

Ten Beautiful Lies About Jesus

How the myths Christians tell
about Jesus Christ suggest
Jesus never existed at all

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Myth No. 1: The idea that Jesus was a myth is ridiculous!

Most people have never heard of the ancient Greek mythographer Euhemerus; and 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 one finds; and the more one finds suspicious silences and curious resemblances to the pagan and Jewish religious ideas and philosophies that preceded Christianity. And once one 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.

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 one examines 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 essay is to shed light on ten of these beloved Christian myths:

MYTH No. 1: The idea that Jesus was a myth is ridiculous!

MYTH No. 2: Jesus was wildly famous – but there was no reason for contemporary historians to notice him...

MYTH No. 3: Ancient historian Flavius Josephus wrote about Jesus

MYTH No. 4: Eyewitnesses wrote the Gospels

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

MYTH No. 6: History confirms the Gospels

MYTH No. 7: Archeology confirms the Gospels

MYTH No. 8: Paul and the Epistles corroborate the Gospels

MYTH No. 9: Christianity began with Jesus and his apostles

MYTH No. 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 construction into the familiar figure (or more truthfully, figures) of Jesus – in short, a mythic Christ. And finally, I want to briefly discuss how very differently things would be if there *had* been a historical 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 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? But for all their bluster, the truth is 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.

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 BC. 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 absolutely 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 show a regular 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 even a single historian mentions the resurrection until the 3rd and 4th centuries, and then it is only by Christian historians. Of the anonymous Gospel authors, only “Luke” even *claims* to be writing history, and none of them ever cite any other sources or show signs of a skilled or critical examination of conflicting claims, have no other literature or scholarship to their credit that we can test for their skill and accuracy, are completely unknown, and 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.

Myth No. 2: Jesus was wildly famous – but there was no reason for contemporary historians to notice him...

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?

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 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 any and all should have been noted by somebody. But curiously, absolutely 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, But Roman records show the first such universal census didn't occur until decades after this, during the reign of the emperor Vespasian in 74 CE. On top of that, Luke's census is rather suspiciously convenient and looks more like a clever plot device than a genuine historical fact.

Actually, it creates more problems than it solves: why doesn'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, it makes no sense whatsoever that he would also drag his 9-months-pregnant wife along! The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem 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.

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 BCE and the census mentioned by Luke couldn't have happened before 6 CE, 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. There is absolutely no way 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 absolutely 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, 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 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 even the son of a royal official (John 4:46-53)! In addition, he delivered many sermons to great multitudes of thousands 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 and even Rome itself? How is it that none of his astounding new teachings were recorded by anyone at the time? We have absolutely no trace or mention of Jesus' exploits anywhere until the New Testament books 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 - Jesus' tremendous popularity peaks out 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 from 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 who 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 of the Gospel's account 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. Worse, the details only make matters worse when you compare the timelines of the

Synoptic Gospels with John's; they are completely incompatible. According to Mark (and Matthew & Luke, who copy him) 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 of the Passover, the 14th of Nisan (19:14, 31, 42) To make matters still worse, all Gospels insist this happened on a Friday, too. 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, there are even more questionable New Testament examples to discuss later, 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 also 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 could never have been ignored by works like Pliny's *Natural History*, Seneca's *Natural Questions*, Ptolemy's *Almagest*, the works of Tacitus or Suetonius, and any number of other authors whose works no longer survive but who still 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 different **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. Does anyone really believe that everyone in history but Matthew simply forgot about this little incident? Of course, the final icing on the Jesus cake is his **resurrection and ascension** into Heaven in front of many witnesses. It’s strange enough to realize that such a world-altering supernatural event, 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. But it comes without a trace in the historical record for nearly a century – even only one of the four Gospel writers mentions it. Matthew 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 dependant 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?

Most 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:

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 (modern Turkey)

Origen – Christian theologian

Eusebius – Christian historian

Tertullian – (a.k.a. Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus) Christian apologist

Ignatius – Patriarch of Antioch

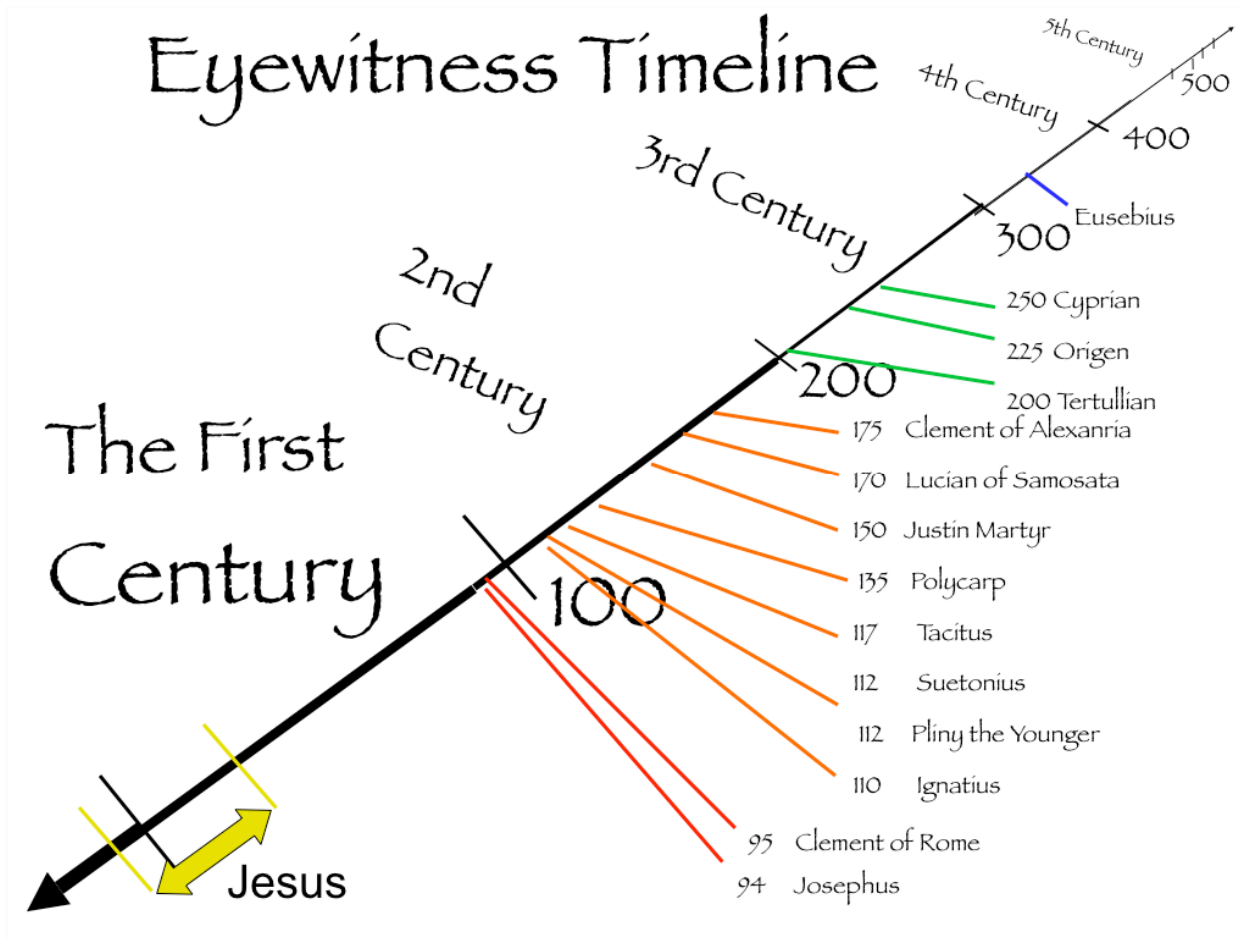
Clement of Alexandria – Christian philosopher and scholar

Hippolytus – Christian theologian and writer

Often you see some or all of this group trotted 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 the 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 BCE to 4 BCE.

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 between 4 to 8 BCE and the year 30 or 33 CE. Here’s how close the written

accounts of Jesus come to him:



As you can see, absolutely *none* of these supposed witnesses is in any position to give any 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. Still more to the point, 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 one or two that do seem to mention Christ (e.g. Tacitus, Suetonius) are just snippets that happen to repeat common Christian beliefs of their day

in passing, while actually discussing some other subject altogether, not making any pronouncements on Jesus' historicity.

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; here are still later commentators who we would expect to have mentioned Christ, but did not. An examination of all of them is outside the scope of this essay, but I do discuss all of them in my forthcoming book. For now I will briefly touch on a few of the more significant ones.

Seneca the Younger (c. 3 BCE – 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 recorded eclipses and other unusual phenomenon, 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 supposedly was spreading like wildfire across the empire. This uncomfortable fact made Augustine later 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 for the Lord they even forged a series of correspondence between Seneca and his "dearest" friend, the Apostle Paul.

Gallio (died 65 CE) 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 so interested in just this sort of thing. But Seneca shows no sign of ever having heard of Christians or Jesus at all. What's also strange is that even in Acts, Gallio has never heard of Jesus, either. 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 says. And the 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, largely the only 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's 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 BCE – early 1st century CE) 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 remain of this work, but obviously if the nativity story in Matthew had ever really happened, it is somewhat incredible that none of it would ever have been 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. And 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 BCE - c. 50) Writer, political commentator and esteemed Jewish statesman, above all Philo was 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 religion, and not afraid to talk about it. 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 spent time in Jerusalem - his family was intimately connected with the royal house of Judea. So when Jesus' fame and new philosophy had 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 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 any of these events.

And 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

Some claim that **the 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 him? He is confused with earlier figures of Jesus Pandira (mid 1st century BCE) and Jesus ben Stada (2nd century CE), 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 and 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 But perhaps there is one Jewish source that does have information about Jesus – or does he?

MYTH No. 3:

Ancient historian Flavius Josephus wrote about Jesus

To recap, there are no contemporary accounts of Christ from any source. 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 years 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 a brief but glowing summary of Jesus' miraculous career. The passage is so blatantly counterfeit that no one denies it is a later Christian forgery; the only debate is over how much of it is a forgery. 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. 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." Pardon? Another sad calamity? What sad calamity? Josephus has just given us 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. Many classical historians, including Doherty, G. A. Wells and Kirby, have noted that without the Testimonium passage, the continuity between the passages flanking it flows seamlessly into each other. This fact alone is a tremendous indication that the passage is 100%, 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 absolutely no mention of the Testimonium. Not a word. This couldn't have been simply because no one happened to read it; Josephus' histories were immensely popular and poured 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 can furnish an answer than from the Gospel narratives?" (*Contra*

Celsus, 2:33) In the same book (1.47), Origen even quoted 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 Josephus 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. And where did Eusebius get his copy of *Antiquities of the Jews*? He inherited it from his master... who inherited it from Origen! No matter how you slice it, the Testimonium sticks out like the complete fraud it is.

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 given radical new teachings. And perhaps 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 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) and his companions, and condemned them 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.█

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 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 consider 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 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 image that this was a time of Jewish persecution of Christians.

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 who 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. When I asked him about this, he explained to me 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.

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 mentioned some different Jesus out of the blue for no reason, 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 so-called 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 for the first time. 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.

When one takes 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 had both 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 - but more significantly, none of them even provide the evidence they are supposed to.

It is sobering to realize that in all of recorded history, for the first century the closest we have to historical support for the Gospel's 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 and 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.

And 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. And after all, unlike all the myriad phony healers, sham miracle-workers and failed messiahs well-documented from this time, he was supposed to be *the real thing*, the one who genuinely could do what the others could not; he even raised the dead – 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 triumphantly entered. 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 - was marked by spectacular supernatural events: angels, 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 40 days, before ascending bodily into heaven before a crowd of his followers.

Despite all this, perhaps it's conceivable that the Romans and Greeks might have missed all the fuss – but how could anyone in Judea? Without being able to read Justus

of Tiberias ourselves, we might even be willing to discount his omission of anything about Jesus. But the silence of Philo of Alexandria on any deed or word of Jesus is deafening. And the silence of *everyone* at the time absolutely goes against the image of Jesus presented to us in the Gospels. Given the zeal that the early church took to latch on to any ancient writing that even *seemed to possibly* 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 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 *hundreds* of contemporary references to Jesus, even if only 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 event in human history. Instead, they are forced to fight tooth and nail to defend the veracity of two highly suspicious pieces of text.

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 instead 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.

MYTH No. 4: Eyewitnesses wrote the Gospels

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 has represented the Gospels as four independent, consistent, complementary and thoroughly trustworthy eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life from his closest associates; cherished, preserved and 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 a full century from the 50's all the way to the 150's. Scholarship has fine-tuned this speculation somewhat. 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* 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 found 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 CE). Clement cited 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 suggesting that Clement - a prominent leader of the Church in Rome - had no knowledge of our Gospels.

The letters of Ignatius of Antioch (written c. 107 CE) 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), to make matters worse, 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 Marks' Gospel, Matthew's Gospel uses about 607 and Luke's Gospel uses about 360.⁴ The parallels are so widespread and apparent that the majority

opinion among Biblical authorities has been in agreement over it ever since; namely that Matthew and Luke based their material upon Mark's. If the Farrer Hypothesis is correct, Luke also copied from Matthew (while others speculate both used a hypothetical second source, "Q").

Matthew is not the only source Luke is stealing 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. Luke's mistakes in plagiarizing are one of the ways we know that it's him 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 in order 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), Luke could not have written his Gospel before then; and it is more plausible that it was written much later. The fourth Gospel, John, was also 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. 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 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 theologians, not illiterate Aramaic speakers.

There are still plentiful 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 have to plagiarize the bulk of somebody else’s story (who wasn’t even an eyewitness!) and just add a few little touches of his own here and there?

And 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 that little 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 could ever have made. Interestingly enough, when you compare Matthew's and Mark's Gospels, you'll find that the author of Matthew is constantly correcting Mark's blunders about all aspects of Jewish society, religion, the calendar, holidays, customs, attitudes and 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 could have made the mistakes that the author of Mark did. For instance, as Earl Doherty observes, Mark 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, and while Luke is apparently very familiar with Rome's sites and taverns, which he casually mentions, 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 quoted by Hippolytus sometime around 120-140.⁶ Some Church factions found it highly suspect and rejected it as heretical; and to be fair, it's quite possible that the original author *was* a Gnostic. But heretical or no, it proved to be so popular, 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.

Like the other Gospels, there are indications that John been re-edited and added to. For example: in John 2:11, Jesus performs his "first miracle", then in verse 23 Jesus does more miracles, and then after that in 4:54 Jesus does his "second miracle." There are also two endings clumsily attached, including a famous Pythagorean story of fishermen catching 153 fish (a sacred number to the Pythagoreans) that has been plagiarized and retooled for Jesus.

Finally, if there remained any doubt whether close associates of Jesus wrote the Gospels, remember that anyone close to Jesus would have been long dead by the time the Gospels began to be written in the later first and early to mid second century. So we have no way to know who (or how many) really wrote the Gospels, and only guesses as to when or where, or how many times they've been edited and re-edited. But 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?

MYTH No. 5: The Gospels Give a Consistent Picture of Jesus

In the face of multiple lines of evidence, Biblical historians today largely accept that the Gospels were not written by the names traditionally attributed to them. However, a common fallback position is that 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 genuine 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 neither consistent 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). 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). 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 withers!) 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, saying 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 sarcastically telling them, “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 22nd Psalm: “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*” *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* (15:34).

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 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; instead he says Jesus 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 it to Hebrew; 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 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 Matthew (He also gets plenty of historical window dressing, though often incorrectly, from Flavius Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews*). However where 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.

Right from the cradle, Luke’s Jesus is wonderful and faultless. Even as a boy of twelve, he amazes his exasperated parents when they lose him for a few days and 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 stark contrast to the cranky, 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 in a sobbing mess but simply knells (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: oddly, as he prays in the garden, suddenly an angel from Heaven 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? In the more scrupulous Bible translations (such as NRSV) these two verses are in double brackets – to indicate that translators consider them spurious. One reason is that the angel and bloody sweat verses are absent from our oldest and many of our most reliable manuscripts of the New Testament. **!**

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 parable (in

virtually identical language) that the Lord will NOT be right back during his follower's 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 loudly 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 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)

John 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, et al.). 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, who say that it lasted only about a year, took place mainly in the Galilee, and Jesus came

to Jerusalem only once, at the very end of his life. John, however has it stretched out over three years, and centered 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 the 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. In stark contrast to Matthew's quintessentially Jewish rabbi Jesus, 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" 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.

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. He 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 on-the-go Jesus spends too much time washing his disciples feet (13:4-12) and then talking in the upper room, droning on for four whole chapters from Luke 14 through 17. He barely arrives at Gethsemane on schedule (18:1) with no time for any high jinks in the garden at all 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 deeply troubled Jesuses are sweating blood at this point, but he is gung-ho, spending the whole of chapter 17 announcing to God how he is ready to roll. In the other Gospels a sad-puppy-dog Jesus asks if he really, really has to drink this cup of suffering, and hopefully wonders if maybe God can call off this 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, forget those ladies in the three other Gospels; John draws the line and doesn’t let that creepy Judas go kissing on *his* Jesus! When they come to get 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 draws back in panic and fall to the ground (18:6). Now *that’s* a Jesus for you. Though Matthew’s Jesus supposedly fulfils 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; and 19:11) his two cent’s worth in spirited back-and-forth exchanges (John’s Jesus is also fluent in Latin, apparently).

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 particular 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 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 Gospels⁸ but it is obvious from lines of evidence such as this and others 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 gung-ho, can-do 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 (Mt.27:32, Mk.15:21, Lk.23:26). Even while crucified, John's Jesus remains the Boss on the Cross; he's still calling the shots, barking out 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 like 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 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 no word-for-word parallels like the ones we see between the other Gospels.¹⁰

It would take an encyclopedia (and there are some!) 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 with a 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 gets in hot water with the Jewish leaders in the last week of Jesus' 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).

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 money changers, 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).

When was Jesus born? The years of Jesus' birth and death are in irresolvable contradiction: If Luke is right when he unmistakably states that Jesus was born in 6 CE, then Matthew cannot be right when he just as plainly states that Jesus was born sometime before 4 BCE. (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 themselves 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 BCE). We know what time Mt. Vesuvius erupted and destroyed Pompeii (August 24th, 79 CE, 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 BCE). 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, like earthquakes; mass conversions; mass resurrections; trials before governors, kings and emperors; hours of worldwide darkness, et al.? 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 – his relationship to John the Baptist (were they perfect strangers or first cousins?); disparate accounts of the time line 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 portrayal of Jesus varies so widely that Biblical historians have been able to reconstruct dozens of "historical" Jesuses in their own image; all equally plausible – and of course, perfectly contradictory. And all attempts at sifting 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 one source, which appears to be completely literary fiction.

MYTH No. 6: History confirms the Gospels

As mentioned before, Luke 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 and Matthew. 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 say 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. 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 constantly 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 1:17).

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.

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. 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, the High Priest acting as interrogator himself – 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 to paint the Jewish religious leaders as stereotypical villains.

And there are other less obvious implausibilities, too. 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?

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

Similarly, the Gospels' portrait of Roman Governor Pontius Pilate 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 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. On his command, Jews were massacred, such as 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 it was “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 and stouter loyalty to the emperor than of the governor himself, would not be let live another hour.”⁹ Nor would the Governor feel particularly inclined to grant their requests,

either. In fact, 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 in 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, or 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 “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 loathe to do in any circumstances anyway): “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

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 and 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 And Robert Price has noted 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 does he just refuse to condemn him unless the priests can come up with a charge that sticks?

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 offers 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 the Passover (or any other day), and there is no evidence that the Romans had any such customary pardon either¹⁶ - not that Pilate would’ve ever offered to release a convicted murderer and anti-Roman insurrectionist even if there had been! 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 else pick Barabbas over Jesus, anyway? Famed miracle healer and teacher, just acclaimed as King by the whole town 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?

The Book of Acts also contains a number of features that don’t make much sense if any of the Gospel stories were 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 Jesus’ miracles and healings? What about that pair of rock-splitting earthquakes, worldwide darkness, the angel? Anyone notice 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, 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! To the Romans, 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 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 exclaims, "You are out of your mind, Paul! Too much learning is driving you insane!" (26:24)

MYTH No. 7: Archeology confirms the Gospels

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. In fact, a number of them (Arimathea, Emmaus, Cana, etc.) are *only* ever mentioned in the Gospels.

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. ¶ Though Jews like Isaiah (9:1) derided the region as "Galilee of the Gentiles," in the Gospels it is already filled with synagogues and Pharisees (about 40 years too early, since they didn't arrived until after the

destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70), and the major cities of the region like Sephoris and Tiberius are meticulously and thoroughly ignored - because they are Gentile.

One incongruous fact about 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 place 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 tiny fishing hole 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)

Similarly, Jesus’ best girl Mary Magdalene has caused plenty of geographical consternation. The common assumption is that “Magdalene” means “from Magdala” But was there ever a town called Magdala? Matthew 15:39 says after the feeding of the 4000 Jesus hops in a boat and sails off to “Magdala”. But Mark, Matthew’s original source, says Jesus went to the region of “Dalmanutha” instead (Mark 8:10). Both these names are suspicious; there is no evidence for either in first-century Galilee. In fact, no town with the name “Magdala” appears either in the Old Testament or any other pre-Christian records,² and the name “Dalmanutha” has never been found anywhere else but here.³ And on top of this contradiction between Magdala and Dalmanutha, further complications are in the many textual variants in the manuscripts of Matthew and Mark: Some texts of Mark said Dalmanutha, or Dalmounai,⁴ other early copyists followed Matthew and changed it to an M-word; variant forms like Magedan, Magadan, Magdala, Mageda, Magadam, Magada, or Melegada.⁵ In the margin of one early manuscript, the *Codex Bezae*, a scribe has even left instructions telling how to alter the word “Melegada” into something closer to Magdala: "Insert dal after g, erase the da."⁶ Others have suggested it is connected with Megiddo, modern Mejdol, and Magdalgad⁷ but while there may be

plenty of “M” names, the actual place itself has ever been found, so no one can truthfully say they really know where, or whether, “Magdala” ever existed.

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). 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. But where is Arimathea? The Bible mentions Arimathea exactly four times – when the four Gospels introduce Joseph of Arimathea. (Matt 27:57; Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50; John 19:38). Apart from this, there is no record of Arimathea anywhere; not in the Bible, not in Jewish, Greek or Roman records, or anywhere else. The first time any record of it appears anywhere outside the Gospels is in the fourth century gazetteer *The Onomasticon*, written by – surprise! - our reliable old friend Bishop Eusebius. None of these facts are very encouraging to would-be Arimathea hunters.

Eusebius claimed Arimathea was not really Arimathea, but actually Ramathaim-Zophim in the territory of Ephraim (*Onomast.* 144.28), which was also the birthplace of the Old Testament prophet Samuel. After Eusebius made this announcement - but never before that - traditions tying Joseph of Arimathea to this town took off and began to develop. In the Middle ages a monastery of Joseph of Arimathea was erected there, though even then competing traditions already insisted that Arimathea was really located at nearby Rentis, 15 mi. E of Jaffa.²⁰ But scholars, not exactly impressed with Eusebius’ sterling reputation have been far less confident of this fact than he was. With absolutely no information to go on except that Arimathea was “a Jewish city” (Luke 23:50), no one can honestly say with any kind of confidence that they know where Arimathea was – or

more importantly, if it ever even really existed. But this hasn't stopped some from claiming to have located the fabled Arimathea.

Jerry A. Pattengale, writing in the normally reliable *Anchor Bible Dictionary* authoritatively states it “was in the Shephelah hills area, approximately 20 mi. E of modern Jaffa” (though he notes other possibilities as well), and states that “In 145 B.C., the Syrian king Demetrius II Nicator delivered three Samaritan toparchies, including Arimathea, to the Jewish leader Jonathan.”⁸ But he is only assuming this territory exchange included Arimathea; as the actual text in First Maccabees makes no mention of Arimathea whatsoever, saying only “Samaria and Galilee.” (1 Macc. 10-11) In reality, the location of Arimathea still remains a mystery, though scholars have generally tended to try and identify "Arimathea" with every known Aramaic site that begin with "r;" guesses have included Ramah,⁹ Ramathaim or Rentis, both a few miles northwest of Jerusalem on the border of Samaria,¹⁰ as well as er-Ram and el-Birah-Ramallah, 5 and 8 mi. N of Jerusalem, respectively.¹¹ But in any case, there is no clear support for Arimathea being *any* of these places, beyond some conjectures as to spelling variants. As one commentator notes, “the location of Arimathea has not (yet) been identified with any assurance; the various ‘possible’ locations are nothing more than pious guesses or conjectures undocumented by any textual or archaeological evidence.”¹²

And so suspicion lingers that Mark simply made the whole place up. He certainly seems to have made up Joseph of Arimathea. 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.”¹³ And

Carrier has shown that Arimathea is an Aramaic pun, ari- (best) mathai- (disciple) –a (town/place)”¹⁴ Is it just a coincidence that this follower of Jesus comes from Bestdiscipleville, Judea - or was Mark just being cute?

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.” Poor Mark! Another mistake. 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.¹⁵ And Mark wasn't the only one confused. Like the Dalmatha/Magedan difficulty, multiple names have popped up in the early manuscripts here, too.¹⁶ Some have “Gergesenes” instead of Gerasenes or Gadarenes.¹⁷

Yet another missing locale is Emmaus. Luke tells us that the risen Jesus appears to two of his followers traveling “on the road to Emmaus,” a village he says is only about sixty *stadia* (7 miles) from Jerusalem (Luke 24:13). Luke is the only person to ever mention this village, and archeologists have looked far and wide for it ever since.

Adding to the fun, 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 follower (also traveling along the road) in a radiant new form before he returned to heaven.

Scholars have also 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). All this seems to point to the Gospels being set in a literary creation, not taking place on the real map of ancient Palestine.

And 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 TV "archeologist" Simcha Jacobovici. 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.

MYTH No. 8: Paul and the Epistles corroborate the Gospels

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 think that he only wrote 7 of the 13 letters attributed to him, and even his genuine letters have interpolations. For example: 1 Thes. 2:15-16 has a passage (probably a scribal margin note that became accidentally inserted) 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. Who was Paul's Christ? Observe how he and the other NT 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 (I Peter 3:19) and led captivity captive (Eph. 4:9)

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. **!** But when early Christian writers like Paul speak of their "Christ Jesus", they sound as if they are describing a mythological figure - not a flesh-and-blood human being. Paul never talks about Jesus' death, the Lord's Supper, or any of the events of

Christ's life as though they actually happened to a real man from Galilee who lived on Earth just a few years before.

How do Paul and other apostles like himself 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*."² 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, 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; the only scriptures they knew were the Jewish scriptures.

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 are constantly telling us (e.g., in Romans 3:21, 16:25-27, Colossians 1:26 and 2:2, I 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. (Several times, the Spirit of God and the Son of God are treated as the same thing (as in Romans 8:9, Galatians 4:6, 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.³ 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 absolutely 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.⁴

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 visit to Jerusalem for fifteen days 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 such things as all this missing info 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 go 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 say “What would Jesus do”?

As Earl Doherty notes, one 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, you would suppose that they at least want to know what he taught. But 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 avoids any mention of Jesus’ earthly life, or contradicting 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.

One 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 (both uneducated and illiterate, according to Acts 4:13) from the Galilee 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.

Even when he describes 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.⁵ Likewise, his terse two-verse "account" of the Transfiguration (2 Peter 1:17-18) is clearly taken from Matthew 17:5 (itself taken from Mark). So it's clear that whoever was trying to pass himself off as "Peter" had never heard of any personal recollections of Jesus' life from the real Peter.

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 doesn't *act* 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 so-called “Pillars of the Church”, Peter, John and James, are nobodies, his personal enemies, and they 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 him – 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 either. In fact, there’s no sign that Paul thought 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. Why? 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 in the 3rd century⁶ 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.⁷

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15: 5-8), he gives us a laundry list of appearances from the risen Jesus. However, his list doesn't tally with any of the other accounts and raises some suspicious questions. According to Paul, Jesus appeared to 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 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 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 led by a *mebaqquerim* – or in Greek, an *episkopos*, the same word in the New Testament for a bishop.⁸ Remember, Paul never says the Twelve were 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. 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 here.

And 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 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. But then again, the Gospels contradict each other, too... 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?"⁹ 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.¹⁰

It’s also a shame that Paul doesn’t give any details about these Jesus sightings, including his own - he never 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,¹¹ 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 does not say anything about Peter or John traveling around with Jesus, and apart from that one suspicious partial line, says nothing that would make us think he believed James had any special relationship to Jesus. The ramification of this can't be emphasized enough: **there is nothing in the New Testament that was really written by anyone who claimed to personally know Jesus.**

MYTH No. 9: Christianity began with Jesus and his apostles

Acts portrays the early church as a happy little band of believers gathered around Jesus' family and disciples in Jerusalem. Nothing in that scenario jibes with reality. Paul and our other earliest Christian witnesses show that right out of the gate, completely divergent forms of Christianity were already established and spread far and wide before Jesus was supposed to have even picked up his cross. Even before Paul is converted, there are already Christian communities as far away as Damascus in Syria and Antioch in Asia Minor, and even Rome itself, even though tradition still maintains that Paul founded them. His letter to the Romans makes it perfectly clear that the church there had already been in existence for many years, and that he had never been there (Rom. 1:13,15; 15:20-23).

Paul himself complains about the diversity among 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?” (I 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 constantly rails against his rival apostles all over the place, 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) 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 Bart Ehrman wonderfully terms them, "Christmongers." (*Didakhê* 12:5)

Even before Paul, some Christian groups believed Christ had nothing to do with dying or being resurrected; to the Gospel of Thomas community, Christ was never crucified at all. And there were still other profound disagreements, even about the very basics 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. And what's more, these early Christianities were already in conflict with one another.

Luke constantly portrays 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 find in real life 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 the Jerusalem Church and Paul over issues like circumcision and eating with Gentiles. ! 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 and Paul's brand of the faith. What an amazingly paranoid, venomous and arrogant account of this private back room deal with the Jerusalem leaders. Paul's accusers are false believers and spies, and he knows they were really secretly brought in (by his many enemies, no doubt) to enslave them. Far from receiving a warm welcome and a friendly hashing out of differences, and submitting to their decrees, Paul refuses to go along with them "even for a moment"(!)

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 verses like Matthew 9:14 (and 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 scripture from the Baptist cult originally. Among other indications, John the Baptist's nativity story is four times longer than Jesus' in Luke, and it takes 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.

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 made 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 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 from the Hebrew underworld to the seven heavens to defeat the demonic *Archai*. Mark’s community took the opposite tack; their suffering Jesus was an ordinary human man who God adopted at his baptism, tested and later resurrected and exalted to divine Lord to reward his obedience. This is in stark contrast to the Johannine community’s Jesus, the Greek 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 of 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 (and occasionally heretics) as they could.

All early Christian factions claimed apostolic authority for their beliefs. But if the Twelve were anywhere 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 the Gospels frequently disagree in details about 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. And yet the truth is we have absolutely nothing from any of the twelve apostles – not a single authentic document, only a handful of forgeries like I and 2 Peter, written decades after the apostles were supposedly all dead.

But did they ever live at all? Zindler argues that the Twelve clearly serve a zodiacal function in the gospels. And indeed there are astrological motifs in the names of the Apostles and their stories in the gospels. 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. The sun-god nature of Jesus becomes clear as crystal when one examines the early

history of the Christian cult. (Excavations beneath the Vatican have revealed a mosaic depiction of Christ as the sun-god Helios – with solar chariot, horses, and all!)”⁶ If the twelve disciples are not real historic individuals, but merely symbolic placeholders for the twelve houses of the zodiac, 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!

Likewise, the oldest perceptions of Jesus are mythic, not biographical. One early pre-Pauline NT element is the Kenosis Hymn, found in Philippians 2:5-11:

“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 some 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 first noticed by French mythologist Paul-Louis Couchoud in the 1930s. Generations of Bible scholars have read this passage as though it said God had bestowed the divine title *Kyrios* ("Lord") upon Jesus – but Couchoud was the first to notice that 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

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). In "The Spiritual Body of Christ and the Legend of the Empty Tomb," Carrier details the ways that Mark's entire gospel is a treasure trove of symbolic, rather than historical meaning. 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, selected sayings from the Gospel of Thomas, snappy one-liners from Cynic and Stoic philosophy, bits of astrology and sacred geometry, pharisaic parables and proverbs, names from Paul's epistles, and above all, like 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, he composed a brilliant literary creation, a potent mix of Judaism and Paganism: a moving story filled with powerful

Jewish symbolism, with a narrative that paralleled 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 even while it concealed their meaning. 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, in secret. Mark is not telling a story of something that happened in reality, he is creating a framework for passing on a sacred mystery. The cornerstone Gospel upon which all the others were built was not a biographical work at all, but an impressive literary construction.

MYTH No. 10: Christianity was a totally new and different miraculous overnight success that changed the world!

The Christian movement was variegated 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 those 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 are either ignored, denied, rationalized away or declared to be later copies of Christianity. Such handy, simple answers. So... why didn't the early Christian Fathers ever think of them?

Early 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 pagans 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, he used his evil powers and inspired the heathen nations to pre-emptively copy all of "True Christianity's" rites and rituals, theological ideas, religious language, 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

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 pagan model. It’s only when the other Mediterranean gods begin having demi-god sons with mortal women that God suddenly announces that he has a demi-god son too. Paul (or whoever really wrote the Letter to the Ephesians) avers that God has been keeping Jesus a secret all this time (Eph. 3:4-5), 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.

In fact, 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.

And how did this mystery faith not only come to eclipse all its sister faiths, but eventually give rise to all the various unruly assortment of 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 world with his teachings and miracles and then the faith snowballing down the hill of Golgotha, as his disciples and Paul convert hundreds at a time and found churches as they travel 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 orthodox (“right belief”) who had had 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 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, they whitewashed over even the variety of early Christianities and made it appear that their rival Christianities were all nothing more than Johnny-come-lately heretical spin-offs.²

Today we know that the real growth of Christianity was nothing like the tidy, rosy pictures 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, but slowly and piecemeal, like weeds taking over a neglected front yard.

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 has analyzed the estimated 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 is for *all* first century groups that had some form of belief in Jesus, including all 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 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.

Pliny's letter also proves how unknown Christians were to most people, even in the early second century. He had been governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor for well over a year before he even knew there were any Christians in his province. He was one of Trajan's top legal advisors for several years, with decades of court experience, including serving as Praetor (the Roman equivalent of both Chief of Police and Attorney General⁶). 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:

"It is 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 adopting Christianity was illegal! Therefore, Christians must have been extremely rare indeed. For this means he never once saw a trial or a riot, 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 impossible — unless Christians were barely there... This is proof positive that Christians must have been extremely scarce — to the point of social invisibility.”⁷

Keith Hopkins surveyed the evidence and scholarship on early Christian populations in a landmark paper⁸ 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 1/10th of 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 three hundred years to come anywhere close.

Carrier adds that archeological evidence secures the case: throughout Palestine, vast amounts of material evidence document Jewish occupation unmistakably and there is considerable evidence of pagan inhabitants – but there is absolutely 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

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 continue languishing in obscurity, or even slip quietly into extinction. But instead, Christianity owed its success to a century of bad fortune for the ancient Mediterranean.

The third century was a time of chaos for the Roman world; dominated by a period of near-perpetual civil war, economic crisis and political chaos throughout the Roman World.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

quickly raise cash 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 exchange, and 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; they became 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, like 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 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 Gibbons 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 any opportunistic infection. 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 divine judgment. Christianity's long stint on the lunatic fringe had finally turned social exile into a strong advantage.

Christianity ultimately triumphed first by becoming useful to Rome's rising power player Constantine, then becoming favored by the Roman emperors, and finally, 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; it had no compunctions against strictly enforcing dogma and persecuting heretics; and on top of all that, it had growing numbers. The religion had everything an aspiring totalitarian emperor could want. And yet Christianity still only truly flourished when it gained the ability to literally eliminate its competition in 395, when every other religion was actually outlawed.

The collapse of the Roman world had 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 not as strong as it had been before the empire's decline, and worse, it was inextricably enmeshed with

the faded glories of the old ways. Constantine began the process of nailing the coffin lid on the gods. And since they wouldn't be needing their temples, he also began to gradually emptying the rich treasuries of the pagan temples. 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.

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 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 any spiritual truths it fostered, but thanks to the most worldly of motives: power and money.

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 problems to the default position that assumes there simply *had* to be a historical individual (or more than one!) 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 would things look differently if Jesus had been real? Here are a few examples:

-There would not be the strange absence of biographical information about Jesus from Paul and everyone else in the early generations of Christian writers.

-The Jesus movement would have begun in the Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem and radiated out from there, instead of appearing scattershot all over the far corners of the empire in Alexandria, Rome, and Asia Minor.

- The early Christian communities would be much more homogenous, not seemingly clinging onto a few isolated fragments of Jesus' teachings and personality and ignoring the rest.

-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 who believed he saved through his secret Gnostic wisdom.

-Paul (or an even earlier Christian) would not have had to insert a reference to the Cross into the Pre-Pauline Kenosis Hymn.

-Paul's odd list of witnesses to the Risen Christ would jibe with the Gospels.

- Paul's dynamic with the Jerusalem Pillars would be very different (and probably far more deferential).

-The many, many issues that continued to tear the early church apart would have been resolved by Jesus if he had actually pronounced on them as he does in the Gospels.

-Paul would have no reason to have to explain the Lord's Supper if it was already a tradition of the disciples. What's more, John would not have been able to get away with excluding it from his gospel.

- Jesus' teaching would not appear in the writings of earlier authors, such as Pharisaic literature, Stoic and Cynic maxims and Pythagorean fables.
- Flavius Josephus would mentioned him, if only as just another false Messiah and charlatan. Not to mention Philo, Justus of Tiberius, Nicolaus of Damascus, and the scores of others.
- There would not be so much confusion and contradictions over who the twelve apostles were.
- Jesus' Trial accounts would be more consistent, not be blatantly fabricated and so full of mistakes.
- People would agree on his date (or day! or year!) of his death.
- The trial accounts of Peter and Paul in Acts would mention Jesus.
- There would not be so many disparate kinds of Christs being preached in the early years.
- In reality, Pharisees would have admired, supported and mentioned Jesus. Like them, he opposed the Sadducees, and stood up to the Romans. He even taught their parables. █
- Perhaps it's not unreasonable to think that there could have been physical evidence and relics preserved, rather than the many frauds that did not appear until three hundred years later. We might also have genuine accounts dictated by the apostles or other eyewitnesses.

If Jesus had been a real individual we have a thorny paradox: Either Jesus was a remarkable individual who did and said these amazing things – and no one outside his cult noticed him for the rest of the century; or he didn't – and yet right after his death tiny house communities appear scattered across the empire that cannot agree about the most basic facts of his life. The truth is inescapable: there simply could never have been a historical Jesus.

Endnotes

MYTH No. 1: The idea that Jesus was a myth is ridiculous!

1. Carrier, WIDBTRS

MYTH No. 2: Jesus was wildly famous ...

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

MYTH No. 3: Ancient historian Flavius Josephus wrote about Jesus

1. 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. *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, v. 3, pp. 919-920. Besides the Naassene Fragment quoted by Hippolytus (Ref. 5.7.2-9) c. 120-140, there is 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.

MYTH No. 5: The Gospels Give a consistent picture of Jesus

1. Ehrman, *Orthodox CoS*, pp.187-194
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
3. Cohn, pp. 98. For multiple examples, see also pp.112-113
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*

MYTH No. 7: Archeology confirms the Gospels

1. Maccoby, p. 42
2. Price, Da Vinci p. 236
3. Terry, "New Testament Textual Variants"
4. *ibid*
5. *ibid*
6. Glaue, p. 103
7. *Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 843
8. Anchor Bible Dictionary, "Arimathea"
9. *Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible*, p.100
10. *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*, Map 70
11. Anchor Bible Dictionary, "Arimathea"
12. Roy W. Hoover in Copan and Tacelli, p.130
13. Price ISSOM p. 327
14. *ibid* p. 326
15. Carr, "Are the Gospels Eyewitness Accounts?"
16. *ibid*
17. Safrai "Gergesa, Gerasa, or Gadara?"

MYTH No. 8: Paul and the Epistles corroborate the Gospels

1. Doherty, JP p.16. I am indebted to Earl Doherty's *The Jesus Puzzle* for nearly all the content of this section.
2. Mack, WWTNT? p. 102
3. Doherty, *op. cit.* p. 73
4. *ibid*, p. 75
5. *ibid*, p. 24
6. Doherty, CTV note #85 pp. 252-3
7. *ibid*
8. Dead Sea Scroll 1QS, *Community Rule* 8.1-4
9. Price, ISSOM, p. 344
10. Carrier, SBOC ET p. 192
11. Price, *op. cit.* p.183

MYTH No. 9: Christianity began with Jesus and his apostles

1. Doherty, JP p. 272
2. Price, DJ pp. 265-266
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

MYTH No. 10: Christianity was a totally new and different miraculous overnight success that changed the world!

1. Price, DJ p. 88

2. Ehrman, LC pp. 4-5
3. Carrier, "How Successful was Christianity?" from *Was Christianity Too Improbable to be False?* (2006)
4. Carrier, NTIF, 420
5. ibid
6. ibid, p. 421
7. Carrier, "How Successful was Christianity?"
8. Keith Hopkins, "Christian Number and Its Implications," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6.2 (1998): pp. 185-226
9. Carrier, NTIF, pp. 425-426
10. Fox, p. 269
11. Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.69
12. Carrier, "How Successful was Christianity?"
13. Buescher, *The Other Side of Salvation: Spiritualism and the Nineteenth-Century Religious Experience*
14. Carrier, NTIF, p. 409
15. Carrier, FNTC; also Ch. 18 "Was Christianity Too Improbable to be False?"
16. See Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians*, also *Magnesians* 6, *Trallians* 4 & 9, *Romans* 4 & 7; *Smyrnaeans* 6-7)
17. Carrier, op. cit.

Conclusion: Can Jesus be saved?

1. For plentiful examples of rabbinic parallels, see Price, DJ pp. 253-257

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