

JESUS

GOD OR MAN?



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"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic--on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg--or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

"But what about you? He asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven."

Matthew 16:13-17

Introduction

There have been many, many challenges to the deity of Jesus and the authenticity of the Bible through the years. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and the movie based on the book are only the most controversial of this generation. Never before has a bestselling book so defamed biblical Christianity. And the movie fans the flames.

Some people argue the book was written as fiction, and should be viewed as such. They do not understand what all the fuss is about. We live in a postmodern society which views all religions as ways to God. But, no other religious leader, not Mohammad, not Buddha, not Confucius, made the claims Jesus made: the Son of God, indeed, God himself. Mr. Brown bases much of his claims in his book, most notably that Jesus was deified by man, on real historic events. Even as fiction, the book is being used as fodder for skeptics.

Stripped of his claims to deity, Jesus becomes another religious leader, another prophet. And Christianity becomes nothing more than another religion. If we cannot rely on the Bible as the word and revelation of God, and know that Jesus is the only Son of God, then we are wasting our time. But we can, and we are not.

No other faith rests on historical evidence as compelling as that which exists for Christianity. No other religious leader was raised from the dead; no other ancient religious book possesses the kind of manuscript, archaeological and prophetic evidence which the Bible can claim.

This booklet not only addresses issues raised by *The Da Vinci Code*, but hopefully will help you, the reader, to see Jesus as who he claims to be, the one Peter knew so well: "The Christ, the Son of the living God." It is my prayer that it will serve as a tool which can be used when the next challenge to Christianity comes along. And the next. And the next.

If Jesus is alive, and he is, then he is Lord and God. And we can trust him to be our Lord and our God.

Is Jesus really God or was he deified by man?

In Scripture, Jesus repeatedly claims to be Lord and God (Matthew 26:63-64, John 8:58, Acts 5:29-32). He claims to have “all authority in heaven and on earth: (Matthew 28:18). He possesses all the divine authority there is.

You would expect the Bible to make that claim about Jesus. The Koran claims that the Muslim Allah is the one God; the Book of Mormon presents the central truth claims of that religion. Is there evidence outside of Scripture that early Christians did not see Jesus as a “moral prophet,” but worshiped him as God? Is there non-biblical evidence that The Da Vinci Code and other challenges to Christianity are wrong and the Bible is right?

Yes. In fact, if we had no New Testament we could reconstruct the Christian doctrine that Christ is Lord on the basis of non-Christian writings, nearly all as old as the New Testament books themselves.

Tacitus (AD 55-120), the greatest ancient Roman historian, in his *Annals*, writes (ca. AD 115): “Christus...suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition broke out” (*Annals* XV.44). “Superstition” makes clear the fact that the followers of Christus believed something miraculous, not simply that he was a great human teacher.

Pliny the Younger was a Roman administrator and governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor; 2 volumes of his letters are extant today. The tenth of his correspondence books (written around AD 112) contains the earliest non-biblical description of Christian worship: “They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ as to a god.” Note that they worshiped Christ as God, not merely a religious teacher or leader. And they did so in AD 112, not AD 325 after Constantine.

“Until that moment in history [at the Council of Nicaea, AD 325], Jesus was viewed by his followers as a mortal prophet...a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless. A mortal...By officially endorsing Jesus as the Son of God, Constantine turned Jesus into a deity who existed beyond the scope of the human world, an entity whose power was unchallengeable”
(The Da Vinci Code).

And what of early non-biblical Christian records?

Clement of Rome (AD 95) repeatedly refers to the “Lord Jesus Christ.” He also promises a “future resurrection” on the basis of his “raising the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead” (24.1).

Ignatius (AD 110-15) refers to “Jesus Christ our God” (intro. to *Ephesians*). To the Smyrnaeans he writes, “I give glory to Jesus Christ, the God who has thus given you wisdom” (1.1).

And Justin the Martyr (AD 150) repeatedly refers to Jesus as the Son of God (cf. *Apol.* 22). He also describes the fact that God raised him from the dead and brought him to heaven (*Apol.* 45). The *Didache*, written before AD 100, repeatedly called Jesus “The Lord.”

We could go on and on. Evidence that the first Christians believed Jesus to be divine is simply overwhelming. The historical record conclusively proves Jesus was worshiped as God before Constantine and the Nicean Council. The early Christians were absolutely united in their common affirmation, Jesus is Lord. Even without a Bible, we can know that Jesus existed, that he was crucified by Pontius Pilate, and that the first Christians believed him to be raised from the dead and worshiped him as their Lord. The enemies of Christianity have tried to denigrate Jesus and his followers, but not a single critic ever claimed that he did not exist.

How do I know the Bible is not the product of man?

The Old Testament canon was finalized by two councils held at the city of Jamnia, one in AD 90 and the other in AD 118. Constantine had absolutely nothing to do with the process. The canonical process of the new Testament involved four criteria for accepting a book as Scripture.

First, it had to be written by an apostle or based on his eyewitness testimony. This criteria along exempted the second-century Gnostic books like the so-called Gospel of Judas. Second, the book had to possess merit and authority in its use. Third, a book had to be accepted by the entire church, not just a single congregation or area, and the book had to be approved by the decision of the larger church, not just a few advocates.

F.F. Bruce, one of the world's foremost authorities on the creation of the Bible, says, "One thing must be emphatically stated. The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired, recognizing their innate worth and generally apostolic authority, direct or indirect... what these councils did was not to impose something new upon the Christian communities, but to codify what was already the general practice of those communities" (*The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*).

The Dead Sea Scrolls are mentioned by *The Da Vinci Code* as being the "earliest Christian records." There are no New Testament records in them... they have nothing to do with any agenda to "promote the divinity of the man Jesus Christ," as the book asserts. The Coptic Scrolls are not "the earliest Christian records" either.

The Bible says of itself: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). But, we might

"The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great... Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made him godlike"
(The Da Vinci Code).

expect this book to claim to be the trustworthy word of God. Is there objective historical evidence for or against this assertion? Yes.

No original manuscripts exist for any ancient book. Writing materials were too fragile to stand the passage of centuries. This is the case for Aristotle, Plato, Julius Caesar, the writings of Buddha and the Koran just as much as it is for the Old and New Testaments. However, we possess today some 5,000 ancient Greek copies of the New Testament, and 10,000 copies in other ancient languages. New Testament sections and quotations in the writings of early church fathers date to A.D. 100. Complete volumes of the New Testament date to the 4th century. Note that each predates Constantine.

Now compare these manuscripts with other ancient documents. Of Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, we have today only nine or ten good manuscripts, none copied earlier than 900 years after Caesar. For the *Histories of Tacitus*, we have only four and a half of his 14 original books, none copied earlier than the 10th century A.D. For Aristotle's works, we possess only five manuscripts of any one volume, none copied earlier than A.D. 1100 (14 centuries after the original).

Manuscript evidence for the New Testament is remarkable, far surpassing that which exists for any other ancient book. And those who work with these ancient copies (called "textual critics") are convinced that they have been able to recover a Greek New Testament which is virtually identical to the original. Quoting F.F. Bruce again, "The variant readings about which any doubt remains among textual critics of the New Testament affect no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice." When *The Da Vinci Code* asserts, "History has never had a definitive version of the book" and claims that scholars cannot confirm the authenticity of the Bible, he's simply wrong.

Archaeology also supports the Bible. Such findings continue to confirm the geographical and historical veracity of the biblical texts. For instance, the pool of Bethesda (John 5:2ff) was once dismissed as historical fiction. Now archaeologists locate it in the northeast quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. I've seen it.

Researchers have identified the remains of Caiaphas, the high priest of Jesus' trial and crucifixion. They have discovered the skeleton of Yohanan, a crucifixion victim from AD 70, and note that these remains confirm the details of Jesus' crucifixion as it is described in the gospels. Archaeological evidence strongly supports the trustworthiness of the biblical narratives.

Fulfilled prophecy overwhelmingly back what the Bible says. At least 48 major Messianic prophecies can be identified in the Old Testament. Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled each one. The odds that one man could fulfill them all are one in 10 to the 157th power, a number larger than the atoms of the universe.

Billions of people across 20 centuries can attest to the fact that the teachings of the Bible have been proven true and authoritative in their personal lives. But even such overwhelming subjective evidence to the side, there is still outstanding evidential reason to believe that the Bible is the trustworthy word of God.

The best way to know if the Bible is true is to test its claims personally. You know a car repair manual is trustworthy if it works in repairing your car. A recipe is proven by the meal it produces. When we meet Jesus personally, we discover that he is who the Bible says he is. And that the Bible really is the word of God.

What about the claims of other religions?

We can believe that Jesus existed, the Bible is trustworthy, and that Jesus is the risen Lord. But, what makes him so unique? Why is he the only way to God? Followers of other religions are just as sincere in their beliefs as Christians are in theirs. Why do we have to believe the claims of Jesus to go to heaven? Jesus said of himself: "I am the Way, the Truth, the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6).

Some of you may say objective truth does not exist, so the claim "Jesus is Lord" is merely personal and subjective. But, if I say, "There is no such thing as absolute truth," haven't I made a claim to absolute truth? We don't accept relativism with regard to the historicity of the Holocaust, or our doctor's diagnosis, or the airplane mechanic's assurance that the plane is safe. Objective truth is an intellectual and practical necessity in life.

You may think all religions teach the same truth. But Buddha taught that there is no "god," despite the fact that some of his followers now worship him. Hindus believe in thousands of territorial deities but no "Lord" of the universe; Brahman is the divine force which sustains the universe, not a personal God to be worshipped. Muslims believe that Allah is the one supreme ruler of the universe. Jews believe that Yahweh revealed himself through the Laws and Prophets of their Scriptures, that Jesus was not the Messiah, and that the New Testament is not the word of God. Christians believe Jesus is the only way to the Father.

If any one of these religions is right, the others by definition are wrong. None believes that other religions are equally correct or divinely inspired. They all describe different paths up different mountains.

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Beyond the Da Vinci Code: Why do I need Jesus in my life?

We know Jesus existed, that he was worshiped as God by the early Christians, that the Bible is the trustworthy word of God. We know that Jesus' claims to be God and the way to God stands on evidence and reason. Now, why do you need him personally? What will he do for you which no one else can?

The Bible diagnoses our problem: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). If you're the exception, the one person who has never lied or cheated or had an immoral thought, I'd like to meet you and learn how you did it. The rest of us know that it's true, that we've all made mistakes and sinned. So what? "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). God cannot let my sins into his perfect heaven, or it wouldn't be heaven any longer. My sins must be punished, my debt paid.

This is why Jesus came: to die in our place, taking our punishment on himself (see Isaiah 53:5, 12). No one else in all of human history has done this, or could do it. Every other person has sinned, with his own debt before God. Only Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life (Hebrews 4:15), so he had no debt to pay. He could thus die for us, taking our place and purchasing our salvation. He then rose from the dead to prove his divinity, and to show us that we would live after death with him in paradise (John 14:1-6).

You need Jesus in your life so that your sins can be forgiven and you can spend eternity in heaven. He is the only one who can give you this gift. But every gift, even those which come from God, must be opened.

How can I meet Jesus for myself?

If you believe that Jesus is real, his word is true, he is the risen Lord, and he is the only One who can give you eternal life, you are ready to meet him personally. You can now open the gift of salvation he died to give you.

These are the biblical facts which make possible your personal relationship with God:

- 1. God loves you.** He created you and wants to have a personal relationship with you now on earth and eternally in heaven (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:4-5).
- 2. Sin has separated you from God.** The Bible defines "sin" as choosing our will over God's. We have each made this mistake (Romans 3:23). Our sins have now separated us from our holy God, and he cannot allow us into his perfect heaven. Instead, we are each destined for an eternity separated from God in hell (Revelation 19:11-15).
- 3. You cannot repair your broken relationship with God.** Many people think we can be good or religious enough to earn God's forgiveness and go to heaven when we die. But the Bible teaches that the only payment for sin is death (Romans 6:23; Ezekiel 18:20). Someone must die for the sins we have committed.
- 4. Jesus died to pay the debt owed by your sins.** Since Jesus was sinless and owed no debt to God, his death could pay for our sins. He took our place on the cross and suffered the penalty we deserved. His death now makes it possible for a righteous God to forgive our sins and offer us salvation (Romans 5:8; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24).
- 5. You must receive the gift he died to give.** Now you must choose to trust in what Jesus has done for you rather than trusting in your own efforts to restore your relationship with God. In faith, rely completely on Jesus to make you right with God. Confess your sins and mistakes to God, and choose to live by God's word and will. Decide that you will make Jesus the Lord and Master of your life.

How can you make this decision?

Through prayer you can meet Jesus today. There is no single prayer you must pray to become a Christian, no magic formula. But the following words are one way to trust Christ as Lord. They are the prayer I offered to God on September 9, 1973, when I first trusted in Jesus as my Savior. If you will pray them with the sincere commitment of your heart and life, you will join me in knowing Jesus personally and living for him as your Lord.

Dear God,

Thank you for loving me. Thank you that Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for my sins and failures. I admit to you that I am a sinner, that I need you to save me. I ask you to forgive me for my sins. I turn from them now. I invite Jesus into my life as my Savior and Lord. I turn my life over to him. I will live for him as long as I live. Thank you for giving me eternal life and making me the child of God. In Jesus' name, Amen. If you prayed this prayer for the first time just now, please tell someone about your decision. Christianity cannot be lived alone. A coal by itself goes out—it needs the heat of other coals. Share your new faith with someone you trust, and with a church where you can grow in your commitment to Christ.

If you would like someone from Park Cities Baptist Church to talk with you concerning your relationship with God, please call **214-860-1540**. We would be excited and honored to help you follow Jesus personally

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