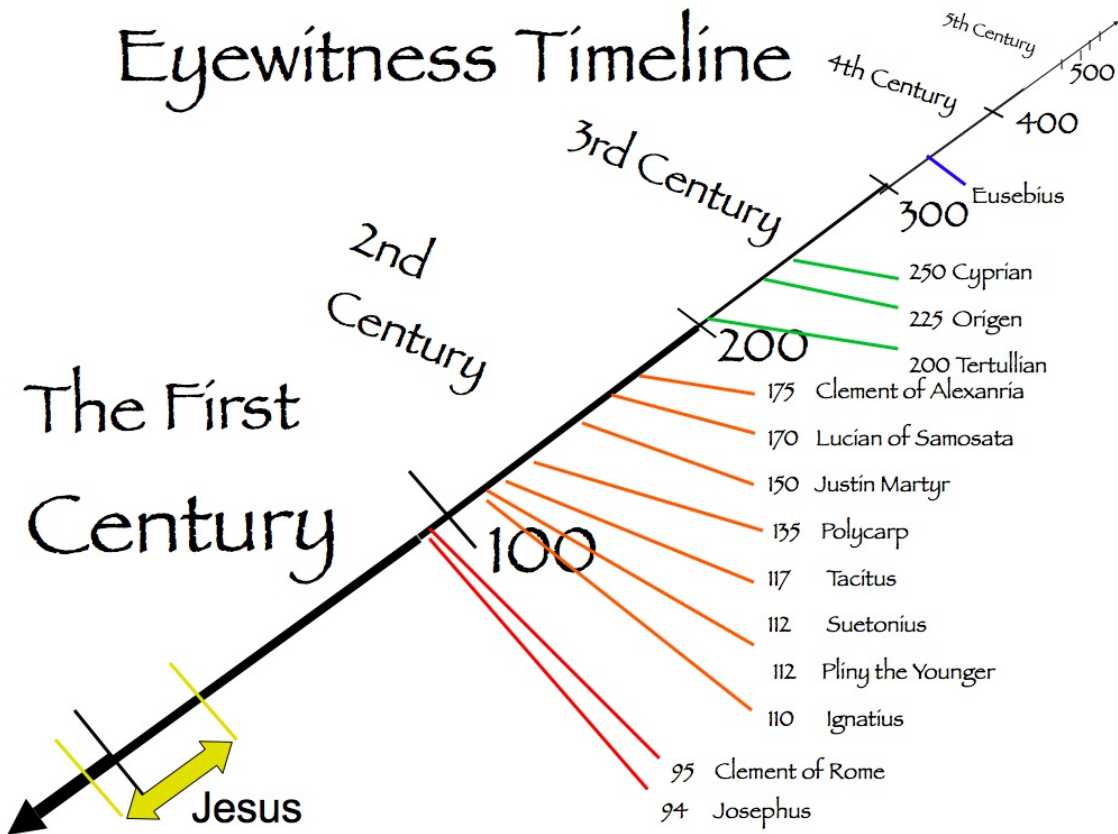
- Flavius Josephus – Jewish aristocrat and rebel general turned historian
- Tacitus – Roman historian
- Thallus – Roman chronologer
- Lucian – Roman satirist
- Suetonius – Roman historian
- Pliny the Younger – Roman governor
- Mara Bar-Serapion – Syrian letter-writer (likely a philosopher, but his actual occupation is unknown)

- Phlegon – Roman writer
- Justin Martyr – (a.k.a. Justin of Caesarea) Christian apologist
- Clement of Rome – Bishop of Rome
- Polycarp – Bishop of Smyrna, Asia Minor
- Origen – Christian theologian
- Cyprian of Carthage – Christian theologian
- Eusebius – Christian historian
- Tertullian – Christian apologist
- Ignatius – Patriarch of Antioch
- Clement of Alexandria – Christian philosopher and scholar
- Hippolytus of Rome – Christian theologian and writer

When Was Jesus?

Often we see some or all of this group brought out by apologists and simply presented in a laundry list as witnesses of Christ. But what happens when we take a closer look at these so-called “eyewitnesses”? For instance, what if we arrange them on a timeline with Jesus? Our first problem is where to put Jesus on that timeline. Since Matthew and Luke give conflicting details of his birth, most estimates assume Luke was wrong and go with Matthew, giving estimates a range from 8 B.C.E to 4 B.C.E.

Equally problematic is the year Jesus died – it’s a guessing game based on clues from the Gospels. In a nutshell, it has to be when Pontius Pilate was Prefect of Judea (from 26 or 27 to around 36 or 37). If John is right (and all the other Gospels wrong), it also must be a year when Passover fell on a Saturday. But most scholars side with the Synoptic Gospels against him, and look for a year when Passover fell on a Friday – which leaves two possibilities, 30 or 33. That said, the early Church was no more certain than we are, and many had still other ideas. But just for argument’s sake, let’s place Jesus’ life roughly between 4 to 8 B.C.E. and the year 30 or 33 C.E. Here’s how close the written accounts of Jesus come to him:



Timeline of Supposed Eyewitnesses to Jesus

- Flavius Josephus: 37 - c. 100
- Clement of Rome: born ? – c. 98 - 102
- Ignatius: c. 35 - 107
- Pliny the Younger: c. 62 - 113
- Suetonius: c. 75 - 160?
- Tacitus: c. 55 - after 117
- Polycarp: c. 69 - 155
- Justin Martyr: c.114 -167
- Lucian: c. 125 - 180
- Clement of Alexandria: c. 150 - 211/216
- Tertullian: c. 155 - 230
- Origen: c.185 - c. 254
- Cyprian of Carthage: c. 208 - 258
- Eusebius: c. 235 - 339

Notes:

Dates on the timeline refer to the year they wrote the source in question; dates above are their birth and death. The four names from the list that do not appear on the timeline are: **Thallus** - the dates of his life are unknown, but he is believed to have written c. mid 2nd century, as is **Phlegon** (c.140's AD). **Hippolytus** was probably born in the later 2nd century; he was active in the 3rd century and died c. 235. Very little is known about Syrian **Mara Bar-Serapion** apart from the contents of his single surviving letter; dates for its composition range from as early as 73 C.E. to as late as 300 C.E.

As you can see, none of these supposed witnesses were in any position to give a contemporary eyewitness account of the time in which Jesus supposedly lived, because *none of them were even born yet* during the period in question. And even the very earliest of these writings are nearly one hundred years after Jesus' alleged birth. If that weren't enough already, the fact is none of the so-called "testimonies" are very impressive. Few are even talking about Christ in *any* context. For the most part, they are discussing Christians, not Christ at all. The two that do (or just appear to) even mention Christ, namely those of Tacitus and Suetonius, are just snippets that happen to mention common Christian beliefs of their day in passing while actually discussing some other subject altogether, not making any grand pronouncements on Jesus' historicity (see the appendix for details of just what they actually said).

They Should Have Noticed

But there *were* many first century writers, philosophers, historians, and other commentators who had good reason to notice Jesus, and despite apologists' fervent denials, a wealth of their writings still exists today. But these perfectly respectable sources are never on Christian lists of historical witnesses. They include important figures like Epictetus, Pomponius Mela, Martial, Juvenal, Seneca the Younger, Gallio, Seneca the Elder, Pliny the Elder, Plutarch, Justus of Tiberias, Philo of Alexandria, Nicolaus of Damascus and more. And these are just the contemporaries; there are still later commentators who we would expect to have mentioned Christ, but did not. For now let's briefly touch on a few of the more significant ones.

Contemporary Romans

Seneca the Younger (c. 3 B.C.E. – 65) Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Stoic philosopher, writer, statesman, and de facto ruler of the Empire for many years, had three compelling reasons to mention Jesus at least at some point in his many writings. First, though regarded as the greatest Roman writer on ethics, he has nothing to say about arguably the biggest ethical shakeup of his time. Second, in his book on nature *Quaestiones Naturales*, he records eclipses and other unusual natural phenomena, but makes no mention of the miraculous Star of Bethlehem, the multiple earthquakes in Jerusalem after Jesus' death, or the worldwide (or at the very least region-wide) darkness at Christ's crucifixion that he himself should have witnessed. Third, in another book *On Superstition*, Seneca lambasts every known religion, including Judaism.¹ But strangely, he makes no mention whatsoever of Christianity, which was supposedly spreading like wildfire across the empire. This uncomfortable fact later made Augustine squirm in his theological treatise *City of God* (book 6, chapter 11) as he tried mightily to explain away Seneca's glaring omission. In the 4th century, Christian scribes were so desperate to co-opt Seneca they even forged a series of correspondence between Seneca and his "dearest" friend, the Apostle Paul!

Gallio (died 65 C.E.) Seneca's silence is compounded by the fact that his older brother was Junius Annaeus Gallio, who actually appears in the Bible. According to the author of the book of Acts (18:12-17), Gallio was the magistrate who heard Paul's case and threw it out of court. If this is true, it's curious that Gallio never seems to have told his brother about this amazing Jesus character that everyone was so excited about, since Seneca was very interested in just this sort of thing. But Seneca shows no sign of ever having heard of Christians or Jesus at all. It's also strange that even in Acts, Gallio has never heard of Jesus. This makes no sense at all if Jesus was a famous miracle worker recently executed who had returned from the dead and remained in Jerusalem for forty days, as Acts also says.

Contemporary Jews

The strange absence is not confined to Greeks and Romans, there are also writers from Judea:

Jewish historian **Justus of Tiberias** (died c. 101) was a native of Tiberias in Galilee (not far from Jesus' hometown), was personal secretary to King Herod Agrippa II (who allegedly met the apostle Paul), and even wrote a history of the Kingdom of Judah covering the entire time when Jesus lived. And it's very interesting to read what he says about Jesus: *he doesn't say a single thing*. In fact, the main reason we even know of Justus' history is because of that very fact. Only fragments of Justus' work survive today, but the 9th century Patriarch of Constantinople, Photius, reported his displeasure after reading Justus' chronology by grumbling:

*“I have read the chronology of Justus of Tiberias... being under the Jewish prejudices, as indeed he was himself also a Jew by birth, **he makes not the least mention of the appearance of Christ, or what things happened to him, or of the wonderful works that he did.**”*

(Photius, Bibliothec, Codex 33)

Nicolaus of Damascus (c. late 1st century B.C.E. – early 1st century C.E.) was, among many other things, tutor of Cleopatra and Mark Antony, and personal friend, advisor and court historian to King Herod the Great. Nicolaus wrote a world history in 144 books up to the end of Herod's reign, relying heavily on Herod's personal memoirs and of course his own first-hand knowledge (Josephus cites Nicolaus as a principal source for his own account of Herod's reign).

Only a few fragments of this work remain, but if the nativity story in Matthew really happened, it is somewhat incredible that none of it was mentioned by Nicolaus. He would have been an eyewitness when the wise men came to Herod's court and so badly troubled the King (“and all Jerusalem with him,” Matt. 2:3) that he summoned all the chief priests and scribes for an emergency meeting to learn more about this rival messiah. He would have been on hand when Herod learned that the magi had deceived him, went into a rage, and dispatched his soldiers to kill all the infant boys in Bethlehem “and all its districts” (Matt.2:16).

All this would have been far too important for Nicolaus to leave out, even if only to defend Herod's mass infanticide (Herod's murder of his own two sons scandalized Rome, and in fact may have been the inspiration for the whole scenario in Matthew). Needless to say, anything he had to say about

Herod's part in the birth of Jesus, pro or con, would have been far too indispensable for Christians to ignore.

Philo of Alexandria (c.20 B.C.E. – c. 50) Writer, political commentator and esteemed Jewish statesman, Philo was above all the greatest Jewish philosopher of the Greco-Roman world; he fused Jewish and Greek thought to create Hellenistic Judaism. Philo was one of the more prolific writers in the ancient world. Around thirty of his books still survive, not just his extensive philosophical treatises on Judaism, but also his commentaries on contemporary politics and events of note affecting the Jews.

He was certainly interested in fringe religions, and not afraid to talk about them. He wrote a great deal on other Jewish sects of the time, such as the Essenes and the Therapeutae, but nothing on Jesus, or on Christianity either, even though his home of Alexandria was supposedly one of the early cradles of Christianity.

Philo was in just the right time and place to be a brilliant historical witness to Jesus. He lived before, during and after the alleged time of Christ, and he had strong connections to Jerusalem. He didn't just spend time in Jerusalem – his family was intimately connected with the royal house of Judea. So when Jesus' fame and new philosophy spread all across Judea and beyond, when Jesus had his triumphant procession into the Holy City, drove the moneychangers from the temple, was crucified, resurrected and ascended to Heaven, when Jerusalem experienced two major earthquakes, supernatural darkness, and all the dead holy people emerged from their graves and made their way through Jerusalem – Philo was on the scene through all of that.

In fact, he could have quite *literally* been on the scene for all of that. Philo would have loved to have been able to speak firsthand with these great Jewish saints he wrote so much about. But apparently neither their return from the dead nor any of those other miracles made much of an impression on either him – or anyone else in Jerusalem – because he never makes the slightest mention of any of these events.

This absence is particularly strange considering what a huge influence Philo had on Christian theology. The early Christians were Philo's biggest fans. It was early Hellenistic Jewish thinkers like Philo who first combined Jewish thought with the idea of "The *Logos*," i.e. the Word, as in "In the beginning was the Word," and "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." Philo also wrote of the *pneuma* ("breath") as the inspiration of God, the

supernatural power that flows from God into the human soul. The word *pneuma* appears almost 400 times in the New Testament, most notably as *hagion pneuma* – the Holy Spirit. As Frank Zindler has noted, without Philo, the idea of the Trinity couldn't have been invented years later by the second century Christians.²

Commentators After Jesus

There are still many other candidates from the century or two after the time of Jesus that, although they would not have been eyewitnesses, still could have had reason to comment on Jesus, his teachings, or the miraculous events associated with him. Seeing how eagerly the Roman church pounced upon and preserved the barest mentions of Christ in pagan writings, we can be quite certain that if any of these writers had talked about him, the church would have done the same with their writings as well. Here are just a few:

Pausanias was a 2nd century Greek travel writer whose stops included Antioch, Joppa, Jerusalem and the banks of the river Jordan. He was fascinated by all kinds of gods, holy relics and sacred or mysterious things, frequently pausing in his descriptions to relate local legends or digress on the wonders of nature, including earthquakes and meteorological phenomena.

Aelius Aristides (117 -181) (not to be confused with the Christian apologist Aristides) was a famous Greek hypochondriac who wrote extensively on his own visions of various gods, especially Asclepius. He was obsessed with pursuing miraculous healing of his endless imagined illnesses, which stretched on for 38 years. He wrote his best work on sacred teachings, and his other writings are praised for their social history of Asia Minor (where many early Christian communities existed). Yet nowhere do Jesus' sacred teachings or his impact on history appear.

Marcus Cornelius Fronto (100-166) wrote *Discourse against the Christians*, of which only a single fragment survives. But judging by the reactions to his work, Jesus' exploits never seem to have been mentioned.

Maximus of Tyre (c. 2nd century) was a Greek philosophical lecturer who drew upon a wide range of philosophies and mysticism. In fact, it was

Maximus who turned the early Christian theologians on to Platonism. But he has nothing to say about Jesus' teachings.

Athenaeus of Naucratis (c. 200) A Greek writer living in Egypt, Athenaeus wrote the monumental 15-volume work *Deipnosophistae*, "Philosophers at Dinner," which records a series of seemingly endless, meandering conversations that range over most every conceivable subject, with countless digressions usually starting from some dinner-related issue (food or music or linguistics), but running off to encompass other things (like luxury, humor and pornography). It is rather odd that in all these conversations, Christians or Christianity never once came up. This may be because Christianity was a small movement not on anyone's radar at the time – except this is almost 200 years after Christianity began and Egypt was supposedly one of the early centers of the faith. One of Paul's rivals is Apollos, a popular Egyptian preacher (Acts 18:24-28), and Christian tradition claimed that Egypt had a line of bishops starting from the time of Mark.

Lucius Flavius Philostratus (c.170 – c. 244)

Greek-born Roman courtier and writer. He is best known for his biography of Apollonius of Tyana, but he also wrote *Lives of the Sophists*, a collection of biographical sketches of illustrious men. Like Jesus, Apollonius performs miracles and healings, drives out demons, prophesizes, gains a large following and comes back from the dead. But Jesus himself gets no mention from Philostratus in either book.

Diogenes Laertius (c. early 3rd century) wrote *Lives of the Philosophers*, a monumental encyclopedia documenting in detail all the philosophical schools prominent in his day. Luke certainly painted Christianity as a philosophical school, so its failure to get even a brief mention suggests Christianity was still largely unknown even after two centuries.

Sextus Empiricus (c. 3rd century) wrote a massive collection of books refuting practically every philosophy that existed at the time, in elaborate detail. Just as with Diogenes Laertius' compendium of philosophy, Christianity never gets a mention.

There are still more writers who covered a wide variety of subjects that

might well have included Jesus or the events described in the Gospels, including Herodes Atticus, Lucius Apuleius, Aulus Gellius, Artemidorus Daldianus, and others. And these are just the writers we know about...

The Talmud

Some claim that the various Talmuds provide evidence for Jesus, albeit from hostile witnesses. However, the account of various figures called Jesus in the Jewish scriptures is a convoluted mess, as Frank Zindler's *The Jesus the Jews Never Knew* amply demonstrates, and the references to Jesus that some Christians claim to find don't appear until much later. The name of our familiar Jesus of Nazareth (*Yeshua' ha-Notzri* in Hebrew) never appears until the last layers of Jewish Rabbinic literature in the 6th or 7th century. Or is it our Jesus? He is confused with earlier figures of Jesus Pandira (mid 1st century B.C.E.) and Jesus ben Stada (2nd century C.E.), has connections with the government³ and is criticized for strange behavior like burning his food in public.

When he is excommunicated for practicing magic and leading Israel astray, a herald spends forty days searching for witnesses to testify on his behalf, but none can be found. So he is hanged on the eve of Passover, along with his five disciples Mathai, Naqai, Nezer, Buni, and Todah.⁴ It's hard to imagine how much of this Christian apologists would want us to accept as reliable information about their Jesus, or how the Jewish accounts can be called corroboration when they can't even place their various Jesuses in the right century.⁵

Is the Argument from Silence Worthless?

A surprising number of apologists act as though this overwhelming historical silence about Jesus is no big deal at all. They dismiss it all by sniffing, "That's just an Argument from Silence," as if this was a logical fallacy instead of a logical argument. What makes absence of evidence into evidence of absence? Simply put, in the case of Jesus, the Argument from Silence means:

- 1) Should the writer in question have been able to know what Jesus said and did?
- 2) Did the writer have reason to talk about these things at some point?

If the answer to these is yes, and yet we still find no trace anywhere in their writings, it's reasonable to ask why.

Compounding the problem is that the Gospels all insist that Jesus was renowned not just throughout all Jerusalem but the entire region of Palestine, the Decapolis and Syria. If you add the book of Acts, then Jesus' fame supposedly quickly spreads to Asia Minor, Egypt, Greece, Rome and still further, throughout the Mediterranean world. Add wide-reaching political events and spectacular, unprecedented miracles allegedly witnessed by multitudes on top of that, and the lack of corroboration for the Gospels and Acts is a serious problem.

Suddenly it doesn't seem so reasonable just to assume that the preacher Jesus Christ of Nazareth had to have been a real person. Especially when one sees the number of ancient writers who had opportunity and more importantly, motive, to discuss Jesus in their writings, many of which have survived to this day. In many cases, these same writers have much to say about other much less interesting messiahs – but not Jesus, the only one who supposedly really did the miracles all the would-be saviors promised. We are left with a Gospel of the Gaps.

This phenomenon is not just restricted to the history writers of the first few centuries. Even in fiction writing there is evidence that Christianity remained a largely unknown religious movement on the fringe of society for hundreds of years. We know of at least half a dozen ancient pagan novels written between the late 1st and 3rd centuries. Yet notably, Christians are never encountered in any of them before the 4th century, even though these stories typically involved adventures across the whole known world and through all areas of society. For example, in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* he encounters a number of cultists from various religions, but never a single Christian.

In the case of Jesus, his believers are left with two unhappy choices: either the Gospels were grossly exaggerating Jesus' life and accomplishments, and Jesus was just another illiterate, wandering preacher with a tiny following, completely unnoticed by society at large – or he was an outright mythical character. One common reaction from apologists is to insist that there are huge gaps in the historical record of the first century, big enough to hide Jesus in.

This is not just untrue – as we've seen, there were plenty of writers who

had every chance and every reason to discuss Jesus in their surviving work – but this situation is worsened by yet another consideration. *Christians themselves were responsible for the lion's share of all ancient writings that survived.* Remember it was the Church that for hundreds of years doggedly preserved the writings they approved of – and destroyed or simply neglected to maintain the ones they didn't like.

So when we talk about this historical blind spot surrounding Jesus, it's important to emphasize this is not merely a case of pervasive silence. This was not a level playing field where some texts *just happened* to be lost. It is something much more shocking: a pervasive silence, lasting for centuries, that occurs *even in an environment where the odds were stacked completely in favor of the Christian scribes and copyists.* They were able to preserve every scrap of documentation they desired, and suppress, destroy, alter, censor, or otherwise bury any text that displeased them. And even if their motives were as pure as driven snow, it was all too easy for unpopular texts to be lost simply to the ravages of time through neglect. Which is why it is especially noteworthy to look at some cases where we have reason to believe that the historical record is not just spotty - but was tampered with deliberately.

Suspicious Silences

Seneca In his book *On Superstition*, Seneca the Younger took aim at every known religious sect of his time, pagan and Jewish. But he made no mention of Christians, an uncomfortable fact that Augustine tried to explain away quite unconvincingly in his book *City of God*.⁶ Remarkably, Augustine's quotation is all that survives from this particular book. It is very curious that it wasn't saved, since nearly everything else Seneca wrote was preserved. Christians should have loved a text that attacked Jews and pagans, especially by such an eminent pagan philosopher as Seneca. It is also the only Senecan text we would expect to mention Christianity, so the disappearance of this particular book out of well over a hundred surviving writings of Seneca seems suspiciously like the work of snubbed Christian monks.

Philo of Alexandria Eusebius mentions that Philo also wrote a book on Pilate's persecution of the Jews (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, book 2, ch.5) - one more book where Jesus certainly should have been mentioned, but obviously

wasn't, since neither Eusebius nor anyone else ever cites this book for historical documentation of Jesus and his famous execution under Pilate's watch.

Hippolytus of Rome 3rd century Church father Hippolytus' magnum opus was his ten-volume *A Refutation of All Heresies*, or the *Philosophumena*. At the end of book 1, Hippolytus declares that he will proceed to blow the lid off all the secret teachings of the mystery faiths, but those next two books are mysteriously missing. So the one place that could have told us how much the Christians borrowed or adapted from pagan mystery religions was inexplicably lost from the collection.

Cassius Dio Early 3rd century Roman historian Cassius Dio (or Dio Cassius) spent twenty-two years chronicling 983 years of Roman history in 80 volumes. The first 34 volumes and the final 20 volumes survive as fragments and in abridgements by other authors. But the 35th through the 60th books are complete – with just a single exception: Book 55 (from the years 12 B.C.E. to 9 C.E.) strangely has a considerable gap in it. What's more, this puzzling blackout is apparently quite pervasive; even subsequent epitomes by other authors don't know what Dio had to say here, though they can often fill gaps in the text elsewhere. What has been lost – or removed – from volume 55?

Oxford historian Peter Swan notes that Dio's surviving material implies that he discussed Herod the Great's death in this section of missing text.⁷ If so, this is where we would expect to find mention of the remarkable events Matthew describes: all of Jerusalem being troubled by news of the new messiah (2:3), Herod's court intrigue with the Magi, his emergency council of all the chief priests and scribes to find the birthplace of the new messiah, his slaughter of the innocents, or the miraculous Star of Bethlehem. Certainly if he had mentioned any one of these, no Christian would have failed to preserve it and comment on it, seeing how desperately they searched for and doggedly latched on to any scrap of historical confirmation for the Gospels. But on the other hand, if Dio *didn't*, then this otherwise unlikely hole in the middle of Dio's record suddenly does make sense – as a victim of surgical editing by displeased Christian scribes.

Tacitus is widely regarded as the greatest Roman historian of all time, but

he is best known in apologetic circles for making one of the earliest pagan references to Christ and Christianity. Christians treasured his off-the-cuff mention of Christ (see the appendix). But it appears they didn't want to save quite everything Tacitus wrote. His history of the emperor Tiberius has a curious gap of two years – from mid-29 C.E. to mid-31 C.E., including all of the year 30, often regarded as a likely year of the Crucifixion.

In the *American Journal of Ancient History*,⁸ Vanderbilt University classical historian Robert Drews argues that early Christians deliberately expunged the section, and that this one spot was targeted because Christians were embarrassed by the great historian failing to make any mention of Jesus' death, or any of the spectacular events that occurred at the time of the Crucifixion. If Christians didn't squelch this passage, its absence is otherwise very strange and hard to explain (unlike other gaps in Tacitus, as Drews notes).

One might wonder if Christians destroyed the passage because it made a negative comment about Christ. But this is unlikely, since if Tacitus had something bad to say about Christ he would have said so when he made his famous remark about Nero blaming the Christians for the fire in Rome. And actually, he would not have had to make his side comment there in the first place if he had already mentioned Christ earlier.

Plutarch There is another suspicious gap in book 4, chapter 6 of Plutarch's *Symposiacs* (Table Talk). There he starts to discuss "Who the god of the Jews is," arguing that the god of the Jews is really just Bacchus. He then starts listing examples of similarities between "the mysteries of the Jews" and the mystery religions of Dionysus, Bacchus and Adonis. But in the middle of this the text is cut off, and the rest of that scroll is missing, although the table of contents shows several sections remaining on other subjects besides this one - so the loss appears deliberate, as though the rest of the scroll was simply torn off at that point.

Peregrinus Proteus (c. 95-165 C.E.) was a Cynic philosopher-turned-Christian from Parium in northwest Asia Minor. During his career as a Christian in Palestine, he became a top church leader, expounding and commenting on the scriptures – and reportedly even writing a number of them himself! If this is true, we actually may have Peregrinus to thank for some of the books of the New Testament. So what happened to all these

Christian commentaries?

Unfortunately for Peregrinus, he is best remembered as the target of Lucian's *Passing of Peregrinus*, in which Lucian told everyone what a vain, pompous, conniving charlatan Peregrinus had been. So once his wickedly satirical account of Peregrinus' life (including, incidentally, the details of how easily he was able to dupe the gullible Christians) reached the public, there was no way the humiliated Christians would tolerate having his name attached to anything remotely connected to their religion.

Lost Critiques

Lastly, it is perhaps not surprising but still worth noting that all critiques of Christianity from the early centuries of its existence have been lost. They survive only in brief excerpts quoted in books written by their Christian detractors. The ones that we know of include Celsus' *The True Logos*, Marcus Cornelius Fronto's *Discourse against the Christians* and Hierocles' *The Lover of Truth*.

According to Augustine and others, the Neo-Platonist philosopher Porphyry of Tyre was a Christian, but that must have been before he wrote *Against the Christians*, fifteen books against what he called "a confused and vicious sect." It is Porphyry who first realized and showed that the Old Testament book of Daniel was a later forgery and that the "Sea" of Galilee is nothing of the kind. Though many Church apologists wrote against him, his own writing survives only in the fragments they quoted.

Even the Emperor Julian wrote sharp critiques against Christianity in his scathing satire *Symposion* (or *Kronia*), and the three books in his philosophical treatise *Against the Galileans*. Even though *Galileans* only survives in the excerpts from Cyril of Alexandria's rebuttal, it exposed problems in Christian theology that still hold up today. Eunapius (c. 4th - early 5th century) wrote *History against the Christians* with the explicit aim of critiquing Christian versions of historical events from 270 to 404, or as he put it, "when the practice of Christianity was gaining ground and usurping all men's minds."⁹ For instance, he gives his own take on the claims regarding Constantine's "conversion." Despite its anti-Christian bias, many later historians, including Christians, employed it as a source, before it was finally lost (except for fragments). His *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* still survives.

Again, these are only the ones we know about. Add up all these missing pages, books, letters and scrolls from respected writers of the ancient world, and there is not just a lost library, but a string of evidence of Christians seeking to alter the record to cover up the embarrassing absence of Jesus from secular history.

Conclusion: A Century of Silence

Why didn't anyone notice Jesus? As we can see, it's ridiculous to say we just don't have many records surviving from the alleged time of Jesus. The truth is, not only did plenty of contemporary historical accounts survive from the first century, but many of these very writers were in the right time and place and had excellent motive to have written about Jesus' famous life, teachings, ministry and miracles. But there is no external corroboration for anything written in the Gospels. If Jesus really lived and died and returned from the dead in the early first century, it didn't seem to make an impact until the end of the first century. But perhaps there is one Jewish source that does have information about Jesus – or does it?

For further reading:

The Oxford Classical Dictionary, Third Edition Hornblower, Simon and Spawforth, Anthony, editors, Oxford University Press, 1999

Myth No. 3:

Ancient historian Josephus wrote about Jesus

“Certainly the attestations I have already produced concerning our Savior may be sufficient. However, it may not be amiss, if, over and above, we make use of Josephus the Jew for a further witness...”

- Eusebius of Caesarea, *Demonstratio Evangelica*

To recap, there are no contemporary accounts of Christ from *any* source,

in or outside the Bible. Indeed, only one writer on the apologists' list even comes close to being a near contemporary – though he was born years after Jesus' alleged death, with an account written some sixty years after the times suggested for the crucifixion: Jewish historian Yoseph bar Mattatyahu, better known to us as **Flavius Josephus**. In the year 93 or 94, Josephus wrote his *Antiquities of the Jews*, which contains two disputed passages many hold up as historical evidence for Jesus. The first is the so-called *Testimonium Flavianum*, a snippet that interrupts an otherwise gloomy chapter to bring us this brief but glowing summary of Jesus' miraculous career:

“Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was (the) Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.”

(*Ant.*, book 18, chapter 3)

But is it real?

The passage is so blatantly counterfeit that no historians today deny it is a later Christian forgery; the only debate is over how much of it is a forgery. Still, wishful apologists try to argue that Josephus really did mention Jesus, and overenthusiastic scribes merely embellished his account. They even try to reconstruct the “original” Testimonium.

But there are several strong indications that the entire passage is an interpolation, including its non-Josephean vocabulary and misuse of terms. Still another is that it barely relates to the rest of the chapter. The following paragraph starts by saying “About the same time also another sad calamity put the Jews into disorder.” Another sad calamity? But what sad calamity? Josephus has just presented a commercial for Jesus, not a sad calamity! This reference skips over the Testimonium entirely and points to the previous section. *That* passage, where Pilate sets his soldiers loose to massacre a large crowd of Jews in Jerusalem, certainly fits the bill as a sad calamity, but no

versions of the Testimonium do, “reconstructed” or not.

Many commentators, including Doherty, G. A. Wells and Peter Kirby, have noted that without the Testimonium passage, the two passages flanking it flow seamlessly into each other. This fact alone is a tremendous indication that the passage is entirely fraudulent.

Perhaps the major giveaway is that this passage does not appear *until the 4th century*. For the first 300 years of its existence, there is no mention of the Testimonium anywhere. This couldn't have been simply because no one happened to read it; Josephus' histories were immensely popular and pored over by scholars. For centuries his works were more widely read in Europe than any book other than the Bible. According to Josephus scholar Michael Hardwick in *Josephus as an Historical Source in Patristic Literature through Eusebius*, more than a dozen early Christian writers, including Justin Martyr, Theophilus Antiochenus, Melito of Sardis, Minucius Felix, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Julius Africanus, Pseudo-Justin, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen, Methodius and Lactantius, are known to have read and commented on the works of Josephus.

Origen in particular relied extensively on him; his own writings are filled with references to Josephus. But it is obvious Origen had never heard of the Testimonium. When his skeptical Roman opponent Celsus asks what miracles Jesus performed, Origen answers that Jesus' life was indeed full of striking and miraculous events, “but from what other source can we furnish an answer than from the Gospel narratives?” (*Contra Celsum*, 2.33) In the same book (1.47), Origen even quotes from *Antiquities of the Jews* in order to prove the historical existence of John the Baptist, then adds that Josephus didn't believe in Jesus, and criticizes him for failing to mention Jesus in that book!

And no one else seems to have heard of the Testimonium for 300 years, either – it is never quoted until the 4th century, when the notorious Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea begins quoting it repeatedly.

Meet Eusebius

Who is Eusebius, and why is he notorious? In addition to being bishop of Caesarea, and courtier and biographer of the Emperor Constantine, he was the very first Christian historian, still venerated by the Catholic and Orthodox Churches as “the Father of Ecclesiastical History.” In a very real sense, he is

responsible for virtually everything we know about the early centuries of Christianity. But despite this, history has not been kind to Eusebius.

He was generally well regarded up until the Enlightenment, although even in Eusebius' own time, many of his peers did not trust him or his work. Over two dozen complaints from his contemporaries still survive: accusations of lack of integrity, poor scholarship, deliberate misrepresentations in his histories, and hypocrisy.¹ As scholarship advanced, his histories became more and more suspect. By the early 20th century, new archeological discoveries like the Nag Hammadi library finally nailed the coffin on Eusebius' remaining credibility.

Edward Gibbon, author of the classic *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, said with disdain, "What can be gleaned of Eusebius does not endear him to modern scholars," and openly expressed his scorn for him in no uncertain terms more than once. Constantine biographer Jacob Burckhardt dubbed Eusebius "the first thoroughly dishonest and unfair historian of ancient times."²

His alleged forgeries include a pair of letters between the ruler of Edessa and Jesus himself (the legend of the letters went on to include the *Mandylion*, or "Holy Face of Edessa" – a self-portrait of Jesus!), a letter (possibly two) from Emperor Marcus Aurelius, alterations to Flavius Josephus' *Antiquities*, deliberate falsification of dates, swiping from a Roman novel to create Christian martyr "biographies," and forging a heretical succession to make it appear rival Christian factions were just a small knot of misguided crackpot heretics from much later who all inherited their errors from one another. Eusebius had no difficulty in altering any inconvenient aspects of reality that didn't suit him. In fact, he seemed to doctor the facts habitually and constantly; he re-wrote his official church history at least five times.³

Constantine's Vision

Apart from the Testimonium, perhaps his most famous creation is **the Labrum**, Constantine's battlefield vision of the cross (actually not a cross at all, but the Chi-Rho, the monogram of Christ in Greek). According to Eusebius' posthumous biography, this miracle converted him to Christianity, made him sole Emperor and led to the eventual dominance of Christianity over the pagan religions. Interestingly enough however, this life-changing event did not appear in Eusebius' earlier book *Ecclesiastical History*, written

while Constantine was still alive. There he tells a very different story of Constantine's rise.

In the earlier version, there is no conversion story at all. Eusebius credits Constantine's victory to the fact that the future emperor was a lifelong Christian. He strongly implies that Constantine's pagan father Constantius was a Christian too, downplaying his pagan religion completely by emphasizing his piety and virtue, saying that he was "most friendly to the Divine Word," and a pious protector of Christians.⁴ But when Eusebius writes *Life of Constantine* years later he changes tack, adds the miracle conversion story, and instead of trying to deny Constantius' paganism, tells us that the emperor was only *pretending* to be pagan (*Vita Constantini* book I, ch. 16-18) - and that in reality his entire court were all secretly Christians!

Of course, in reality, though Constantine was the first Christian Emperor, he never stopped being a pagan Emperor as well. Despite Eusebius' best attempts at spin-doctoring, he remained half pagan, half Christian, and all politician. Like his father, he never gave up paying his proper respects to the Sun god, not even while he reigned as the supreme Christian leader. In fact, in 310, two years before his great victory, Constantine claimed to have had an *earlier* divine vision prophesying victory – but this one came from Apollo, in his sacred pagan grove in Gaul.

Constantine was a unifier; he carefully cultivated his pious image towards both the Pagans and the Christians in his realm. Whenever possible, he used language and symbols that had double meanings for both religions. The reason his famous vision was of the Chi-Rho and not a cross was because it had appeal both as a monogram for Christ, and as the abbreviation pagan scribes originally used for *chreston* ("good").⁵

Other Contributions of Eusebius

Plenty of other interesting things developed under Eusebius' watch: Constantine's mother Helena went to the Holy Land, paying a great deal of money as she went, which resulted in **the discovery of Jesus' Tomb** (Conveniently enough, some think Eusebius was also the Empress' personal tour guide on this trip).⁶ This same discovery also led to later findings of **Pieces of the True Cross** and **Holy Relics**, such as the nails used to crucify Jesus. Helena's trip inspired many others to follow in her footsteps; the Christian **Pilgrimages** industry got its start and went gangbusters around this

time. Eusebius' martyrologies also went a long way towards promoting the **Christian Cult of Saints and Martyrs**.

Richard Carrier notes that one outstanding problem for relying on any references from Eusebius is that he is "notorious for reporting (if not creating) forgeries," yet "unfortunately, Eusebius is often our only source for much of the early history of Christian texts, and so I am forced to cite him frequently. Even when I appear to cite him confidently, readers must keep in mind that he is not exceptionally trustworthy."⁷ In fact, Carrier is even less diplomatic than that: "Eusebius was either a liar or hopelessly credulous, and either way not a very good historian."

So three hundred years after Josephus, the Testimonium Flavinium makes its first appearance in three books of Eusebius, who cites it from his copy of *Antiquities of the Jews*. And where did Eusebius get his copy of *Antiquities of the Jews*? He inherited it from his master... who inherited it from Origen. The same Origen who never heard of the passage! No matter how you slice it, the Testimonium sticks out like the complete fraud it is, and Bishop Eusebius is prime suspect for the forgery.

What *would* a genuine reference to Christ in Josephus have looked like? It wouldn't have been complimentary in the least; Josephus would have called him a charlatan and never referred to him as the messiah. The vocabulary would match Josephus' genuine writings, the passage would fit the tone and content of the surrounding text, and would be much longer and more detailed if Jesus has actually done anything noteworthy or had presented radical new teachings. But most importantly, it would have been seized upon hundreds of years earlier by the early church fathers who were so hungry for just this kind of historical evidence from Josephus!

The "James Reference"

The second alleged mention of Jesus in Josephus is the "**James Reference**" in *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 20, Ch. 9, which appears to make a reference to Jesus' brother James. Josephus describes the antics of Ananus, a very unpopular high priest in Jerusalem who assembled the Sanhedrin council, and brought charges against a "the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was Jacob," (James and Jacob are cognates, like Peter and Pedro) and his companions, and condemned them all to be stoned to death. This caused an uproar, and citizens complained to King

Agrippa, who took the high priesthood from Ananus and made Jesus, the son of Damneus, high priest.⁸

Is it a genuine reference? Unlike the infamous Testimonium Flavianum passage, few think it is a forgery. For one thing, it seems too short for a forger to bother slipping it in. But there are several indications that this passage is not talking about our familiar Jesus. Perhaps the most important consideration is the fact that Josephus' report of a trial and death sentence carried out on James and his companions is completely at odds with all other accounts of James' death (cf. Hegesippus and Clement of Alexandria, quoted in *Historia Ecclesiastica* Book 2, Ch.1:3-4 and Ch. 23:4-18) which agree that James, the head of the Jerusalem church, was killed alone by an angry mob. The crowd stumbled upon James by himself, confronted him in the street, seized him, threw him off the temple roof and stoned him. Finally one of the mob beat him to death with a fuller's club.

And there are other questionable features. Josephus never used the terms "Christ" or "Messiah" – not even in reference to his own personal pick for Messiah, Emperor Vespasian. He preferred the term "charlatan" for all the false messiahs he describes. Nor would his Roman audience be familiar with the term.

Another aspect that makes no sense is the outrage of the Jews. Most would have considered a Christian leader a hated heretical cult guru. So why would his death sentence make the conservative Jewish establishment so furious that they would protest that the trial was illegal, petition the king and even go chase after the Roman governor to demand he depose their own High Priest? None of this supports the New Testament's portrayal that this was a time of Jewish persecution of Christians.

Who was this James?

All this and more raises the question of whether the venerated old Jewish holy man James in Josephus' account is even supposed to be the same person as James the Christian leader in Jerusalem whom the Church claimed was Jesus' brother. Then there is the curious matter of the other Jesus mentioned in the passage, Jesus, the son of Damneus. What does he have to do with all this? As it turns out, perhaps he is the key to solving the whole mystery.

The answer appears to be that the sentence fragment "who was called Christ" was inserted into the text by mistake. Historian Richard Carrier is an

authority on accidental scribal interpolation. He explains that this looks exactly like a case of accidental scribal interpolation of a marginal note. The phrase “the one called Christ” (*tou legomenou Christou*) is a simple, concise, compact statement that is typical of brief interlinear notes, which often employ participle constructions like this. It looks exactly like what a scribe would write in the margin to himself to indicate that he thinks this ‘Jesus’ is ‘the one called Christ.’ But it interrupts the sentence, and though it is not bad Greek per se, it is clunky and confusing. Remove that awkward phrase and the sentence reads even more smoothly.

The Jesus of the James Reference

Also, there is the context to consider. Why would Josephus suddenly say out of the blue that Ananus summoned to trial “the brother of Jesus”? The fact that his name is James is an afterthought — the actual object of the sentence is that this man *is the brother of Jesus*. Why are we supposed to care? Who is this Jesus? Why is Ananus after his brother? We would expect a digression here, or (if Josephus wrote the Testimonium) a back-reference to where he already covered this. Otherwise, the reader is left scratching his head.

But let’s look at what Josephus is telling us. After Ananus summons this trial and gets this ‘brother of Jesus’ killed, everyone is infuriated, King Agrippa takes the high priesthood from him and makes Jesus, the son of Damneus, high priest (*Antiquities* 20.203). If *this* is the Jesus whose brother Ananus killed, then that explains why the punishment was to depose Ananus and install in his place the brother of the man he unjustly killed. Certainly it is more probable that Josephus meant Jesus, son of Damneus, than that Josephus just mentions some different Jesus out of the blue, with a strange lack of any digression on who this Jesus was, leaving the reader wondering ‘Who is *that*?’

Carrier adds, “In fact, imagine you are an ancient reader of the text. What would you conclude? You would ask yourself, ‘Who’s this Jesus guy?’ (even if “the one called Christ” was tacked on, most readers would not know what that meant, or why it had anything to do with Ananus going after his brother, etc.). Then you would read on, and see, ‘Ah, that’s the Jesus.’ That is, since Josephus doesn’t tell you who this Jesus is, there is only one Jesus he leaves his reader to infer that it is: Jesus, son of Damneus.”

The elegance of this simple and thoroughly credible explanation is quite compelling. Carrier's answer is the only one that makes sense of each of the problems with the James reference in Josephus. It explains why Josephus' report does not match the other accounts of James' death: because they are talking about two completely different men. Because it is not a forgery, only a margin note, we see why the interpolation is so short and content-free. Lastly, and most satisfying, it clarifies the text, causing a confusing passage to suddenly make perfect sense.

If Josephus was originally talking about “Jesus, the son of Damneus,” the same Jesus he mentions just a few lines later, then there is no longer any mystery over why Josephus did not explain who this Jesus was or what “the Christ” meant. And it is only when we put forward that Josephus is talking about Jesus and James, the sons of Damneus, that it finally becomes clear why the Jews would be upset at the death of this James, and why his brother Jesus became high priest. Of course, there is no way to prove this short of the appearance of an original *Antiquities* manuscript, but together all these factors establish a strong case for reasonable doubt.

Jesus the Invisible Son of Man

When we take the trouble to look for confirmation of the Bible from contemporary (or even near-contemporary) historical eyewitnesses for Jesus, amazingly, the first thing we discover is: *there are none*. This fact alone is astounding. Looking at the supposed period of Jesus' ministry, we find there were numerous commentators who both had opportunity and could be reasonably expected to make mention of his exploits – yet none of them show any awareness of Jesus whatsoever. Incredibly, this silence continues throughout the entire first century. The figures that are touted as witnesses don't come until decades, even centuries, after Christ's time; more significantly, none of them even provide the evidence they are supposed to (see the appendix for details).

It is sobering to realize that in all of recorded history, for the first century the closest we have to historical support for the Gospels' picture of Christ are an outright forgery, and a single disputed line that in all likelihood refers to someone else entirely. This is why these two problematic bits of text in Josephus are fought over so fiercely. As brief, questionable and disputed as these two small scraps are, they are quite literally *all there is* to historically

support the Bible's account of Jesus in the first century.

Yet how can this be? Jesus was supposed to have been bigger than the Beatles, single-handedly capturing the attention of all Judea and Galilee, and as far afield as Syria and the Decapolis. The Gospels claim his teachings enraptured multitudes and outraged the establishment. Even if one discounted all the miraculous events surrounding his birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension merely as later legends, if nothing else his (allegedly) controversial, (allegedly) new teachings alone should have left an impact in the historical record.

After all, unlike the myriad well-documented phony healers, sham miracle-workers and failed messiahs from this time, he was supposed to be the *real thing*, the one who genuinely could do what the others could not: feed thousands, heal the sick, even raise the dead, not just once, but numerous times.

Among his thousands of supporters were said to be the highest members of society: a royal official, a centurion, a temple leader and members of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. He single-handedly drove out the moneychangers from the Temple. The entire city of Jerusalem wildly acclaimed him as he entered triumphantly. He was dramatically arrested and endured a wildly illegal tribunal of the Jewish leaders before being brought before not only Pilate, but also King Herod, in a spectacular show trial that played out before the entire city of Jerusalem.

His death – and resurrection – were marked by spectacular supernatural events: angelic appearances, earthquakes, legions of beloved Jewish saints coming back from the dead and publicly appearing in Jerusalem, supernatural darkness that covered the entire world, or at the very least the entire region, for hours, and much more. And he appeared again to many of his followers afterwards, some say for as long as forty days, before ascending bodily into Heaven before a crowd of his followers.

Despite all this, perhaps it's conceivable that the Romans and Greeks missed all the fuss – but how could anyone in Judea? Without being able to read Justus of Tiberias ourselves, we might be willing to discount his omission of anything about Jesus. But the silence of figures like Philo of Alexandria or Nicolaus of Damascus on any deed or word of Jesus is deafening. And the silence of *everyone* at the time completely goes against the image of Jesus presented to us in the Gospels. Given the zeal of the early church to latch on to any ancient writing that even *seemed* to offer

documentation of Jesus, can we really believe they missed or failed to preserve *every single reference to him* for the first hundred-plus years?

If even just one of the supernatural stories told about Jesus were true, no one would even bother with a pair of doctored lines in Josephus – we would have *dozens* of contemporary references to Jesus, even if only to be found in quotations from later Christian authors. If true, the events of Jesus’ life really should have been what Christians have always exaggeratedly claimed they were: the best-attested events in human history. Instead, they are forced to fight tooth and nail to defend the veracity of two highly suspicious disputed passages.

We might even expect to have physical evidence for him. Instead all we have is a two thousand year history of forged relics. It doesn’t seem too much to hope that Jesus might have left writings himself. But we have nothing but ridiculous forgeries centuries after the fact, like the correspondence between Jesus and King Abgarus, or Seneca and Paul, and a string of examples of Christians doctoring the historical record, like the forged Testimonium in Josephus, to conceal Jesus’ conspicuous absence.

What *do* we have, then? We have the Gospels.

For further reading:

James Carlton Paget, “Some Observations on Josephus and Christianity,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 52.2 (Oct. 2001): pp. 539-624

Myth No. 4:

Eyewitnesses wrote the Gospels

“But Christ—if he has indeed been born, and exists anywhere—is unknown, and does not even know himself, and has no power until Elias come to anoint him, and make him manifest to all. And you, having accepted a groundless report, invent a Christ for yourselves, and for his sake are inconsiderately perishing.”

-Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, Chapter 8

The four Gospels of the New Testament – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – are the only sources we have for biographical information on Jesus. Twenty centuries of Church-approved history have represented the Gospels as four independent, consistent, complementary and thoroughly trustworthy eyewitness accounts of Jesus’ life from his closest associates – cherished, preserved, faithfully and accurately handed down through the ages to today. But this official story has some serious credibility problems. There are two critical questions that need to be answered: who wrote the Gospels, and when?

When Were the Gospels Written?

A wide range of possible dates has been proposed over the years, running over a full century from the 50’s all the way to the 150’s and still later. Scholarship has somewhat fine-tuned this speculation. It’s long been accepted that the Gospels were written after Paul’s letters, which would put them after 58 CE. Furthermore, most mainstream scholars tend to place the earliest, Mark’s Gospel, in the mid 70’s, sometime just after the Jewish-Roman War (66 – 70). This is because Mark contains unmistakable allusions to various events of the revolt, including the destruction of the temple in the year 70.

There are still other reasons to date *all* of the Gospels later than the 70’s, or even the 90’s. One is because of the pervasive silence of early Christian writers concerning them. Respected Christian biblical historian Bruce Metzger has gone into great detail surveying the consensus of scholars on the emergence of the New Testament, in *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Clarendon, 1987) and has uncovered some troubling facts.

One of the first glaring non-references to the Gospels is in the first letter of **Clement of Rome** (written c. 95 C.E.). Clement cited the Old Testament as “scripture” over a hundred times, and frequently refers to Hebrews and some of Paul’s letters, though he considers them as “good counsel,” not scripture.¹ But oddly, Clement *never* refers to any Gospel. On two occasions he even “quotes” Jesus, but without ever referring to any written source, and these two “quotes” don’t quite correspond to anything in our Gospels.² Remarkably, this suggests that Clement – a prominent leader of the Church in

Rome – had no knowledge of them.

The letters of **Ignatius of Antioch** (written c. 107 C.E.) show that, like Papias, Ignatius appears to be very familiar with the letters attributed to Paul, but his knowledge of the Gospels is problematic. Some have suggested that he may have borrowed ideas and phrases from the Gospels, but all of these citations are conjectural. Not only does he not make any precise quotations, frustratingly, he never names his sources either – or even hints that he is citing a source at all.³

Matthew and Luke come later still. How do we know? Because both plagiarized from Mark. More than two hundred years ago, Bible scholars noticed an interesting – and quite incestuous – relationship between the first three Gospels. Though there are major divergences between them (which is worrisome already), even the agreements between them are suspicious.

The three share a truly astonishing number of near-identical passages, arranged in much the same order and in many cases using the exact same wording. Luke reproduces 50% of Mark's text, and Matthew a whopping 90%. Of the 661 verses in Mark's Gospel, Luke's Gospel uses about 360 and Matthew's Gospel uses about 607.⁴ The parallels are so widespread and apparent that the majority opinion among Biblical authorities has been in agreement ever since; namely that Matthew and Luke based their material upon Mark's. If the Farrer or Goodacre Hypotheses are correct (and I believe Goodacre's modified Farrer hypothesis is), Luke also copied from Matthew (while others speculate both used a hypothetical second source, "Q").

Matthew is not the only source Luke stole from. In *Josephus and the New Testament* (Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), Josephan scholar Steve Mason demonstrates that Luke copied from Flavius Josephus as well – but unfortunately, not always accurately. In fact, Luke's mistakes in plagiarizing are one of the ways we know that he's copying from Josephus, and not the other way around. Where there are points of contact between them, the information Josephus provides is: 1) more extensive, 2) much more detailed, 3) more accurate, and 4) in the correct context. For example, he knows exactly when and why the census under Quirinius happened, that the census was only of Judea and not the whole world, etc. By contrast, Luke's details on the same matters are sketchy and simplified, quite often wrong, and unrelated to the story. They are merely tidbits that have been inserted into the narrative simply to provide window dressing and flourishes of authenticity. Luke is quite deliberately mining the works of Josephus for historical details

he can use to give his Gospel the appearance of a real historical work. He is fabricating history, not recording it.

Incidentally, since Josephus wrote *Antiquities of the Jews* in the mid-90s (c. 93 or 94), this means the author of Luke could not have written his Gospel before then, and it is more plausible that it was written much later. A date early in the second century, or perhaps even as late as the 130's would be a realistic estimate of its composition, along with the book of Acts, which Luke also wrote.

The fourth Gospel, John, was the last Gospel to be written. Even conservatives allow that John may have been written as late as the turn of the first century, citing one piece of physical evidence, the John Rylands Papyrus (P52), a fragment about the size of a credit card (see [photo](#)). However, as A.N. Wilson notes, "In spite of claims by journalists and non-papyrologists in recent times, it is difficult, if not impossible to date papyrus within a 50-year margin."⁵ So the last Gospel could date from nearly any time in the early to mid 2nd century.

Who Wrote the Gospels?

Tradition lists the four evangelists as: Matthew Levi, a tax collector and one of Jesus' twelve disciples; John Mark, the apostle Peter's interpreter; Luke, Paul's personal physician (also said to have written Acts); and finally "the disciple whom Jesus loved," traditionally insisted to be the apostle John, son of Zebedee – but this is sheer guesswork. Actually, *all* of the author's names are sheer guesswork, or pious fraud. The titles "According to Matthew," etc., were not added until late in the second century. All four Gospels were originally anonymous, none claim to be written by eyewitnesses, and all contain giveaways that they were written generations later, by well-educated Greek-speaking theologians, not illiterate Aramaic speakers.

For instance, Luke's Gospel opens by telling us his story has been handed down to his generation: "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as *they were handed on to us* by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word..." (Luke 1:1-2, NRSV). Matthew occasionally lets it slip that he is writing long afterwards, such as when he described the Jewish authorities' cover-up of the resurrection ("this saying is commonly reported

among the Jews *until this day*,” Matt. 28:15) and the story of the field of blood (“Wherefore that field was called the field of blood, *unto this day*,” Matt. 27:8). There are other indications that make this even more apparent.

Some Anachronisms in the Gospels

Historian Robert Price has noted several instances where the Evangelists accidentally added elements to their stories that never could have occurred during the time they are depicting. Here are just a few of them:

The Story of the Woman Taken in Adultery (John 8:1-11), one of the most beloved passages from the Bible, is a beautiful and truly timeless story of forgiveness (“Let he who is without sin throw the first stone”), with just the perfect dash of sex to spice it up. But it is completely fictitious. It was obviously written during the time when the early Jewish Christians had begun trying to decide which parts of the traditional Jewish law they would keep and which they would let go. As Price notes, no one in Jesus’ time would ask Jesus whether we should obey the Torah or not! Compliance with Mosaic Law was not an optional suggested serving of ethical advice. It was rigorously enforced; after all, that was what public stoning was for.

Speaking of stones, we could call the apostle Simon Peter “Rocky,” since that is what his nickname Cephas (in Greek *Petros*) meant. Matthew has Jesus making a pun when he tells Peter “upon this rock I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). Though if this had happened in reality, Peter would have scratched his head and asked, “Say, Jesus - what’s a church?” since churches hadn’t been invented yet, and wouldn’t be developed until many decades later.

Matthew gets ahead of his story (10:38) when he has Jesus tell his disciples, “He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” – an odd thing for him to say, since no one is supposed to have any idea that he is going to be arrested and crucified later on. But his disciples apparently let it go without any confusion or alarm – just as they do in John, when Jesus again blabs the end of the book: “Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again” (John 10:17).

Incidentally, there’s another odd thing about Jesus’ speech here in Matthew that often goes unnoticed. Ostensibly, he is giving instructions to his twelve apostles to go out and start preaching, which they immediately do in

the next chapter (Matt. 11:1). And one chapter later they are all together with Jesus again (Matt. 12:1, Mark 6:30) and perfectly fine. None of which would seem out of place, if Jesus hadn't just told them that they were going out to be persecuted (10:22-23). But that pales in comparison to what else he says before they set out:

“For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the son of man comes.”

(Matt. 10:23)

The son of man is Jesus, of course, and his coming spells the end of the world (see Mark 13:24-27 for details: the sun and moon darkening, the stars all falling, etc.). Modern day believers rationalize this failed prophecy by saying that Jesus was *really* talking to all of us in the audience, but his disciples would've had no way of knowing this message wasn't *really* directed at them. Besides, once you start rationalizing this much aren't you already as good as admitting the Gospel is nothing more than fictitious window dressing? (And does anyone really think that Christian missionaries haven't gone through all the cities of Israel yet?) And if Jesus really *did* say it, why didn't the world end around the year 30? No matter how one tries to twist this verse into something else, the fact remains that this prophecy of Jesus just doesn't hold up. Doesn't that make him a false prophet?⁶

The Gospels vs. the Gospels

There are still plenty of other problems that kill any wishful notions of apostolic authorship: Matthew and Luke contradict each other in such critical details as the genealogy of Jesus – and thus both can't be right. And why would a real eyewitness like Matthew need to plagiarize the bulk of someone else's story – someone who *wasn't* an eyewitness – and just add a few little touches of his own here and there?

And on the other hand, if Mark received his Gospel from Peter, why is it that the other Gospels have *more* anecdotes about Peter, including for example, Jesus telling him, “You are Peter the rock, and upon this rock I will build my church”? Would Peter himself forget such an incident? It gets worse. Mark shows no understanding of the social situation in the Holy Land, making numerous errors that no one living in early first century Judea would

have made. Interestingly enough, when you compare Matthew's and Mark's Gospels, one finds that the author of Matthew is constantly correcting Mark's blunders about all aspects of Jewish society, religion, the calendar, holidays, customs, attitudes – even repeated misquotes of scripture.

One last nail in this coffin is that whoever wrote the Gospel of Mark also demonstrates a George Bush-like lack of familiarity with Palestinian geography. No one who had actually lived in Palestine would have made the mistakes that the author of Mark does. For instance, as Earl Doherty observes, Mark 7:31 tells us Jesus departed “from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis,” a trip 50 miles out of his way, on foot! This is one of several similar geographical blunders Mark makes. Meanwhile, though Luke appears very familiar with Rome's sites and taverns, which he casually mentions without any further explanation, not only does he not know much Aramaic, but he has little knowledge of Judea itself, since he blithely follows Mark's blunders as well (unlike Matthew, who corrects them).

The earliest known appearance of John is among Gnostic circles. The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* cites many second-century Gnostic quotes from John; the earliest is a fragment dated sometime around 120-140, later quoted by Hippolytus.⁷ Certain Church factions found it highly suspect and rejected it as heretical. To be fair, it's entirely likely that the original author *was* a Gnostic. But heretical or not, it proved to be so popular that it couldn't be repressed, despite the fact that it has virtually nothing in common with the teachings, theology, style or even the content of the Synoptics, which it often contradicts entirely.

Like the other Gospels, there are indications that John has been re-edited and expanded. For example, in John 2:11, Jesus performs his “first miracle.” Then in verse 23 Jesus does more miracles, but after that, in 4:54 Jesus does his “*second* miracle.” There are also two endings clumsily attached, including the story of the Miraculous Catch of Fish (John 21:1-11). In this Jesus fish story, if you will, he reappears to his disciples, who have shrugged their shoulders and returned to being simple fishermen now that their lord has been crucified. But when he miraculously fills their nets to bursting with 153 fish, they realize he has returned.

As Price has seen, it's a bit absurd to picture them carrying on their inventory as usual if they have just realized their crucified master has risen from the dead - “You fellows go have breakfast with the resurrected Son of

God. I'll stay here and count the fish!"⁸ But the real question is, why go out of the way to mention that there were exactly 153 fish?

It's because this was the number of the fish in the *original* story. In that Greek story, our hero, the philosopher Pythagoras (a strict vegetarian) bets the fishermen that if he can correctly guess the number of the fish in their nets, they will let them go free. Of course he gets it right; just like in Jesus' story some 500 years later, there are exactly 153 fish. One hundred fifty-three just happened to be a sacred "triangular" number to the ancient Pythagoreans.

Finally, if there remains any doubt as to whether close associates of Jesus wrote the Gospels, remember that considering the average lifespan of the time, any contemporaries of Jesus would have been long dead by the time the Gospels began to be written in the late first and early to mid second centuries. So we have no way to know who (or how many) really wrote the Gospels, and can only guess when or where, or how many times they've been edited and re-edited. Still, despite all that, could there still be real historical information preserved in them? Just what do the Gospels have to say about who Jesus really was?

For further reading:

Richard Carrier, "The Problem of Luke's Methods as a Historian," in *Not the Impossible Faith*, pp. 173-87

Steve Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* (Hendrickson Publishers, 1992)

Myth No. 5:
The Gospels give a consistent picture of Jesus

“*And Jesus too is many things, according to the conceptions of him...*”
- Origen, *Commentary on John*

In the face of multiple lines of evidence, Biblical historians today largely accept that the Gospels were not written by the four authors traditionally attributed to them. However, a common fallback position is that the Gospels are still based on oral tradition or perhaps even interviews with key characters, and so still present four independent witnesses of Jesus. Furthermore, they insist that these four traditions present a consistent portrait of a real person. For instance, Anglican theologian C.F.D. Moule, quoted in Michael Grant's *Jesus: A Historian's Review of the Gospels* (Scribner, 1995) asks:

“How comes it that, through all the Gospel traditions without exception, there comes a remarkably firmly-drawn portrait of an attractive young man moving freely about among women of all sorts, including the decidedly disreputable, without a trace of sentimentality, unnaturalness, or prudery, and yet, at every point, maintaining a simple integrity of character?”

Grant himself is sold, and adds, “The consistency... of the tradition in their pages suggests that the picture they present is authentic.” Yet even a cursory examination of the four Gospels shows that this idea is nothing but wishful thinking. The Gospels are consistent neither in their portrayals of Jesus' character nor of the events of his life.

Mark's Jesus is a fallible, suffering human. There is no miraculous account of his birth; his story begins when he becomes God's son at his baptism (1:11), reflecting the early Christian belief called Adoptionism. He is a “secret messiah,” not only denying that he is God (10:18), but hiding his true identity, disguising his message and teaching his followers in secret: “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables, in order that they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand . . .” (4:11-12). Incidentally, many historians who accept the idea of the “secret messiah”

motif don't think it reflects what the "real" Jesus did, but that it was a literary device to explain why Jesus was unknown in his own day – a telling admission...

Mark's Jesus uses traditional pagan magic techniques (spit and magic words) to heal the blind and deaf, but not always successfully (7:32-35; 8:23-25). He loses his temper sometimes, both with people (8:33; 9:19), and with inanimate objects – infamously cursing (and withering) a fig tree after failing to find figs on it – because it was not yet fig season (11:12-14). He can even be a bit of a jerk. He initially refuses to cast out a devil from a Gentile woman's daughter, telling her it is not right to take the children of Israel's bread and toss it to the dogs (7:25-27).

In the garden of Gethsemane, Mark's Jesus fares the worst. He is distressed and agitated (14:33), even "sorrowful unto death" (14:34). He goes off on his own, and then breaks down completely, falling to the ground on his face (14:35) and prays three times to take away the cup of suffering from him (14:36,39,41), stopping in between to scold the disciples for falling asleep on the job (14:37-38,40) before finally telling them sarcastically, "Fine, go ahead and sleep now; look, here they come to arrest me" (41-42).

Mark's Jesus repeatedly tells people he will return during their lifetimes (9:1; 13:30; 14:62) and dies in despair on the cross crying words cribbed from the opening line of the 22nd Psalm:

"Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*
(15:34, cf. Psalms 22:1)

Matthew's Jesus is a new and improved take on Mark's original. After all, Matthew was not setting out to create some new Gospel, just revising the only one he knew. But when he's not copying Mark verbatim, he upgrades Mark's Jesus by correcting Mark's mistakes about basic Judaism, not repeating his geographical errors and expanding on the narrative, including: a dark and suspenseful nativity story, a suitable genealogy, a longer ending, embellishing Jesus' deeds and attributes, and beefing it up with plenty of miracles throughout.

Matthew's Jesus is also a most Jewish Jesus, a rabbi who upholds the Torah, insisting "not one jot or stroke of the Law will pass away" (5:17-19). He wears a prayer shawl tasseled with *tzitzit* (9:20-22), observes the Sabbath

(12:1-8), teaches, worships and heals in synagogues as well as the Temple (4:23; 9:35; 14:21).

Matthew doesn't just correct mistakes Mark makes, he also fixes mistakes Mark's Jesus makes, even removing anything that makes his Jesus look less than perfect. For example, in Mark 6:5-6, Jesus is unable to do any "mighty work" in his (unnamed) hometown and is amazed at their unbelief (even though just 3 verses before the crowds are astonished by his learning). Matthew will have none of that. He cuts out Jesus being taken by surprise, and changes "could not" do mighty works to "did not" (13:58).

In addition, Matthew constantly claims that nearly every event in Jesus' life was prophesied in the Hebrew scriptures. Some of his Old Testament "prophecies" are so vague, à la Nostradamus, they could mean anything (13:35); others are simply self-fulfilling prophecies cut-and-pasted into the story (e.g., 21:1-7). He's also not above taking verses out of context, citing prophecies that either weren't about the messiah (e.g., 1:23; 27:9-10), or weren't prophecies in the first place (e.g., 2:13-15), even prophecies that no one has ever managed to find (e.g., 2:23). He even goes so far as to deliberately alter scriptures to fit what he wants them to say, such as when he cuts out whole generations of Jesus' genealogy to make it fit his numerological scheme (1:17).

Contrary to Mark's Jesus, Matthew's Jesus doesn't say that he will return any moment now. Instead his Jesus says he will come back ... some day, and gives a parable against slacking off just because the Lord delays his coming (Matt. 24: 42-51).

Matthew switches Jesus' last words from Aramaic to Hebrew so that he cries out "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani" not "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani." Mark wanted the bystanders to think Jesus is calling for Elijah (Mark 15:34-35). Unfortunately, his play on words only works in Hebrew, not in Aramaic. It makes no sense for the bystanders to think that Jesus is calling for the prophet Eli if Jesus was saying "Eloi." Matthew changes the quote to Hebrew; this is historically incorrect for someone like Jesus to have spoken, but at least it makes the pun work (27:46).

Luke's Jesus is serene, beatific and unflappable. Interestingly, Luke claims to be the only one who is giving us the REAL story, unlike all the other Gospels floating around. But then he takes the outline and major portions of his Gospel story from Mark (50% of Mark appears in Luke, often

in identical wording) and from Matthew (or perhaps the hypothetical source “Q”). He also gets plenty of historical window dressing, though again, often incorrectly, from Flavius Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews*. However, when he is not copying verbatim from Matthew and Mark, he is totally incompatible with either. Unlike Matthew, Luke gives us a happy, angst-free nativity story and a brand new genealogy for his perfect Jesus – both completely irreconcilable with Matthew’s versions.

Right from the manger, Luke’s Jesus is wonderful and flawless. Even as a boy of twelve, he amazes his exasperated parents when they lose him for a few days only to finally find him in the temple, confounding the teachers of the law with his knowledge (2:40-52). He never feels despair, doubt or fear and remains unfazed in tight corners. Jesus is surprised to be unable to work miracles in Mark 6:5-6; Matthew says he was unsurprised and able but just unwilling (13:58); Luke’s Jesus tops them both. Not only is his Jesus *not* surprised, he even anticipates all this difficulty, and then effortlessly breezes out of the clutches of a lynch mob for good measure (4:16-30).

In contrast to the distraught anguish of Mark’s Jesus (and Matthew’s copycat Jesus), Luke’s Jesus is as imperturbable as a Japanese geisha in Gethsemane. Unlike them, he doesn’t feel the need to take Peter, James and John along for any moral support. Nor does he become distressed or agitated, or “sorrowful unto death.” He doesn’t collapse to the ground but simply kneels (22:41) and prays just once (not three times), asking God politely, if he would be willing, to please remove the cup (22:42). He doesn’t berate the disciples, or rub it in with any snide zinger at the end like Mark’s and Matthew’s Jesuses. Instead, he rouses them just once, as Judas is arriving (22:46).

In fact, there’s only a single point where Luke’s unflappable Jesus is less than dignified perfection: as he prays in the garden, an angel from Heaven suddenly appears to give him strength (22:43). Then, “in his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground” (22:44). This odd, sudden burst of angels and agony momentarily interrupts his divine calm but then abruptly vanishes again, and he returns to his normal Zen master mode. Why the anomaly? In the more scrupulous Bible translations (such as the highly respected New Revised Standard Version) verses 43 and 44 are in double brackets – to indicate that translators consider them spurious. Why? One important reason is that the pair of angel and bloody sweat verses are absent from many of our most

reliable manuscripts of the New Testament, including our oldest.¹

While Mark's Jesus dies in anguish and despair, Luke's Jesus exits with composure and acceptance. Luke dispenses with the words of the 22nd Psalm altogether and takes his Jesus' parting line from Psalm 31:5: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" (23:46). And contradicting Mark's Jesus, Luke repeats Matthew's (or Q's) parable, in virtually identical language, that the Lord will NOT be right back during his followers' lifetimes after all (12: 42-46).

John's Jesus is a Superman without a Clark Kent. Not only is he no secret Messiah at all, he has a radically different personality, much more large and in charge, in total control at all times. This Jesus *knows* he's God, and he doesn't care who knows it! He is constantly talking about his divinity and declaring himself to be the bread of life (6:35, and again in 6:41 and 6:48), the living bread that came down from Heaven (6:51), the light of the world (8:12 and 9:5), from above and not of this world (8:23), the Son of Man (8:28), the good shepherd (10:11), the resurrection and the life (11:25), the way, and the truth, and the life (14:6), the true vine (15:1) and even says "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am" (8:58).

As if all this wasn't enough blasphemy already, he also makes it explicitly clear that he is God, too: "The Father and I are one" (10:30). "Even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (10:38). "Can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, 'I am God's Son'?" (10:36). It's difficult to understand how John's Jesus wasn't stoned to death on his first day of preaching, since the other gospels' Jesuses get into trouble for far less sacrilege.

John's Jesus is not born of a virgin; he matter-of-factly states that Jesus is Joseph's son without comment (1:45). Nor is he born in Bethlehem; John consistently denies any Bethlehem link, insisting that Jesus comes from Nazareth in the Galilee (1:45-46; 7:41-42, 52, ff.). And unlike the other Gospels, when John the Baptist says he's not fit to baptize him, John agrees – no baptism for the perfect and sin-free Messiah in this Gospel.

The ministry of John's Jesus is in striking disagreement to the other Gospels, which say that it lasted only about a year, took place mainly in the Galilee, and that Jesus came to Jerusalem only once, at the very end of his

life. In contrast, John stretches it out over three years and centers action mostly in Judea around Jerusalem, where he goes back and forth often.² In the Synoptics, Jesus drives the moneychangers from the Temple at the very end of his career, in the week before his crucifixion (Mark 11:15-18, Matt 21:12-13, Luke 19:45-47). In fact, Mark tells us *this* is why the Jewish leaders start plotting his death (Mark 11:18). Not John's tough-guy Jesus; his 3-year career *begins* by thrashing those defilers of the Temple with a homemade scourge (John 2:13-16).

John's Jesus also has an entirely different speaking style. He gives no parables, no snappy Cynic-style comebacks, no Sermon on the Mount (like Matthew) or Sermon on the Plain (like Luke), and so no Beatitudes: no Blessed are the Meek, no Love thy Neighbor, no Suffer the Little Children, no Consider the Lilies of the Field, no Turn the other Cheek. The poor and the suffering may be the focus of his ministry in the other Gospels, but they barely get a mention from John's Jesus. This is a *Republican* Jesus.

And who else does John's Jesus hate besides liberals? The Jews. Though Matthew's rabbi Jesus is quintessentially Jewish, John's Jesus *hates* the Jews. His antipathy is not just confined to the treacherous Jewish leaders and the rich hypocritical fat cats. No, John's testy Jesus is as obsessed with "the Jews" collectively as Mel Gibson. The other Gospels mention "Jew" or "the Jews" no more than a handful of times (5 times apiece in Matthew and Luke, 6 times in Mark³), but in John they are brought up a whopping 71 times, and over half of the time in some nasty anti-Semitic fashion.

The Jews are depicted as conniving persecutors out to murder Jesus (5:16). They badmouth him (6:41); stalk him (7:1-11,25,35); are blind to his teaching (7:46-47); accuse him of having a demon in him (8:52) and try to stone him (8:59).⁴ John's Jesus even refers to them as the lying spawn of their father the Devil (8:44) which is a trifle odd, seeing as they are the chosen people of God and well, Jesus himself is one – not to mention our anti-Semitic Gospel writer John, too (at least, according to Christian tradition).

If John can be believed, the Lord's Supper never happened and Jesus never established the sacrament of the Eucharist. Instead, during a public sermon in a Capernaum synagogue much earlier in his ministry, an event no other Gospel relates, he describes himself as the Living Bread, and outrages his Jewish audience by insisting they eat his flesh and drink his blood (6:51-58). Though Luke tells us six times that the Last Supper is a Passover Seder

(22:1,7,8,11,13,15) – he even has Jesus explicitly say so – John contradicts this completely. His Jesus doesn't have a Last Supper of Passover lamb – he IS the Passover lamb. There is no way his Last Supper can be a Seder, because he repeatedly tells us this happened the day before the Passover feast (13:1, 29).⁵

Though all the other Jesuses spend hours in the garden of Gethsemane, John's Jesus instead spends the evening washing his disciples feet (13:4-12) and then talking in the upper room, for four whole chapters from 14 through 17. He barely arrives at Gethsemane (18:1) before Judas shows up in the very next verse (18:2).

Needless to say, John's SuperJesus doesn't cry or need any angels to comfort him in the garden of Gethsemane. All the other Jesuses are deeply troubled at this point, but not John's; he spends the whole of chapter 17 announcing to God how he is ready to roll. In the other Gospels an apprehensive Jesus asks if he really has to drink the cup of suffering, and wonders hopefully if maybe God can call off the whole crucifixion thing (Matt. 26:39, Luke 22:42, Mark 14:33-36). But John's Jesus laughs scornfully and says bring it on! "Shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me?" (18:11). He even seems to be openly mocking the suffering Jesuses in the other Gospels when he jokes "...What shall I say, 'Father, save me from this hour?' But for this cause I came unto this hour" (12:27).

When John's Jesus is arrested, he remains in complete control of the whole situation. For starters, unlike in the three other Gospels, John draws the line and doesn't let Judas kiss on *his* Jesus. When the soldiers come for him, Jesus demands to know who they are looking for, and then steps forward to announce, "I am he." Upon hearing this, the entire detachment of armed troops, completely overwhelmed by his sheer presence, draws back in panic and falls to the ground (18:6). Though Matthew's Jesus supposedly fulfills prophecy at his trial by never saying a word, John's Jesus blows this off completely and refuses to keep his mouth shut, giving both the High Priest (18:20-21, 23) and the Roman governor (18:34, 36, 37; then again in 19:11) his two cents' worth in spirited back-and-forth exchanges.

Back Together Again

But for all these major differences between John's Gospel and the three Synoptics, once we get to the Passion story, even John is cribbing from Mark.

One of the reasons we know this is because of a particular quirk of Mark's. As Biblical scholars know, Mark has an interesting habit of using a literary device called "intercalation."⁶ This is when he sandwiches two parts of an anecdote around another anecdote. This can be just for dramatic effect or to help move the story along, or to emphasize a point he is trying to make.

Earl Doherty gives an example from Mark's Passion story. The story of Peter's denial is broken up into two parts. The first half starts with Peter sneaking into the High Priest's courtyard to spy on Jesus' trial (14:53-54). The action then switches for ten verses to Jesus' interrogation by the High Priest (14:55-65). Then Mark cuts back to Peter again, where he is discovered and has to give his three denials "before the rooster crows twice" (14:66-72).⁷ When John tells his story, we see the identical arbitrary break; he follows Mark and also breaks up his Peter's Denial scene the same way, by inserting Jesus' interrogation in the middle (John 18:15-27).

So from this and many other indications, it's very clear that John is working off a copy of Mark, too. The serious differences between John and the others have led many scholars to argue that he could not have known about any of the other Gospels,⁸ but it is obvious from lines of evidence such as these that at the very least he knew Mark very well – *he just didn't care*. He wanted to tell the story *his* way, regardless of what any other Gospel might say. As Earl Doherty writes:

"...John, too, lays out the events just as Mark does, and adds nothing new to the plot line, even if he introduces significant changes of interpretation to fit his own theology. For example, Jesus' death takes place on Passover eve, rather than on the following day as in the Synoptics, but this is not because John has inherited a different element of tradition. Most Johannine scholars are agreed it is because he wishes to play up the symbolism between the slaughter of Jesus on Calvary and the slaughter of the Passover lambs in the Temple, and so he fashions his version of the story to make the two coincide."⁹

When it's time to get crucified (on a completely different day and time than any other Gospel!), John's Jesus isn't about to let anybody else carry his cross up the hill for him, unlike the Jesuses of other Gospels who need help from hapless bystander Simon of Cyrene (Matt. 27:32, Mark 15:21, Luke 23:26). And even while crucified, John's Jesus remains the Boss on the

Cross; he's still calling the shots, giving terse orders to his mother ("Woman, behold your son!"), his disciples ("Behold your mother!") and even his crucifiers ("I thirst!") (19:26-28). No anguished cries of "My god, my god, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34-5, Matthew 27:46), no gentle "Father, forgive them" and no time to chitchat with the two fellow crucifyees (Luke 23:34,39-43) for this Jesus.

When he decides he's had enough, he pronounces the job done ("It is finished!") and deigns to give up his spirit – that's right, nobody kills John's Jesus; *he's* the one who says when it's time to go, just as he tells us: "No man taketh (my life) from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again" (10:18).

Remarkably, John has virtually nothing in common with any other Gospel. It is just as different from the three Synoptic Gospels as any of the dozens of other "Gospels" (also written around the same time as John) that were rejected as heretical. As the *Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* notes, John differs significantly from the synoptic Gospels in theme, content, time duration, order of events, and style. Virtually all Jesus' sayings are unknown to the other Gospels. Only about 8% of John's Gospel is parallel to the other Gospels, and even in those few cases, there are none of the word-for-word parallels we see between the other Gospels.¹⁰

It would take an encyclopedia (and there are several, see p. 90) to list all the discrepancies between the various Jesuses we find in the Gospels and the New Testament, but there are still a few other important discrepancies worth examining. For instance:

Why did the Jews want to kill Jesus? The Gospels give entirely different rationales for why the Jews wanted Jesus dead. After Mark's Jesus heals a man's withered hand in the synagogue early in his career, the Pharisees immediately begin plotting how they might destroy him (3:6). But as Price wryly notes, this is strange, since Jesus doesn't get arrested for 11 more chapters, and when he does, the Pharisees have nothing to do with it (11:18, also Matt. 12:14).¹¹

Luke's Jesus runs afoul of the Jewish leaders in the last week of his life after he drives the moneychangers from the Temple (19:47-48). The fate of Matthew's Jesus isn't specifically linked to the Temple incident; instead, it's sealed in a secret meeting of the chief priests, scribes and elders around the same time, two days before Passover (26:2). Incidentally, seemingly

omniscient Matthew doesn't just know the details of various secret meetings of Jesus' enemies (26:2; 28:11-15); he also knows things such as what angels say to Joseph in his dreams (1:20, 2:13, 2:19, 2:22).

Of course, John's Jesus starts his three-year career with the Temple-cleansing incident. So when the wicked Jews do get around to planning to kill Jesus (11:43-53), it has nothing to do with the Temple or the incident with the moneychangers, but because he raised Lazarus from the dead – an event that doesn't even occur in the other Gospels (11:43-53).

Why did Judas betray him? The motives for Judas betraying him range from none at all (Mark 14:10-11), to petty theft (Matt. 26:15), to possession by Satan (Luke 22:3), to petty theft *and* possession by Satan (John 12:5-6; 13:27). Luke and John even claim to know the *exact moment* when Satan enters Judas' heart, though they don't agree when this was – or say how they (or anyone else) could know this.

When was Jesus born? The years of Jesus' birth and death are in irresolvable contradiction: if Luke is right when he states that Jesus was born in 6 C.E., then Matthew cannot be right when he just as plainly states that Jesus was born sometime before 4 B.C.E. (And even if a way were found to make Matthew and Luke agree on the year Jesus was born, the two nativity stories still contradict one another at every point. By their own statements they exclude each other; they simply cannot both be correct).

When did Jesus die? Similarly, no one can say for certain what year Jesus died. As mentioned before, it is a guessing game: it has to be during Pilate's prefecture, on a year when Passover fell on a Friday – that is, if the Synoptics are right, and John is wrong. If he is right that Jesus died on a Friday the day before Passover, which he tells us repeatedly (19:14, 31, 42), then all the other Gospels are wrong.

And incidentally, we know what day Cleopatra put an asp to her breast (August 12th, 30 B.C.E.). We know what time Mt. Vesuvius erupted and destroyed Pompeii (August 24th, 79 C.E., between 2 and 3 in the afternoon). We know what day Julius Caesar forgot to beware the ides of March and bumped into Brutus (March 15th, 44 B.C.E.). So why *don't* we know the actual date that Jesus died? Or entered triumphantly into Jerusalem? Or drove the moneychangers from the Temple? Or raised Lazarus from the dead? Or

any of the other spectacular events we find in the Gospels and Acts: earthquakes; mass conversions; mass resurrections; trials before governors, kings and emperors; hours of worldwide darkness, etc.? Why don't we know the day (or even the year!) of *any* event in Jesus' life? If you were there the day the sky opened and the angels received Jesus as he ascended up into Heaven, wouldn't you remember it for the rest of your life?

Of course there are still more discrepancies on basic and important matters, such as his relationship to John the Baptist (Were they perfect strangers? First cousins? Did they even live at the same time?), disparate accounts of his final weeks, his trial, his death, resurrection and ascension. It is no exaggeration to say that the four Gospels contradict each other from before Jesus' birth to after his death and at nearly every juncture in between. This has not been lost on scholars over the years. As historian Paul Winter noted:

“The discrepancies are many and multiple, and at times concern issues so fundamental that, at first glance, one might think that they spoke of totally different events and personalities. It looks as if Jesus in Mark were not the same person as Jesus in John: they speak differently, act differently, die differently.”¹²

The portrayals of Jesus vary so widely that biblical historians have been able to reconstruct dozens of “historical” Jesuses in their own image, all equally plausible – and perfectly contradictory. And all attempts to sift through textual criticisms to tease out the “real” Jesus seem to ignore one nagging problem: not only do the four Gospels give us four very different and incompatible Jesuses, *they appear to do so quite deliberately*. Historians don't take such liberties with real people and events – but storytellers and mythmakers do.

So this is the state of the Gospels: four contradictory, convoluted and reworked writings set down decades after the supposed events by unknown author or authors falsely being passed off as eyewitnesses, and all primarily derived from a single source, which as we'll see, appears to be entirely literary fiction.

For further reading:

Re: Mark's "secret Messiah" motif: C.M. Tuckett, ed., *The Messianic Secret* (Philadelphia, 1983); F. Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge, Mass, 1979)

Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford, 2004)

Two excellent encyclopedias of Biblical discrepancies:

Mike Davis, *The Atheist's Bible Companion to the New Testament*, Outskirts Press, 2009

The Skeptic's Annotated Bible (Also available for the Book of Mormon and the Koran!) is online at:

www.skepticsannotatedbible.com

Myth No. 6:

History confirms the Gospels

"If the historical reliability of the Gospels is so obvious, why have so many scholars failed to appreciate the incontestable nature of the evidence?"

-Robert W. Funk

As mentioned before, Luke is the only Evangelist to even *claim* to be recording history – and this is demonstrably a lie, since there is plentiful evidence that Luke was acting as a historical novelist, not a historical reporter. To begin with, he stole the basic story outline, often in identical language, from Mark (if some Bible scholars are right, he stole from Matthew as well). Then he enthusiastically – but often inaccurately – mined from the work of *actual* historian Josephus and others, including Homer and the Greek playwright Euripides, for historic details, geographical notes, and famous individuals he could insert into his story in order to give the whole work an air of authenticity.

His defenders today still latch on to these little snippets of historical detail and triumphantly hold them up as proof of his “incredible accuracy,” conveniently ignoring his mistakes and outright falsehoods – such as when he goes too far and includes historical details that are extremely dubious, if not outright impossible (such as Paul meeting Agrippa and Berenice in Acts 25:23 – 26:32 – an event that Agrippa’s close friend Flavius Josephus would certainly have mentioned if true); or anachronistic events that actually happened long after the time he claims they did (such as those described in Gamaliel’s speech in Acts 5:34-37). Luke also betrays unfamiliarity with basic facts of Judaism and Palestinian geography when he naively repeats Mark’s numerous mistakes without comment, and has Paul saying things like “I have belonged to the strictest sect of our religion and lived as a Pharisee” (Act 26:5 NRSV). If Luke was really acquainted with Judaism he would have known that even a Pharisee would admit that the Essenes were a far stricter sect.¹ If Paul ever said anything like this he was either lying or grossly mistaken. Lastly, for someone presented as a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul, he really needs to do his homework: Luke repeatedly gets facts about Paul wrong and contradicts the facts given in his epistles (for example, see Acts 9:26-28, which is shown to be false by Paul’s own accounts in Galatians 1 and 2).

Luke is eager to give his Gospel the respectability of a genuine historical account, but he exhibits none of the qualities of a real historian – not even by the standards of historians from his own time. His “research” appears limited to picking scenic period details from other writers and using them to spruce up a re-write of Mark’s Gospel based on his own theological slant.

Jesus’ Trial on Trial

And was Mark’s account a historical one to begin with? His frequent mistakes about the fundamentals of Judaism and Judean geography betray that he is no early first century eyewitness on the scene. And several of the most basic elements of his story don’t hold up to historical realities. For instance, modern Jewish scholars have listed problems with the trial of Jesus since at least the 18th century.² The proceedings described by Mark and company go against everything we know about the Judaic legal system. Jewish legal authority Haim Cohn (Attorney-General of Israel and later Justice of the Israeli Supreme Court) scrutinized the different Biblical

accounts of Jesus' trial with a fine-toothed comb in *The Trial and Death of Jesus*,³ and his verdict is harsh: even where the Gospels do agree with each other, on point after point he finds that the Gospel writers get their facts wrong, sometimes ridiculously so.

The trial is incompatible with multiple well-established provisions of ancient Jewish law; in fact the violations of Jewish law in Jesus' trial dog-pile on each other so fast it's hard to keep up. All of them are virtually inconceivable, and of course highly improper: neglecting Passover, meeting by night, holding trial in a private home, conducting a trial in secret, the High Priest acting as interrogator himself and even striking the defendant with his hand, the failure of the witnesses to agree, mocking and beating the prisoner, and many more, any of which should have resulted in a mistrial. Even worse, they appear to have deliberately misrepresented certain aspects of the trial to paint the Jewish religious leaders as stereotypical villains.

There are other less obvious implausibilities as well. Luke has the beloved rabbi Gamaliel make a cameo appearance to save Peter at his trial in Acts, so he should have been present and prominent at Jesus' trial, too. But there is no mention of this in any account, Biblical or Jewish.⁴ Of course, if he had been there, it would have been utterly out of character for him to take part in such a gross miscarriage of justice (which the Gospels say was unanimous). And if such an outrageous trial really had broken all these rules in a rush to condemn a man the *whole city* had joyfully acclaimed just days before (John 12:13, Matt. 21:8-10), then how is it none of the historians and writers of the day ever mentioned it, especially when they give detailed accounts about so many much less interesting would-be messiahs and scandals in Jerusalem from the same period?

The Gospels are also completely wrong about first century Jewish religious politics. The Pharisees and the High Priest were *never* in cahoots with one another. Nothing could be further from the truth – they were bitter political enemies. In reality, most everyone in Judea *hated* the High Priest, who was both a Sadducee (the Pharisee's political opponents), and a puppet appointee working for the hated Romans. The Pharisees regarded the Temple priesthood as mere ceremonial functionaries doing the nation's spiritual grunt work, keeping the sacrifices going and maintaining the Temple.⁵ Even in the best of times the Pharisees seemed to regard most high priests as little more than trained monkeys, saying "a learned bastard takes precedence over an ignorant High Priest."⁶

Pilate Light

Similarly, the Gospels' portrait of Roman Governor Pontius Pilate also comes from an alternate reality. They unanimously portray him as a concerned but indecisive worrywart who can't bring himself to execute Jesus but is too weak to prevent it. He is such an incredible pantywaist that all he can do is plead with the crowd, waffle back and forth, and let the Jews push him around until they threaten to tell Caesar on him if he refuses to do what they say and kill Jesus. At this point he gets so scared that he finally just gives in and literally washes his hands of the whole thing. Could such a dithering little nancyboy ever cut it as the occupational military ruler of a strategically important province seething with rebellion? The question is moot, because the real Pilate was nothing like the limp doormat the Gospels describe.

Like his boss, the emperor Tiberius, the real Pontius Pilate was an arrogant, ruthless despot. Philo of Alexandria described him as "naturally inflexible and stubbornly relentless." He committed "acts of corruption, insults, rapine, outrages on the people, arrogance, repeated murders of innocent victims, and constant and most galling savagery."⁷ Josephus described him as "extremely offensive, cruel and corrupt."⁸ Pilate had no problems killing the natives, nor did he ever lose much sleep over whether they were innocent or not.

Under his command, scores of innocent Jews were massacred, such as recorded in Josephus' *Antiquities*, vol. 18.2, when his soldiers, disguised in local dress and armed with daggers, slipped into a crowd of protestors, and on his signal, killed everyone caught in their net (Josephus says they killed "a great number"), protestors as well as innocent bystanders.

The Evangelists have the Jewish priests playing him like a fiddle – bossing him around, lecturing him on how to do his job, and even threatening him outright (John 19:12). In the real world, telling Pilate what to do was a sure way to get yourself swiftly and/or unpleasantly killed. Justice Cohn makes this very clear: "Any Jew who dared to remind the governor of his duty toward the emperor, or to hint at more fervid patriotism would not be let live another hour."⁹

Nor would the Governor feel particularly inclined to grant their requests, either. In fact, like so many other aspects of Jesus' trial, the opposite is true:

one scholar noted “It has been said that Pilate would always refuse what the Jews desired of him, and always do what they implored him not to.”¹⁰

And as for the laughable threat that he would get into hot water with Caesar if he did not execute Jesus, nothing could be further from the truth. When Pilate was finally recalled to Rome in the year 36 (where he was probably forced into retirement, possibly even exiled or executed), it was certainly not because of any reluctance to kill enemies of the Empire, but for yet another notorious slaughter, this time of a procession of Samaritan pilgrims on their way to the sacred Mount Gerizim.¹¹

Cohn finds other flaws in the story that simply don’t add up: the Jews bring Jesus to Pilate for execution on the pretext that “it is not lawful for us to put any man to death” (John 18:31) – this is plainly and simply untrue.¹² Nor would they have held any “pre-trial” if there was reason to turn a prisoner over to the Romans (something they would have been loath to do in any circumstances anyway): Cohn notes “There is not a single instance recorded anywhere of the Great or Small Sanhedrin ever acting as a investigatory agent of the Romans.”¹³

In another mistake, John 18:28 asserts the Jews could not enter Pilate’s Praetorium because they would be defiled. Cohn retorts: “Nothing in Jewish law or ritual, however, would support the contention that by entering the king’s – or anybody’s – place or a courtroom a Jew could become unpure.”¹⁴

Yet another aspect that makes no sense is the way Pilate punctuates his interrogation with trips back and forth to talk to the crowd (Luke 23:4,13, 22). Cohn finds this whole scenario “so ludicrous as to border on the absurd; what proud Roman governor would keep jumping from his lordly seat of judgment at odd intervals and running out into the courtyard to talk with a mob of natives?”¹⁵ Robert Price notes still more problems: first of all, if the Sanhedrin had asked Pilate for the death penalty, it would have been death by stoning, as the Torah required (*Mishnah Sanhedrin* 6:4h & i). Pilate finds no fault with Jesus – so why doesn’t he just refuse to condemn him unless the priests can come up with a charge that sticks?

We Heart Barabbas

Instead, the Gospel writers have Pilate resort to a “tradition” of releasing a prisoner to the crowd for Passover (Matt. 27:15, Mark 15:6, Luke 23:17, John 18:39), and offer them their choice of Jesus or Barabbas, a well-known

murderer and rebel. But what customary pardon is this? The Jews never had a custom of freeing prisoners on Passover (or any other day), and there is no evidence that the Romans had any such customary pardon either¹⁶ – not that Pilate would ever have offered to release a convicted murderer and anti-Roman insurrectionist even if there were such a custom! There have been many attempts to justify the historical veracity of this so-called “*Privilegium Paschale*.” Roman and Jewish records have been ransacked in the search for supporting evidence, but without success.¹⁷

And why would anyone pick Barabbas over Jesus, anyway? Famed miracle healer and teacher, just acclaimed as king by the entire city a few days ago – or a notorious killer? Which one would *you* pick? If we believe the Gospels, it was the conniving chief priests who got the crowd to root for Jesus’ death (Matt. 27:20, Mark 15:11, Luke 23:23).

But the people loved Jesus (Luke 23:27-28) and despised those rich fat-cat priests who cooperated with the occupying enemy.¹⁸ So how could those hated Roman toadies not only talk the multitudes into choosing to free a murderer over their beloved Messiah, but actually whip them up into a *frenzied mob howling for Jesus’ blood*? (Matt. 27:22, 25; Mark 15:13-14; Luke 23:18,21,23; John 18:40). Remember, just 12 hours earlier they were so “very much afraid of public uproar if Jesus were to be arrested in the open” (Mark 14:2) that they had to seize him at night and illegally hold a secret trial in a private house. But apparently all it took to sway the fickle multitude was some spirited cheerleading. Why were they ever worried?

Could this Barabbas have had a following of his own that outvoted Jesus’ followers? Though Matthew only refers to Barabbas as a “notorious prisoner” (27:16), Mark and Luke say he was a rebel who had committed murder in an insurrection (Mark 15:7, Luke 23:19). This leads some to theorize Barabbas was chosen because he was a rebel hero, and the crowd was packed with Zealots. John seems to realize Pilate would never have agreed to release a killer with Roman blood on his hands, so he makes Barabbas a bandit (18:40) instead. Not to mention it would seem awfully contradictory to have the same crowd howling for Pilate to release an anti-Roman rebel to also yell “We have no king but Caesar!” (19:15).

But Barabbas was probably never a real person in the first place. Because the “tradition” Mark alludes to in his passion story is actually the Hebrew tradition of releasing not a man, but the scapegoat. It’s no coincidence that the name Barabbas means “Son of the Father.” (And in fact, in many Syriac

manuscripts, we find Barabbas called *Jesus Barabbas!*¹⁹⁾

Mark's Gospel gives us two sons of the father; one carries the sins of Israel, murder and sedition, and is released unharmed into the "wilderness." The other is sacrificed so that his blood will atone for the sins of Israel. This is identical to the Day of Atonement ritual found in the Old Testament: on that day, the high priest took two goats, killing one as a blood sacrifice to the Lord and releasing the other unharmed to carry away the people's sins as a scapegoat (Leviticus 16: 5-10,15-22).

Richard Carrier has noted Mark's setup so clearly duplicates the two goats tradition held every year in the Temple on Yom Kippur there can be no doubt that this is what Mark is doing: he is creating a fictional story that echoes the Jewish Day of Atonement ceremony.²⁰

Inexplicable Acts

The Book of Acts also contains a number of features that don't make much sense if any of the Gospel stories are true. After Jesus' death, his right-hand man Peter amazes Jerusalem by healing a well-known local beggar lame from birth (3:2-11) and is arrested. The court is stymied – Peter's miracle has been so conspicuous that everyone in Jerusalem has heard about it (4:16). There's no denying it – what can they do?

But hold on a minute – all this consternation over Peter healing a cripple? *That's* the only miracle that has Jerusalem all abuzz? *That's* the miracle the Chief Priests want to hide from the public? What about all of Jesus' miracles and healings? What about that pair of rock-splitting earthquakes, worldwide darkness, the angel? Hasn't anyone noticed the Temple curtain is ripped in half? Or all the resurrected saints that have filled Jerusalem? Jesus returned from the dead for forty days and then ascended to Heaven – shouldn't everyone still be talking about that?

If any of this story was true in the first place, the court's concerns make no sense at all – unless Peter's modest healing was the only notable miracle that had occurred up to that time. All of the trial accounts in Acts (Peter, Stephen and Paul) share the same bizarre memory lapse: none of the Roman authorities have any notion who this Jesus person is. There's not the slightest hint that he was renowned throughout Palestine, condemned and executed by the authorities, that his body disappeared, or that he had been spotted in the Jerusalem area, alive again – for forty days, if Luke is to be believed! In the

real world, if a condemned criminal was discovered somehow alive again, the authorities would simply do a better job of making sure that he and all his accomplices were executed properly. And such an unprecedented roundup would have attracted considerable attention.

Instead, we find that for the Roman authorities, the question of Jesus is nothing but some obscure Jewish religious dispute. And it's not just the Romans with amnesia: Paul's Jesus is just his invisible friend, the talking light in the sky. All that Paul knows about Jesus is what "Moses and the prophets" revealed in the scriptures: that the Christ would suffer, rise from the dead, and proclaim light to all (26:22-23).

He never hints that any of this just occurred recently in Jerusalem, or that anyone witnessed it. In fact, while Paul is making his defense, Festus makes it clear the source of Paul's gospel is the Hebrew scriptures when he exclaims, "You are out of your mind, Paul! Too much learning is driving you insane!" (26:24).

For further reading:

On Homeric and other Greek influences in the Gospels, see:

Arnold Ehrhardt, *Framework of the New Testament Stories*, 1964, pp. 51-8

Burton Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins*, 1993, p.114

Dennis MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer?*, 2003

On Luke as a poor historian, even by ancient standards, see:

"The Problems of Luke's Methods as a Historian" in Richard Carrier's *Not the Impossible Faith*, pp. 173-87, ff.

N. F. Gier, *God, Reason, and the Evangelicals* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1987), pp. 145-49

On the uneven reliability of Acts in general, see:

Richard Pervo, *The Mystery of Acts* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2008) and
Richard Pervo, *Acts: a Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009)

See also the chapter on the Book of Acts in the forthcoming book *On the Historicity of Jesus* by Richard Carrier.

Myth No. 7:

Archeology confirms the Gospels

“Scripture contains many contradictions, and many statements which are not literally true, but must be read spiritually and mystically...”

- Origen, *Commentary on John*, book 10, chapter 4

Physical archeology is no kinder to Christian claims. It is telling that so many places associated with Jesus have never been positively located because no one seems to agree just where they were supposed to have been, so we have competing sites for the Garden of Gethsemane, Golgotha, Jesus’ tomb, etc.

Archeology and Geography have also revealed numerous false depictions of real places. The setting of the Gospels is an idealized, Never-Never Land version of Galilee. Because the Evangelists are trying to appease Roman readers, the Gospels portray Judea and the Galilee as a peaceful, idyllic countryside under benign Roman rule instead of what they really were: areas of bitter unrest and constant rebellion against the crushing oppression of Roman soldiers and tax collectors.¹

Though Jews like Isaiah (9:1) derided the region as “Galilee of the Gentiles,” in the Gospels the major cities of the region like Sephoris and Tiberias are meticulously and thoroughly ignored – because they are Gentile. And the Gospels paint a Galilee already under the theological thumb of the Pharisees - but this appears to be about 40 years too early. Pharisees were certainly a major presence in the Galilee after the priesthood and legal

schools were relocated there after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 – the same time when the Gospels were written – but were they so prominent in the early century?

We know from Hegesippus and Justin Martyr² there was already another sect, “the Galileans,” who logically would have been the prevailing religious figures at this time. Any Pharisees during the pre-war period would most likely have been outsiders and hardly influential. The Gospels are portraying a scenario from the late first and early second centuries, not the alleged time of Jesus.

Ships of the Desert

Another incongruous aspect of Jesus’ travels is often overlooked: why does an inordinate amount of his adventures involve travel at sea? As Dennis MacDonald has demonstrated, it is one of many indications that Greek epics like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* inspired Mark. It is natural that stories set in the Greek isles would involve a great deal of sea-going – but such nautical episodes seem very out of place if you try to graft them onto a rural Palestinian setting as Mark did. Where do you have maritime adventures in landlocked Galilee? Mark solved it by inventing a brand new body of water, the Sea of Galilee. MacDonald reveals a surprising fact: no one ever referred to this small river-fed lake, just 7 miles long and 4 miles wide, as a “sea” before Mark did. Even Luke consistently corrected Mark, calling it by its real name and proper term: Lake Chinnereth. This modest body of water seems like an unlikely stand-in for the ferocious sea where Jesus and the disciples have to battle life-threatening storms and powerful waves – a fact recognized even in ancient times, as we learn from the third-century pagan intellectual Porphyry discussing the problems of Mark 6:45-52:

“Experts in the truth about these places (in Galilee) report that there is no sea there, though they do refer to a small, river-fed lake at the foot of the mountain in Galilee near the city Tiberias, a lake easily traversed in small canoes in no more than two hours and insufficiently capacious for waves or storms. So Mark greatly exaggerates the truth when he ludicrously composes this fiction of a nine-hour journey and Jesus striding upon (the water) on the tenth (the tenth hour, “the fourth watch of the night”) to find his disciples sailing on the pond. Then he calls it (a sea), not merely a sea but one beset by

storms, dreadfully wild, and terrifyingly agitated by the heaving of the waves, so that from these details he could represent Christ as performing a great sign, namely, calming a mighty and violent storm and rescuing his scarcely endangered disciples from the deep and open sea.”

(Porphyry, *Contra Christianos*, fragment 55, trans. by MacDonald)

As mentioned earlier, all of Porphyry's writings were lost except for quotations in the writings of his apologist critics. It's illuminating to hear the response from this Christian opponent, Macarius Magnes (*Apocriticus* 3.6). He first tries to suggest that perhaps Mark meant the fourth "hour" of the night instead of the "fourth watch" (which would still make no sense). Then he insists that the Gospel was right to call the lake a "sea," primarily because "it is enough for us that the inspired author of Genesis tells us concerning the Creator Himself that the gathering together of the waters He called seas." But then he spends the rest of the chapter giving the real reason to defend Mark's error – because of the "inner meaning" and "deeper allegory underlying the story!"

Macarius goes on to dissect all the elements of the story: the sea represents the brine and bitterness of existence; the night is human life; the boat is the world; those who sailed all night are the human race; the wind is the devil's opposition; the fourth watch, the coming of Jesus. But the fact that the story is unrealistic and therefore *could never have actually happened in real life* does not perturb him in the least. He is solely concerned with the allegorical meaning of his scriptures – a tendency we see over and over again in religions of the ancient world, including early Christianity.

Jesus in Wanderland

On an earlier boat trip, Mark has Jesus disembarking on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, in what he describes as "the country of the Gerasenes," but this is another of Mark's geographical errors. Gerasa was more than 30 miles from the shore. Matthew corrected Mark's Gerasenes to more plausible Gadarenes in his version (Matthew 8:28). Gadara was a well-known spa only eight miles from the lake.³ And Mark wasn't the only one confused. Multiple names have popped up in the early manuscripts here, too.⁴ Some have "Gergesenes" instead of Gerasenes or Gadarenes.⁵

According to the Gospels, Jesus was buried in the tomb owned by one of his followers, Joseph of Arimathea, though they disagree on exactly who he was. The oldest gospel writer, Mark, calls him “a respected member of the council” (15:43), forgetting that he had also said the council’s condemnation of Jesus had been unanimous. He also seems to be made up. Price notes: “Like Judas, Joseph of Arimathea is a fictional character who grows in the telling. As Dennis MacDonald has shown, he is based on King Priam, begging Agamemnon for the body of his son Hector. It is because he corresponds to the slain hero’s father that he is called Joseph.”⁶

Meanwhile, Richard Carrier has shown that Arimathea is an Aramaic pun: *ari-* (best) *math-* (disciple) *-aia* (town/place). Carrier confirms that the *ari-* prefix, meaning “best,” appears in such words as *aristocracy* (rule of the best), *aripikros* (best in bitterness, hence bitterest), *arideiketos* (best in display, hence glorious), as explained in standard Greek lexicons. The *math-* root forms the verb *mathein*, to teach, and the nouns *mathê*, lesson or doctrine, and *mathêtês*, disciple. The *-aia* suffix as town or place appears for such regions as Galilaia (Land of the Galiyl) and Judaia (Land of the Jews), and such actual cities as Dikaia (Justice Town) and Drymaia (Thicket Town).⁷ Could it be mere coincidence that this follower of Jesus comes from Bestdiscipleville, Judea – or was Mark just being clever?

Another gospel locale that seems to be picked for literary allegory is when Luke tells us that the risen Jesus appears to two of his followers traveling “on the road to Emmaus,” a village near Jerusalem (Luke 24:13). But the entire incident appears to be taken from the ancient Roman legend of Romulus, who (among many other parallels) also appeared alive again after his death to his followers (also traveling along the road) in a radiant new form before he returned to Heaven.

Even in ancient times, scholars noticed that when plotted on a map, Jesus’ travels make no sense; he pops here and there, seemingly at random. And as we’ve just seen, the Gospels’ authors appeared happy to make up new towns as needed, though some seem accidentally created by later Christian scribes who misunderstood the text (or not so accidentally, by doctoring the text, as we saw above). All this seems to point to the Gospels being set in a literary creation, not taking place on the real map of ancient Palestine.

At the risk of being redundant, we should remember that there has never been a trace of physical archeological evidence for Jesus, despite centuries of the never-ending stream of infamous hoaxes such as the Shroud of Turin, the

many alleged tombs and writings and personal portraits and foreskins of Christ, or most recently the bogus ossuaries of St. James and Jesus' family so enthusiastically touted by disreputable characters like antiquities forger Oded Golan and excitable TV "naked archeologist" Simcha Jacobovici (who incidentally is not an archeologist at all, naked or otherwise).

What about the Written Evidence?

So with little to corroborate the events in the Gospels, the only physical evidence for Jesus we are left to depend on is manuscript evidence. But can we? To make an insecure situation still more precarious, there is the problematic issue of whether the Gospels were even reliably preserved in the first place.

For the first two or three hundred years, early Christian texts weren't copied by professional scribes, but by the most literate (often semi-literate) members of the local church who were willing to do the job.⁸ So transcription mistakes were made all the time; hundreds of thousands of them have survived to this day.⁹ The *Interpreter's Dictionary Of The Bible* says, "it is safe to say that there is not one sentence in the New Testament in which the manuscript tradition is wholly uniform."¹⁰ Bart Ehrman puts it another way: "*there are more differences in our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.*"¹¹ But simple spelling and grammatical errors are not really a cause for concern, since in the vast majority of cases they are easy to recognize.

What *is* more troubling are the dozens, perhaps hundreds¹² of *deliberate changes*. The Gospels were not tamper-proof. Originally, no one thought any of the New Testament books were untouchable. Later writers felt perfectly free to add and remove parts of the texts, edit and "correct" them. How many times this happened and by whom over the decades and centuries is yet another layer of mystery.

Though some Christians prefer to pretend this is no problem, Ehrman shows otherwise: "It would be wrong to say – as people sometimes do – that the changes in our text have no real bearing on what the texts mean or on the theological conclusions that one draws from them. We have seen, in fact, that just the opposite is the case."¹³

Did Jesus promise his followers they could take up venomous serpents? Members of Appalachian snake handling churches bet their lives that he did -

and not infrequently, lose the bet. Did Jesus lose his temper? Is the Trinity explicitly taught in the Bible? Was Jesus totally distraught and in anguished despair during his crucifixion? “The questions go on and on, and all of them are related to how one resolves difficulties in the manuscript tradition as it has come down to us.”¹⁴

Ehrman reminds us that the decisions regarding manuscript texts are by no means obvious, and that competent, well-meaning, highly intelligent scholars often come to opposite conclusions when looking at the same evidence.¹⁵

Again, these are just the changes (accidental and deliberate) that we have evidence of. But we have no reason to believe we have all the evidence there is. In fact, we have *no* New Testament manuscripts from the first century, let alone originals, and nothing but a handful of tiny and largely unhelpful scraps for at least the 100 or 200 years after that, leaving us with a 300 year blackout period of considerable uncertainty for the texts of the New Testament, where anyone could have made changes that would be completely undetectable to us in the present.

Yet we have detected so many alterations and errors already that until more ancient texts are uncovered, we should expect there to be many cases of meddling which we can’t now detect, which casts in doubt the entire New Testament as a reliable source of religious dogma.

Forging Scripture

Even in the New Testament itself we see evidence of a still bigger problem. Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians repeatedly warns Christians to beware of letters forged in Paul’s name (2 Thes. 2:2, 3:17) – ironically, most scholars agree that this letter is itself a forgery! This is a bind for believers in an inerrant New Testament: because either *this* letter is a forgery, or it is authentic and Paul really is warning us that forgers are out there – but either way, it’s inescapable: people *were* forging letters in Paul’s name.¹⁶

It gets worse: the majority of Bible scholars are convinced that half the letters of Paul – as well as the epistles of James, Peter, John and Jude – are just such forgeries. Many apologists try to mitigate this uncomfortable fact by claiming that writing scripture under a more famous false name was a common and accepted practice. Though it was certainly common, it was

hardly accepted. On the contrary, Bart Ehrman notes: “People in the ancient world did not appreciate forgeries any more than people do today. There are numerous discussions of forgery in ancient Greek and Latin sources. In virtually every case the practice is denounced as deceitful and ill-spirited, sometimes even in documents that are themselves forged.”¹⁷

Tertullian reports that a church tribunal convicted a presbyter (a church elder) from Asia Minor for forging fictional miracle stories about Paul. He confessed to committing the crime “out of love for Paul,” but the court was unimpressed and found him guilty. They reprimanded the presbyter and removed him from office.¹⁸ But unfortunately, in many if not most cases, forgers were able to get away with it. The criteria for determining forged scripture in the 2nd and 3rd centuries too often boiled down to whether you agreed with what it had to say!

There is abundant evidence that tampering with texts occurred again and again throughout the early Christian world – not least because the Christians themselves complained about it so often. The author of Revelation is so concerned about his work being tinkered with, he threatens divine wrath upon anyone who dares alter his book (22: 18-19). The second-century Bishop Dionysius of Corinth fumed about not only his letters, but even scripture being deliberately altered:

“When my fellow-Christians invited me to write letters to them I did so. These the devil’s apostles have filled with tares (weeds), taking away some things and adding others...*Small wonder then if some have dared tamper even with the word of the Lord himself*, when they have conspired to mutilate my own humble efforts.”¹⁹

Pagan critics noticed this as well. Celsus accused the early Christian scribes of unscrupulously altering texts left and right:

“Some believers, as though from a drinking bout, go so far as to oppose themselves and alter the original text of the gospel three or four or several times over, and they change its character to enable them to deny difficulties in the face of criticism.”²⁰

The Church Father Origen responded to this charge of Celsus by claiming that he knew of no one who had altered the Gospel except heretics,²¹ so this

was no argument against True Christians, who would never do such a thing. In private writings, however, Origen changes his tune:

“The differences among the manuscripts have become great, either through the negligence of some copyists or through the perverse audacity of others; they either neglect to check over what they have transcribed, or, in the process of checking, they make additions or deletions as they please.”²²

The two faces of Origen: when confronted with a *nonbeliever's* accusation, Origen actually denies that Christians changed texts, but when talking to his fellow Christians, he turns around and complains about the exact same thing himself! Origen was not the only one complaining that “heretics” altered the texts of scripture to make them say what they wanted them to say; it was a very common charge from early Christian writers.²³

But Bart Ehrman observes that increasingly, the evidence of our surviving manuscripts points the finger in the opposite direction (besides, we must remember Origen himself was eventually condemned as a heretic – so when he complains about “heretics” he may well be talking about Christians we would call “orthodox.”). In his popular book *Misquoting Jesus* and his well-documented scholarly study *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, he carefully details examples of the “official” Church scribes quietly changing the scriptures to make them less useful to heretical arguments and bring them more in line with their own dogma.

So Are Our Gospels the Real Deal?

It's easy to see how this situation would trouble believers. Faced with the dilemma that we have no surviving original manuscripts, and are relying on copies of copies of copies of copies... what confidence can we have that the Gospels in our Bibles today match what was originally written? Christian apologist Lee Strobel asked the late biblical scholar Bruce Metzger this same question in *The Case for Christ* and got this answer:

“What the New Testament has in its favor, especially when compared with other ancient writings, is the unprecedented multiplicity of copies that have survived... The quantity of New Testament material is almost embarrassing in comparison with other works of antiquity.”²⁴

Strobel crows that there is a mountain of Christian manuscripts “compared to the anthills of Tacitus and Josephus,” and Metzger notes that fewer than 650 Greek manuscripts of Homer’s *Iliad* survive.²⁵ However, as Earl Doherty aptly responds in *Challenging the Verdict*, multiplicity may be an asset, but it’s also perfectly understandable in the case of the Gospels.

First of all, there’s more than a little irony in hearing Christians bragging about the number of their scriptures that survived from antiquity, seeing that it was the early Christians who controlled what was preserved and what was lost! Much of the ancient world’s classic literature was discarded or even put to the torch by the Christian West. As it was, nearly all the works of the Greek philosophers were lost to Dark Age Europe until the Crusades. More on this point in a moment. Metzger has more to add:

“We have copies commencing within a couple of generations from the writing of the originals...”²⁶

An exaggeration of this magnitude coming from a respected historian of the late Dr. Metzger’s stature is disappointing. According to no less an authority than Metzger himself, the oldest complete texts of the Bible are the *Codex Sinaiticus* and *Codex Vaticanus* - which only date back to the fourth century.²⁷ Metzger goes on to hold up other famous New Testament fragments: the three Chester Beatty papyri and the twenty-two Bodmer papyri - all of which date to the third century. Third century? *Fourth* century? Two and three hundred years is a far cry from just “a couple of generations!”

Manuscripts – or Pieces of Manuscripts?

Metzger saves a tiny scrap of John’s Gospel, the Rylands Library Papyrus P52, for last. Even though P52 is the earliest piece of any book of the New Testament we have, it is so tiny we can scarcely make any pronouncements on just what its text says or how much it matches our Gospel of John – the entire text could sit upon a credit card and contains no complete sentences, and only one complete word (see below). Besides which, P52 only goes back to some uncertain point in the mid-second century c. 150 C.E., possibly even later. Scraps like this are not datable any more precisely than a 75 year window. Carbon dating is not accurate enough, so we can only judge by the

script style, and we can't say precisely when a particular script style was in fashion.²⁸



The oldest “manuscript” of the Gospel of John,
Fragment P52 (actual size is 3.5” x 2.5”)
Left: recto (front) Right: verso (back)
Only a single word is actually intact: *kai* (“and”).
Photo: John Rylands University Library

Yet even if P52 did date as early as apologists wish it did, to c. 125, the fact would still remain that there is not a single New Testament manuscript, original or copy, not even a scrap, that can be dated to within the lifetime of any biblical character. And Strobel and Metzger conveniently fail to mention that the *second* oldest set of Christian fragments, Egerton Papyrus 2, is from a completely unknown Gospel!

Getting back to our first point, playing games with scraps like P52 also inflates the count of “New Testament manuscripts” that Christians love to trumpet. Apologists gloss over the fact that for the first thousand years of Christianity the majority of manuscripts are tiny fragments, not complete texts that could help determine how reliably the Gospels were transmitted. And yet, apologists are still happy to count them as more “manuscripts” of the *New Testament*, as if they *were* complete sets of all the New Testament books. But it’s dishonest to claim fragments like P52 are even a “manuscript” of the Gospel of John, let alone the whole New Testament. As Paul Doland rightly points out, it’s nothing but a manuscript of those five partial verses from John 18. This trick gets played with every fragment quite shamelessly.²⁹ Metzger continues:

“...whereas in the case of other ancient texts, maybe five, eight, or ten centuries elapsed between the original and the surviving copy.”

You can hardly expect to prove how good the New Testament’s credentials are simply by saying how bad Homer’s credentials are, though this is exactly what Strobel and Metzger seem to be thinking. But of course comparing the New Testament with, say, Homer or Caesar’s account of the Gallic Wars is apples and oranges to begin with.

First of all, the historic reliability of Greek classics has no bearing on how closely the surviving texts of the New Testament match the originals. What’s more, we have no reason to suspect that scribes altered writings from Homer or Caesar to support their particular religious dogma. But we have every reason to suspect it with the New Testament – in fact, we *know* they did; there is overwhelming evidence of the practice running rampant for centuries.³⁰

And just like the New Testament, there are countless places where we have undecidable variants in Homer’s writings, and we know that they were meddled with long before any of our manuscripts appeared. For instance, some sections mention bronze weapons, others iron, which conflates two historical periods.

Evidence like this shows that, like the Old Testament, the Iliad and the Odyssey were constructed and reconstructed over many centuries before reaching manuscript form.³¹ So for all we know *neither* Homer nor the New (or Old) Testament are reliable. Ironically, this analogy boomerangs on apologists looking to defend the historic evidence for Jesus, since few historians today believe that a single historical individual named “Homer” ever really existed, either.

How Many Manuscripts?

Metzger adds:

“In addition to Greek Manuscripts we also have translations of the Gospels into other languages at a relatively early time – into Latin, Syriac and Coptic... a little later Armenian and Gothic. And a lot of others – Georgian, Ethiopic, a great variety...”³²

Underscoring this are some impressive numbers of surviving New Testament manuscripts:

Greek Manuscripts – 5,664

Latin Vulgate – 8,000 to 10,000

Ethiopic, Slavic and Armenian – 8,000

In total there are a whopping 24,000 manuscripts!³³

That *is* impressive - 24,000 manuscript copies! With such a wealth of evidence, surely the New Testament is the best preserved of any ancient writings...

Well, as Doherty makes very plain, perhaps our confidence *would* be on more solid footing if all these copies didn't come hundreds of years after the texts were originally written. For instance, Strobel's and Metzger's joy over the 2,856 Greek minuscule text manuscripts surviving today seems much less remarkable when you read further and learn that all these were written in the 9th century or later.

In fact *all* of these 24,000 intact copies are younger (by hundreds of years!) than our oldest complete Bibles, the *Codex Sinaiticus* and *Codex Vaticanus*, and these two watershed tomes only date back to around the year 300 or later.

Which gives literally *hundreds* of years for scribes to play with the texts as they liked, let alone for mistakes to creep in. So who cares if we have twenty-four thousand – or even twenty-four million - of these Johnny-come-lately copies of copies of copies? We do not have even a *single* copy of any New Testament text from the time that really matters, the formative period of Christianity – the early phase when we would expect to find the greatest number of changes in developing religious ideas.

It's the texts from this early period that would give us an idea of how reliably our New Testament came down to us from the originals. But we have no old texts from the first 300-plus years of Christianity, only thousands of the mass-produced copies that were produced centuries afterwards – along with all of their mistakes, forged passages and deliberate alterations! (And to make matters worse, *Sinaiticus* and *Vaticanus* have different content from each other – and from our modern Bibles!)

This inflated count of manuscripts is a cheap trick apologists play on the

flock. A true count would ignore the later copies as irrelevant and only take into account the root manuscripts. How many do we have of those? There are only around 720 root texts for the NT and most of those are medieval. Also, a large number of these 720 texts are not even complete books, much less complete Bibles, and a considerable number are not in the original language, but are translations into Latin, Georgian, Syriac, Ethiopic, Coptic, etc. Of all these, only about 14 or so date prior to 200 C.E., and these are mostly mere scraps. Many of these fragments have fewer than twenty words, and in fact some don't have more than a few complete words at all, only pieces of words that scholars have to reconstruct through educated guesswork.³⁴ So suddenly Homer's 650 extant copies doesn't seem so bad...

The Satanic Verses

There is another trick being played on laypeople, since the "reliability" of a textual tradition is not determined by the number of root manuscripts we have, but by how closely they support one another. By this measure the New Testament does not fare very well. In fact, despite all the root texts we have, *there are one thousand, four hundred and thirty-eight* significant deviations in the whole of the Greek New Testament.

Note, this figure does *not* include spelling and simple grammatical errors, which are legion. Of these 1,438 significant divergences, despite the best efforts of critical scholarship and paleographical science, it has been estimated that nearly a third cannot be resolved with any certainty.³⁵ In these cases, there's simply no way to know which of them was the original reading, or if any of them even *are* the original reading.

The evidence is also conclusive that there was tremendous meddling with the manuscripts at all stages of development, and since we don't have any complete manuscripts from the stage between 50 and 150 C.E., there were a hundred years more of that meddling that we have no means to detect at all (Incidentally, the Old Testament is just as riddled with variants and disagreeing manuscript traditions of its own³⁶). Metzger has still more to add:

“Even if we lost all the Greek manuscripts and early translations, we could still reproduce the contents of the New Testament from the multiplicity of quotations, in commentaries, sermons, letters and so forth of the early church fathers.”³⁷

But as Metzger's own scholarship shows us (and no one disputes it is excellent scholarship), for the first hundred years of Christianity we would not be able to get any such information from any of the early Church Fathers. We've already seen that none of the early Church figures shows familiarity with the Gospels. Ignatius, Polycarp, Clement of Rome (not even the anonymous scribes who forged writings in their names!), the authors of the Epistle of Barnabas, the *Didakhé*, even the book of Revelation – all fail to mention the Gospels and show only very uncertain awareness of concepts from them.

Justin Martyr is the first Christian who clearly quotes from a Gospel (though he does not even identify any of them by name, simply referring to them as “the memoirs of the apostles”) and this is not until the 150s! To make matters worse, often his quotes don't match anything from our Gospels!³⁸ Worse still, even the writings of the early Church Fathers such as Ignatius and Bishop Dionysius of Corinth themselves have been tampered with, and most of these forgeries were not discovered until modern times.³⁹

As we saw earlier with Dionysus, scribes would not even wait for the author to die before jumping in to make changes. In general, the manuscripts of these “early witnesses” are in no better shape than the New Testament texts. So Metzger's implication here that we have some battery of early witnesses able to vouchsafe the reliability of the Gospels – let alone give us their complete contents! – is proven to be perfectly ridiculous *by Metzger himself*.

Trust in the Word

Of course, absolutely none of these matters regarding the quantity or quality of manuscripts have any bearing on the *truthfulness* of the text's content. After all, the original printings of the Book of Mormon still exist, and no one denies there was scarcely a gap between the original and today's text. But no one outside of LDS circles cites its historical reliability - nor should they: Ancient Hebrews didn't bring steel swords, silk clothing or horses to pre-Columbian America. “Mormon archeology” is an oxymoron.

We would be foolish to take the Gospels, the Book of Mormon, Homer, Caesar's memoirs or any historical manuscript at face value without any other corroboration. “Innocent until proven guilty” only works for people, not

ancient texts. Richard Carrier addresses this very issue:

“Evangelical apologist Craig Blomberg argues that one should approach all texts with complete trust unless you have a specific reason to doubt what they say.⁴⁰ No real historian is so naive. I am not aware of any ancient work that is regarded as completely reliable.

A reason always exists to doubt any historical claim. Historians begin with suspicion no matter what text they are consulting, and adjust that initial degree of doubt according to several factors, including genre, the established laurels of the author, evidence of honest and reliable methodology, bias, the nature of the claim (whether it is a usual or unusual event or detail, etc.), and so on.

Historians have so much experience in finding texts false, and in knowing all the ways they can be false, they know it would be folly to trust anything handed to them without being able to make a positive case for that trust.

This is why few major historical arguments stand on a single source or piece of evidence: the implicit distrust of texts entails that belief in any nontrivial historical claim must be based on a whole array of evidence and argument. So it is no coincidence that this is what you get in serious historical scholarship.”⁴¹

The Gospel Truth

Regardless of which version of the Bible you rely on, Ehrman cautions:

“Even the translation you hold in your hands is affected by these textual problems we have been discussing, whether you are a reader of the New International Version, the Revised Standard Version, the New Revised Standard Version, the New American Standard Version, the New King James, the Jerusalem Bible, the Good News Bible, or something else. They are *all* based on texts that have changed in places.”⁴²

To cover all the textual, historical, geographical and archeological problems of the Gospels (let alone the New Testament or the Bible) would take a library. Suffice it to say, these have just been a few examples of the overwhelming lack of corroboration for the Gospels from history and archeology. But what about the rest of the New Testament? The Apostle Paul

and those other authors bear witness to Jesus, too – don't they?

For further reading:

Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*

Myth No. 8:

Paul and the Epistles corroborate the Gospels

“Where possible Paul avoids quoting the teaching of Jesus, in fact even mentioning it. If we had to rely on Paul, we should not know that Jesus taught in parables, had delivered the Sermon on the Mount, and had taught His disciples the 'Our Father.' Even where they are specially relevant, Paul passes over the words of the Lord.”

- Albert Schweitzer

What about Paul and the other New Testament writers? Paul is responsible for most of the NT Epistles, though many if not the majority of Bible scholars now accept that he only wrote seven of the thirteen letters traditionally attributed to him (1 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, Galatians and Romans), and that even his genuine letters have interpolations.

For example, 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16 has a passage (probably a scribal margin note that became accidentally inserted) uncharacteristically gloating that the Jews are now being punished for crucifying Christ – an unmistakable reference to the destruction of Jerusalem that occurred long after Paul was dead.

Still, in his genuine letters, Paul declares he has been given a Gospel to proclaim. What did he preach about Jesus?

What Was Paul's Gospel?

The word “Gospel” has come to mean the four NT books that tell the life story of Jesus (and less commonly, to the scores of other Gospels that didn't

become part of the New Testament). But to Paul and the generations of Christians before Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were written, the “Gospel” meant the whole Christian message he preached, not a biography of Jesus “according to” anyone. In fact, for Paul, there could only be one true Gospel of Christ – not four. All the rest were false (Gal. 1:6-9). Paul’s Gospel had nothing to do with any biography or teachings of Jesus; for him the Gospel was that Christ Jesus died for our sins and all who believed in him would be saved. This sounds familiar enough to those acquainted with the standard Christian message. So how is Paul’s Gospel different from the ones that came later with Mark and company?

Who is Paul’s Jesus?

The story of Jesus from the four Gospels is so ingrained after being retold for the better part of two millennia, that it never occurs to most of us that Paul and the Epistle writers might have seen Jesus differently. In fact, this earlier Jesus of Paul and the earlier generations of believers is *very* different – so different, one could argue it’s impossible to think they are talking about the same person.

We all know who Jesus is in the Gospels: he was the Son of God, born to a virgin mother in Bethlehem. He grew up in Nazareth, a small Galilean village. At his baptism, the Holy Spirit descended on him and he went into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan for 40 days. Then he traveled the country with his twelve disciples, preaching, healing, casting out demons and performing miracles.

His fame spread far and wide, even to other kingdoms and cities. Multitudes heard and sought him out, including the rich and powerful. All of Jerusalem hailed him as the King of the Jews when he entered the Holy City. But then he was betrayed to his enemies and crucified. He rose from the dead three days later and returned to his disciples before finally ascending to Heaven.

Though the four Gospels disagree on numerous critical points, this thumbnail sketch is more or less what the four do agree upon, so we would expect that the Jesus of Paul and the Epistle writers would also correspond to this story. But is this the case? No, it is not. Who was Paul’s Christ? Observe how he and the other New Testament writers describe their Christ Jesus.

He is:

- The image of the invisible god, the first-born of all creation (Col.1:15)
- The brightness of God's glory and the express image of God, and he upholds all things by the word of his power (Heb. 1:3)
- In him dwells the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Col. 2:9)
- He is the Mediator of the new covenant, the great Shepherd of the Sheep, the great High Priest who has passed through the Heavens (Heb. 9:15, 13:20, 4:14)
- He has disarmed and subjugated all the supernatural principalities and powers, angels and authorities (Col.2:15, Eph. 3:10)
- He is the Lord of both the dead and the living (Rom 14:9)
- He descended into the lower parts of the Earth (Eph. 4:8-9), preached to the spirits imprisoned there (1 Peter 3:19) and "led captivity captive" (Eph. 4:8)
- He ascended on high, and gave gifts to mankind (Eph. 4: 10)
- He will deliver his followers from the wrath to come (I Thes. 1:10)
- He is a righteous Advocate with the Father (I John 2:1)
- He is able to subdue all things to himself (Phil. 3:21)
- All things in Heaven and Earth were created by him, through him, and for him (Col.1:16, Heb. 1:2, 2:10)
- He is before all things, and in him all things consist (Col.1:17)

This is quite a resume, but notice what is missing. As Earl Doherty points out, in speech after speech in the book of Acts, Christian apostles start with the man Jesus, recalling his miracles and teachings, and declaring their faith in him.¹ But when the earlier generation of Christian writers like Paul share the Gospel of their "Christ Jesus", they sound as if they are describing a mythological figure, moving through the Heavens and to and from the underworld – but not a flesh-and-blood human being.

Paul never talks about Jesus' death as though it actually happened to a real man from Galilee who lived on Earth just a few years before. Nor does he give any details about the events of Jesus' life: not the places he traveled, not the miracles he performed, not the parables he told, not even the teachings or instructions he gave. Even the few vague references to people

we think of as Jesus' friends and family are problematic.

For instance, we hear nothing about Jesus' virgin birth, nothing about Mary or Joseph, Bethlehem or Nazareth, Herod or Caesar, shepherds or wise men, a manger or a star over Bethlehem. We learn nothing about his cousin John the Baptist, or his baptism, not even when Paul compares the baptism of believers to Jesus' resurrection (Romans 6:3-11). We are never told about any ministry he had, or any details from it: his sermons, his miracles, his healings, his exorcisms, his infamous cleansing of the Temple, or his arrest.

Paul's Jesus vs. the Gospels' Jesus

Paul's curious description of Jesus doesn't agree with anything we read in the Gospels. He tells us that Jesus "made of himself no reputation" and took the form of a servant (Philip. 2:7). Yet in all the Gospels, Jesus is renown from Syria to Galilee to the Decapolis to Judea and beyond the Jordan. He is adored by multitudes in the countryside and recognized as King of the Jews by all of Jerusalem. But does Paul know that? He talks as though none of the Jews would know about Jesus at all if not for preachers like him:

"How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:14)

Though the Gospels' Jesus astounds all with his teachings, none of the teachings given in the Epistles are ever acknowledged as his; in fact Paul never says anything about Jesus being an earthly teacher at all. To Paul, Jesus is a divine presence who whispers teachings directly in his ear. Paul speaks of information he has received "from the Lord," – he never says from Jesus – and so it is difficult to argue that he is talking about anyone but God himself (or his Spirit Christ) in the first place.

There are only four times when Paul claims to be relaying messages from "the Lord," and in none of these cases does it appear that he is quoting an earthly Jesus. In 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 he assures his readers "by the word of the Lord" that the dead in Christ will rise first when the Lord descends from Heaven with "a shout with the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God," and that the faithful still living will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. If he learned this, it had to be by another

vision, because Jesus never says anything remotely like this in the Gospels (and notably, here, like in so many passages, there is no hint that this coming of the Lord will be a *second* coming).

In 1 Corinthians 9:14 Paul says the Lord commands that preachers like him should be supported financially, though in the Gospels Jesus never taught this; he only instructed his disciples not to carry money and to eat whatever was given them (Matt. 10:9-10, Luke 10: 4-8). Twice in 1 Corinthians Paul says that, not he, but “the Lord” condemns divorce (1 Cor. 7:10-11, 25). If this is authentic and not just a later interpolation, then this would be the closest he ever comes to quoting Jesus.

But again, he never claims to be doing so, and in light of the recurrent way he refers to his Christ being a supernatural spirit, there’s no reason to think he’s operating any differently here. In fact, since he insists that he learned nothing of his Gospel from the Apostles or anyone else, the only thing he *could* mean is that this teaching from “the Lord” came from either another vision of his Christ from Heaven, or the Lord God himself.²

Paul doesn’t just fail to mention any of Jesus’ miracles - he rules out that Jesus did any. In describing his Gospel, he scoffs at those Jews who require miraculous signs:

“For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness.” (1 Cor. 1:22-23)

As G. A. Wells observed, this would indicate that Jesus provided no miraculous signs; if Paul thought Jesus had performed miracles, then why would his Christ be a stumbling block to the Jews? If the Jews required miracles, Paul should have had the perfect response for them: he could just tell them about the many miracles Jesus did - John actually numbers the signs that Jesus performs in his Gospel, handily enough.

And of course, seeing that Paul was happy to brag about his own miracles (Rom. 15:19) and claim that signs and mighty wonders were the marks of legitimate apostles (2 Cor. 12:12), why would he never bring up any of the miracles performed by his Lord?

Even the simple fact that Jesus was ever on Earth at all never gets stated. All his appearances seem to be coming directly from Heaven. The Gospels painstakingly detail (often in contradiction to each other) Jesus’ deeds on

Earth, but we are not given any peek into what happened on the spiritual plane.

In the Epistles this is entirely reversed. Over and over we hear about his activities and accomplishments across the various Heavens (Hebrews 4:14; Eph. 3:10, 4:10), into the depths of the realm of the dead (1 Peter 3:19, Eph. 4:8-9), his accomplishments at the primordial dawn of creation (Col.1:15-17; Heb. 1:2, 2:10), and all his mighty supernatural aspects (Rom. 14:9; Col. 1:19, 2:9-10,15; 1 Peter 3:22; I John 2:1, etc.) - but no details about any time spent on Earth.

Does Paul's Jesus have anything in common with the Gospels' Jesus? When you start going down the list of differences between Paul's Jesus and the Gospels' Jesus, what seems like it should be an identical match breaks down to just a few very basic items. Certainly both were said to have been born a mortal son of a divine father and human mother (just like Hercules, Perseus, and all the other pagan demigods), died for our sins and to have risen from the dead.

But when you look at the actual details from these lives, it seems as though there are only two main similarities between them: both died by crucifixion, and both had a Last Supper. And even these two apparent points of connection start to pull apart when you look at them closely.

The Last Supper – or the Lord's Supper?

Let's begin with the Last Supper. Does Paul describe the Last Supper, the final meal Jesus shared with his disciples on the night he was betrayed and arrested? Here's what he says:

For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: and when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, "Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me." After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, "This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Cor. 11:23-25)

Could this be a passage where Paul is talking about a historical Jesus? There are reasons to think otherwise. To begin with, Paul never specifies

where or when this night of betrayal occurred. Of course, *we* all know when it happened – because we’ve read the four Gospels, which didn’t exist when Paul wrote this. But Paul never says this was the last meal of Jesus and his disciples, that this was a Passover meal, or that it took place in Jerusalem. And it’s significant that he does not call it the Last Supper, but the Lord’s Supper, a term used nowhere else in the Bible but here.³

The reason this fact casts doubt on the Last Supper being a historical event is that Christianity was not the only religion – or the first - to have a “Lord’s Supper.” Paul uses a term from the pagan mystery cults, *kuriakon deipnon*, “the Lord’s Supper,” for the ritual he claimed came exclusively to him, straight from the heavenly Christ.⁴

These Mystery Faiths were ancient sects found throughout the Mediterranean world. Each had its own savior god or goddess who promised resurrection. Through secret rituals, or “mysteries”, the initiate was born again into a mystical bond with their personal savior. Many if not most of the mysteries included communal sacred meals, often involving bread and wine.⁵

The similarity to the Christian sacrament was so great that Paul expressly forbids his followers from participating in pagan sacred meals: “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons!” (1 Cor. 10:21). The honorary title of the cult gods in the mysteries was *Kyrios*, “Lord” – the exact same word used in the New Testament for Jesus’ title.⁶

Incidentally, we still have surviving written invitations to sacramental banquets held in honor of these mystery gods, such as “Pray come with me today at the table of the *Kyrios* Serapis”(for goddesses, it was *Kuria*, “Lady” - as in “Our Lady” or “Notre Dame”).⁷ Paul admits there are many so-called gods and *Kyrioi*, and has to remind his flock in Corinth that for them, there is just one God, the Father, and just one *Kyrios*, Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 8:5-6).

Betrayed?

Getting back to the Lord’s Supper passage, there is a more serious consideration: did Paul really say Jesus was betrayed? As numerous scholars have noted, the verb he used here was *paradidomi*, which in Greek literally means “handed over.” Unlike the English word “betray,” all the Greek words that can mean “betray” actually have other primary meanings (one reason why the ambiguity in the text is not so evident to us today). While the word

can mean “betray” (as well as “deliver”, “turn over”, “committed” and “commended”, among others), Paul never uses the word in the sense of any betrayal, but always uses it when he describes how God delivered Jesus over to his death for us, as he does in Romans 4:25 and 8:32.⁸

Significantly, it is also the exact same term used in the Greek Septuagint – that is, in what Paul considered the scriptures - for the passage in Isaiah 53 where the Suffering Servant is said to have been delivered up by God for our sins.⁹ In Ephesians 5:2 and 25, Galatians 2:20, and 1 Peter 2:23, it is Jesus himself who has given himself up for sacrifice.¹⁰

The word *paradidomi* also appears in this same sense in verses like these and others:

Believers are delivered to martyrdom
(2 Cor. 4:11)

Paul hands down traditions to the believers
(1 Cor. 11:2, 23; 15:3)

Holy commandments and faith are delivered to the saints
(1 Peter 2:21; Jude 1:3; Romans 6:17)

Delivering people to prisons and the hands of the Gentiles
(Acts 22:4, 21:11)

God consigns sinful angels into chains
(2 Peter 2:4)

Commending people to the care of God
(Acts 14:26, 15:40)

God delivering men over to their lusts
(Romans 1:24, 26, 28)

Paul delivers blasphemers and fornicators to Satan
(1 Timothy 1:20, 1 Cor. 5:5)

Jesus delivers the kingdom of Heaven to God

(1 Cor. 15:24)

As can be seen in all these verses, outside of the Gospels there are arguably no cases in the New Testament where the verb *paradidomi* means “betrayed.” In every instance, it always means some form of “hand over” or deliver (in a hostile, neutral, or even positive sense). It is compelling that *paradidomi* is also used figuratively of a crop whose ripeness “permits itself” to be harvested. This is the meaning it has in Jesus’ parable in Mark 4:29: “But when the crop permits (*paradidomi*), he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”¹¹

Of course, no one would ever say that God betrayed Jesus – or that he betrayed himself or the kingdom of Heaven(!), but generations of Bible editors have chosen to translate *paradidomi* as “betrayed” anyway. After all, everyone knows that Jesus was betrayed – except Paul and the entire generation of earliest Christian writers, apparently. Incredibly, Paul never mentions a betrayal by Judas or anyone else. Nor do any of the other New Testament Epistles until the Gospels arrive.

But why doesn’t anyone remember this incident? Paul tells us that he learned of this via a revelation from the Lord. But Doherty points out a problem with a declaration like this: how could Paul say that he learned about this by a mystic vision? It would be ridiculous for him to tell his readers that the Lord told him all this if everyone already knew about the Last Supper and remembered what Jesus had said that night.

So we are left with two uncomfortable possibilities: either A) he was lying about where he learned about the Lord’s Supper, and really heard about it from the other Apostles - something he continuously and emphatically denies; or B) There was no one who knew anything about the Last Supper. But how could the Apostles have forgotten their final meal with Jesus?

Given the choice, most Christian scholars pick A, and insist that Paul is recounting historical facts that were passed down to him, though most stop short of calling him a liar outright. But there are several lines of evidence that suggest B is actually the real answer, and that there was no Lord’s Supper in Christianity before Paul created it here in his letter to the Corinthians.

Nothing for Supper

The author of Hebrews is one of those who seem unaware of the Last

Supper. Talking about the divine covenant, he goes back to the Old Testament and has Moses take the sacrificial blood of calves and goats and say, “This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you” (9:20). But strangely, he fails to make the glaringly obvious connection and says nothing about Jesus establishing the *new* covenant at the Lord’s Supper with the same words: “This is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many” (Mark 14:24).

He drops the ball again when he compares the Old Testament High Priest Melchizedek with Christ. Here again he has another perfect opportunity to bring up the Last Supper: like Christ, Melchizedek also took bread and wine and offered a blessing (Genesis 14:18). The comparison is perfect. Yet despite a lengthy discussion of other parallels, this one completely slips by him. Such an omission makes no sense – that is, unless the author of Hebrews had never heard of the Last Supper.

Even Paul himself is silent about the other supposed details that occurred that night. In fact, it’s worse: like the other Epistle writers, he isn’t simply silent; he actually seems to go perversely out of his way to avoid the slightest mention of what went on this historical occasion – even when it would make his point perfectly.

For instance, immediately after he relates his origin story of the Lord’s Supper, he adds “whosoever shall eat this bread and drink this cup of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:27). Yet he says not a word about Judas Iscariot, the one man who did eat and drink unworthily, and who in fact *was* guilty of betraying the Lord!

And though Paul declares he is getting his facts straight from the source, what he claims Jesus said isn’t the same as what any of the Gospels say – not that the Gospels agree on what Jesus said, either. His words continue to grow and change with each retelling, as each author added his own little touches. Some scribes deliberately combined parts of different versions in attempts to make the Gospels agree.¹² In fact, the Bible gives us no less than six different versions of the liturgical words of the Last Supper.¹³

The earliest is Paul’s account in 1 Cor. 11:24-25; then Mark 14:22-25; Matt. 26:26-29; Luke 15-19 and 20. With Luke, we have two different forms of the text to choose from. Most early manuscripts end the account at verse 19. The version referred to as the Western Text, found in the early 4th or 5th century volume *Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis*, has an expanded version, which now includes verse 20 of most translations. It’s interesting to see how

the Gospel accounts continue to evolve and expand upon Paul's original version from decades before. Mark adds a line about Jesus drinking no more until the day he drinks it in the Kingdom of God, and changes "my body, which is broken for you" to "my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many."

Matthew and Luke both make subtle changes of their own. Matthew does Mark one better, as he likes to do, by adding "for the remission of sins." Luke adds a personal note from Jesus telling his disciples in advance that he is going to suffer soon. He also scrambles the sequence all around; unlike all the others, his Jesus starts with the cup, then breaks the bread, then goes back to the cup again.

Our sixth and final version comes from John. However, this is complicated by the fact that according to John, the Lord's Supper never happened! Unlike the other Gospels, in John there is no Lord's Supper and Jesus never establishes the sacrament of the Eucharist. His Jesus does say something somewhat similar - but not at any final meal with his disciples.

Instead, this takes place during a public sermon in a synagogue in Capernaum, much earlier in his ministry – an event the other Gospel writers don't know about. He describes himself as the Living Bread, and then outrages his Jewish audience by insisting they eat his flesh and drink his blood (John 6:51-58). Here again, we see anonymous Gospel authors freely taking liberties with their descriptions of what is supposed to be a historical event, or ignoring it as though it never happened at all.

Interestingly enough, some scholars suspect that Mark and Matthew's Last Supper was not originally a Passover meal at all. Paul says nothing about it being a Passover meal. On the contrary, he simply talks about "the night" it happened as if there were nothing else special about that evening.

The only mention of Passover comes earlier in the story; nothing in the description of the meal itself indicates it. Price believes the Passover connection came later to give a Jewish spin to a ritual that is plainly taken from the Mystery Religions.¹⁴

Luke's retelling of the story makes up for this by telling us six times that the meal is a Passover Seder (22:1,7,8,11,13,15) and even has Jesus explicitly mention it. John contradicts this completely. There is no way his last supper can be a Seder, because he repeatedly tells us the Last Supper happened the day *before* the Passover feast (13:1, 29).¹⁵

How does Paul know about Jesus?

Just how does Paul know Christ? Is it through what Jesus did during his life? Did the Apostles or others who had witnessed Jesus' ministry tell him? No! Paul vehemently denies that he has received his knowledge from any man. He has learned of the Son through *revelation and scripture*. "God chose to reveal his Son in me," he says in Galatians 1:16.

Burton Mack points out that the Greek term here, *en*, means "in" in the sense of "by means of," so Paul is saying quite literally, "God chose to reveal his Son *through me*."¹⁶ The writer of Ephesians, in 3:4-5, says: "The mystery about Christ, which in former generations was not revealed to men, *is now disclosed to dedicated apostles and prophets through the Spirit*."

Paul always points to scripture (Romans 1:2, 1 Corinthians 15:3-4) as the source of his gospel, and everything he knows about Christ and salvation. It is God, through the Spirit, who has supplied this gospel, and God who has appointed apostles like Paul to carry the message. It's important to recognize that Paul had been dead for decades before the Gospels were even written. Paul and most of the other epistles came first, and the Gospels and Acts came later. Paul's scriptures were the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible known as the *Septuagint*.

To Paul, the existence of the Savior has up to now been unknown. He has been a secret, a "mystery" hidden away in Heaven for eons by God, but now he is revealed along with the promise of salvation. This is what Paul and the other epistle writers repeatedly tell us (e.g., in Romans 3:21 and 16:25-27, Colossians 1:26 and 2:2, 1 Peter 1:20). They don't refer back to any sort of human Jesus and indeed, as in Titus 1:2-3, often there's no room for such a figure in their theology. Instead, they speak of Christ as *now* present on Earth (e.g., I John 5:20), sent by God just as he also sent the Spirit (and in several places, the Spirit of God and the Son of God are treated as though they were the same thing, as in Romans 8:9, Galatians 4:6 and Phil. 1:19).

Did Paul even know there was *supposed* to be a real person named Jesus? If you look for biographical info on the late Jesus of Nazareth from Paul or from any non-gospel Christian writer in the entire first century, you are out of luck – no one has anything to say about Jesus the Human Being. The words Bethlehem, Nazareth and Galilee never appear in the New Testament letters, and the word Jerusalem is never used in connection with Jesus.¹⁷ There is not a hint of any of the sacred sites, let alone pilgrimages. What about holy relics

– Jesus’ clothes, the things he used in his everyday life, the things he touched? There is nothing of the sort until the 4th century, when pieces of “the true cross” begin to surface, Jesus’ tomb is “discovered”, the first shrine on the supposed mount of Jesus’ death is set up, and the pilgrimage business gets kicked off, still going strong today.¹⁸

The Silence of Paul – And Everyone Else

Why the absence? The standard rationalization is that Paul was uninterested in the earthly life of Jesus – truly one of the flimsiest rationalizations to come out of Christianity, which is saying a lot. Acts says after his conversion, Paul went immediately to the elders in Jerusalem and reported for duty, but by Paul’s own account in Galatians, he waited three years following his conversion before making a short fifteen day visit to Jerusalem to get to know Peter and James. And he didn’t make it back there for another fourteen years.

Did Paul learn all the facts of Jesus’ life on that one occasion? Did he visit the holy places? If he did, can we believe he would not have shared these experiences, at least at some point in all his letters?

It is often claimed that the explanation for Paul’s glaring silence about Jesus’ life is simply that these were “occasional” writings; Paul (and apparently, every other NT writer for nearly the entire first century) just never had “occasion” for mentioning any of this missing information about Jesus in their letters.

But of course they *constantly* have “occasion” – and miss it again and again. The New Testament writers never cite Jesus’ teachings or examples in the squabbles that tore apart the early church over issues like circumcision, whether salvation was by grace or by works, taking supper with unbelievers, etc., etc. Instead, they constantly refer back to the old Jewish scriptures.

One example: Jesus had taught that all foods are clean – and yet this was still an issue in the early Christian community. So why did Paul have to keep arguing about it? If Jesus himself had pronounced on the question, why was there any dispute at all? Paul only had to quote Jesus’ own teachings and that would have settled the issue. Case closed. So why doesn’t Paul ever ask, “What would Jesus do”?

As Earl Doherty notes, we would think that when Paul sets off on his missionary journeys, people would be asking questions about this man from

Palestine who was the Son of God and Savior of the entire world? If not questions about his life and miracles, one would suppose that they would at least want to know what he taught. Instead, there's a total absence of any of these things, an all-encompassing silence that lasts until at least the final quarter of the first century.

Perhaps if it was just Paul who oddly avoided any mention of Jesus' earthly life, or contradicted the picture of Jesus given in the Gospels, we might be able to shrug and say, "Well, that's just Paul for ya." But when all the other early (more specifically, pre-Gospel) New Testament writers do the exact same thing, the excuse becomes untenable. Though no objective scholars still think James, Jude, and I & 2 & 3 John were actually written by the followers and family members of Jesus they pretend to be, it's striking that none of these letters talk about Jesus' life either.

We would never know from reading the epistles of James or Jude that either was Jesus' own brother. The real author or authors who forged the letters could not have known James and Jude were supposed to be Jesus' relatives; otherwise how could they have passed up the opportunity to namedrop the Savior and increase the authority of their letters even more?

It is a similar situation with the forger(s) of the apostle Peter's letters. Though in both letters the author tries to pass himself off as the apostle Peter and an eyewitness to Jesus (1 Peter 5:1; 2 Peter 1:16,18) you would never know from reading either of Peter's supposed "letters" that he was a simple fisherman from the Galilee (both uneducated and illiterate, according to Acts 4:13) who really knew Jesus personally and spent time with him.

Instead, we read dry, stuffy discourses in highly educated Greek by a scholar clearly well acquainted with the Septuagint and other literature, who lays out authoritative community rules for life under Roman rule and lectures about Jesus like a college professor discussing an antique marble bust.

And though the author is writing in part to combat scoffers who accuse Christians of falling for "cunningly devised fables," he has no personal testimony to counter their objections. Even when describing the crucifixion (1 Peter 2:21-24), he never says a word from his personal experience of what he saw and lived through that day – instead, he quotes a few lines from the Old Testament (Isaiah 53:5) to describe what happened on the most important day of his life!¹⁹

Likewise, the terse two-verse "account" of Jesus' Baptism and the Transfiguration (2 Peter 1:17-18) is clearly taken from Matthew 3:17 and

17:5 (itself taken from Mark). So it's clear that whoever was trying to pass himself off as "Peter" had never heard any personal recollections of Jesus' life from the real Peter.

Brothers of the Lord?

There are two passages in Paul's authentic letters that deserve closer inspection: the "brother of the Lord" passage in Galatians 1:19 and the list of the risen Christ's appearances in 1 Corinthians 15. Paul certainly never acts as if he thought James was the "brother of the Lord," as Gal. 1:19 seems to say. Nor does he appear to think that Peter or James had any special connection to Jesus.

To Paul, the three so-called "Pillars" of the Jerusalem Church, Peter, John and James, are nobodies, his personal enemies, and have nothing to add to Paul's understanding of the Gospel (Gal. 2:2-6).

It is astounding that he speaks with such scorn and derision about men who are supposedly Jesus' own disciples and relatives. How can he so callously dismiss the closest followers of his own Lord and Savior as losers and false believers with nothing of value to say to him?

Not only does Paul not feel the need to defend his opposition to the Apostles, he says nothing here that would indicate that he is even *aware* that their relationship with Jesus is any different than Paul's own. To Paul they are just the same as himself – and certainly no better.

But how can Paul talk so viciously about James, the man he calls "Brother of the Lord"? Maybe he never did call him that. In fact, if this single sentence fragment is removed, there is no clue anywhere in Paul's writings that he thought James was Jesus' brother, or that Peter had any special relationship with Jesus, or that Peter or James – or anyone else – even *knew* Jesus.

Though Christians seize on the one and only verse (Gal. 1:19) that has Paul refer to James in passing as "the Brother of the Lord," it seems more likely that this was a marginal note inserted by a later scribe, whether by accident or deliberately.

How can we say that? Because if Paul had ever really said any such thing, it's very hard to understand how he could then just a few verses later disdainfully dismiss James as though he was a nobody (Gal. 2:6).

We have no manuscripts of Galatians until partial ones from the 3rd century,²⁰ so there had been plenty of time for such a scribal note to find its

way into all the early copies. In fact we have many examples of just this sort of thing; it happened all the time.

And we can't forget that the epistles of James and Jude say nothing about either author being Jesus' brother – though the author of Jude identifies himself as James' brother (Jude 1:1) – suggesting that the tradition of James and Jude being Jesus' brothers only arose later.²¹

Witnesses to the Risen Lord

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15: 5-8), he gives us a laundry list of appearances of the risen Jesus. However, his list doesn't tally with any of the other accounts and raises more questions. According to Paul, Jesus was seen by the following, in this order:

1. Cephas
2. then the Twelve
3. then more than five hundred brethren at once
4. then James
5. then all the apostles
6. lastly, by Paul himself

Apologists act as though Paul provides concrete corroborating evidence here of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. But you only have to look at it to see that it doesn't match any of the Gospel accounts – not that they agree with each other either, of course.

One extremely odd feature of Paul's list is that he goes out of his way to refer to the disciples as if they were two different groups. First, he says that "Cephas (a.k.a. Peter), and then the Twelve", saw Jesus. Then five hundred of "the Brethren," and still later, James and all the apostles. Why would Paul phrase this so oddly? Isn't Cephas one of the Twelve? So why wouldn't Paul just say Jesus was seen by his disciples and leave it at that?

And why would he say the Twelve? At this time Judas Iscariot was dead and his replacement Matthias not yet chosen (Acts 1:20-26), so it would have been the Eleven, not the Twelve. It would appear that Paul (or whoever edited 1 Corinthians) was treating Peter and "the Twelve" as a different group entirely from James and "the apostles."

Why? Who are these apostles, and why aren't they included with either

the Twelve or the 500 Brethren? It's possible that the reason Paul treats "the Twelve" as an entirely separate group from the disciples is because they *were* a separate group. Essenes also had a "Twelve" of their own, their ruling council of Twelve, led by a *mebaqquerim* – or in Greek, an *episkopos*, the same word in the New Testament for a bishop.²²

Remember, Paul never says "The Twelve," "The Brothers of the Lord" (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:5), or "The Apostles" were family or personal disciples of Jesus, or that Jesus had a following at all, or treats the Jerusalem church leaders Peter, James and John as if they had any special connection to Jesus. For Paul, "apostles" and "brethren of the Lord" are simply believers in Christ like himself.

Incidentally, why do hundreds of laymen get a visit from Jesus before "all the apostles," much less James, supposedly Jesus' own brother and leader of the church? And why aren't any of these appearances recorded in the Gospels? Each Gospel gives its own spin on the post-resurrection appearances, but none of them correspond with the list given here.

But At What Pentacost?

What about these 500-plus Brethren who all saw the Lord at the same time? Why is an incident of this magnitude not mentioned in any Gospel or the book of Acts? And how could there be five hundred men at this appearance when the book of Acts (1:15) tells us that there were only around 120 believers *total* at the time of Jesus' ascension?

Either Paul or Luke (or both) is wrong about these figures, but they can't both be right. It is strange that apologists rely so heavily on this curiously worded list as "historical proof" of the resurrection, since it completely contradicts the Gospels.

Price makes some excellent observations here: "The appearance to more than five hundred followers of Jesus is so grandiose that it must be a later, apocryphal legend. If such a thing were known from the earliest times (and if it had happened, how could it not be?), why do we find no mention of it in the Gospels? Can we imagine any, much less all, of the evangelists would have been ignorant about it or omitted it had they known about it?"²³

But perhaps the whole incident is just based on a misunderstanding: Carrier notes several curious similarities in vocabulary between Paul's account of the over "five hundred" (*pentakosiois* in Greek) Brethren and

Acts' events on the day "of the Pentecost" (*tês pentêkostês* in Greek). There seem to be too many to be a coincidence. He wonders if Luke reworked Paul to come up with his story, or if Paul originally described a Pentecostal experience and not an appearance to "over five hundred" believers at all. One or the other is likely true,²⁴ and neither possibility jibes with the timeframes given in the Gospels.

It's also a shame that Paul doesn't give any details about these Jesus sightings, including his own – though Luke can't get enough of the story of his miraculous conversion (giving us three inconsistent versions), Paul never once tells us he was divinely waylaid by Jesus on the road to Damascus, only that through scripture and revelation he "saw" the Lord. And since he describes all these other appearances the same way, perhaps "appearance" is too strong a word for any of these cases.

Did Cephas, James and the rest simply see the Lord exactly the way Paul did, with the eyes of faith? Since this entire set of names appears to have originated as a list of credentials for the various apostles,²⁵ we should keep in mind that Paul's "list of eyewitnesses" is really nothing more than a roll call of the commonly-accepted individuals and groups (some of whom may have been purely mythical anyway) who claimed to speak for Christ.

But why is it that the best Paul can offer in defense of the resurrection is this small and problematic laundry list of "witnesses," anyway? Imagine you are Paul writing this letter. If the traditional picture of Paul were correct, you would have plentiful evidence to bring out here in support. You know Jesus' brothers. You know Jesus' disciples. It's not unthinkable that you know his mother. Jesus himself has appeared to you in a vision on the road to Damascus.

So you should have access to the whole story from start to finish, including his miraculous birth, famous career, astounding miracles, bold new teachings, and all the amazing occurrences of his death, resurrection, return to his followers and his final ascension into Heaven. What would *you* say?

With all his available options – eyewitnesses, relatives, his own exciting conversion story – Paul offers nothing but a suspicious list, with a few names of those who Paul claims found Jesus the same way he did: speaking to him from the Hebrew scriptures.

It's important to note that all this means we have *no* authentic writings from the leaders of the Jerusalem Church, or from anyone who claimed to be a personal disciple of Jesus. Everything we know about the three “Jerusalem Pillars,” James, Peter/Cephas and John, comes from Paul – and Paul says nothing about Peter, John or anyone else traveling around with Jesus. Apart from one suspicious and highly uncharacteristic partial line, he says nothing that would make us think he believed James had any special relationship to Jesus.

The implication here can't be emphasized enough: **there is nothing in the New Testament that was actually written by anyone who could claim to have personally known Jesus.**

For further reading:

Earl Doherty, *The Jesus Puzzle: Did Christianity Begin with a Mythical Christ?*, Canadian Humanist Publications, 1999

Myth No. 9:

Christianity began with Jesus and his apostles

Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ.

- Paul, 1 Corinthians 1:12

Acts portrays the early church as a small but courageous band of believers gathered around Jesus' family and disciples in Jerusalem, and that the fledgling religion spreads outward from them. But this familiar scenario doesn't appear to jibe with historical reality. Paul and our other earliest

Christian witnesses show that completely divergent forms of Christianity were already established and spread far and wide in locales as remote as Alexandria, Damascus, Corinth, Antioch and even Rome itself by the middle of the first century.

Is Christ Divided?

Paul himself complains about the diversity among early believers, who incredibly treat Christ as just one more factional totem figure, some saying they belong to Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas – or to Christ. Paul asks “Has Christ been divided?” (1 Cor. 1:10-13). The Gospels say many first-century exorcists cast out demons in the name of Christ – but pointedly, *not* the Christ of Jesus’ followers (Matthew 7:21-23, Mark 9:38, Luke 9:49).

Paul also repeatedly rails against his many rival apostles, who “preach another Jesus.” In his letters Paul often rages and fumes that his rivals are evil deceivers, with false Christs and false gospels so different from his own true Christ and true Gospel, that he accuses them of being agents of Satan and even lays curses and threats upon them! (2 Cor. 11:4, 13-15, 19-20, 22-23; Gal. 1:6-9; 2:4)

Other early Christians were just as concerned as Paul. The *Didakhê*, an early manual of Christian church practice and teachings, spends two chapters talking about wandering preachers and warning against the many false preachers who are mere “traffickers in Christs,” or as Bart Ehrman wonderfully names them, “Christmongers” (*Didakhê* 12:5).

As we’ll see shortly, even before Paul at least some Christian groups believed Jesus Christ had nothing to do with dying on a cross (as evidenced in the Kenosis hymn in Philippians). For instance, to the “Thomasine” Christians, salvation had nothing to do with Jesus dying or being resurrected. In fact, the Gospel of Thomas makes no reference to Jesus being crucified or even dying for our sins at all; instead, that Gospel says he will save those who embrace his secret teachings. It appears to be these same Thomasines whom John targets in his gospel with his famous “Doubting Thomas” passage (John 20:24-29).

There were still other profound disagreements between early Christian communities, not just about how to worship, but about even the very basic nature of Jesus. At the same time we see no evidence that anyone knew of any disciples or family of Jesus; the only “evidence” Paul and others can

offer for Jesus comes from their own interpretations of the Old Testament scriptures or their own personal “revelations.” And what’s more, these early Christianities were already in conflict with one another.

Christianities in Collision

Luke works hard to paint all the early Christian apostles as one big happy team, with Peter and Paul working hand in hand to spread the faith. So it’s shocking to read Paul’s letters and discover Peter and Paul were bitter opponents with irreconcilable religious differences.

Luke’s happy account of the so-called Apostolic Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15:4- 29) whitewashes over the many running disputes and quarrels between Paul and the Jerusalem Church over issues like circumcision and eating with Gentiles.¹ None of the fierce debates Paul describes appear in Acts; instead, there is a warm welcome and friendly discussion of the unfortunate misunderstanding, and great rejoicing by all afterwards (15:7-11, 31).

Compare that with Paul’s own words (Gal. 2:2-6), in which he can barely hide his contempt for the Jerusalem apostles, and reveals just how close early Christianity came to a total split between Peter’s and Paul’s brands of the faith. It is an amazingly paranoid, venomous and arrogant account of this private back room deal with the Jerusalem leaders.

Paul calls his accusers false believers and spies, and he “knows” they were really secretly brought in (by his many enemies) to enslave them (Gal. 2:4). Far from receiving a warm welcome, having a friendly hashing out of differences, and submitting to their decrees, Paul refuses to go along with them “even for a moment”(!) (Gal. 2:5)

Surprisingly, John the Baptist’s sect was another rival competing with early Christianity. The 2nd century *Clementine Recognitions* even preserves their arguments against the Christians, and traces of the conflict are still in the New Testament: Luke 3:15 tries to downplay the fact that some argued that John was Christ. In several verses (Matthew 9:14, Mark 2:18 and Luke 5:33), the disciples of John the Baptist actually confront and argue with Jesus himself.

Luke’s Gospel begins with what was clearly originally scripture from the Baptist cult. Among other textual indications, John the Baptist’s nativity story is four times longer than Jesus’ in Luke, it takes very little editing to

completely separate out the elements involving Jesus and Mary from John's nativity story, and the story doesn't suffer at all from their removal. On the contrary, it makes more sense.

A War in Heaven

If early Christianity is supposed to have begun as a single movement, then it was a wildly schizophrenic one. As Price notes:

“The cherished image of a single early church untainted by heresy, with everyone of one heart and soul worshipping one Christ, and eventually producing a harmonious canon of scripture speaking a single Gospel with a single voice – is a myth. In every case, an earlier diversity has been unsuccessfully hidden away behind a screen of history as the finally dominant faction wished it had been.”²

Pioneering Bible Scholar F.C. Bauer was the first to notice how a great deal of the New Testament only makes sense when you realize there was a war going on in the early church.³ Peter and Paul were on opposite sides of two rival Christianities, one Jewish, one Gentile, in major conflict with one another. The New Testament is divided along these lines, with each side having its own Gospels and Epistles, and evidence of several completely different traditions about Jesus.

Paul's Christians seem to have no details of Jesus' earthly life and instead venerate a cosmic Christ who traveled to the Hebrew underworld and back up through the layers of the Heavens to defeat the demonic spirits.

Mark's community took the opposite tack. Their suffering Jesus was an ordinary human man whom God “adopted” at his baptism, tested and later resurrected and exalted to divine Lord to reward his obedience. This is in stark contrast with the community who followed the Gospel of John. Their Jesus was the *Logos* who was there at creation and fearlessly wanders across Judea loudly declaring that he is God himself.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, Jesus is the heavenly High Priest who offers his sacrifice in a heavenly sanctuary, a perfect blend of traditional Jewish theology and Alexandrian-style Platonism, and a conception of Christ unlike any other.⁴

In addition to Peter's, Paul's, John the Baptist's and the other Gospel

factions, there were still many other Christian or proto-Christian sects in the first and second century. Some we know nothing about except that their names happened to be included in Orthodox heresy-hunting manuals. Doubtless there were many more that we will never know anything about. Once the faction that became the “orthodox” position had become strong enough to begin enforcing its will, the Church worked long and hard over centuries to burn as many of these heretical writings (as well as the occasional heretic) as they could.

The Missing Twelve

All early Christian factions claimed apostolic authority for their beliefs. But if Jesus’ twelve disciples were anywhere near as important as claimed, the scantiness of information on them makes no sense. Price notes, “It is astonishing to realize that the canonical lists of the Twelve do not agree in detail, nor do manuscripts of single Gospels!”⁵ And just as with Jesus, the Gospels frequently disagree about basic facts concerning the disciples.

It should be apparent that if the twelve Apostles were actual historical figures, especially ones who were primarily responsible for the growth of Christianity, it would simply be impossible to have such widespread and ongoing confusion over the basic question of who they were. Nor would we have to do so much guesswork to glean any biographical information about them. The fact that we have conflicting legends about where they went, what they did and how they died does not bode well for their veracity either.

If these men were really the first missionaries and fathers of the church, surely they would have had writings that were treasured by the first Christians, even if they had dictated them to a scribe. Sermons, memoirs, letters, doctrinal teachings, liturgy, encouragements – the list of what we might expect from them goes on and on. Yet the truth is we have nothing from any of the twelve Apostles – not a single authentic document, only a handful of forgeries like 1 and 2 Peter, written well after the supposed apostles of Jesus were all dead.

But did they ever live at all?

Most of our information on the lives and activities of the apostles does not come from the New Testament, but from much later writings. Many Christian communities wrote a biography of the disciple they adopted as their founder, so many that “Acts of the (various) Apostles” (and some notable non-apostles

like Pilate and Paul's female helper Thecla) became an actual genre of early Christian literature. But today all are generally acknowledged to be pure invention.

In fact, Mark appears to simply have co-opted the names of the known leaders of the early Jerusalem church (James, Peter, John and Cephas) and recast them as Jesus' disciples or family. In the Gospels Peter and Cephas are conflated (e.g., John 1:42), but venerable Christian tradition notwithstanding, Paul makes it clear they are two separate individuals (Galatians 2:7-9).

One often-cited defense of the historicity of the twelve disciples is John P. Meier's article "The Circle of the Twelve: Did it Exist During Jesus' Public Ministry?" (*JBL*, 116/4, 1997, pp. 635-72). Meier spills much ink arguing against those who say the Twelve were a later invention, yet he goes nowhere near the idea that Jesus could be fictional as well. His defense boils down to two criteria, embarrassment and multiple attestations.

By "criterion of embarrassment," Meier means (pp. 665-6) that the Crucifixion and Jesus' betrayal by Judas were too shocking for early believers to make up, so they can only be historical facts. But then he ironically solves his own dilemma when he notes that right from the beginning, believers (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:3-5; Matt. 27:9-10; Mark 14:21; John 13:18, 17:12; Acts 1:16, 20, and many more) repeat that all these "events" occurred "according to the scriptures."

Then he is quick to deny even the possibility that these Old Testament texts are being used to create a myth, insisting, "the shocking fact calls forth the scripture texts—not vice versa." How does he know?

Similarly, before we even begin to examine the credibility or transmission of his sources (something he never addresses), his "multiple attestation from independent sources" breaks down – since there is nothing that would indicate that "the Twelve" Paul mentions are Jesus' disciples of the Gospels and Acts.

Meier takes it for granted that if the Twelve existed at all, Jesus created them and one of them, Judas, handed him over to the authorities (p. 669) – but neither of these "facts" are ever established by Paul. What's worse, Meier's sources ("Mark, John, Paul, probably L, and probably Q," p. 663) are neither independent nor do they give multiple attestation, since Paul never names anyone in his "Twelve" or says what their connection was to Jesus, if any, and the Gospels disagree with one another on the identities of the Twelve.

With further irony, Meier goes on to describe at length how puzzling it is that we have so little historical data on the Twelve, and points out gaping holes. For example, Paul says much about his interactions with the leaders of the Jerusalem church and other apostles – but any mention of the Twelve is glaringly absent:

“One would have expected that the history of the first Christian generation would be replete with examples of the Twelve’s powerful presence and activity in the church. The exact opposite is the case.

“When we stop to consider how Paul goes on at length about his relations or struggles with Peter, James, John, Barnabas, Apollos, and various apostles or ‘pseudo-apostles’ in the churches of Jerusalem, Antioch, Galatia, and Corinth during the 30s, 40s, and 50s of the first century, it is astounding that Paul never mentions his relations or interaction with the Twelve as a group.

“Likewise surprising is that Luke, for all the emphasis he puts on the Twelve as a living link between the time of Jesus and the time of the church, has increasingly little to say about the Twelve as the chapters of Acts pass on. The total silence from the rest of the epistolary literature of the New Testament – deuterio-Paul, James, Peter, John, Jude, and Hebrews – is equally deafening. The same could be said for almost the entire corpus of the apostolic fathers.”

(pp. 670-71)

Meier admits the absence of the Twelve from most of the NT and the 2nd century Leaders of the Church puzzlement puzzles him. The only reasonable conclusion he can come up with is that they must have only played a significant role during Jesus’ ministry and then swiftly disappeared. But is it reasonable to think they would vanish without a trace from all early Christian writings, only to reappear hundreds of years later in spurious legends as the founders of churches all across the empire, as if they had been a dynamic presence all along? Perhaps a better reason why they only played a significant role during Jesus’ ministry is that they were only characters in his fictitious story.

All-Star Apostles

Frank Zindler argues that the Twelve clearly serve a zodiacal function in the Gospels. Indeed, there appear to be astrological motifs in the names of some Apostles and their stories in the Gospels. For example, “Thomas” was not a personal name in New Testament times; it was the word for “Twin” as well as the Hebrew name for the constellation Gemini. And the disciples James and John were nicknamed “Sons of Thunder,” just like the Roman Twins Castor and Pollux, one mortal and one the son of the Thunder god Zeus.

As Zindler points out, if Jesus was a sun god (and who else is born on the winter solstice and worshiped on Sunday?), he would have needed twelve zodiacal accomplices.

Mark appears to be making precisely this astrological connection when he has the brothers James and John come up to Jesus and call shotgun to sit on either side of him when they are all enthroned in Heaven (Mark 10:41; Matt. 20:20), or when Matthew has Jesus say, “I tell you this: in the world that is to be, when the Son of Man is seated on his throne in heavenly splendor (i.e., the sun), you, my followers will have thrones of your own (i.e. the twelve zodiacal houses), where you will sit as judges of the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28).

Many historians remain skeptical about these associations, though it’s interesting that the same historians who do not accept astrological motifs in the Gospels have no difficulty recognizing that the sacred iconography of Christianity’s sister religion Mithraism is an allegorical depiction of astronomical phenomenon: namely, the precession of the equinoxes (as demonstrated in David Ulansey’s *Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*, Oxford, 1989).

There’s no doubt that Jesus was later linked with the Sun, as evident in early Christian art. Zindler notes that excavations beneath the Vatican have revealed a mosaic depiction of Christ as the sun god Helios, complete with solar chariot.⁶ Sun-god associations of Jesus like this suggest influences from the imperial Roman sun-god cult that began around the year 200. In 313 Constantine openly (and probably quite deliberately) conflated Sol Invictus and Christ Jesus. This led to 4th century fusions like Jesus’ birthday being celebrated on the winter solstice, Dec. 25th - the same day as the sun god’s – a deliberate political move to usurp pagan practice by an imperial Church.

But most mainstream scholars argue that these astrological connotations

are a later fusion, and accept that in the Gospels, the twelve disciples actually represent the twelve tribes of Israel (who may have zodiacal associations of their own). That parallel is unmistakable: the twelve tribes' kingdom was founded by the first Jesus – who we call Joshua, (though the two actually share the same name, *Y'shua*) and the theme of the "New Israel" runs throughout the New Testament.

If the twelve disciples are not real historic individuals, but merely symbolic placeholders for the twelve houses of the zodiac and/or the mythic twelve tribes of Israel, then it starts to make sense why only a few have any recognizable personality, and why most are merely names on a list – and not always the same list...

The Name of the Lord

Likewise, the oldest perceptions of Jesus himself are mythic, not biographical. One early pre-Pauline New Testament element is the Kenosis Hymn, found in his letter to the Philippians:

“And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point
of death — even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in Heaven and on Earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.”
(Philippians 2:8-11 NRSV)

We learn two very interesting things about Jesus in this hymn. Price has pointed out a startling fact about this simple hymn, itself based on Isaiah 45: 22-23. The line “ – even death on a cross” was not part of the original hymn, as several scholars have noted; the phrase interrupts the meter of the rest.⁷ It's

striking to realize that *a reference to crucifixion had to be inserted* into this early song of worship. Did these believers originally believe that Jesus had died on a cross? Evidently not.

But the hymn's most staggering detail was uncovered by French mythologist Paul-Louis Couchoud in the 1930's. Generations of Bible scholars have read this passage as though it said God bestowed the divine title *Kyrios* ("Lord") upon Jesus – but Couchoud was the first to note this is not what the text says at all. Read it again.

After his death the Son was given "the *name* that is above every name." The title "Lord" is not a name; "Jesus," on the other hand, is.⁸ And "Lord" is not the name the hymn says God gave him – rather, it says God gave him the *name of Jesus*. Incredibly, one of the earliest Christian texts tells us that the Savior did not receive the name Jesus until *after* his death!

The devastating implications were not lost on Couchoud. In *The Creation of Christ* he concludes: "*The God-Man does not receive the name of Jesus till after his crucifixion*. That alone, in my judgment, is fatal to the historicity of Jesus."⁹

Making His Mark

Perceptions of Jesus changed forever once the anonymous author we call Mark wrote *The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. Mark tells us what he is doing right from the outset: he is writing a gospel, not a history or a biography (Mark 1:1).

And numerous historians, including Arnold Ehrhardt, Thomas Brodie, Richard Carrier, Randel Helms, Dennis MacDonald, Jennifer Maclean and more have detailed the ways that Mark's entire Gospel is a treasure trove of symbolic, rather than historical, meaning.¹⁰

Even though increasing numbers of believers came to later accept it as historical fact – and were encouraged to do so – the original Gospel was an allegory, constructed from a variety of sources, both Greek and Jewish: classic Homeric themes, possibly selected sayings from the Gospel of Thomas, snappy one-liners from Cynic and Stoic philosophies, bits of astrology and sacred geometry, pharisaic parables and proverbs, names from Paul's epistles, and above all, as with Paul, motifs from the Hebrew Scriptures: Psalms, the Jacob's Well story in Genesis, and passages from Ezekiel and 2 Chronicles.

Taking all these elements and then deliberately employing a simple, folksy style of *Koine* Greek, Mark composed a brilliant literary achievement. In a potent mix of Judaism and Paganism, he created a moving story filled with powerful Jewish symbolism and a narrative that parallels the burial liturgy of the Orphic Mysteries and classic motifs from the Homeric Epics.

Mark's Gospel story, just like the parables he put in Jesus' mouth, was written to teach truths while concealing their meanings. The entire Gospel of Mark is one great parable to conceal the secret, sacred truths of a mystery faith, the Mystery of the Kingdom of God. Mark has Jesus give this clue to the reader of his Gospel:

“The Mystery of the Kingdom of God is given to you, but to those who are outside everything is produced in parables, so that when they watch they may see but not know, and when they listen they may hear but not understand, for otherwise they might turn themselves around and be forgiven.”

(Mark 4:11)

Like the pagan mysteries, the truths of Mark's Mystery of the Kingdom of God are being concealed behind parables, only explained to insiders. Mark is not reporting history; he is creating a framework for passing on a sacred mystery to a chosen few and no one else. And he fully expected his initiated readers to recognize this is what he was doing. The cornerstone Gospel upon which all the others were built was not a biographical work at all, but an impressive literary construction.

For further reading:

On the diversity of early Christianity: Robert M. Price, *Deconstructing Jesus*, in particular pp. 21-99; Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities and Lost Scriptures* (which contains the Gospel of Thomas, and many more “lost” Gospels); James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories Through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971)

On the problematic nature of the Twelve Apostles: Robert M. Price, *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man*, pp. 183-203

Myth No. 10:

Christianity was a totally new and different miraculous overnight success that changed the world!

“Deos fortioribus adesse.” (The gods are on the side of the stronger)
–Tacitus

The Christian movement was diverse and innovative, but its component elements were hardly new. And regardless of which particular form of the movement one chooses to call “true Christianity,” it was certainly no overnight success. We have the word of the early Church Fathers themselves on both these scores.

Christians were entirely on the defensive concerning charges that they had stolen from the much older mystery faiths and other pagan religions. Christian apologists today employ the ostrich defense – staunch, dismissive, unwavering denial. Any similarities with the older pagan faiths either are ignored, denied, rationalized away or declared to be much later copies of Christianity.

Such handy, simple answers. So... why didn't the early Christian Fathers ever think of them?

The Devil's Christs

Church Fathers like Firmicus Maternus and Justin Martyr were greatly troubled by the similarities of Jesus' allegedly historical biography to his fellow saviors' pagan mythologies. They certainly didn't deny the commonality, which was obvious to everyone in the ancient world. Nor did they try to accuse the long-established mainstream pagan religions of stealing from the story of Jesus, a ridiculous position that no one at the time could have gotten away with.

The only defense left to them was: the Devil did it. They invented the concept of Diabolical Mimicry: that Satan was able to decipher the Old Testament prophecies and foreseeing the coming of Christianity, used his evil

powers to inspire the heathen nations to pre-emptively copy all the rites and rituals, theological ideas, and religious language of “True Christianity” – even details of the life of its Savior – centuries before Christianity even began! “Even the Devil has his Christs!” Firmicus bemoaned.

As Price remarks: “Conservative scholars and Christian apologists have never been at ease even recognizing the existence of the dying-and-rising-god motif in non-Christian Mystery Religions, much less their relevance for Christian origins. As apologists are merely spin doctors for a theological party line, their aloofness to the dying-and-rising-god mytheme is scarcely surprising and one is hard-pressed to take their disdain seriously, anymore than the ancient attempts of Justin Martyr and Firmicus Maternus to discount such parallels as Satanic counterfeits.”¹

Sons of Gods

Apologists breeze over another important consideration: just the mere fact that Jesus is “the Son of God” is a huge indication that he is a new creation based on the classic pagan model. It’s only when the other Mediterranean gods like Zeus begin having demigod sons with mortal women that God suddenly announces that he has a demigod son too.

Paul avers that God has been keeping Jesus a secret all this time (Romans 16: 25-27), as does the real author of Colossians 2:2, but he offers no word of explanation as to why God would need or want to keep such a basic fact about his very nature top secret for so long.

Actually, it was more than just a secret. According to the commandments God himself gave them, it was blasphemy, immediately punishable by death, to even suggest such a thing. To the Israelites, the Lord their God was one – not two, or three, or three-in-one. Anything else was heathen idolatry.

So the timing of Jesus’ debut and his severe doctrinal about-face, coming only after all these other sons of gods had already been imagined, does seem rather convenient. In fact, the very question of who stole from whom, Christianity or the Mystery Faiths, misses the most essential point: Christianity *is* a Mystery Faith.

A Miracle Spread?

And how did this mystery faith not only come to eclipse all of its sister

faiths, but eventually give rise to the thousands of unruly, often feuding sects and movements that today compose the world's largest religion?

The traditional view of Christianity's spread starts with Jesus shaking up the entire Judean region with his teachings and miracles and the faith snowballing down the hill of Golgotha, as his disciples and Paul convert hundreds at a time and found churches throughout the Mediterranean until miracle by miracle and martyr by martyr, the entire Roman empire, and then the entire Western world, becomes Christian.

But this image of the faith as an unstoppable juggernaut is nothing but the invention of one fourth-century branch of Christianity. After over three centuries of bitter fighting, a single faction emerged as "the one true faith." These victors wasted no time in rewriting the history of Christianity to portray themselves as the true "Orthodox" ("right belief") church who had kept a firm hold on the correct dogma all along, inherited directly from Jesus himself.

Spin-doctors like Luke downplayed the conflicts between the followers of Paul, Peter, John the Baptist and still others to make it appear that there had never been much of a conflict at all, and that all these early Christian communities were parts of the same orthodox team. Lastly, orthodox scribes whitewashed over even the variety of early Christianities and made it appear that their rivals were all nothing more than Johnny-come-lately heretical spin-offs.²

Today, thanks in part to discoveries like the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, we know that the real growth of Christianity was nothing like the tidy, rosy pictures writers like Luke and Eusebius painted as official Church history. Christianity didn't conquer the known world like an unstoppable supernatural shockwave radiating out from the crucifixion. Its various factions lingered on the religious periphery, coming together only slowly and piecemeal and with great difficulty, barely hanging on for centuries as just one more strange and suspect mystery cult before the decline of the Roman world, along with its pagan rivals, gave it the chance to finally supplant them.

Christianity on the Fringe

Even by their own account, Christians languished as a fringe cult for centuries, a loose scattering of tiny bickering groups rejected or opposed by

society.³ Acts 1:15 claims there were only about 120 believers after the death of Jesus, but asserts that a few miracles later the population had gone up to 3000 (2:41) and finally 5000 (4:4) before Stephen is martyred and all the believers scatter – except the Apostles, we’re told (8:1,11:19).

Richard Carrier summarizes the evidence and scholarship on the number of first century Christians and notes that we are never told how the author of Acts came up with these figures, and these are the only hard numbers we get:

“All we get is a general impression of winning converts here and there — but whenever anything more precise is said, we rarely hear of more than several households per town. Even at our most optimistic, that doesn't look good. We could perhaps imagine a hundred Christians per city by the year 100... (but this is out of an estimated total population of 2.5 million for all of first century Palestine, Carrier notes) ...Even by the most optimistic estimates, Christians had then penetrated fewer than 70 towns or cities across the whole Empire — and that only makes for a total of 7,000 people. Again, that's socially microscopic.”⁴

What’s more, this includes *all* first century groups that had some form of belief in Jesus, including those later regarded as heretical. “True” Christians were a smaller subset still. Nor do these numbers reflect those converts who later left the faith. Naturally, Luke doesn’t mention any unsatisfied customers, but we know from Pliny the Younger’s letter to Trajan (see appendix) a significant number of Christians became dissatisfied and left the faith on their own, even without persecution – and still more were quick to jump ship when threatened with execution.⁵ Not everyone wanted to become a martyr.

This letter from Pliny the Younger to the Emperor Trajan, written around the year 111, also proves how unknown Christians were to most people, even in the early second century. In it Pliny freely admits he has no experience with Christians. In fact, he says he knows nothing about how they are to be punished or even charged (10.96.1-2). Carrier explains the ramifications:

“This is proof positive that Christians must have been extremely scarce — truly to the point of social invisibility. Pliny had been governor in Asia Minor for over a year already, before even learning there were any Christians in his province, and before that he held the post of Consul (the highest possible

office in the entire Roman empire, short of actually being emperor).

He had also been a lawyer in Roman courts for several decades, then served in Rome as Praetor (the ancient equivalent of both Chief of Police and Attorney General), and then served as one of Trajan's top legal advisors for several years before he was appointed to govern Bithynia.⁶ It's therefore *absolutely incredible* that Pliny had *never* attended a prosecution of Christians and knew *absolutely nothing* about how to prosecute them – he didn't even know why being a Christian was illegal!

Therefore, Christians must have been extremely rare indeed throughout the entire empire, and even at Rome, where Pliny had decades of legal experience. For this means he never once saw a trial, nor had a Christian brought before him, nor ever heard the issue discussed in the Senate, courts, or porticoes, or by any of his peers – not in Asia (until this occasion), nor as top legal advisor to Trajan, nor as the leading law officer in Rome, nor as a lawyer, not even when he held the highest office in the land. That is simply not possible – unless Christians were barely there.”⁷

Keith Hopkins surveyed the evidence and scholarship on early Christian populations in a landmark paper,⁸ and warned that no one can make any definite claims on the subject, at least for the first two centuries. Anyone who says anything about the number of early Christians is speculating, not asserting a fact.⁹ Robin Lane Fox's own research agrees with Hopkins' findings. He notes that Christian writers used words like “all” and “everywhere” quite freely when they described their religion's success, but in actuality, though we have a wealth of material documenting life in the Roman Empire – inscriptions, pagan histories, texts and papyri – Christians are scarcely to be found before 250. The two fullest histories, written in the early third century, make no mention of them whatsoever.¹⁰ And both Hopkins and Fox are supported by the early Church Father Origen, who admitted in the mid-third century that Christians were only a tiny fraction of the population.¹¹ Carrier concludes by weighing the numbers in the balance and finding them wanting:

“Any conclusion that actually has evidential support, even if we start with 5,000 Christians in the year 40, must still fit projections for the 3rd and 4th century, and when we do that — when we use the evidence we have — we never even approach 1% of the population by 100 A.D. In fact, we can barely

pass 0.1%. The evidence simply does not exist to push the numbers higher... No matter how we try to tweak our growth model, the actual evidence permits only one conclusion: we cannot prove Christianity was attractive to any more than one out of every thousand people in the first century. That's simply not miraculous, or even surprising.”¹²

To put this in perspective, take one particularly weird-beard example, Spiritualism in the 19th century. This séance-and-ectoplasm set gained 3 million followers in the United States in just ten years;¹³ by comparison it took Christianity nearly two hundred years to come anywhere close.

Carrier adds that archeological evidence secures the case: throughout Palestine, vast amounts of material evidence unmistakably document Jewish occupation and there is considerable evidence of pagan inhabitants – but there is no material evidence of any Christian population until centuries later. “In fact, only in the third century does material evidence of a Christian presence anywhere in the Empire begin to match that of even minor pagan cults.”¹⁴

Rome Goes to Hell

Christianity winding up on top was anything but inevitable. Its eventual emergence after a slow, painful crawl for three hundred long years was thanks to the collapse of Rome. During the centuries that Roman civilization enjoyed prosperity and security, Christianity had little to offer. As long as the Pax Romana held, followers of Jesus would never be anything more than just one more foreign cult among many.

Chances are, Christianity would have been doomed to languish in obscurity, perhaps even slip quietly into extinction. Instead, Christianity owes its success to a century of bad fortune for the ancient Mediterranean.

The third century was a time of chaos throughout the Roman world, dominated by near-perpetual civil war, economic crisis and political chaos.¹⁵ The crisis began with the assassination of the young emperor Severus, which kicked off decades of continuous civil war and short-lived emperors. As each grabbed power, they needed ways to raise cash quickly to pay the enlarged army. They took the easy route and just cut the silver in coins with cheaper metals, causing runaway inflation.

Meanwhile, the frontiers were neglected and barbarians from all sides

attacked repeatedly. It was no longer safe for merchants to travel and the financial crisis crippled commerce so badly Rome's vast trade network collapsed. Finally, in 258, the Empire itself crumbled into three warring states. A succession of "soldier-emperors" gradually succeeded in briefly reuniting the Empire and securing the borders in 274, but in 284, Diocletian was forced to split the empire in half.

The glory of Rome would never burn as bright again. The classical world began its long, sad, sea change into the dank medieval world: citizens of the cities were forced into the countryside to go seek food and protection from large landowners, becoming serfs in the process. Great metropolitan forums and plazas were abandoned for cramped, walled fortress-towns.

By the end of the century, every Roman social institution was in ruins. Nothing escaped: cultural institutions, economic structure, and all aspects of society were fundamentally transformed – including Roman religion.

Rome's destruction was Christianity's salvation. Traits that had long made Christianity so uninviting to the Roman elite, including disdain for "worldly" learning and culture, condemnation of wealth and materialism, and a focus away from this earthly life of suffering – all appealed to the poor and disenfranchised, a target demographic growing every day. Carrier notes that Christianity could flourish during Rome's collapse because it was a well-organized, empire-wide social service independent of the system crashing all around it.

It also didn't hurt that throughout the second century, the role of Bishop solidified into a lucrative profession, one that continued to gain prestige and political power as well. Early on, Bishops scrambled to consolidate their power. The letters of Ignatius, which appear to have been forged in the famous martyr's name by bishops themselves, are filled with exhortations to obey the Bishop as if he were Christ Jesus himself, that the Bishop is the mind of Christ, and that the clergy should be attuned to their Bishop like the strings of a harp.¹⁶

Though historians like Gibbon squarely blamed Christianity for the decline and fall of the classic world, the truth is that Rome brought it upon herself. The causes were many, not least of which was years of increased and unchecked corruption.¹⁷ Christianity was a symptom, not a cause of the Pagan world's ill-health, but it certainly took full advantage of its host environment like an opportunistic infection.

The collapse of the Roman world dragged its traditional patron gods

down with it. Though Paganism was still a strong force and not ready to leave the stage yet, it was no longer as robust as it had been before the empire's decline, and worse, it was inextricably enmeshed with the faded glories of the old ways.

The humbling of once mighty Rome dovetailed nicely with the Christian message. When times were good, few had any use for the weird cult. But in bad times, the religion was just the thing to cling to. Then, as now, it was an easy sell for Church leaders to explain the secular world's collapse as apocalyptic divine judgment. Christianity's long stint on the lunatic fringe had finally turned social exile into a strong advantage.

God's Emperor: Constantine

Christianity ultimately triumphed first by becoming useful to Rome's rising power player Constantine, then by becoming favored by later Roman emperors, and finally, by becoming mandatory. It didn't come out on top by playing fair. It was aggressive with an exclusivist take-no-prisoners monotheism. It had an unquestioning, obedient flock, with no compunctions against strictly enforcing dogma and persecuting heretics. On top of all that, it had growing numbers. No question: the religion had everything an aspiring totalitarian emperor could want.

Yet Christianity still only truly flourished almost a century later, when it gained the ability to literally eliminate its competition in 395, when every other religion was actually outlawed. Contrary to popular belief and Christian tradition, Constantine did not make Christianity the official state religion of Rome. That remained sun worship during his entire reign and after his death, when he was duly deified as a god. He was the lifelong *Pontifex Maximus*, the chief high priest of the sun god Sol Invictus, who appeared everywhere, including imperial banners and coins. Even today, the Arch of Constantine commemorating his defeat of Maxentius still gives thanks for the victory to Sol Invictus in his solar chariot.

But even while he played lip service to both pagans and Christians, Constantine began the process of nailing the coffin lid on the gods. And since they wouldn't be needing their temples, he also began gradually emptying them of their rich treasuries. As Keith Hopkins has noted, the change from paganism to Christianity created enormous windfall profits for the Emperor.

And the rest is history. Less than a century after Constantine's rise to

power, Christianity was finally the winner, though it would never be able to rest easy: always threatened by heresy and schisms, always guarding against new ideas from within and without. In the end, there was nothing miraculous or astounding about the birth and spread of early forms of Christianity, except perhaps how varied and contradictory the various sects were, and how anemic they were for hundreds of years before coming to power.

The “overnight success” of the Roman orthodoxy after centuries of political wrangling in the Darwinian jungles of religious history is remarkable – not for anything lofty or noble, but as a primer on Machiavelli and a beautiful example of Darwinian evolution in action. Ultimately, Christianity succeeded in seizing the Roman Empire, and thus the western world, not because of the beauty of its teachings or the spiritual truths it fostered, but thanks to the most worldly of motives: power and money.

For further reading:

For the motif of dying and rising gods, see Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection: “Dying and Rising Gods” in the Ancient Near East*, Coronet books, 2001

For more on the abuses involved in the rise of Christianity, see:

Ramsey MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth through Eighth Centuries* (1997), *Christianizing the Roman Empire: A.D. 100 – 400* (1986) and *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (1981)

Conclusion:

Can Jesus be saved?

There comes a point when it no longer makes sense to give Jesus the benefit of a doubt. Even if we make allowances for legendary accretion, pious fraud, the criteria of embarrassment, doctrinal disputes, scribal errors and

faults in translation, there are simply too many irresolvable problems with the default position that assumes there simply *had* to be a historical individual (or even a composite of several itinerant preachers) at the center of Christianity.

Indeed, the New Testament and the unfolding of Christianity would look very differently if Jesus – even a merely human Jesus – had been an actual historical figure. How differently would things look if Jesus *had* been real? Here are a few examples:

The Silence of Paul – and Everyone Else

There would not be the strange absence of biographical information about Jesus from Paul and everyone else in the earliest generations of Christian writers. Incidentally, when ostensibly biographical information *does* first appear decades later in the late first century with the Gospel of Mark, it appears disconnected from the mythic details of the earlier Christ.

This new account of Mark's is short and relatively unornamented, and with each successive version, that basic story is expanded, gains more details, is fleshed out and ramified in mutually incompatible directions as time goes on. (see myth no. 8)

Needless to say, the silence of *all* contemporary commentators, both during and for decades after the years of Jesus' ministry, makes no sense considering that we *do* have historical evidence for much less interesting messianic figures and events in Judea from that same period – and that without taking any alleged miracles into account! (see myth no. 2).

Distribution and Spread

The Jesus movement would have began in the Galilee and in Judea around Jerusalem, radiating out from there instead of divergent sects appearing scattershot all over the far corners of the empire in places like Alexandria, Greece, Rome and Asia Minor.

Forgetting Jesus

Those same early Christian communities would be much more homogenous, not seemingly clinging onto a few isolated fragments of Jesus' teachings and personality, and then forgetting or just jettisoning the rest to create completely incompatible versions of their Christ Jesus – particularly if those same communities had been founded by Jesus' own disciples or family members.

A Jesus Who Never Died

There would not be early Christian communities who had no concept of Jesus dying for sins (or dying at all), like that of the Gospel of Thomas community. Their Gospel not only contains no information whatsoever about his suffering or dying to save humankind from their sins, but explicitly states that his followers will only be saved through heeding his secret Gnostic wisdom (*Gospel of Thomas*, Saying 1).

Jesus Without a Cross – or a Name

Paul (or perhaps an even earlier Christian) would not have had to insert a reference to the cross into the Pre-Pauline Kenosis Hymn in Philippians 2:5-11. It's fascinating that this early Christian hymn, perhaps the very earliest surviving Christian writing we have, celebrated the sacrifice of a savior who died – by not by crucifixion.

And what's more, this same early hymn goes on to tell us that the savior did not receive the name Jesus (in Hebrew, "Yahweh Saves") until *after* he died and was exalted (see myth no. 9).

But what other name could Paul's Christ have had in the unquoted portion of the Philippians hymn? The Gnostics certainly had plenty of names to go around for their various Christs; Price has noted that in the Nag Hammadi texts, the savior goes by names like Melchizedek, Seth, Derdekas, Zoroaster, the Third Illuminator, and others.¹ It's entirely possible that Paul had no idea what his Lord had originally been named during his time on earth – if he even believed that Jesus *had* been on earth.

Paul's List of Witnesses

Paul's odd list of witnesses to the risen Christ in 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 15: 5-8) would not conflict with the Gospels, and the Gospel accounts themselves might be expected to be more in agreement with one another (see myth no. 8).

The Jerusalem Church

Paul's problematic dynamic with the Jerusalem Pillars would be very different - and probably far more deferential – if he actually thought they had been family and disciples of Jesus. Instead, he ignores them for fourteen years and when he finally comes into open conflict with them and is

summoned to account for himself, he contemptuously dismisses them (Gal. 2:2-6) as nobodies(!), enemies and false believers. Their relationship is so antagonistic, Luke feels the need to completely rewrite history to cover it up (see myth no. 9).

Splits in the Early Church

The many, many issues that continued to tear the early church apart (circumcision, adhering to Mosaic law, eating with unbelievers, faith versus works, etc.) would have been long-resolved by Jesus if he had actually pronounced on them as he does in the Gospels. For example, Peter and Paul are still arguing over the Hebrew dietary laws – even though Jesus taught that all foods are clean (Mark 7:14-23), and in Acts (10:9-16) Peter has already received a vision from Jesus telling him (three times) the same thing all over again!

The Eucharist

Paul would have no reason to have to explain the Lord's Supper if it was already a tradition of the disciples, and it would be very strange for him to try to take credit for receiving it in a vision if everyone already knew about it from the disciples. And by the same token, John would not have been able to get away with excluding the Lord's Supper from *his* gospel.

Earlier Teachings

Jesus' teachings would not appear in the writings of so many earlier authors, such as in Pharisaic literature, Stoic and Cynic maxims and Pythagorean fables (see myth no. 4).

The *Testimonium Flavianum*

There would have been no need for Eusebius to forge the *Testimonium Flavianum* in the 4th century. Flavius Josephus would have mentioned Jesus, if only as just another false messiah and charlatan. Of course, we could also expect to see mention of Jesus as a teacher, preacher, or popular martyr from Philo, Justus of Tiberius, Nicolaus of Damascus, and scores of others (see myth no. 2).

Miracles and Other Spectacular Events

It bears repeating that if any of Jesus' miracles or the other spectacular

events that appear in the Gospel stories (e.g. earthquakes, supernatural darkness, the mass resurrection of dead Jewish saints who emerged from their graves and come into the streets of Jerusalem, etc.) had really occurred, it's very doubtful that they *all* would have been missed by *all* contemporary accounts – including the other gospels!

Response from the Authorities

By the same token, if Jesus *had* actually returned from the dead, it's astounding to think that there was no reaction from the populace or the Jerusalem authorities, or that no one would agree how long he remained on earth (just one afternoon? More than a week? *Forty days?*) before visibly ascending through the clouds into Heaven.

Identities of Jesus' Disciples

There would not be so much confusion, awkward gaps of information and outright contradictions over who the twelve apostles were. And it seems unlikely that there would be so much literary (and perhaps also astrological) symbolism intertwined in their stories if the twelve apostles were actual human beings and not fictional characters.

First Century Historical Accounts

We might also expect to have genuine accounts, if not written (since the apostles were allegedly illiterate), then at least dictated by the apostles or other eyewitnesses. By the same token, we might expect to find Jesus or Paul had been mentioned in the writings of the real historical figures who appear in the Gospels and Acts.

Jesus' Trial

The details of Jesus' trial accounts would be more consistent, not be blatantly fabricated out of the Hebrew scriptures and so full of unrealistic errors (see myth no. 6).

Chronology

People would agree on the date (or day! or year!) of his death. And perhaps it's not too much to expect that the sources would agree on the general circumstances, if not the date or year, of his birth, death, resurrection, and nearly every other event in Jesus' life.

Absence of Jesus in Later Trial Transcripts

The trial accounts of Peter and Paul in Acts would mention Jesus instead of revealing a widespread ignorance of any of the events surrounding Jesus' ministry, trial and execution.

Rival Christs

There would not be so many disparate kinds of Christs and gospels being preached in the early years by the rival, "false" apostles Paul continually fumes about (2 Cor. 11:4, 13-15,19-20, 22-23; Gal. 1:6-9; 2:4) or the "traffickers in Christs" warned against in the *Didakhê* (12:5), not to mention the many "true" Christian factions, such as that of Apollos (1 Cor. 3:5-9, 22; 4:6), according to Acts 18:25 an Alexandrian Jewish Christian, teaching in Corinth, who appears to have originally been a disciple of John the Baptist (see myth no. 9).

Judean Religious Politics

The interactions between Jesus and the religious authorities would be very different than as portrayed in the Gospels, which get many basics completely wrong. In reality, Pharisees would have admired, supported and mentioned Jesus. Like them, he opposed their bitter enemies, the Sadducees, and stood up to the Romans. He even taught their parables.²

Physical Evidence

Finally, perhaps it's not unreasonable to think that there could have been writings, physical evidence or actual relics of Jesus preserved, rather than the scores of frauds that did not start appearing until three hundred years later.

Conclusion

If Jesus had been an actual historical figure we have a thorny paradox.

Either this Jesus was a remarkable individual who said and did a host of

amazing, revolutionary things – but no one outside his fringe cult noticed for over a century. Or he didn't – and yet shortly after his death, tiny communities of worshipers that cannot agree about the most basic facts of his life spring up, scattered all across the empire.

The truth is inescapable: there simply could never have been a historical Jesus.

Appendix: Apologist Sources

It bears repeating that the first problem with all the so-called “historical eyewitnesses” to Jesus is that none of them were around during the alleged time of Christ – or even close. Though the Gospels paint a picture of Jesus' fame spreading far and wide thanks to his miraculous deeds and teachings, the many historians who composed the abundant historical record of the time have absolutely nothing to say about the first century's allegedly most notable personality.

We *do* have accounts concerning all manner of false miracle-workers and failed messiahs. How could the historians manage to write detailed accounts about all these much less interesting losers and fail to notice the one man who was the real deal? Could everyone outside his cult have missed everything he did and said?

Decades and decades roll on without Jesus leaving a trace in the historical record of the Jews, neighboring kingdoms and provinces, the Romans, or the Greeks. By the second century there is only a handful of tiny scraps and snippets that are supposed to be testimony to the historical reality of this world-shaking Jesus figure. And even this late, we still aren't finding comments of Jesus' life or deeds or teachings - this handful of “historical confirmation” turns out to be simply stray remarks (usually in passing) from pagan commentators about Christians and their beliefs in the second century.

Even the second century (and later!) Church fathers seem to show astounding ignorance about the basic facts of their own savior's life until after the Gospels begin to circulate. Only after that do we start to hear

Christians bragging about their connections to Jesus' disciples, though these can all be shown to be fabrications. Late second century Christian leaders used claims like these to aggressively assert their own authority over rivals, so their motives are far from pure to begin with. Here's what these much later commentators have to say.

Late First Century

Ignatius (c. 35 -107)

According to the official story, Ignatius of Antioch (also known as Theophorus) was the third Bishop (or Patriarch) of Antioch. On the way to his eagerly awaited martyrdom in Rome, he allegedly wrote seven letters (six more have been rejected as forgeries). Ignatius is a very problematic witness for Christ. He was born some time in the mid 30's, so he certainly *should* have known the Apostles. The church thought so as well and later tradition alleged that he served under John and was personally appointed by Peter. But even when Ignatius is trying to assert his authority on doctrinal arguments he never says anything remotely like this. Instead, he can only claim that his knowledge of Jesus comes from the Holy Spirit, and from his own ability to discern "heavenly things."

What's worse, scholars have questioned if *any* of Ignatius' letters are genuine. And there are good reasons to be suspicious; not only are there odd inconsistencies between the letters and unbelievably over-the-top declarations of his holy death wish, he is supposedly allowed to speak to local congregations along the way (who come see him without any legal repercussions!) and write letters to spread his outlawed faith! Ignatius also "foresees" many future events after his death, and presciently enough, the letters appear to be combating the Gnostic Basilides who was not active until much later, around 120-125 to 140.

In Ignatius' time, Bishops were not yet the citywide leaders of the church, so he could not have been one, nor could he have written to any. Besides, only one letter, the fourth one, says he is a Syrian bishop; the first three letters present him as just an ordinary member of an unnamed church. It's not until two centuries later, with Origen and Eusebius, that anyone corroborates the claim, and even then they disagree on who preceded him.¹

In fact, in all these letters we see a picture of the church as it was in Asia Minor a few decades after his death. Newly emerging church leaders are

struggling to gain control over their flock and defeat competing doctrines. Each letter appears to be written primarily to reinforce the power of the local bishop and enhance the prestige of his church. The real authors of the Ignatian letters appear to have been the bishops mentioned in them.

Who was Ignatius, really? B.D. Mueller has argued convincingly that he must have been a zealous Christian from Syria who was fed to the lions in Rome probably during Trajan's rule. Decades later an Ephesian Christian, most likely its bishop Onesimus, used the well-loved martyr to aggressively bolster his own position by forging a self-serving letter in Ignatius' name. It worked so well that several others followed from the leaders of other churches. Far from being a witness for Jesus, Ignatius instead provides evidence for the forgery used to prop up the claims of the emerging church hierarchy.

The “Apostolic Succession”: Polycarp of Smyrna and Clement of Rome

In the later half of the second century, Christian factions increasingly claimed that they were the only ones who had the real teachings handed down from Jesus. Some claimed their doctrine came straight from Jesus' secret teachings, or from his own relatives, but the victorious faction that later became the Roman Catholic church claimed that their dogma was handed down from Jesus to the apostles to themselves in an unbroken chain. But despite this bold talk, they were only able to back it up with two examples - neither of which holds up under examination:

Polycarp (c. 69 -155)

Polycarp was said to be bishop of Smyrna (now İzmir in Turkey), martyred around 155. Toward the end of the second century, Irenaeus of Lyons asserted his authority by claiming that as a boy he had seen Polycarp, and that Polycarp had known the Apostle John (Irenaeus also said John had lived all the way up to the time of Trajan, 98 -117). However, this connection to John appears to be completely made up; no one before this ever makes such a claim, despite ample opportunities to do so - not even Polycarp himself (!), nor his biographer, nor the *Apostolic Constitutions* which listed out the lines of Bishops in Smyrna.² Irenaeus had also claimed that Papias, the 2nd century bishop of Heiropolis, was another disciple of John; but Papias' own writings disprove this, too.

Irenaeus is also the alleged source for Polycarp's martyrdom; he was not present for the actual martyrdom, but learned it that day in Rome by a heavenly voice.³ The account follows the standard rules for the genre of Christian (and Jewish) Martyr stories. Made to look like authentic court dramas (some even claim to be actual transcripts), they may seem realistic if you only read one or two, but actually read nothing like the dozens of genuine Roman court records which survive⁴. After a few the same routine script appears again and again⁵, complete with stock characters like the humble but unshakable martyr hero/heroine, the cowardly fair-weather Christian who recants under pressure, the cruel Roman judge who wants to learn more about this strange religion and fails to get the hero's witty double-entendre jokes, wicked Jews, the pagan crowd who vacillate between crying out for blood and stunned pity and admiration; and of course miracles, miracles and more miracles.

On the lam, Polycarp is betrayed and arrested. When he enters the amphitheater, a voice from Heaven, audible only to the Christians present, says "be strong and manly, for I am with you." After a brief (but deeply implausible) conversation with his judge on Christianity, morality and secular authority, Polycarp is sentenced to be burned at the stake (the Jews were especially enthusiastic in collecting the firewood). But to everyone's amazement, the flames would not burn him. Instead, the fire encompassed his body in a glowing halo, illuminating him like "baked bread" or gold in a furnace, with a sweet scent like frankincense. Finally the bored executioners gave up waiting and fatally stabbed him. At this a dove flew out of Polycarp's wound, along with a torrent of blood so great that it extinguished the bonfire.

The surviving account claims Irenaeus originally authored it, then his disciple Caius transcribed it, Socrates of Corinth then copied from that copy, and finally Pionius (well, really Pseudo-Pionius, a 4th century forger passing himself as Pionius) wrote from *that* copy, "carefully searched" into the matter, and somewhat redundantly, had the whole thing manifested to him by the blessed Polycarp himself "through a revelation."⁶

Clement of Rome (? – wrote c. 98-102?)

We know almost nothing about this early Roman church leader, since nearly every aspect of his life is in dispute: some say he was the fourth pope, others the second. It's claimed he was martyred in Crimea in 102, tied to a

ship's anchor and thrown overboard, though a medieval Kievian prince allegedly owned Clement's decapitated head, and earlier sources say he died peacefully of old age in Rome in 99 - or in Greece in 100. Of the numerous writings attributed to Clement, all but one have been rejected as forgeries, and it's not clear that he wrote even that single unsigned letter.

What's worse for apologists, even this letter provides no support for the Gospels. Although he is head of the leading Christian church in the world, he never refers to any Gospel, only the Old Testament and letters of Paul. Though he has plenty of perfect opportunities in his letter to give examples from Jesus' life and teachings he misses them all, and instead he offers plenty of such examples from Old Testament figures ad nauseum. Even when he talks about Jesus' death, like Paul and the epistle writers, he has no biographical information at all - he can only turn to Isaiah 53 for details. The few "teachings" from Jesus and the "Holy Spirit" he does give are evocative of the Q Gospel source, but don't quite match up with them or anything in the Gospels we have.

Second Century

Pliny the Younger / Emperor Trajan (wrote c. 112)

Pliny the Younger (not to be confused with his uncle, Pliny the Elder) was the governor of the Roman province of Bithynia, in what is northwest Turkey today. Pliny had also been a lawyer in Roman courts for several decades, then served in Rome as Praetor (the ancient equivalent of both Chief of Police and Attorney General), and then served as one of Trajan's top legal advisors for several years before he was appointed to govern Bithynia.⁷

In the year 112, he wrote to his close friend, the Emperor Trajan, for advice on how to deal with a group of accused cultists who were brought into his court. He had never dealt with this outlawed cult of Christians before, so he questioned them and tortured two female deaconesses to learn about this strange new superstition. He gave the defendants repeated chances to renounce their foreign god and offer sacrifice to the Emperor. Those that did were released and those who refused were executed. Had he done the right thing? The Emperor reassured him that he was right in executing them, but told him not to actively persecute the cult.

These letters are the first recorded instance of Romans recognizing Christianity as a new religion. While Pliny certainly talks about Christians,

briefly describing their practices and beliefs in passing, the only thing his letters tell us concerning Jesus is that 2nd century Christians in Asia Minor worshiped a god called Christ. He says nothing whatsoever that might indicate he thought their god Christ was a man named Jesus alive and kicking in Judea in the previous century.

The fact that an educated Roman governor and Consul (the highest possible office in the entire Roman Empire, short of actually being the Emperor) knows so little about Christianity that he has to conduct interrogations to get the basics proves that it was still a little known fringe movement at this time. What's more, Trajan's reply mentions no trial precedents or decrees against Christians, highlighting the fact that no trial records existed in Roman archives for famous Christians like Jesus, Peter or Paul. If there had been, Pliny would not had to go into detail describing the trials he conducted. ⁸

Tacitus (c. 55 - after 117)

Cornelius Tacitus is remembered first and foremost as Rome's greatest historian, but he is beloved by apologists for making mention of Christ. Here's the well-worn passage found in the fifteenth volume of his *Annals*. Tacitus is describing an incident in the reign of Nero: His scapegoating of Christians for the fire that destroyed two-thirds of Rome in 64 C.E.:

"In order to put an end to this rumor, therefore, Nero laid the blame on and visited with severe punishment those men, hateful for their crimes, whom the people called Christians. He from whom the name was derived, Christus, was put to death by the procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius. But the pernicious superstition, checked for a moment, broke out again, not only in Judea, the native land of the monstrosity, but also in Rome, to which all conceivable horrors and abominations flow from every side, and find supporters..." (*Annals 15*, ch. 44)

Is this reliable evidence for Jesus? Clearly not - Tacitus is not even claiming to be quoting any 80-year-old firsthand historical accounts of "Christus." He is simply giving a quick thumbnail sketch of these cultist's beliefs in passing while discussing something else, repeating the same legends every second-century Christian was taught. By this time well into the second century, any Christian-on-the-street "knew" that Christ had been crucified under Pilate.

There is further proof that this does not originally stem from some eyewitness report. We know the Romans did not keep exhaustive records of the countless crucifixions they carried out throughout the empire - let alone records going back nearly a century before. So where would Tacitus have looked? Richard Carrier notes that it's inconceivable that any archival records on Jesus existed in Tacitus' day for many reasons, not the least of which being that Rome's capitol had burned to the ground more than once in the interim.

Even if such an animal *had* ever existed, it's even less conceivable that he would have bothered to go on such a wild goose chase – rifling through a century's worth of records, literally tens of thousands of barely legible documents – just for this casual mention.⁹ It would simply be too easy to just ask a Christian or a colleague, like his close friend Pliny the Younger (he could even have very likely gotten his information from Pliny, from the very same interrogation Pliny mentioned in his letter to Trajan; see above).

Again, considering how the Church latched onto a bit of writing like this and preserved it as evidence for Christ merely because of an incidental mention, think of how they would have gone absolutely gangbusters over anything that Pontius Pilate himself had written that specifically talked about Jesus! So we can rest assured that there aren't any reports from Pilate that have been overlooked for the last 2000 years.


And would even a hypothetical Roman record ever really have said “Christus” (in other words, “the Messiah”!) was executed instead of Jesus Ben Joseph of Nazareth”, or at least the Latin equivalent? “Christ” is the Greek translation of a Jewish religious title, not the surname of a condemned criminal. To suggest that “Christus” would have been the name found on a Roman police report is ridiculous.

LSEP **Suetonius (c. 75-160?)**

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus was a Roman administrator, historian and secretary to the Emperor Hadrian, best known for writing the respected “Lives of the First Twelve Caesars.” Though he never makes any reference to Jesus, he is commonly touted as a historical witness for Christ, because of a single line written about the year 120, in his biography of the Emperor Claudius:

LSEP "As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he (Claudius) expelled them from Rome." (*Life of Claudius* 25.4)

First, it should be obvious that since the expulsion in question took place in Rome around 49-50 (according to Peakes Commentary of the Bible), it's clear that this rabble-rouser Chrestus who was instigating the Jews in Rome's Jewish ghetto at that time wasn't Jesus! But some wishful thinkers love to make the unsupported claim that what Suetonius *really* meant to say was Christ or Christus. But is Chrestus a misspelling of Christ? No. "Chrestus" is the Latin form of the Greek name *Chrestos*, meaning "Good." In fact, Chrestus was a very common name in Rome, especially for hard-working slaves. Archeologists have found the name more than eighty times in Roman inscriptions.¹⁰ But besides all this, it is perfectly obvious Suetonius both knew how to spell "Christ" and didn't confuse Christians with Jews because he specifically mentions Christians - not "Chrestians!" - by name in another passage. He tells us, during the reign of Nero (54-68 AD):

 ...punishments were also inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief." (*Lives of the Caesars* 26.2)

So we find that the first alleged reference does not refer to a historic Jesus at all, and the second reference is concerning Christians, not Christ. No one disputes the existence of Christians. Unsurprisingly, even most Christian theologians today have no trouble freely admitting that Suetonius is not a witness of a historical Jesus.

Mid to Late Second Century

Justin Martyr (c. 114 - 167)

Justin (also Justin the Martyr, Justin of Caesarea, Justin the Philosopher) was the first great Christian apologist, writing more than a century after the alleged time of Jesus. He is the first to make identifiable quotes from the Gospels (and to say so) though he calls them "memoirs of the apostles" and never says who their authors are.¹¹ Oddly, he never quotes or even mentions any Epistles, though he does refer to Revelation and quotes a great deal of additional oral tradition, such as the belief that Jesus was born in a cave outside Bethlehem (*Dialogue with Trypho* 78.5).¹²

Though he's a century too late to be an eyewitness himself, apologists cite him thanks to his letter addressed to the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius. (Not that the emperor ever knew this; addressing a letter to the emperor was a common writer's ploy to make their work sound prestigious). In it he refers

to two alleged “proofs” of Jesus, a testimony of Pontius Pilate and the tax records of Quirinius. Jeffery Jay Lowder has pointed out serious problems with Justin's references.

First, like many early Church fathers, Justin Martyr was not known for his meticulous historical accuracy. He makes incorrect statements, due to both honest mistakes and deliberate dishonesty. In similar cases he has been caught referring to documents which supposedly support his exaggerated claims, but actually do not.¹³ In another example, while trying to argue that the Old Testament prophesied about Jesus, he beefed up his list of “proof texts” with fictitious examples and then said with a straight face that “with our own eyes we see these things having happened and happening as was prophesied.”¹⁴

Second, it appears neither source ever existed except in his imagination. It is preposterous for Justin to imply that he had examined the 150-year-old tax schedules for Quirinius. But even if the archives *had* bothered to preserve them for a century and a half, and they had somehow miraculously managed to survive the archives being burned to the ground at least twice, there is still no chance that Joseph’s name would have appeared on them: the fact is that while the kingdoms of Judea, Samaria and Idumea were subject to the tax, the independent province of Galilee was not.¹⁵

For the reasons noted for Pliny and Tacitus and above, it is just as ridiculous to suggest that there might have been any sort of official report of Jesus’ trial from Pilate in the Roman archives. There is simply no evidence that dime-a-dozen criminal trials and crucifixions in occupied Judea were ever reported to Rome in the first place, let alone lovingly detailed accounts of any particular execution.¹⁶ Considering Justin's unreliable handling of historical facts, he was either bluffing or naively just *assumed* that such documents must exist.

There’s a third possibility: Justin calls his alleged source “The Acts of Pontius Pilate” which sounds like the title of a Christian writing, not a Roman report. Could it simply have been yet another Christian forgery? In the 4th century both Christians and pagans wrote competing *Acts of Pilate*, neither one particularly believable. A Christian scribe also wrote a “Report of Pilate to the Emperor Claudius,”¹⁷ possibly as early as the second century, but it is too brief to be the one Justin refers to. Still, there may have been an early Christian piece of bogus Pilate literature that Justin had in mind (assuming he was telling the truth in the first place).

Ironically enough, though Justin doesn't make a very good historical witness for Christ, he does inadvertently provide strong evidence *against* the historic Jesus. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, he repeats some of the common arguments of his critics – and shows that there were pagans and Jews who openly doubted Jesus had existed at all. His opponent is blunt:

“But Christ – if He has indeed been born, and exists anywhere – is unknown, and does not even know himself, and has no power until Elias comes to anoint him, and make him manifest to all. And you, having accepted a groundless report, invent a Christ for yourselves, and for his sake are inconsiderately perishing.”

(Dialogue with Trypho, Dialogue 8)

Justin harrumphs in response that he will prove that Christians “have not believed empty fables, or words without any foundation but words filled with the Spirit of God, and big with power, and flourishing with grace” (Dialogue 9). At this the onlookers break into roaring laughter and shout “in an unseemly manner.” Justin fumes and starts to storm off, and is only persuaded to stay when they promise not to mock him any further.

Justin's quotes in the mid second century reveal the late evolution of the gospels, which were then apparently still anonymous. He also backhandedly underscores the influence of pagan religion when he attempts to explain away embarrassing parallels between the Mystery Faiths and Christ story by saying wicked demons anticipated Christianity and inspired all the heathen religions to copy it preemptively

Thallus and Phlegon of Tralles (c. mid 2nd Century?)

Apologists claim **Thallus** is a pagan eyewitness for the supernatural darkness said to accompany Christ's resurrection. However, we know almost nothing about this writer. Who he was, what he wrote and when he lived are all mysteries. Every scrap that can be gleaned comes from a tortured chain of Christian sources - and does not support apologists' claims.

Historical opinion says Thallus most likely wrote in the 2nd century. The first mention of him is by Theophilus, c. 180 AD. In the 9th century, a Byzantine monk named George Syncellus quoted a 3rd century Christian historian, Julian Africanus. Julian Africanus is said to have disagreed with Thallus because the pagan writer claimed that the darkness mentioned in

Matthew's Gospel was simply an eclipse. Now, it isn't even clear what exactly Thallus actually wrote, what time frame he was referring to, or whether he even mentioned Jesus at all. Neither any of his or Africanus' works survive to check.

All that said, one thing is sure: Julian Africanus was right that the darkness in the Gospel accounts can't be explained as an eclipse, since Passover happens during a full moon, when an eclipse would've been impossible. Of course, the darkness also is said to have lasted three hours, and covered the entire world(!), which would also put the kibosh on any eclipse theory. So why is anyone still claiming any of this as a witness for Jesus in the first place?

And as we mentioned previously, nobody besides the author of Matthew seems to have noticed this impossible phenomenon - not the Greeks, the Jews, the Persians, the Chinese - not even the other Gospel writers! All of which doesn't inspire much confidence in this particular supernatural wonder. Which shouldn't be all that surprising: in the Mediterranean world, eclipses at a king's death were a common legendary feature, and philosophers believed that earthquakes accompanied them. We have hundreds of examples of ancient chroniclers playing fast-and-loose with the dates of eclipses in order to associate them with important occasions, or simply inserting imaginary ones.

Another potential eyewitness proffered by apologists is the pagan historian **Phlegon of Tralles** (Tralles was a town in Asia Minor, near Aydin in southwest Turkey today). In that very same passage mentioning Thallus, Julian Africanus (again, according to 9th century Byzantine monk George Syncellus) goes on to allude to Phlegon:

[L
SEP]“Phlegon reports that in the time of Tiberius Caesar, during the full moon, a full eclipse of the sun happened, from the sixth hour until the ninth. Clearly this is our eclipse!”

Some points worth mentioning: we know that Phlegon wrote in the mid-second century (c.140's C.E.) so first of all he was not an eyewitness. Secondly, he was a collector of far-fetched stories; he happily reported uncritically on every bizarre oddity he could find – sideshow subjects such as mythical beasts, hermaphrodites, and ghost stories, so he's not exactly the best source for accurate meteorological reporting. It's extremely likely that he was doing nothing more than repeating second-century Christian hearsay

anyway.

And did Phlegon even say what Julian claimed he did in the first place? When Eusebius gives a verbatim quotation of Phlegon, we hear something quite different:

[L
SEP]“In fact, Phlegon, too, a distinguished reckoner of Olympiads, wrote more on these events in his 13th book, saying this: ‘Now, in the fourth year of the 202nd Olympiad (32 C.E.), a great eclipse of the sun occurred at the sixth hour (noon) that excelled every other before it, turning the day into such darkness of night that the stars could be seen in Heaven, and the earth moved in Bithynia, toppling many buildings in the city of Nicaea.’”

As we can see, he says absolutely nothing of Jesus, nor that the eclipse took place during a full moon, nor that it lasted three hours, nor that it occurred in Jerusalem, nor that it occurred during 33 C.E., the alleged year of Jesus’ crucifixion - all of which Julian attributes to him!

Nor can it be said to corroborate the Gospel’s earthquake at Jesus’ tomb: even if one could take the liberty of assuming this occurred at just the right time for the crucifixion - both Bithynia and Nicaea were over 600 miles away in Asia Minor! If there is such clear documentation for earthquakes in this period, then why is there no record of any “mighty earthquake” hitting Jerusalem to back up the claim of Matthew’s Gospel?

Though then again, no one seemed to notice any of the other supernatural things Matthew says occurred then, such as the Angel of the Lord blazing down from Heaven to roll away the stone and incapacitate the Roman Guard at the Tomb with sheer terror, or all those dead holy people emerging from the cemetery and strolling around downtown Jerusalem...

If anyone is still dying to investigate the matter further, Richard Carrier gives a thorough examination of both Thallus and Phlegon in his essay “Thallus: an Analysis” which can be found online at:

www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/thallus.html

[L SEP] **Lucian of Samosata (c.125-180 C.E.)**

Lucian was the Mark Twain, Jules Verne and James Randi of the second century all rolled into one. Brilliant and sarcastic, he studied rhetoric to be a courtroom advocate, but after practicing law in Antioch for a time he gave it up in favor of his true calling: to travel extensively throughout the empire - Asia Minor, Greece, Italy and even Gaul - giving improvisational comic

lectures as he went along, and winning fame and fortune. He was also a popular novelist, one of the first in western history. He wrote wildly imaginative tales like the first science fiction novel, *A True Story*. In it adventurers sail beyond the Pillars of Hercules only to be caught up in a giant waterspout and dumped on the Moon, where they quickly find themselves in a war of the worlds between Endymion, the king of the Moon and Phaethon, the king of the Sun, over colonization rights to Jupiter (no joke!).

Plato's *Symposium* is a philosophical discourse set at a dinner; in Lucian's *Symposium*, the diners get drunk, tell dirty stories and behave badly. In other works he gleefully took on the Greek pantheon and the mortals who love them (*Dialogues of the Gods*), the afterlife (*Dialogues of the Dead*), and pointed out the ineptitude of certain contemporary philosophers (*The Sale of Lives*). He also wrote a scathing expose on Alexander of Abonutichus, a sham cult leader who convinced his flock that a trained snake with a puppet head (complete with blond hair) was the Macedonian serpent god "Glycon."

He also turned his attention to Christians. In the *Passing of Peregrinus* he gives the dirt behind a well-known Cynic philosopher-turned-Christian named Proteus Peregrinus (who is mentioned with respect by a number of ancient writers). After a series of misadventures (being caught in adultery and fleeing the scene naked with a radish sticking out of his rear end; corrupting a handsome boy and bribing his parents to avoid charges; strangling his father to death) he went into exile and wandered from one country after another:

"During this period he apprenticed himself to the priests and scribes of the Christians in Palestine and became an expert in that astonishing religion they have. Naturally, in no time at all, he had them looking like babies and had become their prophet, leader, head of the synagogue and whatnot, all by himself. He expounded and commented on their sacred writings and even authored a number himself. They looked up to him as a god, made him their lawgiver, and put his name down as official patron of the sect, or at least vice-patron, second to **that man they still worship today, the one who was crucified in Palestine because he brought this new cult into being.**"¹⁸

Before he is spotted eating at a pagan sacred banquet and finally kicked out, he is able to live very well by lucratively milking his Christian flock. Lucian notes that Christians are a con artist's dream come true: zealous, credulous and easy marks: "If any charlatan and trickster, able to profit by

occasions, comes among them, he quickly acquires sudden wealth by imposing upon simple folk.”¹⁹ Of their legendary founder, Lucian adds “**it was impressed on them by their original law giver that they are all brothers, from the moment they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws.**” He also remarks disapprovingly that “the poor wretches” take all this on faith, “receiving such doctrines traditionally without any definite evidence.”

These two bare remarks are all there is all to Lucian’s “witness” of “that crucified guy the Christians worship.” He clearly only knows this founder by hearsay, not to mention being a little fuzzy on the details of both him and his fringe cult. And this backhanded testimony makes more trouble for Christians than it solves.

First of all, how desperate for historical verification do you have to be if you’re forced to scrape from the idle banter of a comedian 150 years after the fact? All the historians ignored Jesus, but a Roman era Jerry Seinfeld is supposed to have researched and vouchsafed the matter for us? Lucian himself makes no claim that he guarantees the veracity of this information; quite the opposite, in fact – he tells us the Christians get their doctrines handed down to them and accept them with no evidence whatsoever.

But though he’s not offering evidence for a historical Christ, he *is* offering testimony Christians today don’t want to hear: that even in ancient times Christians were considered ready-to-fleece simpletons, and worse, this rascal Peregrinus is the real author of a number of Christian scriptures! (A shocking charge, but it *would* explain why there are so many Cynic influences in the Gospels...)

It’s a shame that Lucian could not have foreseen that nearly two millennia later modern descendants of Peregrinus’ gullible flock would be using *him* as a “historical witness” to their disputed founder. Though would he have laughed or cried?

Third Century

Tertullian (c. 155 – 230)

Tertullian (a.k.a. Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus) is also far too late to be an eyewitness, and is dependent on the Gospels for everything he knows about Jesus. But he makes two absurd claims that should be mentioned, since even today apologists still parrot them as fact. The first is

that the Roman emperor Tiberius received intelligence from Palestine that convinced him the Christ was the one true God, and brought the matter before the senate with a motion that they make Jesus an official Roman deity.

“Tiberius, in whose time the Christian name first made its appearance in the world, laid before the Senate tidings from Syria Palestina which had revealed to him the truth of the divinity there manifested, and supported the motion by his own vote to begin with. The Senate rejected it because it had not itself given its approval. Caesar held to his own opinion and threatened danger to the accusers of the Christians.”

(Apology ch. 5)

Though Tertullian advises his Roman readers “Consult your histories!” this story he trumpets so confidently is absolute nonsense. Obviously, if the Roman emperor and Pontifex Maximus, high priest of Jupiter, had suddenly renounced the protection of the gods of Rome and converted to an obscure foreign cult, it would have been the most significant event in Roman history

20

Even conservative evangelical historian F. F. Bruce has to smile when he writes “It would no doubt be pleasant if we could believe this story of Tertullian, which he manifestly believed to be true, but a story so inherently improbable and inconsistent with what we know of Tiberius, related nearly 170 years after the event, does not commend itself to a historian's judgment.”

21

The Palestinian intelligence that allegedly converted Tiberius came from the Roman Governor Pilate, of course. Tertullian's second howler appears later in the same book, after he tells his Roman readers that the account of the worldwide darkness at the Crucifixion can be found in the Roman archives (a blatant lie), and the fact of Jesus being “encompassed with a cloud and taken up to Heaven” was far more certain than the identical assertions they made about their savior Romulus.

He adds that after Jesus' death Pilate immediately became a Christian and sent word to Tiberius Caesar. He assures us “Yes, and the Caesars too would have believed on Christ, if either the Caesars had not been necessary for the world, or if Christians could have been Caesars.”²²

It's uncertain whether Tertullian is just making up his facts again or if he was relying on a Christian “Acts of Pilate” like Justin Martyr may have. Needless to say, the real Pontius Pilate - hated, cruel, and bloody - never had

a life-changing experience as Governor. He continued to rule Judea with an iron hand, arresting and executing Jews without trial, antagonizing the populace, outraging the Jewish leadership, and ordering the occasional massacre until finally complaints of one massacre too many reached the Roman legate of Syria and led to his recall to Rome to answer for his crimes. He disappears from the historical record after this, strongly suggesting he was either executed or exiled.²³

Pesky historical facts like this did not stop later Christians from writing a variety of fanciful medieval accounts of Pontius Pilate's rehabilitation and conversion, even his sainthood (!). Alternately, there are tales of his guilt, remorse, and subsequent suicide or ignoble execution; even ghost stories where he rises every good Friday and washes his hands in vain.

Honorable Mentions:

Some amateur apologists are willing to drag out the name of any early Christian they can come across and cite them as a eyewitness for Jesus, no matter if they lived hundreds of years too late to know if Jesus was real or not. The fact that some of them died for their beliefs is often held up as proof of the existence of Jesus. Of course, every religion has martyrs, so this is hardly unique to Christianity. Throughout history, even today, people continue to die and kill for ideas that others find bizarre.

But more to the point, even though a few of these did die for their beliefs, none of these second century (or later!) martyrs cited was in any position to know if Jesus existed or not. They were in the same boat as we are now: all born after the alleged time of Christ and dependant on the Gospels for both their knowledge of Jesus, and their faith. These include:

Hegesippus – Jewish convert (c. 110 – c. 180)

Clement of Alexandria (Titus Flavius Clemens) – Theologian (c.150 - 211/216)

Hippolytus – Antipope (d. 235)

Irenaeus - Theologian (late 2nd century)

Origen –Theologian (c. 185–c. 254)

Cyprian of Carthage – Theologian (d. 258)

Eusebius – Infamous historian (c. 275 – May 30, 339)

A few others are worth mentioning:

Quadratus

A second century Bishop of Athens said to be the first Christian apologist. In a defense of Christianity written around the year 124, he notoriously says some of those healed and raised from the dead by Jesus were still alive – nearly a century later! Eusebius called him a "man of understanding and of apostolic faith" and declared, falsely, that Quadratus' writing moved the emperor Hadrian to issue a favorable edict towards Christians. A generation later Jerome took Eusebius' description and improved on it, now saying (also falsely) that Quadratus was a personal disciple of the Apostles and freely embellishing on the sparse information given by Eusebius.

Aristides

Another second century Athenian Christian who wrote an apologetic of his own. Eusebius said that both Quadratus and Aristides delivered their apologies together to the Emperor Hadrian while he was in Athens. But few if any historians believe Eusebius' highly doubtful claim, since Hadrian was a lifelong Epicurean, in Greece to participate in the Eleusinian Mysteries (and probably accompanied by his young lover Antoninus). The only other notable feature of Aristides apology is that it contradicts our Gospels by saying that the Jews, not the Romans, crucified Jesus.

Mara Bar-Serapion (c. unknown, dates range from 73 C.E. to 300 C.E.)

This letter is one of the stranger choices to pick as historical documentation for Christ for several reasons, as we'll soon see. Mara, son of Serapion was a Syrian who wrote a letter to his son while he was in prison for unknown charges. Some think he may have been a Stoic philosopher. That is about the extent of what anyone knows for sure about him. When he wrote the letter in question is anybody's guess, though because he mentions the Jews being expelled from their kingdom, it's believed he wrote sometime

after the Jewish–Roman war ended in 70 C.E. His letter is generally dated sometime in the second or even the third century.

The fact that Mara Bar Serapion certainly could not have been a contemporary of Jesus is one thing everyone seems to agree on, so we can rule him right out as an eyewitness (not that he even claimed to be). When you actually read the letter, you wonder why anyone gets worked up over it at all. Here’s the section of the letter that some apologists have tried to say refers to Jesus:

[SEP]“For what benefit did the Athenians obtain by putting Socrates to death, seeing that they received as retribution for it famine and pestilence? Or the people of Samos by the burning of Pythagoras, seeing that in one hour the whole of their country was covered with sand? Or the Jews by the murder of their wise king, seeing that from that very time their kingdom was driven away from them? For with justice did God grant a recompense to the wisdom of all three of them. For the Athenians died by famine; and the people of Samos were covered by the sea without remedy; and the Jews, brought to desolation and expelled from their kingdom, are driven away into every land. Nay, Socrates did "not" die, because of Plato; nor yet Pythagoras, because of the statue of Hera; nor yet the wise king, because of the new laws which he enacted.”

-A letter of Mara, Son of Serapion
(Roberts-Donaldson English Translation)

First of all, we must ask: *What the hell is he talking about?* Athens didn’t suffer any famine or pestilence after Socrates’ death. Pythagoras was never burned by the people of Samos; he left it in 530 B.C.E. and had a long life afterwards in the Greek colonies of Croton and Metapontum in what is now Italy. Likewise, the island of Samos was never “covered with sand” or “with the sea” - in an hour or otherwise. And what does he mean when he says Pythagoras did not die “because of the statue of Hera”? None of the “facts” given in this passage are correct, and some are completely baffling!

Secondly, there are still more pressing difficulties for anyone claiming this letter as reliable historic testimony. Where is any indication that this “Wise King” who “enacted new laws” is Jesus? Not only does Bar-Serapion *not* mention Jesus by name, he is talking about figures - Socrates and Pythagoras - who lived 500-600 years before. Bar-Serapion could even more

plausibly be referring to some King of that period (when there actually *were* Kings of Israel!) and when the kingdom quite literally was abolished, brought to desolation and the Jews expelled into Babylonian captivity!

As Farrell Till, editor of the Secular Web so aptly notes, this is far from the only possibility: one could just as easily assume that Mara Bar-Serapion was referring to the Essene "Teacher of Righteousness," who was often mentioned in the Dead Sea scrolls found at Qumran as a messianic figure who suffered vicariously for the people. Since Essene teachings were widely circulated before and after the time Jesus allegedly lived, one could argue that this teacher lived on in the teaching which he had given.

The point is that Mara Bar-Serapion simply did not identify the "wise king" whom the Jews had "executed," and in the absence of that information, one can only guess who this was supposed to be. Yet again we have a document touted by fundamentalists as proof positive for the historic Jesus that turns out to have no details at all, and in this case bizarre nonsensical content without even any evidence that Jesus is the subject being discussed in the first place!

These are all we have. Despite the best efforts of Christian apologists, there simply are no historical "witnesses" for Jesus for the first three hundred years of Christianity.

Endnotes

MYTH No. 1: The idea that Jesus was a myth is ridiculous!

1. Carrier, S&Gw/oG, pp. 242 – 244. All material used with permission from the author.

MYTH No. 2: Jesus was wildly famous – but ...

1. Augustine, City of God, Book 6, Ch. 10.12

2. Zindler, TJTJNK, p.18

3. *Talmud Sanhedrin* 43a

4. *ibid*

5. Zindler, *op. cit.*, p. 241

6. Augustine, *op. cit.*, Book 6, Ch. 11

7. Swan, p.188, pp.36-38

8. R. Drews, pp. 112-22

9. Eunapius, p. 553

MYTH No. 3: Ancient historian Josephus wrote about Jesus

1. "Testimonies of the Ancients Against Eusebius," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*

2. Burckhardt, Jacob, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, Dorset Press, 1949, p. 283

3. Metzger, *Canon*, p.202

4. Eusebius *E.H.*, book VIII, ch. 13-14; see also 10.8.8 and 9.9.1

5. Fox, p. 616

6. Odahl, "Eusebius of Caesarea"

7. Carrier, FotNTC, section III, note #6

8. Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.200

MYTH No. 4: Eyewitnesses wrote the Gospels

1. Metzger, *Canon*, pp. 42-43

2. *ibid*, pp. 41-42

3. *ibid*, pp. 44-49

4. Carr, "Are the Gospels Eyewitness Accounts?"

5. Wilson, p. 251

6. For more discussion of Jesus as a failed prophet, see Loftus, ch. 12, pp.316-43

7. Anchor Bible Dictionary, v. 3, pp. 919-920. Besides the Naassene Fragment quoted by Hippolytus (Ref. 5.7.2-9) c.120-140, there are also Valentinian texts cited in Clement of Alexandria's *Excerpta ex Theodotou* c. 140-160, a Valentinian Exposition to the Prologue of the Gospel of John quoted in Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.*1.8.5-6) c. 140-160, and the commentary of Heracleon on John c. 150-180, quoted in Origen's own commentary.

8. Price, ISSOM, p. 158

MYTH No. 5: The Gospels give a consistent picture of Jesus

1. Ehrman, *Orthodox CoS*, pp.187- 94

2. Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible, "John, Gospel of," p. 724

3. Macabi, Tom, "Anti-Semitism in John's Gospel" in Kimel

4. *ibid*

5. Eerdman's Dictionary, *op. cit.*

6. Doherty, JP, p. 243

7. *ibid*, p. 244

8. Eerdman's Dictionary, op. cit.
9. Doherty, op. cit.
10. Filson, T.V., "The Literary Relations among the Gospels," essay in Laymon, "The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible"

11. Price, ISSOM, p. 150
12. Winter, p. 154

MYTH No. 6: History confirms the Gospels

1. Price, ISSOM, p. 251
2. Wells, HEJ, p. 14
3. Cohn, p. 98. For multiple examples, see also pp. 112-13
4. *ibid*, p. 132
5. Maccoby, pp. 26-27
6. *ibid*, p. 23
7. *Legatio ad Gaium* 301, cited in Cohn, p.15 note 46
8. Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible, p. 1058
9. Cohn, p.17
10. *ibid*, citing Blinzler, *Der Prozess Jesu*, pp.35-36
11. *ibid*, p. 16
12. *ibid*, p. 31
13. *ibid*, p. 109
14. *ibid*, p. 147
15. *ibid*, p. 150
16. Price, op. cit., p. 313
17. Winter, p.131
18. Maccoby, *ibid*
19. Origen recorded this; he was troubled to find references to "Jesus Barabbas" in Syriac manuscripts (the Sinaitic Palimpsest and the Palestinian Syriac lectionaries). Even though he knew Jesus was a common Aramaic name, he thought it was unseemly to have Jesus the "Son of God" share a prison with a sinner called Jesus "Son of the Father." The New English Bible and the Scholar's Version (*The Complete Gospels*, Robert J. Miller, ed. Sonoma, Calif.: Polebridge Press, 1992) both now contain *Jesus Barabbas* in their translations. *Sources*: For the Sinaitic Palimpsest, Saint Catherine's Monastery: *Evangelion da-Mepharreshe*. F.C. Burkitt, ed. 2 vols. Cambridge, 1904; other Syriac manuscripts: Monastery at Koridethi in the Caucasus: "The Text of the Gospels and the Koridethi Text," *Harvard Theological Review* 16: 1923, pp. 267- 86; "Codex 1 of the Gospels and its Allies," *Texts*

and *Studies* 7(3): 1902.

20. “The Empty Tomb: Richard Carrier’s Reply to Stephen Davis” [http://theemptytomb.googlepages.com/Carrier — ReplyToDavis.html](http://theemptytomb.googlepages.com/Carrier—ReplyToDavis.html). See also: Loftus, p. 303; and Jennifer Mclean, “Barabbas, the Scapegoat Ritual, and the Development of the Passion Narrative,” *Harvard Theological Review* 100, no.3 (July 2007): pp. 309-34.

MYTH No. 7: Archeology confirms the Gospels

1. Maccoby, p. 42
2. Hegesippus, quoted by Eusebius, *Hist. Ecl.* 4.22.7; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 80
3. Carr, “Are the Gospels Eyewitness Accounts?”
4. *ibid*
5. Safrai, “Gergesa, Gerasa, or Gadara?”
6. Price ISSOM, p. 327
7. Richard Carrier, e-mail to the author, 8/10/10
8. Gamble, chapter 3
9. Ehrman, MJ, p. 207
10. *Interpreter's Dictionary Of The Bible*, vol. 4 p. 595
11. Ehrman, *op. cit.*, p. 10
12. Ehrman, OCS, note 124, p. 46
13. Ehrman, MJ, pp. 207-8
14. *ibid*, p. 208
15. *ibid*
16. Ehrman, LC, p. 10
17. *ibid*
18. *ibid*, p. 32
19. Cited in Ehrman, MJ, p. 53
20. Quoted in *Contra Celsum* 2.27
21. *ibid*
22. Origen, *Comentary on Matthew* 15.14; cited in Ehrman, *op. cit.*, p. 52
23. Ehrman, *op. cit.*, p. 53
24. Strobel, *Christ*, pp. 75-78
25. *ibid*, p. 78
26. *ibid*, p. 76
27. Metzger, *Text*, p. 42
28. Price, ISSOM, p. 34 and Wilson, p.251
29. Doland, section 2, “Challenge No. 2”

30. See Ehrman's *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*

31. For more on the dating, multiple layers and historicity of Homer, see: Nagy, *Homeric Questions* (1996) and Davison, *The Homeric Question, A Companion to Homer* (1962)

32. Strobel, op. cit., p. 76

33. *ibid*, p. 81

34. See Comfort & Barrett for photos and complete texts of the NT mss. up to the end of the 3rd century.

35. Carrier, "Two Examples of Faulty Bible Scholarship," www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/bible.html)

36. For examples, see Finkelstein & Silberman, pp. 10-13

37. Strobel, op. cit., p. 76

38. Doherty, CTV, pp. 40-41

39. R. M. Grant, pp. 20-34

40. Blomberg, pp. 240-54

41. Carrier, DJE

42. Ehrman, op. cit., p. 209

MYTH No. 8: Paul and the Epistles corroborate the Gospels

1. Doherty, JP, p. 16. I am indebted to Earl Doherty's *Jesus Puzzle* for nearly all the content of this section.

2. *ibid*, p. 27

3. *ibid*, p. 64

4. Maccoby, p. 116

5. Doherty, op. cit., p. 110

6. Price, DJ, p. 88

7. *ibid*

8. Ehrman J:APNM, p. 249

9. Wells, DJE, p. 25

10. Doherty, op. cit., pp. 111-12

11. Examples of usage of *paradidomi*: Richard Carrier, e-mail to the author 4/11/06; also John P. Meier, "The Circle of the Twelve: Did it Exist During Jesus' Public Ministry?" *JBL*, 116/4, 1997, pp. 663-4, note 70. *Paradidomi* as harvested: 1 Corinthians Commentary, www.preceptaustin.org/1corinthians_1535.htm

12. Price, ISSOM, p. 298

13. *ibid*

14. *ibid*, p. 297
15. *ibid*
16. Mack, WWTNT?, p. 102
17. Doherty, *op. cit.*, p. 73
18. *ibid*, p. 75
19. *ibid*, p. 24
20. Doherty, CTV, note #85 pp. 252-3
21. *ibid*
22. Dead Sea Scroll 1QS, Community Rule 8.1-4
23. Price, ISSOM, p. 344
24. Carrier, SBOC in ET, p. 192
25. Price, *op. cit.*, p.183

MYTH No. 9: Christianity began with Jesus and his apostles

1. Doherty, JP, p. 272
2. Price, DJ, pp. 265- 66
3. *ibid*, p. 23
4. Doherty, *op. cit.*, p.128
5. Price, ISSOM, p. 186
6. Christ as Helios: Mosaic in Mausoleum of the *Julii*, St. Peter's, Rome (mausoleum M)
7. Price, *op. cit.*, p. 352
8. Price, DJ, p. 85
9. Couchoud (Bonner trans.), cited in Price, ISSOM, p. 355
10. Arnold Ehrhardt, "Emmaus, Romulus und Apollonius," in *Mullus: Festschrift Theodor Klauser*, eds. Alfred Stuiber and Alfred Hermann (Münster, Westfalen: Aschendorff, 1964), pp. 93-99; Thomas Brodie, *The Birthing of the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2004); Carrier, ET, pp.155-65 and NIF pp. 297-321; Randel Helms, *Gospel Fictions* (Amherst, NY; Prometheus Books, 1988); Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2000); Jennifer Maclean, "Barabbas, the Scapegoat Ritual, and the Development of the Passion Narrative," *Harvard Theological Review* (July 2007), pp. 309-34.

MYTH No. 10: Christianity was a totally new and different miraculous overnight success that changed the world!

1. Price, DJ, p. 88. See also Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *The Riddle of*

Resurrection: "Dying and Rising Gods" in the Ancient Near East, Coronet books, 2001

2. Ehrman, LC, pp. 4-5

3. Carrier, NTIF, p. 409

4. *ibid*, p. 420

5. *ibid*

6. OCD, "Pliny (2) the Younger," p. 1198. That Pliny had already served as governor of Bithynia for well over a year: Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.15, 10.17b, and 10.88.

7. Carrier, *op cit.*, p. 421

8. Keith Hopkins, "Christian Number and Its Implications," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6.2 (1998), pp. 185-226

9. Carrier, *op. cit.*, pp. 425-26

10. Fox, p. 269

11. Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.69

12. Carrier, *op. cit.*, pp. 428-29

13. John B. Buescher, *The Other Side of Salvation: Spiritualism and the Nineteenth-Century Religious Experience*, Skinner House, 2004

14. Carrier, *op. cit.*, p. 409

15. Carrier, *op. cit.*, p. 435; see also note #32 on p. 447

16. See Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians*, also *Magnesians* 6, *Trallians* 4 & 9, *Romans* 4 & 7; *Smyrnaeans* 6-7

17. Carrier, *op. cit.*, p. 439

Conclusion: Can Jesus be saved?

1. Price, ISSOM, p. 354

2. For plentiful examples of rabbinic parallels, see Price, DJ, pp. 253-57

Appendix: Apologist Sources

1. Mueller

2. Kummel, p. 240

3. Hopkins, AWFOG, p. 117

4. *ibid*, p. 112

5. *ibid*, pp. 112-14

6. *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, ch. 15-16, 22

7. OCD, "Pliny (2) the Younger," p. 1198

8. I owe this point to Richard Carrier

9. Carrier, DJE

10. K. Linck, *De antiquissimis quae ad Jesum Nazarenum spectant testimoniis*, Giessen, 1913, quoted in Goguel
11. Doherty, JP, p. 259
12. Carrier, FTNC
13. Lowder
14. Grant, *G&RH:I&M*, p. 14
15. Lowder
16. *ibid*
17. Quasten, p. 116
18. Casson, p. 368
19. *ibid*
20. I owe this point to Richard Carrier
21. F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*
Cited in Kirby
22. Tertullian, *Apology*, ch. 21
23. Cohn, T&DofJ, p.16

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-DF

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