

WILL THE REAL JESUS PLEASE STAND UP?



Justin Brierley

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**The evidence for Jesus
in a post-truth world**

Justin Brierley

Presenter of *Unbelievable?* on Premier
Christian Radio, and Senior Editor of
Premier Christianity magazine

Christian Evidence Society
christianevidence.org

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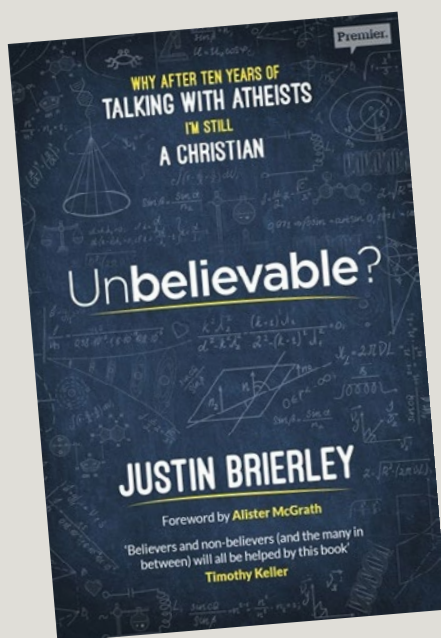
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Unbelievable?

This booklet is an extract from the book
*Unbelievable? Why, after ten years of talking
with atheists, I'm still a Christian*
by Justin Brierley



To find out more about the book and
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Will the real Jesus please stand up?

'I am an historian, I am not a believer, but I must confess as a historian that this penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very centre of history.'

HG Wells

You could almost hear the collective sigh of exasperation (heaved by a thousand Bible scholars) when Richard Dawkins tweeted a link to an article about Jesus to his thousands of Twitter followers in late 2013. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the arch-atheist turned out to be promoting a public event in London aimed at throwing doubt on Christianity. But this was more than your run-of-the-mill scepticism.

The speaker in question, self-published author Joseph Atwill, was due to present his thesis that Jesus Christ was a fictional character, invented by the Roman authorities to pacify the revolutionary sentiments of the Jewish people. His book, *Caesar's Messiah*, claimed that everything we thought we knew about Jesus and the rise of Christianity is a gigantic hoax, perpetrated by the Roman aristocracy. The fact that Atwill had neither scholarly credentials (he's a retired computer programmer) nor a jot of support from any academic in historical studies didn't seem to matter to a professor of zoology like Dawkins. After all, we all love a conspiracy theory, don't we? Especially when it comes to Jesus.

I remember when I received the email from Atwill's PR company detailing his 'explosive' theory on the nonexistence of Jesus that would shake Western civilization to its core (presumably Dawkins received the same missive, sparking his tweet). Atwill was due to present his findings at a press conference which was being billed with all the historical intrigue of a plot from *The Da Vinci Code*.

But I didn't bother attending. I anticipated that Atwill would be touting the same kind of farfetched conspiracy theories that I'd already run across

a hundred times on the Internet. The only difference was that he had the money to publish a book, employ a publicity agency and rent a hall in central London. It turned out that the author's theory was regarded as way-out even within the 'Jesus mythicist' movement, a group considered left-field to begin with. Atwill was on the fringe of the fringe, apparently. Yet, for a day or two, his theory was splashed across several major newspapers and lent the backing of the world's best-known atheist.

Of course, you don't have to pay a PR company to get your ideas heard these days. The Internet will happily do it for you for free. Google can transport you to websites claiming to have irrefutable evidence that 9/11 was orchestrated by a shadowy cabal of powerful Jews, or that the Royal Family are shape-shifting reptiles from another planet, or that we've all been duped into believing the earth is round when it is in fact flat, or that the Holocaust never really took place.

The renewed popularity of bizarre conspiracy theories in our culture is a prime example of the 'post-truth' society we now inhabit. That's not a new word I just made up. In 2016, 'post-truth' was declared the International Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries, following a huge spike in the number of online articles that were either half-truths or patently false. The old adage that 'a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes' has never been more true than in the age of the Internet.

Don't get me wrong, I love the web. We live with more information at our fingertips than we could possibly have imagined a few decades ago. But it also means we live with more misinformation than we've ever had to contend with before. The way-out can begin to look mainstream if enough people start sharing it on their Facebook feed. 'Jesus mythicism' is a defining example of that trend, and one we shall return to later.

Religious roulette

In the early chapters of my book, *Unbelievable?*, I outline why I think God is the best explanation of various aspects of our universe and our experience as humans within it. In short, it makes sense to believe in God. So the next obvious question that arises is: if there is a God, has he revealed himself to us? The Christian claim is that he has.

Jesus Christ was Yahweh in the flesh; the one human who lived on earth while uniquely sharing the divine nature of God. He was a Jewish man who, for the first 30 years of his life, lived and worked in an unremarkable corner of the Middle East that was under occupation by the Roman Empire. Then he began a three-year ministry of miracle-working and preaching as an itinerant rabbi supported by a ragtag group of fishermen, tax collectors and women followers. He declared that God's new kingdom was at hand and that he himself, as the promised Jewish Messiah, was the key to it. Ultimately, his words and actions brought him into conflict with the religious authorities in a series of events that would culminate in his execution on a Roman cross.

Christians claim that God came in Jesus, not only to show us what God is truly like, but in order that we might be reconciled back to that God through a defining act of sacrificial love, when he voluntarily gave up his life on the cross. Christians say he then rose again from death, vindicating his divine claims and inaugurating a new reality of resurrection life for every person who trusts in him. That (in the briefest of nutshells) is the Christian story of how God chose to reveal himself. But, of course, there are many other options on the table too.

Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and a plethora of other religions claim that they contain the true revelation about the nature of God and how he acts in the world. It could be that one of these is true instead. Or perhaps they are all false. For example, a 'deist' God may have chosen to keep himself at a cosmic arm's length from his creation, remaining a passive observer while humans run about squabbling over religion.

So how do we decide? Should we simply plump for one of them – like a religious version of a roulette wheel – and hope that we’ve landed on the correct option? I don’t think we need to resort to that. Out of all the available alternatives, I think we have good reasons to opt for Christianity.

Some people will make their decision based on a personal experience that causes them to believe that Christianity is true. If someone claims that his or her life has been dramatically changed through a spiritual encounter with Christ, supported by a radical change in that person’s character, priorities and lifestyle, it counts as a form of evidence. Naturally the sceptic will be quick to point out that there are people of other religions who claim similar personal experiences. Granted. But that doesn’t negate the fact that something has happened which requires an explanation, regardless of whether other people claim contrary experiences.

The other main way in which we can distinguish various religious claims is on the basis of historical evidence that is generally available. That could take a very long time, given how many religions there are in the world. But if Jesus was who he said he was, and if he miraculously rose from death to vindicate that claim, then we have a very strong case for believing that the Christian view is the true option over the other religious alternatives.

I have a set of similar-looking keys for the entrance door of the church where my wife is minister. Sometimes when entering the building I need to try a few of them in the door before I find the correct one. But if I find the correct one on my first attempt, I don’t bother trying out all the others as well. Likewise, we aren’t obliged to investigate exhaustively the truth or falsity of every religion if we find compelling reasons from the outset that Christianity is true. If God raised Jesus from the dead, then our search is over. We have found the key that unlocks the door.

Christianity makes a set of unique claims about Jesus. But it’s instructive to note that the nature of the evidence for those claims is also unique among all the religions.

From its inception, Christianity has been a public religion making claims that could be held up to historical scrutiny in the place it was birthed. That’s not true of other religions. The precepts of Buddhism originated in the mind of the Buddha alone. The ancient writings of Hinduism derive from mystical

teachings that are not located in a historical framework. Islam is constituted by the teaching and stories of the Qur'an, as related to Muhammad in a private angelic visitation. Likewise, many newer religions have emerged out of the claims of private revelations to individuals. Mormonism and its founder Joseph Smith is an obvious example.

In contrast, the claims by the first Christians about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are all events that were accessible in the public sphere, not the result of private dreams and revelations. From its birth, Christianity was an eminently falsifiable religion. That may sound like a bad thing, but in fact it's a very important principle in the search for truth. The claims of most religions simply can't be verified one way or the other. But we can come to a decision about Christianity based on the available evidence.

So what is the evidence for Christ? Can we trust the accounts of his life in the New Testament? How much can we really know about a man who lived, died and allegedly came back to life again 2,000 years ago?

Reinventing Jesus

Jesus is, unquestionably, the most influential character in history, to the extent that we measure history in the epochs before and after his life. But the time gap since he lived has led to all kinds of conjecture about who he really was. Conjuring a Christ in our own image has become a common phenomenon. Believers of different stripes have variously cast him as a socialist revolutionary, a pacifist, or a Rambo-figure ready for a scrap with any liberal theologian who crosses his path. And there are plenty of non-Christian interpretations out there too.

In the past ten years of hosting *Unbelievable?*, I've come across a wide variety of people recasting the story of Jesus, but reinventing his character goes back much further than that. By the second century AD, various religious sects were writing their own accounts of the life of Christ that bore little connection to the testimony of the Gospels. The popular revival of interest in these so-called 'Gnostic' writings was led by Dan Brown, whose 2003 religious thriller *The Da Vinci Code* mixed fact and fiction together (and lo, 'faction' was born). Whether it was intended or not, the novel's runaway success led many of his readers to believe that the real history of Jesus had been covered up by sinister church bodies, a suspicion that has taken root in the wider culture too. Here are three recent popular theories about the 'real' Jesus.

1. Jesus the guru

Some authors have invented historically fanciful incarnations of Christ. One popular version has come from Deepak Chopra, a bestselling author of New Age self-help books. In *Jesus: A Story of Enlightenment*, Chopra imaginatively fills in ‘the missing years’ between Christ’s childhood and his adult ministry. Drawing heavily on Eastern mysticism, Jesus finds spiritual enlightenment from a sage on an icy mountaintop before achieving ‘oneness’ with God.

Chris Sinkinson, lecturer at Moorlands theological college in the UK, is a regular Christian guest on *Unbelievable?*. As an archaeologist, he spends much of his time excavating the sites where Jesus and his contemporaries lived and walked. When I asked him about the New-Age-guru version of Jesus, he commented:

Chopra’s speculation on the ‘God consciousness’ of Jesus imports a very alien worldview into the Jewish-Hebrew context and culture of Jesus. This means his language is distorted completely. It’s actually a very Gnostic view of Jesus – an anti-material view, which is not Jewish at all.

Jesus draws attention to himself as the source of forgiveness, salvation and transformation. That makes him much more than just ‘a great moral teacher’. In the end, Jesus wasn’t crucified for being a New Age guru or teaching self-help therapy. Jesus was crucified for what was considered blasphemy among first-century Jews: his claim that as Messiah he was the one who could bring forgiveness and transformation.¹

2. Jesus the zealot

A more serious attempt to reimagine Christ is *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* by Reza Aslan. The book claims to show that Jesus was a rabble-rousing political revolutionary, not the peace-loving Messiah we thought he was. The author begins by quoting Matthew 10.34: 'I have not come to bring peace, but the sword.'² Aslan's Jesus becomes one of many apocalyptic preachers in first-century Judea, fomenting Jewish rebellion against the Roman overlords. Christ's crucifixion at the hands of the Roman Empire is at the centre of the book's thesis: it was a punishment reserved for criminals who had committed acts of treason against the state. Aslan claims that the early Church later refashioned Jesus as a peaceful spiritual teacher in the Gospels.

Aslan was brought to public attention after a Fox News interviewer questioned whether, as a Muslim, he had the authority to write such a book. Their toe-curling exchange, in which Aslan bristles with indignation, became a YouTube hit and contributed to the book becoming a bestseller. But when Aslan appeared on *Unbelievable?* to debate about the book, the interview felt no less awkward.

I had arranged for New Testament historian Anthony Le Donne to interact with him. Along with other historians, Le Donne had delivered a stinging rebuttal to Aslan's claims that Jesus was a political revolutionary. In a pointed article titled 'A Usually Happy Fellow Reviews Aslan's *Zealot*',³ he accused the Iranian-born writer of recycling a long-debunked myth with shoddy scholarship to boot. Le Donne was no less pointed in the radio debate when he began by saying:

Reading Zealot was a very troubling experience for me because there was an historical error on at least every third page. Even the 'sword' quote is immediately followed in Matthew by Jesus making clear that he is referring to an inter-Jewish, inter-family conflict. Yet Aslan seems to suggest he is talking about a literal sword aimed outward to non-Jews.⁴

Normally, guests who join me manage to have a pleasant conversation, even if they disagree strongly. Not so in this case. Le Donne directly accused Aslan of being 'misleading', while the author shot back that Le Donne was part of a 'snobbish' elite of scholars who didn't like their views of Jesus being challenged. Who knew that New Testament history could be so exciting?

The debate may have been caustic, but most scholars in the field (and not just the Christian ones) felt the same way as Le Donne. When weighed against the number of peaceful words and actions of Jesus, whose very death would come to represent a symbol of a non-violent response to power, Aslan's attempt to remould Jesus as a first-century Che Guevara seems stretched beyond credulity.

3. Jesus the husband

In 2012, a different drama about the historical Jesus played out in headlines across the world: a newly discovered fragment of ancient manuscript in which Christ purportedly refers to his ‘wife’ was trumpeted as evidence that Jesus had been a married man. Throwing aside conventional academic etiquette, Harvard professor Karen King announced the news to the media before the scrap of papyrus had undergone scholarly review. Subsequent tests on the relic revealed the parchment was indeed old, but cast doubt on the text itself, which seemed likely to have been cut and pasted from an online document. King doggedly held on to her theory until she was forced to admit it was a forgery in 2016, following a riveting piece of investigative journalism by Ariel Sabar for *The Atlantic* magazine. He had managed to trace the provenance of the artefact to its original source – Walter Fritz, a dubious character with the means and the motive for creating the forgery.⁵ King had been the victim of an elaborate hoax.

Anthony Le Donne’s book, *The Wife of Jesus: Ancient Texts and Modern Scandals*, also examined the infamous Karen King manuscript as well as other historical claims that Jesus was married. After meticulous research, however, Le Donne arrived at the conclusion that Jesus was a celibate man, albeit unusually for a rabbi of his day. It’s a non-sensational verdict which he freely admitted will not put him into competition with those whose book sales rely on more exotic theories. ‘The old adage that “sex sells” remains true,’ he said. He continued:

*If you put ‘sex’ and ‘Jesus’ in the same sentence, you are almost certain to get a headline. There is a pressure on scholars to go the sensationalist route. I knew that all I had to say was ‘Jesus was probably married to Mary Magdalene or the woman considered to be a prostitute’ for my book sales to go through the roof. However, I can’t say that because it’s not historically responsible.*⁶

Eliminating Jesus

And that's where we come back to people like Joseph Atwill. The author's sensational claims about the non-existence of Jesus are the very antithesis of historical responsibility. Yet even though his theories are regarded as kooky even by his fellow mythicists, he and those like him are tapping into a general sense of distrust of the Bible that pervades our culture today.

Somehow, an assumption has developed in the public consciousness that the Gospels are a collection of legendary fables. A 2016 survey reported that 22 per cent of people in the UK think Jesus was a mythical figure, while 17 per cent are unsure whether he was real or not.⁷ If accurate, this means that nearly 40 per cent of people doubt the existence of Jesus, a staggering indication of how pervasive such scepticism has become.

Part of the blame must lie with the Internet. Despite the fact that no widely respected historian holds to the mythicist position, if you type 'Did Jesus exist?' into a search engine you'd be forgiven for thinking that the issue is a seriously contested one. Sceptical websites and articles abound, the vast majority of which are run by atheists. Jesus mythicism is a classic example of a movement that can only exist online. Yet, for mainstream academics, the view that Jesus never existed belongs in the same category as those who claim that the moon landings were a hoax.

One such academic is agnostic Bible scholar Bart Ehrman. In years gone by, he won favour among the sceptical community for casting doubt upon aspects of the reliability of the Gospels. But when he wrote a book titled *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*, refuting the idea that Jesus did not exist (after he kept hearing it from atheists), many of his former fans turned against him.

I invited Ehrman into my radio studio to explain why the atheist community remains so keen to fly in the face of accepted scholarship. He suggested that an anti-religious bias is clouding their judgement:

*My guess is that they are people who believe that organized religion is a major problem, so they choose to attack Christianity by claiming that it is rooted in a fairy tale. They can then claim that Christianity was something made up in order to oppress people.*⁸

That interview with Ehrman was one among many I've had with him, but remains a memorable one, partly because it felt so unusual. Let me explain why.

Ehrman's own journey has involved moving from Evangelical Christianity to abandoning faith altogether after coming to doubt the truth of the Bible and the existence of God. I remember when I first came across his bestselling book *Misquoting Jesus*, in which he managed to turn the dry subject of textual transmission into a gripping account of why we can't necessarily trust the New Testament. Ehrman has mastered the art of making academic subjects accessible to a popular audience, and that particular book threw some serious doubts my way when I read it in preparation for interviewing him on my radio show.

In *Misquoting Jesus*, Ehrman explained how the original papyrus documents of the New Testament would have been long lost to posterity. He argued that the number of mistakes and insertions in the many copies produced thereafter cast doubt on the reliability of Scripture. By the time we came to record the radio show, my head was spinning with the new information I had encountered. How could we possibly trust the New Testament accounts?

On reflection that experience was a classic case of Proverbs 18.17: 'The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him' (ESV). When Cambridge Bible scholar Peter J. Williams joined me in the studio to have a debate with Ehrman, it quickly became apparent that the 'problem' of the multiple copies of New Testament documents was also the solution.

For starters, it is precisely the fact we have so many existing copies of New Testament documents, both whole and fragmentary, that has allowed textual experts to compare and contrast variant documents in a detective-style process that recovers the original text. In a court of law, many witnesses to an event can build up a more trustworthy testimony to that event than

a single witness, even if their accounts differ. Likewise, if we had only one surviving text we would have no discrepancies to worry about but little evidence of how closely it represents the original document. However, by examining the difference between the many existing documents available, we can deduce the correct words of the earliest texts, even though none of the originals survived.

Furthermore, when you drilled down to the number of passages actually thrown into question by Ehrman, it turned out that only a tiny handful of words were affected. What had initially seemed like a book that challenged the New Testament to its core turned out, on closer examination, to support the reliability of the vast majority of the text. It was an important lesson in withholding judgement until you've heard both sides of a case.

Over the years Ehrman has frequently returned to be a sceptical voice on the show, debating with scholars who affirm the reliability of the biblical record. In doing so, Ehrman has had precisely no vested interest in defending an orthodox Christian point of view. Which is why the conversation I had with him about those who deny the existence of Jesus was so unusual. Anybody tuning in to this particular episode could easily have mistaken him for the Christian apologist, so fervent was his critique of the mythicist movement.

The contrast of his position with the prevailing willingness to buy into a mythical Jesus was comically highlighted a few years earlier when Ehrman was interviewed on an edition of the *Infidel Guy Show*. As the title suggests, the podcast host Reginald Finley is an atheist, and appeared to have assumed that his guest, like him, was sympathetic to the mythicist view. Ehrman gave him very short shrift, pummelling him mercilessly with a variety of evidences for the existence of Jesus that left Finley slightly dazed. As a show host myself, it was the guiltiest of listening pleasures.

Does mythicism make sense?

Although the established world of scholarship to which Ehrman belongs decries the rise of Jesus mythicism, the fact that so many atheists defend the view has led to several *Unbelievable?* debates on the subject over the years.

One of the most popular arguments (and the subject of a thousand atheist Internet memes) is that the Jesus of the Gospels is actually a pastiche of pagan deities who have similar dying-and-rising stories. The notorious conspiracy-theory film *Zeitgeist*, which has amassed millions of views online, makes exactly these sorts of claims. It includes parallels between Jesus and the Egyptian sky-god Horus, the details of whose birth and life supposedly line up with those of Christ.

For instance, did you know that Egyptians believed Horus was born of the virgin Isis-Meri (Mary) on 25 December in a manger/cave? That his birth was announced by a star in the east and attended by three wise men? That his earthly father was named Joseph and that he was of royal descent? That he was a child teacher in the Temple at the age of 12 and, at 30, he was baptized in the river Eridanus (Jordan) by 'Anup the Baptizer' (John the Baptist) who was later decapitated?

Gosh. It all sounds remarkably familiar, doesn't it? Maybe the Gospel writers really did pinch the Horus myth and turn it into one about Jesus?

Except they didn't. Because if you go and properly research the story of Horus rather than relying on the online articles peddling such claims, you'll find that none of the 'facts' I just listed are actually true. They are either completely fabricated, or versions of the Horus story twisted beyond recognition to create the parallels. In any case, the idea that observant first-century Jews would have been influenced enough by Egyptian pagan myths to invent a Jesus based on them is historically absurd. Yet, without fail, every Christmas a variety of Horus-related Internet memes and articles pop up on my social media timeline.

To their credit, the most serious voices in mythicism have asked that we don't judge them by the standard of fanciful conspiracy films like *Zeitgeist* or the far-fetched conjectures of people like Joseph Atwill. I was often told by my atheist and Christian listeners that to hear the best case for a fictional Jesus, there was only one name I needed to invite on to the show: Richard Carrier. So I did.

Carrier is a leading (and sometimes controversial) figure within the global atheist community and regarded by many as the world's leading Jesus mythicist. Although he doesn't hold an academic post, he has a PhD in ancient history and describes himself as an 'independent scholar' whose research into the historicity of Jesus was crowdfunded by fellow atheists. So what's his theory?

In a nutshell, Carrier holds that early Christians believed in Jesus as a purely spiritual Messiah-figure who was located in a heavenly realm, and never walked the earth. In support of this, he points out that the earliest source of Christianity, St Paul (who did exist), never met a physical Jesus himself. Carrier believes the Gospels were later fabrications by Christians who wanted to flesh out an earthly story for Christ as their religion began to take shape.

If that sounds like an incredible claim to you, then you aren't alone. New Testament historian Mark Goodacre of Duke University expressed bafflement at Carrier's argument when they discussed it on the show. Goodacre described the 'strange leaps of logic' that are needed to eliminate a flesh-and-blood Jesus. He pointed out that the physical existence of Jesus is unquestionably assumed in a variety of ways throughout Scripture, especially in the earliest Christian writings we have, the letters of Paul.

For instance, in Galatians 1.18–19, Paul mentions James the brother of Jesus. It's a throwaway reference, but the fact is you can't be the brother of Jesus without there being a real Jesus to be the sibling of. Then there are the various references in Paul's letters to aspects of Jesus' earthly ministry, such as his summary of the Last Supper in 1 Corinthians 11 and Jesus' death and resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. Nevertheless, Carrier insisted that all these references to Jesus can be recast as referring to a heavenly Jesus.

Mark Goodacre finished their interaction by saying:

*We create so many problems for ourselves if we take the historical Jesus out of the picture altogether. It's not just that we have Jesus' picture, but we have lots of other characters in the story too which only hyper-scepticism would cause us to doubt the historicity of.*⁹

Hyper-scepticism is indeed the problem. For Carrier's position to be plausible, we must make a variety of assumptions. The Gospels must be the accretions of mythological stories, written well after the time they purport to describe. A whole host of characters, plotlines and detailed historical settings must be invented from scratch. The apostle Paul must be speaking in purely mystical terms when he makes references to the ministry of Jesus. It also assumes that all extra-biblical accounts of Jesus are simply trading off a pre-established Christian myth, or have been doctored by later Christians.

I don't often express incredulity on the show, but on this occasion I confessed to Carrier that I was having great difficulty buying his explanation. As Goodacre stated, the 'tortuous' explanations of the mythicists created many more problems than they solved. Like the theories of the 9/11 conspiracies or moon-landing hoaxers, I felt that I was being asked to swallow an entire alternative hyper-sceptical worldview along with Carrier's theory. Maybe he would tell me I just couldn't stomach it, but having met the world's most qualified mythicist, I was genuinely nonplussed by his theory and left wondering, 'Is that really all they have?'

So, colour me unimpressed. On the contrary, when it comes to historical evidence for characters from antiquity, I believe the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth is among the best attested of all.

The evidence for Jesus

The four Gospel accounts of Jesus in the New Testament are estimated to have been written down between 35 and 65 years after his life. Mark is recognized as the earliest Gospel, written within the lifetime of Jesus' first followers, and John the latest. We have thousands of manuscripts of these Gospels from various centuries. Until recently, the earliest existing copies dated to around AD 100–150.

Recently, fragments of what are believed to be a copy of the Gospel of Mark were discovered in an Egyptian death mask and have been dated to the late first century. If the find is verified, it will be further confirmation of the close proximity of Mark's account of Jesus' life to the events it describes. Paul's letters were written even closer to the life of Jesus. Some traditions he quotes refer to creeds that were probably being recited by Jesus' followers within a few years of his death and resurrection.

Why am I telling you all this? Because, contrary to popular assumptions, the number and nature of the historical documents for the life of Jesus is extraordinarily strong compared to other historical figures of the time. A key principle in historical research is that the closer the written sources are to the events they describe, and the more of them we have to compare, the better their reliability. For many key figures of the ancient world, we have as few as 20 existing copies of the documents that detail their lives, often written down decades or even centuries after the events. This means, for example, that we have far better historical evidence for the life of Jesus than we do for the crossing of the Rubicon by Caesar, a major event in the history of the Roman Empire, which nobody questions. The crossing of the Rubicon has only four ancient authors who mention it within a relatively recent time of the event, writing within 65–165 years of the crossing. In contrast, the strong consensus of New Testament scholars today is that our four canonical Gospels were written between 35 and 65 years after the life of Jesus. And, as already noted, Paul provides even earlier data about Jesus.

It's also worth remembering that, within his own lifetime as a Jewish preacher in a remote province of the Roman Empire, Jesus was unknown on the world stage. The histories that tend to be recorded are of world leaders whose names appeared on the currency of the day or are engraved on stone tributes – the kind of artefacts which endure far longer than papyrus scrolls. Lesser figures didn't get their histories written down in ways that survived, if at all. So having any evidence at all for the life of Jesus is a minor miracle in itself.

As Goodacre noted in the debate with Carrier: 'The evidence we would expect to find is exactly what we do find – Jesus surviving in the memories of those who were closest to him.' The fact we have so many early physical records of his words and actions, unmatched by those representing more senior figures of his day, is remarkable.

But, however early historians may date them, can we trust these accounts? A frequent charge brought against the Gospels and epistles is that they were written by biased Christians, calling into question their reliability as historical sources. This has created a situation where some people seem to believe that nothing in the New Testament is admissible as evidence for Jesus. When Kenneth Humphreys, an enthusiastic popularizer of mythicism in the UK, appeared on *Unbelievable?* with Christian apologist Sean McDowell, he persistently refused to countenance any evidence from McDowell that was associated with Christians. It quickly became a frustratingly circular conversation.

With due respect to Humphreys, his demands amount to a bizarrely hyper-sceptical and anti-historical burden of proof to lay on Jesus. The New Testament is a collection precisely of those documents which were regarded as the earliest and most authoritative accounts of the life of Christ and his followers. Naturally, they would have been written down by people who were part of the movement that he launched. Dismissing them because they were written by Christians is a bit like doubting my claim to be married to my wife because those who witnessed us tie the knot were our friends and family, not impartial bystanders. Christian sources inevitably have the theological stamp and reflection of the people who wrote them down, but this doesn't stop them being historical documents, referring to real times, people and places.

Yet even if we were to set aside the Gospels and letters of Paul that testify to Jesus, there are enough extra-biblical, non-Christian sources to put the existence of his life and ministry beyond question. Historians of the time like Tacitus, Josephus and Pliny the Younger all mention Jesus and the early Church which started gathering to worship in his name. There were also critics of Christianity such as Celsus who, in opposing the early Church, confirmed various aspects of the claims being made about Jesus. The fact that their accounts were written down decades after the events was not at all unusual for the age of antiquity. The histories of most significant figures were written down long after their lives had ended.

When I asked biblical scholar N. T. Wright for the one thing he would show a sceptic as evidence for Jesus' life, he pointed to his death, saying:

*The crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth is one of the best attested facts in ancient history. The idea that Jesus never existed is something that no ancient historian would take seriously for a minute. If we take Jesus out of the world of first-century Palestinian Judaism, there are a thousand other things that we simply can't explain. All sorts of evidence points back to the certainty of this figure, and particularly his crucifixion.*¹⁰

My plea to those who dismiss the New Testament accounts of Jesus' life as legendary fairy tales is to be consistent with the evidence. In my experience, sceptics often demand a level of proof for Jesus that they never require of any other equivalent historical figure. If the same amount of scepticism they apply to Jesus were applied generally, we would have hardly any history to speak of whatsoever.

But I want to go further than merely saying Jesus was a historical figure who was well attested by those who lived after him. I believe a strong case can be made that the Gospels themselves contain the testimony of first-person eyewitness accounts about his life, death and resurrection. The research has been led primarily by New Testament historian Richard Bauckham, who has appeared on *Unbelievable?* several times to talk about his book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*.¹¹

While scepticism about the existence of Jesus has been growing among the general public, Bauckham's pioneering work demonstrated how far the academic ground has shifted in the opposite direction. His research explained why the Gospels themselves are filled with telltale signs that the authors were reporting the eyewitness accounts of the very first followers of Jesus.

For instance, Bauckham records how the writings of an early Church father, Papias, show that Mark's Gospel is based primarily on the recollections of Simon Peter. It's evidence that the disciple's first-hand testimony was assumed by the early Christian community, but is also borne out by the fact that Peter plays such a key role in Mark and is included at the beginning and end of the Gospel.

What has perhaps been most remarkable is the way that Bauckham has brought other lines of historical research to bear in his case for the reliability of the New Testament. In 2002, Israeli scholar Tal Ilan published research on how common certain names were among first-century Jews. Analysing the New Testament for the frequency of names and cross-checking it with Ilan's findings showed that there was a striking correlation between the two records. The Gospels are full of the same names that were being used in the time and place that Jesus lived, lending strong support to the conclusion that the Gospels were recorded by people alive at the time, not invented at some hazy distance from the events in a different location.

Bauckham has even challenged the long-held view that John's Gospel is a later theological work produced by an anonymous religious community. Instead, he believes the evidence shows that John was indeed written directly by the 'beloved disciple' of Jesus, and that, despite its more theologically reflective tone, has the greatest claim to be written directly by an eyewitness of Jesus.

These and many other lines of evidence bring us to the conclusion that we have good reasons for treating the stories of Jesus as historically reliable accounts that came from those who knew him. All of which prompts the next obvious question: why should we believe what they said about him?

How to read the Bible

Before we address that question, I'd like to make an important aside.

While I've argued that the accounts of Jesus and his first followers in the New Testament are historically reliable, we need to make sure we read them intelligently. Both believers and sceptics often make the mistake of approaching the New Testament in the same way they would approach a modern-day newspaper report, ignoring the fact that literary conventions have a tendency to change in the course of 2,000 years.

Many genres of literature are represented within the 66 books that make up the New and Old Testaments. The Gospels conform to a genre we call 'ancient biography', and would have been understood in their time as firmly historical accounts. But that doesn't mean we should expect the same from them that we might expect from modern biographies. Those who wrote ancient biography had a more flexible approach to the way they laid out their material than is usually employed today.

One of the most valuable lessons I've learned over a decade of hosting *Unbelievable?* is seeing the many layers of meaning that the Gospels offer in their pages. Each author has a theological aim as well as a biographical one, and arranges his material accordingly. Matthew is keen to draw out the way Jesus' ministry intersected with the Old Testament, whereas Luke is more interested in how this good news will impact a non-Jewish audience. Mark's Gospel is a rapid-fire account whose urgency seems to reflect its early provenance.

The mistake is to treat the Gospels woodenly as inflexible pieces of reportage. When presented with evidence for their historicity, the sceptic is liable to point out some inconsistency between the accounts as proof that they are unreliable. But purported contradictions often have an explanation in the literary conventions of telescoping and reordering material that the Gospel writers worked within. Many gallons of ink have been spilled in debates over whether the accounts are 'inerrant'. But in my view, to obsess

over differences in the details is to focus our energy in the wrong place. We aren't obliged to make every element of the stories line up in order to establish that the Gospels are historically reliable, any more than differing accounts from the battle of Waterloo would change the conclusion that Napoleon's army was defeated.

As a whole, the Bible is a library of books which, given the varied cultures, places and wide timescale they cover, present a remarkably coherent account of God's working in history. I'm a Christian so, while I would affirm that every part of Scripture bears the mark of its human author, I also believe that God has been working in the background to provide a written record for multiple generations about who he is and why he came in the person of Jesus. That's why I use words like 'inspired' and 'authoritative' to describe the Bible. It's more than just an interesting collection of historical records and moral teachings. It stands apart from every other religious and historical record because it reveals the one who is the key to history and salvation itself. Those words exist to make the Word of God himself known to us.

I don't expect a sceptic to share that view of course. But if we can merely agree that the Gospels are generally historically reliable, then we already share enough common ground to address the really important question. If Jesus was who he said he was and if he died and rose again, what should our response to him be?

Answering that question takes us beyond simply analysing the evidence for a Jesus who existed a long time ago. It brings us to the question of whether he has a claim on our lives today.

Reverberating through history

Thousands of Jewish people died by crucifixion under the rule of the brutal Roman Empire in the time of Jesus. It was a uniquely sadistic type of punishment, eventually outlawed as a form of execution because it was deemed too cruel. Yet today, the cross that Jesus died upon has become an extraordinarily potent symbol of love triumphing over hate, peace over pain, and forgiveness instead of fear. It has been represented endlessly in art, fashion and architecture. Through the years it has been banned, burned and blessed. Its mystery continues to divide, reconcile and challenge all kinds of people. To many its message remains the 'foolishness' that Paul spoke of in 1 Corinthians 1.18. But to Christians it is the defining event by which God showed his love for the world.

When I interviewed N. T. Wright about the cross, he said: 'Crucifixion was the most barbaric and horrible way to die in those days. Yet Christians made the cross the symbol of their movement from the very beginning.'¹²

Believing that their crucified Messiah represented God's salvation plan for the world was just about the strangest idea that a group of Jewish followers could have come up with. Nevertheless, the first Christians proclaimed that Jesus died, not as a failed revolutionary, but as a perfect sacrifice through whose death God was reconciling the whole of his disordered creation back to himself. They said that Jesus volunteered himself in our place to suffer all the consequences of the sin, pain and rebellion we have created. They told of how his death was the turning point in a cosmic spiritual battle, in which love battled hate, and love won. Since then generations of Christian believers have claimed to be transformed by trusting in Jesus' death for forgiveness and a new life. But why should a non-Christian believe it?

I meet plenty of people who are happy to agree that a man called Jesus lived in first-century Judea. They will usually affirm that he was a good moral teacher whose words would have an impact on the world for centuries to

come. But believing he was the Son of God whose death paves the way to salvation? That's a step too far. It was C. S. Lewis who most famously captured the inconsistency of such a position:

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 the 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.¹³

It has come to be known as the 'liar, lunatic or Lord' trilemma. Critics often respond that adding a fourth category of 'legend' would cause the argument to fail. In this chapter, I have aimed to show that 'legend' is simply not an option on the table. On the contrary, Jesus' blasphemous claims to divinity were precisely what got him crucified. Since then the life and death of Jesus have reverberated through history for the past 2,000 years. The Gospels report real events performed by a real person at a real time.

We have not been let off the hook of C. S. Lewis's challenge. God came in person to show us what he was like and gave up his own life so that we could be reconciled to him. In doing so, Jesus claimed to be Lord, not just of those who followed him then, but of you and me today.

Before I began *Unbelievable?*, I would have assumed that this story, while beautiful, is something we just accept 'by faith'. I've since learned that Christian faith isn't about believing something without evidence, but trusting in someone because of the experience and evidence we've been granted.

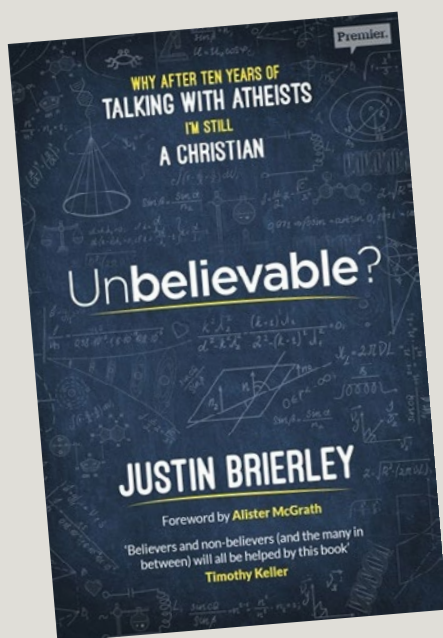
Believing that Jesus is Lord isn't pie-in-the-sky-faith-without-evidence. A whole host of factors make sense of my belief that Jesus was who he said he was, and explain why his life and death are at the centre of our story today. In all my years of hosting the radio show, I have heard any number of alternative theories about Jesus Christ. Ironically, it is the orthodox Christian view of Jesus that continues to strike me as the most radical of all: that a first-century Jewish teacher described himself as the Son of God, was crucified for it and rose from the dead in vindication of that claim.

Notes

1. Justin Brierley, 'Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?', *Premier Christianity* magazine, January 2014.
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3. <http://bit.ly/2voZsuk>
4. 'Was Jesus Just a... Zealot? – Reza Aslan vs Anthony Le Donne', *Unbelievable?*, 14 December 2013.
5. Ariel Sabar, 'The Unbelievable Tale of Jesus' Wife', *The Atlantic*, July 2016.
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7. Barna's 'Talking Jesus' survey: www.talkingjesus.org.
8. 'Did Jesus Exist? – Bart Ehrman Q&A', *Unbelievable?*, 18 August 2012.
9. 'Did Jesus Exist? – Richard Carrier vs Mark Goodacre', *Unbelievable?*, 15 December 2012.
10. 'Is There Evidence for Jesus' Life and Death?': <http://bit.ly/2uMuYiB>
11. 'Richard Bauckham on the Gospels, Part 1', *Unbelievable?*, 29 August 2009.
12. 'Is There Evidence for Jesus' Life and Death?'
- 13 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 52.

Unbelievable?

This booklet is an extract from the book
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