

Atheist? Agnostic?

Jesus: The Evidence

There is a historical and rational basis for Jesus being the Son of God. There is a wealth of evidence to support this.



Jesus: The Evidence

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To use this booklet “interactively”:

Go to www.jesustheevidence.com

Go to the page called “**So, What’s the Evidence Then?**”

Click on the pdf icon and open the document. This contains exactly the same text as this booklet.

If you want to check a Wikipedia or Bible reference, click on the reference and you should be taken to the relevant internet page.

Jesus: The Evidence

Introduction

“Jesus: The Evidence” started life as a three part course run at Cathcart Trinity church in Glasgow in 2006. Since then, we have run the course at various venues throughout Scotland.

The “strap lines” for the course are:

- **There is a historical and rational basis for Jesus being the Son of God.**
- **There is a wealth of evidence to support this.**

Clearly, these are bold statements to make. The purpose of the course is to provide evidence to support these statements and allow the participants to draw their own conclusions on what they hear and see.

However, not everyone is fortunate enough to live in the Greater Glasgow area... So, to make this information more accessible, I thought that it would be useful if the course was summarised in booklet form.

Who is this Booklet For?

This booklet has been written primarily for people who would classify themselves as either agnostics or atheists.

Agnostics: If you're undecided if Jesus is the Son of God or if you don't know if there is a God.

Atheists: If you don't believe in God.

However, the booklet may also be of interest to **Christians**. If you're a Christian and are interested in finding out more about the historical and rational aspects of your faith, this booklet may help.

Why has this Booklet been Written?

Three reasons:

1. You may be surprised by the information that's reviewed here. This information is all in the public domain, but is rarely heard – either inside or outside church circles. I know from personal experience that it can also be difficult to find this information. People generally don't know where to look. Also, if they do look, they may be put off, as the information can be written in "Church" language and buried in Christian books and pamphlets that non-Christians can have difficulties with.
2. We live in rational and secular times. Most people today don't just believe something because they are told to believe by friends, family, politicians or a church. Today, we require the facts before we make our mind up about anything. If you've ever looked into the claims that Jesus is the Son of God, you will have found that much of the discussion is centred around "faith" and "belief". Now, as you would probably expect me to say, there's nothing wrong with faith and belief. However for the average non-believer living in the rational and secular world, this presents some difficulty. "Why believe?" is the question many of us would ask. Often, the answers to this question are provided in terms of faith and in a "Church" language that seems out of step with the rest of the world. This booklet aims to take another approach. I started by saying that there is a wealth of evidence to clearly demonstrate that Jesus is the Son of God. My aim is to present this evidence in as clear and as rational a way as possible.
3. I think it is important that people have the opportunity to explore Jesus' message and experience the positive effects this brings. An atheist friend said to me recently – referring to the bible - "of course Derek, I think it's all just fairy stories". If you have similar views about Jesus - and have no strong evidence to suggest that things are otherwise – then you will never have the opportunity to experience the positive effects of Jesus' message. My hope is that this booklet will give you "food for thought" and encourage you to explore further.

Why did I Write this Booklet?

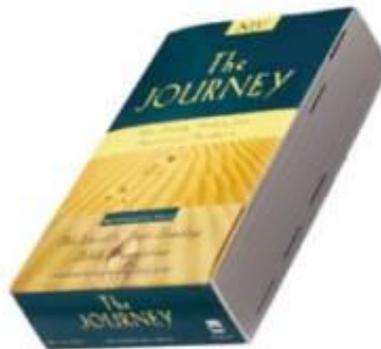
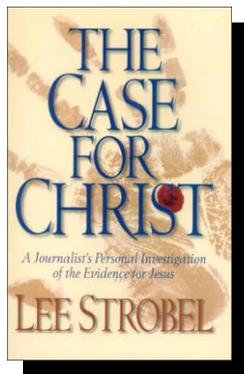
I'm a Christian. However, I used to be an agnostic. Like many people, I thought about and discussed religious matters with my friends in my teens – but never came to any clear conclusions. I suppose I parked the "big

questions” on God and Jesus in a file in the back of my head with a view to thinking about them later – but never did.

So through my 20’s and 30’s, I guess I had the view of most people in the UK today that I really didn’t know what to think about God and Jesus. I suppose I thought that you probably needed to have some form of faith to be a Christian - and that this faith was for other people. People who had perhaps been brought up Christians. Or perhaps, people who had experienced some form of life-changing spiritual experience. Neither situation applied to me.

However, in my late 30’s I thought it would be worthwhile revisiting some of the questions I’d left unresolved in my teens. My thoughts were that as there are plenty of capable and intelligent people who profess to have some form of belief in God (for example, Scientists like Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking. Politicians like Nelson Mandela. Military men like Norman Schwarzkopf and Richard Dannatt). In a survey published in “Nature” in 1997, four out of 10 scientists said they believed in God. Ok, just over 45% said they didn’t believe, and 14.5% described themselves as doubters or agnostics. However, a figure of 40% surprised me. Why did they believe?

Also, if I looked at the religious leaders in this country, they were clearly not stupid men or women. If these people had some belief in God, then perhaps it was worthwhile looking at this again to find out why.



At this time I happened to meet a colleague on a business trip to the USA who, it turned out, also happened to be a Christian. I wasn’t aware of this until I asked him where he had been on holiday that year. He replied that he had been over to Oxford in the UK on missionary work. As you might imagine, this sparked my curiosity and the conversation turned to matters Christian. The result of the conversation was that he said that he’d send me a few books that might help with the questions I had. Sure enough, two weeks later I received a package containing a copy of “The Case for Christ” by Lee Strobel and a bible.

Did reading “The Case for Christ” turn me into a Christian? Frankly, no it didn’t.

However, what it did though was act as the starting point for my own investigation into who Jesus is. I was amazed by what I found. I was amazed by my own ignorance of the evidence I found. How could I be living in a “Christian” country and not be aware of this stuff?

So, the reason I have written this booklet is that I think it’s important to share the information I found with others, and allow them to draw their own conclusions.

Last Notes

There are three parts to this booklet.

- Part 1. The Sources of Evidence
- Part 2. Who Was Jesus?
- Part 3. Resurrection: The Evidence.

I hope you find the contents interesting and (perhaps) surprising.

Part 1: The Sources of Evidence

What are the Sources of Evidence for Jesus?

In the “Jesus: The Evidence” course, we spend a significant amount of time looking at the sources of evidence we have for Jesus and assessing how reliable these sources are.

So, what are the sources of evidence for Jesus?

- The four Gospels of Jesus in the Bible.
- The gospels of Jesus, that didn't make it into the Bible (the apocryphal gospels).
- The letters of Paul in the Bible.
- Written sources from outside the Bible, dated to shortly after Jesus' life.
- Archaeological evidence.
- Circumstantial evidence.

Of these, the most often overlooked is the last point – **circumstantial evidence**. I'd like to ponder this briefly. Christianity has existed on this planet for a very long time. Christianity has more followers today than any other religion on Earth. However, we know that there was a time when there were no Christians on this planet. So, why are there Christians today? Rational cause and effect tells us that at some point in the past, something must have happened (some **cause**) that had the **effect** of compelling some people who weren't Christians to become Christians.

Now this might sound like stating the obvious, but for all of us – atheists, agnostics, Christians, those of other faiths - this provides a direct challenge. Cause and effect tells us that the start of Christianity is a historical event. As a result, when and why Christianity started can be studied like any other historical event. Historians of all faiths and no faith have been doing this very thing for centuries. The key point we must not lose sight of is that “something happened” to cause all the Christianity we see all around us today. Something happened to start it all in the first place – and given all the historical research that's been directed towards finding out “what happened”,

all of us (you, me) can come to our own, **informed** view of what we think happened.

We'll now look at each evidential source in turn. However before that, we should ask one fundamental question.

Did Jesus ever exist?

In the past, people have often asked whether Jesus existed at all. I hope this doesn't appear like I'm brushing this question aside when I say that nearly all contemporary historians (Christian and non-Christian alike) are agreed that He did live and die in first century Palestine. There really is overwhelming evidence - some of which is presented in this course – to back this up.

(For an independent reference on this, go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historicity_of_Jesus)

So we're taking this one as a "given". This would be a very short booklet if we didn't...

The Historical Jesus?

So, if most historians agree that He existed. What view of Jesus do they agree upon?

A few years ago, I read a book by the historian Professor E. P. Sanders called "The Historical Figure of Jesus" (Penguin). E.P. Sanders is regarded as a leading figure in research on the "historical" Jesus. This particular book was written in 1993.

In the book, Sanders provides a brief overview of what the majority of contemporary historians agree upon regarding the historical Jesus. He says that: "[amongst historians, these are] almost beyond dispute". To quote directly:

- Jesus was born circa. 4 BCE, near the time of death of Herod the Great.
- He spent his childhood and early adult years in Nazareth, a Galilean village.
- He was baptised by John the Baptist.
- He called disciples.
- He taught in the towns, villages and countryside of Galilee (apparently not the cities).
- He preached "the kingdom of God".

- About the year 30 [AD], he went to Jerusalem for Passover.
- He created a disturbance in the Temple area.
- He had a final meal with the disciples.
- He was arrested and interrogated by Jewish authorities, specifically the high priest.
- He was executed on the orders of the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate.

(I should say that Sanders' list continues after Jesus' execution – but we'll look at that more closely in Part 3)

This, in essence, is what contemporary historians agree upon. This includes Christian and non-Christian historians. As you can see, this list is a pretty comprehensive outline of Jesus life and death. It also closely matches the events of Jesus' life and death as described in the Gospels.

The Gospels

When I was an agnostic, I thought that the four Gospels in the Bible were theological texts written hundreds of years after the time Jesus was supposed to have lived and that the Gospels we read today were substantially revised and doctored versions of what had probably been written in the first place. In short, they couldn't be used as a basis for historical research on Jesus.

I was surprised to find that the general view amongst historians that specialise in first century, near-East studies was very different.

The majority of information we have about Jesus comes from the Gospels of Jesus in the bible.

Now the obvious question any non-Christian has is: "are these documents reliable and accurate descriptions of Jesus"?

This is a fair question and one I'll spend some time exploring below.

The Four Gospels

There are four Gospels in the Bible. They're called the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These names refer to the "authors" of the Gospels. Whether people called Matthew, Mark, Luke and John actually wrote the gospels, is a matter of historical debate. However, the common view is that:

- "**Matthew**" is thought to have been written by one of Jesus' original disciples called Matthew.

- **“Mark”** is thought to have been written by a man called John Mark. John Mark was a companion of Peter - one of Jesus’ original disciples (also known as Simon or Cephas).
- **“Luke”** was written by a man of the same name. Luke was an associate of Paul the apostle and was actively involved with Paul in spreading of the Christian message through the Roman Empire. The authorship of the book of Acts in the bible (a history of the early church up to around 60 to 65 AD) is also attributed to Luke.
- **“John”** is thought to have been written by one of Jesus’ original disciples, called John. Of all the Gospels, there is most debate amongst historians about authorship of this Gospel.

(For a fuller discussion on the “writers” of the gospels, go to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospels>)

Three of these Gospels – the books of Matthew, Mark and Luke are quite similar in content. In them, the sequence of events in Jesus’ life are similar and the parables (the stories Jesus used to illustrate teaching points) are often identical. Because of these similarities, these three Gospels are sometimes referred to as “The Synoptic Gospels” (Synoptic meaning – “To view at the same time”).

The fourth Gospel (the Book of John) is rather different to the other three – in both style and content. We will look at this in a bit more detail later.

Gospel Reliability?

As I said before, the main source of information on Jesus’ life and death comes from the four Gospels. We should now return to the question: “are these documents reliable and accurate descriptions of Jesus?”

The answer, in part, comes from the dates that the Gospels were written.

As I said earlier, there is debate amongst historians as to who the actual authors of the gospels were. However, there is more agreement on when the gospels were written. The conservative (secular) view amongst historians is that the earliest Gospel (Mark) was written around 60 AD. Matthew and Luke were written some 10 to 15 years later. The Gospel of John was written some time around 90AD.

(For dates of Gospels, see also “**Dating**” section of <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel>)

Now, Jesus was crucified around 30 AD. That leaves a gap of around 30 years between Jesus being alive and the events of His life being written down.

Why are these dates important?

30 years is a very short time. It's less than half a lifetime. I appreciate that life expectancy for people living in 1st century Judaea and Galilee was less than parts of the world today. **However, when the Gospel of Mark was written, there would be a good chance that some of the people who had actually seen and heard Jesus would be still alive.** In other words, there would be still be first hand witnesses for Jesus life available to draw upon for information – and (equally importantly) to challenge what was written down if it were inaccurate.

Also, a span of 30 years doesn't give much time for legends and myths to develop about Jesus. There's a general "rule of thumb" amongst historians that the longer the time-span between an event occurring and it being written about, the greater the chance of legendary material being incorporated into the narrative. The 30 year time-span we have with Jesus is, in historical terms, very short. For comparison, the earliest biographies we have of Alexander the Great were written more than 400 years after his death (written by Arrian and Plutarch). Yet, these are the biographies that we base our historical knowledge of Alexander the Great upon. Another example (that we will look at later) is the great fire of Rome. We base our knowledge of this event on the writings of Tacitus. Tacitus wrote about the fire in 115AD – 51 years after the actual event.

(See "Sources" section of http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_the_Great; Plutarch <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plutarch>; Arrian <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arrian>. Tacitus on the Great Fire of Rome http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Fire_of_Rome)

So, from a historian's perspective, there's a very good chance that the Gospels could be pretty accurate representations of Jesus' life - given that they were written very shortly after the actual events being described.

Thought Experiment

As a way of illustrating the point I'm making. Take a few minutes to consider the following.

I'm writing this in 2011. 30 years ago was 1981. What can you remember of 30 years ago?

Imagine you were asked to write down details of the lives of your own family (mother, father, grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters) and what they were doing in the late-seventies and early 80's (ie 30 years ago). Think about what you could write down today concerning their lives at that time - where they lived, who their friends were, where they worked, what interests they had etc.

To do this, my guess is that you would use your own memory (if you were alive at that time), talk to surviving members of the family, talk to friends and so on. From this, how detailed and accurate a picture could you put together?

Unless you have famous or remarkable family members, it's unlikely you will have any written sources to go on (diaries, newspaper articles etc). It's more likely you would be using oral information from friends and family and your own memory. In short, you would be using the same type of sources as the Gospel writers used in the 1st Century to piece together their descriptions of Jesus' life.

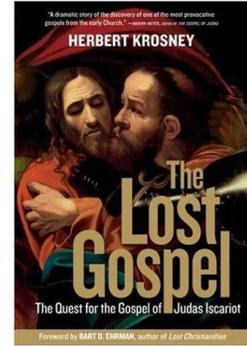
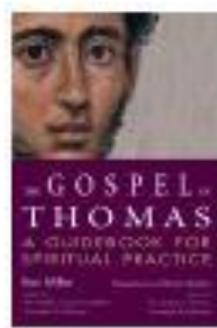
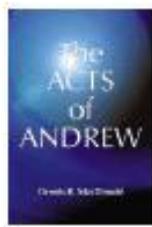
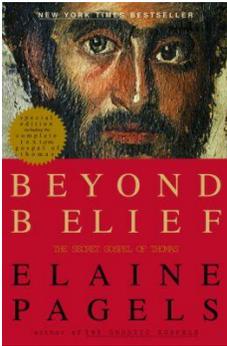
(For more information on the accuracy of the oral traditions the writers of the Gospels would have used as the basis of their writings, go to the "**Oral tradition**" section of <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel>)

I think it's fair to say that you could probably provide a pretty detailed picture of your family at that time. I'm sure that there would be some omissions and inaccuracies, but the broad detail would be correct.

I'm also sure that if another member of your family did the same task, there would be differences in the detail between your and their biographies – but that they would be broadly similar. In this respect, these differing family histories would be a bit like the four Gospels – broadly similar, but differing in some of the details.

Are there other accounts of Jesus' life that are not in the Bible?

There are many other accounts (gospels) of Jesus' life that are not in the Bible. Many of these other gospels have survived to the present day and are available for both historians and the general public to read and study. See a few of these over the page.



You may have read in the press a few years ago about the recently unearthed “Gospel of Judas Iscariot”. This is just one of many other gospels such as “The Gospel of Thomas”, “The Infancy Gospel of Thomas”, “The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew” etc. These **apocryphal gospels** (as they are known) were written during the 2nd Century AD or later. They often contain more fanciful and supernatural accounts of Jesus’ life – just as historians might expect from the historians’ myths and legends “rule of thumb” described previously.

Whilst historians use these apocryphal gospels for study on the life of Jesus, they are perhaps of greater value to study the beliefs of the 2nd and 3rd century Christian communities from which they sprung.

(For apocryphal gospels, see also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Testament_apocrypha)

So, who decided which gospels would be in the Bible?

If there are all these other accounts of Jesus’ life, why are they not in the bible? Who decided what was in and what was out?

The answer is that no one person of church decided. In the 2nd, 3rd and 4th centuries, the central core of the four Gospels (and the letters of Paul, which we will look at later) were accepted by the most Christian churches in the Roman Empire. Some of the other gospels (for example, the gospel of Thomas) were accepted in some churches and not in others.

Eventually around 320 to 330 AD (possibly at the Nicaea Council in 325AD), the final content of the New Testament was decided upon. Interestingly, it was the four oldest Gospels (the ones written closest to the actual events of Jesus life - and thus the ones deemed the most reliable) that “made the cut”.

(For more on the development of the New Testament “canon” go to: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Development_of_the_New_Testament_canon)

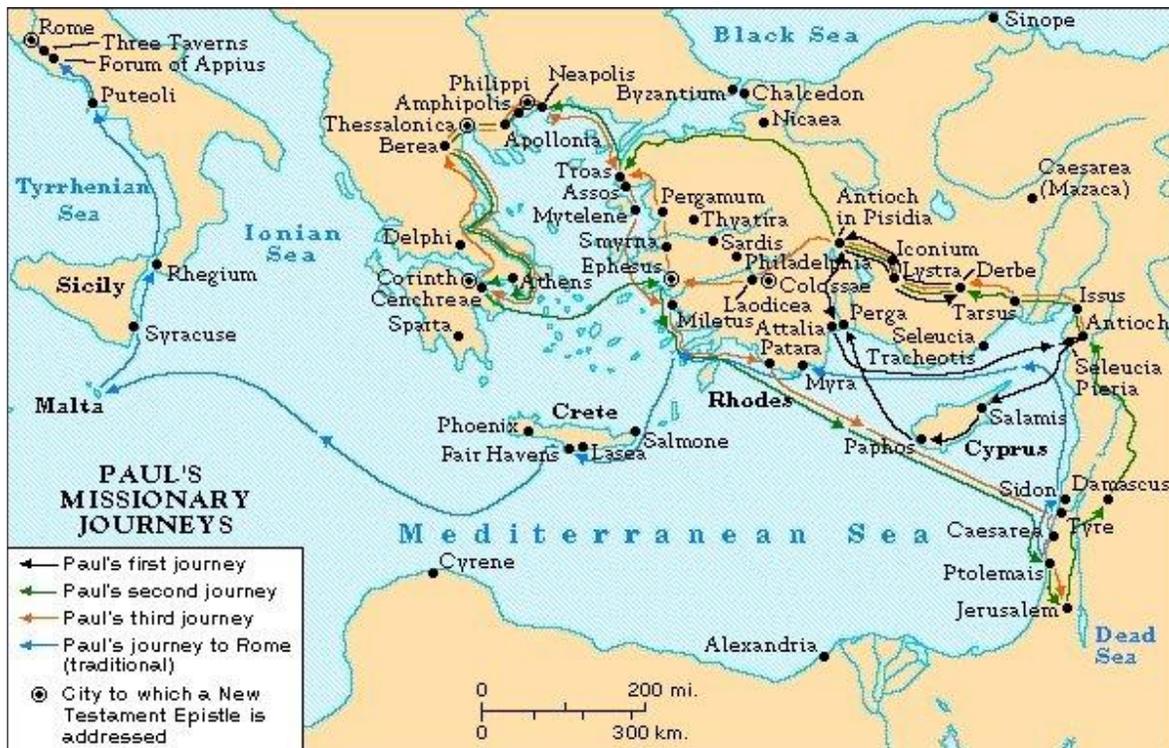
Are the four gospels in the Bible the earliest written works with Jesus mentioned?

Well, actually no. Historians are of the view that some of letters of Paul that appear in the Bible were written earlier than the Gospel of Mark.

Who was Paul?

Historians are generally agreed on the following relating to the life of Paul.

- Paul was a Jew living in Judaea around the time of Jesus. At this time, he was called Saul.
- He was involved in the persecution of early Christians.
- Sometime after Jesus' death a dramatic event occurred in his life to change him from a persecutor of Christ followers to becoming a Christ follower himself.
- Once he became a Christ follower, he was actively involved in the establishment and support of Christian churches throughout the Roman Empire. He also changed his name to Paul at this time.
- He was eventually arrested and imprisoned in Rome.
- He was executed in Rome sometime between AD 60 and AD 70.



Map of Paul's journeys described in the book of Acts in the Bible

(For more on Paul, go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_of_Tarsus)

As part of his work in encouraging the growth of Christian churches, Paul wrote letters to some of these churches. Unfortunately, not all of these letters have survived to the present day.

Those letters that have survived appear in today's Bible. They contain Paul's views on Jesus, guidance on worship, clarification on theological matters and words of encouragement to the fledgling Christian communities they were written to. Interestingly, they also provide details of some of the issues and divisions existing in the early churches relating to the interpretation of Jesus' teachings and Resurrection.

For me, another interesting aspect of the letters is that they are written like genuine letters. They are often responses to letters that were written to Paul. These other letters haven't survived, so we only have half the correspondence and have to piece together the issues that prompted the writing of the letters from Paul's response only. Also, being a personal letter, glimpses of the Paul's personality and mind are preserved in their texts.

Are Paul's letters genuine?

As you might imagine, there is debate amongst historians as to whether these letters were actually written by Paul. Whilst there is debate about the authenticity of some of the letters, historians are confident that Paul wrote:

- A letter to the early church in Rome.
- Two letters to the early church in Corinth.
- A letter to the early church in Galatia.
- A letter to the early church in Philippi.
- The first letter to the early church in Thessalonica (there are two letters to the Thessalonians in the bible).
- A letter to a fellow worker called Philemon.

The other letters in the bible may be genuine – however there is more debate amongst historians as to whether they are or are not.

(See also “**Authenticity of Epistles**” section of http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pauline_epistles)

I won't spend a lot of time discussing Paul's letters in detail here, other than to say that they give a clear picture that Christian worship and Christianity was **well developed at the time of their writing**. Paul was executed between AD 60 and AD 70. Therefore his letters must have been written

earlier than this. The accepted historical view is that they were probably written around 15 to 25 years after Jesus' death.

(The “**Authenticity of Epistles**” section of http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pauline_epistles also gives more details on currently accepted dates of writing)

Why are these dates important?

The letters give a clear picture of Christian worship and belief being well developed **earlier** than 15 to 25 years after Jesus' death.

To illustrate this point, one part of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is worth mentioning here. This letter was written by Paul to a newly established church in Corinth. The letter was probably written around AD 54 to 55.

The Corinthians were mainly Greeks and Romans who, until recently had been worshippers of the Greek and Roman gods. As a result, there were some misunderstandings relating to Jesus' teachings and methods of worship. In the letter, Paul provides the church guidance on these matters. One part, I would like to quote directly (1 Corinthians, Chapter 15 NIV).

Now brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you have received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel are you saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”

Why is this passage important?

As I mentioned before, Paul's letter to the Corinthians is regarded by historians as genuine. The passage above is also regarded by historians as genuine. In other words, it doesn't look like a later addition.

What it shows is that – as least as early as 15 to 25 years after Jesus' death (and most likely earlier than this) – the central message of Christianity was the death and Resurrection of Jesus, and what it meant.

Can the Gospels really be used as the basis for history?

The Gospels may have been written shortly after Jesus death – but can they be used as the basis for a historical picture of Jesus?

Are the Gospels really biographies? Are they not just theological texts written in a biographical style (and so therefore not real history)?

I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this question. This isn't because it's unimportant – more because I could spend pages on it. The EP Sanders book I mentioned earlier devotes three chapters to this very subject.

I think that a fair, summary answer to this question would be that historians are generally of the view that the Gospels are not biographies of Jesus life - in the way that we in the 21st Century understand biographies. There are long periods in Jesus' life that aren't described. For example, the Gospel of Mark doesn't even have any information on Jesus' birth and early life. The parts of Jesus' life that are described are those that have some teaching point to make. Thus, the Gospels are, if you like, selective biographies.

As a result, historians recommend caution to readers of the Gospels. They suggest that they shouldn't be read like contemporary biographies.

However, what historians don't say is that they are completely unreliable fabrications. Most historians (Christian and non-Christian) are of the view that the Gospels - particularly the Synoptic gospels it must be said – are accurate enough to be used as the basis for historical debate on Jesus.

Summary so far.

I appreciate that I've been firing a lot of history and dates at you. I therefore thought, at this stage, it would be worthwhile drawing breath and summarising what all this information means.

- There is good evidence that the earliest Gospel was written around 30 years after Jesus' death.
- There is good evidence that letters describing Christianity were written 15 to 25 years after Jesus' death.
- Implicit in the letters is the fact that Christianity was spreading rapidly through the Roman Empire.

- The letters also imply that Christians had already a well-developed view of themselves and what they believed. Given the dates of the letters, this must have occurred very shortly after Jesus' death.
- These early dates are also important because many of the people who had actually witnessed Jesus and the things He did would still be alive to challenge what was written in (at least the earliest) Gospels and the teachings of Paul.

Interestingly, there is evidence of such challenges in the Bible! Early on, there was some conflict between those Jews who had followed Jesus when He was alive and non-Jews who became Christians after His death. This conflict centred around the style of worship to be used and seems to have been quite bitter.

(for example, see Paul's letter to the Galatians 2:11-21
<http://www.biblestudytools.com/galatians/2.html>)

However, importantly there is no mention of conflict over the details of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

- Historians are of the view that the Gospels are accurate enough to be used as the basis for a history of Jesus.

In summary, there is a good chance that the Gospels provide a pretty accurate account of Jesus' life, death and Resurrection.

Have the Written Sources of Evidence been Reliably Preserved for Us?

For many people the issue of the accuracy of the gospels and other historical sources is a major question. Typical arguments are:

- 2000 years ago is a long time. Printing wasn't invented until the 15th Century. Prior to that, bibles were created by monks in dimly lit cells copying from other, hand-written bibles. Surely mistakes would have crept into the gospels with all this repeated copying?
- The gospels were not written in English. Perhaps our Gospels are translations of translations and therefore a lot of the original meaning has been "lost in translation".
- Punctuation was "invented" in the 15th Century. Prior to this, there was no punctuation in the Gospels. We all know that punctuation can have a massive effect on the meaning of a sentence. Lynn Truss's description of a giant Panda in her recent best-seller "Eats, shoots, and leaves" is a good example. Perhaps we are completely misreading parts of the gospels as a result of this later addition of punctuation?
- What about deliberate alteration of the gospels? We know how controlling various churches have been over the last 2000 years. Perhaps the early church modified or air-brushed out certain parts of the gospels to get rid of inconsistencies and inconvenient details.
- What about later additions? Could the early church have added parts to the gospels to make them fit better with church theology – theology that could have been developed hundreds of years after Jesus' death?

My view is that these are all valid questions and require considered answers. So, let's take each question in turn and look more closely at them.

Copies of Copies of Copies?

It's fair to say that we do have many surviving gospel manuscripts today that are copies of copies of copies of copies...

However, what we also have are very early scraps of Gospel manuscripts as well.

- The earliest of these is a series of papyrus fragments of John's gospel that's been dated to around AD 100 – 150.
- We have over 5,000 papyrus gospel manuscripts in Greek. These are of various ages - from the 2nd Century onwards.
- We have around 8,000 to 10,000 Latin Gospel manuscripts written at various dates.
- We have over 8,000 Gospel manuscripts in Ethiopian, Coptic, Slavic and Armenian.

Where only copies of historical documents exist, historians have a technique known as Textual Analysis that can be used to assess how accurate a document is relative to the (lost) original documents. When Textual Analysis is applied to the gospel manuscripts that have survived to this day, what has been found is that these manuscripts are very close in content to each other. There are mistakes and variances – but they are generally very small and look like human error – rather than deliberate alteration.

(For more on Textual Analysis [aka Textual Criticism], go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Textual_criticism)



Fragment of John's Gospel from AD 100-150

Why would this be? A simple answer is that the people producing these Gospels were devout Christians. As a devout Christian, you would see that it was of great importance that you copied “The Word of God” as accurately as you possibly could. To not do so would be to be failing the God you believed in. Looked at in this way, it is clear that there would be a great motivation amongst the gospel scribes and monks not to make mistakes in the texts they were copying.

Lost in Translation?

This multiplicity of manuscripts also addresses the “lost in translation” question. Linguists studying the various translations of the Gospels have found close concordance between them.

Furthermore, because these early manuscripts exist today (and of course existed in the past) – new translations were being created all the time and the older translations cross-checked for accuracy.

To use a contemporary example, when the current “New International Version” of the bible was written in 1973, the scholars writing it went back to the earliest Greek manuscripts and translated these – thus minimising the possibility of the “lost in translation” effect.

Random Punctuation?

It’s quite an entertaining idea that due to a misplaced comma back in the 15th Century we have a skewed view of Jesus. The reality is bit more banal. Linguists involved in the creation of modern bibles are well aware of this issue and therefore take it into consideration when making these bibles.

I guess you can’t say that there are no misplaced punctuation marks in the Gospels – however it’s very, very unlikely that they would have any **significant** effect on the interpretation of the texts.

To summarise the above points, we can be pretty confident that the Gospels we read today are accurate translations of the earliest manuscripts. There may be some inaccuracies, but the prevailing view of linguists, translators and historians are that they are small beer.

Deliberate Modification?

Whilst we might be slipping into “conspiracy theory” territory, it is a legitimate question to ask whether parts of the Gospels were added to or modified, before the earliest surviving manuscripts were written.

Could the early church have “air brushed” out contradictions and difficult stuff that didn’t fit with the prevailing theology?

Frankly, there were reasons to do so.

At that time, there were varying views within the “Christian world” on who Jesus was and what His teaching meant. You may have heard the terms Gnosticism and Aryanism. These were views of Jesus and His teachings that

were ultimately regarded as heretical by what became the mainstream Christian church. Gnostics and Arians drew their views from the same Gospels that were used by the mainstream church (as well as the apocryphal gospels we talked about earlier). Once the Gnostics and Arians had been “defeated”, would it not have made sense for the mainstream church to modify the passages in the Gospels they had latched on to so that nobody could repeat their “misinterpretations” of the texts in future generations?

(For more on the Gnostics and Arians, go to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gnosticism> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arianism>)

Also, I mentioned earlier that there was also some conflict between those Jews who had followed Jesus when He was alive and non-Jews who had become Christians after His death (the Gentiles). This conflict centred around the style of worship to be used and seems to have been quite bitter. For example, there was debate within Christian circles about whether the strict Jewish dietary laws and definitions of “clean” and “unclean” should be applied to Gentile Christians.

(As before, see Paul’s letter to the Galatians 2:11-21 <http://www.biblestudytools.com/galatians/2.html>. See also Acts Chapter 15 <http://www.biblestudytools.com/acts/15.html>)

In the end, it was “the Gentiles” who carried Christianity on to the present day. Wouldn’t it have made sense to remove any mention of these varying views in the bible?

I think that the best way of responding to the question of deliberate modification is to read the Gospels for yourselves and make your own mind up. Now, to a non-Christian, this might sound a bit daunting. As an agnostic, I thought the bible only existed in the King James version, was full of “thee’s” “thou’s” and “begat’s” and was a bit like reading Shakespeare – a worthy thing to do, but you wouldn’t actually do it in your own free time.

It was a bit of a revelation to me to read the Gospels in the New International Version (NIV) commonly used by Christians today. I actually found it a pleasure to read the Gospels in plain, easy to understand English (incidentally, apologies to all KJV fans for the following).

For example, look at these two translations of the same passage from the bible:

Mark Chapter 11, verses 12 to 14. King James' Version.

“And on the morrow, when they were come from Bethany, he was hungry: and on seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, he came, if haply he might find any thing thereon: and yet when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves; for the time of figs was not yet. And Jesus answered and said unto it, No man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever. And his disciples heard it.”

Mark Chapter 11, verses 12 to 14. New International Version.

“The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard him say it.”

So if you do read the Gospels for yourself, what are you likely to find?

Contradictions and Inconsistencies?

One thing you will find is that there are a number of apparent contradictions between the Gospels. Indeed many atheists cite these contradictions as evidence of the unreliability of the Gospels.

Here are a few examples:

- The number of people that find Jesus' tomb empty varies between the Gospels¹.
- The detail of the birth narrative varies between the Gospels². There isn't a birth narrative at all in the Gospel of Mark or the Gospel of John.
- The order of some of the events in Jesus' life varies from Gospel to Gospel. In one Gospel we find Jesus' mother Mary being told clearly that the child she was to give birth to is the Son of God. Yet in another Gospel, we are told that Jesus' mother and family tried to stop Him in His ministry saying that He “was out of his mind”. Odd behaviour if you knew your son was God's Son³.

1. Compare Mark Chapter 16, Matthew Chapter 28, Luke Chapter 24 and John Chapter 20
<http://www.biblestudytools.com/mark/16.html>, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/matthew/28.html>,
<http://www.biblestudytools.com/luke/24.html>, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/john/20.html>.
2. Compare Matthew Chapters 1 and 2 and Luke Chapters 1 and 2
<http://www.biblestudytools.com/matthew/1.html>, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/luke/1.html>.
3. Compare Matthew Chapter 1 and Mark Chapter 3: 20-21
<http://www.biblestudytools.com/matthew/1.html>, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/mark/3.html>.

However, there is another way of looking at these inconsistencies.

The four Gospels were completed at least semi-independently of each other. If they were all completely consistent – wouldn't that look like there had been subsequent editing to make them consistent?

An analogy to this would be the witnesses to an event like a car crash or a bank robbery. Later, in court, the various witnesses to the robbery take the stand and promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. However, the witnesses' testimonies often vary in detail – based on what they remember and their own viewpoint. Usually though, the witnesses will agree on what generally happened.

A contemporary example of this is the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes on the London Underground in 2005. You may remember that just after it happened, a number of people who had witnessed the chase and the shooting were interviewed by news reporters. You may also remember how confused the initial picture of what happened was. However, after a few days, a consensus picture of the events developed.

The Gospels (particularly the Synoptic Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke) read a bit like this – agreeing in nearly all details, but with a few “inconvenient” discrepancies.

And here's the point – these discrepancies have survived into the modern bibles of today. Why? Because they haven't been taken out by the church - or anyone else for that matter!

Indeed, if you start to consider this, another question arises.

If the early church wanted to air-brush out all the inconsistencies, why not boil the four Gospels down into one seamless narrative? They could have. Why didn't they? Why have four separate biographies? There's no rule to say the bible had to contain all four! I'll return to this question below.

The difficult bits?

As you read the Gospels, you will also come across some rather “difficult” bits that can be hard for Christians to either deal with or explain. Here are a few examples that I was surprised to find when I read the Gospel of Mark for the first time.

- In Mark Chapter 6, verse 5 it says that Jesus could do few miracles in Nazareth. The church teaches that Jesus is God and therefore all-powerful. How then could He have had difficulties performing miracles in Nazareth?¹
- In Mark Chapter 13, verse 32 Jesus says that He doesn't know the day and hour of His return to Earth. If Jesus was God and therefore omnipresent, why would He say such a thing?²
- In Mark Chapter 7, verse 27 Jesus refers to non-Jews as "dogs". Hardly a flattering description – particularly as it's those "dogs" who are Christians today.³
- In Mark Chapter 11, verse 12 we find Jesus talking to a fig tree. Indeed He is cursing it for not having any fruit on it! You'll remember the flak Prince Charles received when he admitted talking to his plants...⁴
- In Mark Chapter 15, verse 35, Jesus cries out when He is on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Is this not a strange thing for Jesus to shout if He knows He will shortly join His father in heaven? This sounds more like Jesus believes He has been abandoned on the cross by God.⁵

1. <http://www.biblestudytools.com/mark/6.html>
2. <http://www.biblestudytools.com/mark/13.html>
3. <http://www.biblestudytools.com/mark/7.html>
4. <http://www.biblestudytools.com/mark/11.html>
5. <http://www.biblestudytools.com/mark/15.html>

Now there are explanations for these passages. To take the first example, Jesus always linked spiritual and physical healing with a person's faith in Him. The people in Nazareth had little faith in Him – probably because He had grown up there and people couldn't see beyond him being Joseph the carpenter's son. As a result, Jesus did few miracles there.

However, rather than try and find explanations for these passages, wouldn't it have been just simpler to remove these altogether? As I mentioned before, there was enough material in the four Gospels for someone to put together one seamless narrative. Why didn't either of these things happen?

And what about the passages latched on to by the Arians and the Gnostics I mentioned above. They're still in the Gospels. Why?

And what about the early conflict between the Jewish and Gentile Christians? We only know about this because it's mentioned in Paul's letters in the bible (and the book of Acts). Why is this still in bible?

Like the copying Monks we mentioned earlier, the most likely answer to all these questions is that early Christians regarded the Gospels as sacred texts – the Word of God spoken through the writers of the Gospels. As a result, they believed that no mere mortal should tamper with them.

Indeed, it would be regarded as the duty of early Christians to preserve these Gospels as accurately as they could – inconsistencies, awkward details, difficult teachings and all.

Summary

So, in summary, historical analysis suggests that the Gospels were written shortly after Jesus' death. It's therefore likely that they represent a fairly accurate picture of the events of Jesus' life and death – as remembered and verified by those who actually witnessed these events.

Also, it would look like that care has been taken to avoid accidental or deliberate modification of the Gospels and letters of Paul. We can therefore conclude that these texts we read today are pretty accurate versions of the Gospels as they were originally written.

Is There Good Historical Evidence for Jesus outside the Bible?

I should start by saying that there is no reliable written document describing the life death and Resurrection of Jesus that is contemporary with the Gospels and Paul's letters.

This sometimes presents a difficulty for both Christians and non-Christians today. If the events of Jesus' life were so momentous, why were they not written about by other writers at the time?

If I'm honest, we don't ultimately know the answer to this question. However, the likely answer is rather mundane if we stop to consider who might have recorded this.

In the first century, there were very few people who could read and write. So clearly there would be very few people capable of writing down the events of Jesus' life. However, people that were capable of writing about the events of Jesus life were Roman and Greek administrators and Jewish scribes.

From a Roman and Greek perspective, Jesus would have been seen as just another Jewish holy man who had stirred up the Jews in Jerusalem and was quickly dealt with before he could cause any real trouble. These events were occurring in a tiny part of the Roman Empire (see below) where this kind of thing happened regularly (Palestine was as volatile then as it is now).



Also, at this time there was an invasion from Parthia and conflicts in Dacia and with the northern Germanic tribes to deal with. All far more major events for the Romans to record – compared to another Jewish trouble-maker being crucified in Jerusalem.

(For events in the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus' crucifixion, go to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiberius>)

Jewish scribes working for the Jerusalem temple hierarchy may have written about Jesus. Their view of Him too, was that he was just another in a long line of troublemakers who had delusions that he was the Messiah. As with the Romans, it would have hardly been worthy of mention.

Further, if the Jewish scribes had written about Jesus, any documents would have had to survive the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70AD and 135AD. I won't go into the details of the Jewish uprisings at these times, and the Roman response, other than to say that the Romans ultimately flattened the city, destroyed the Jewish temple completely and either killed or scattered the Jewish inhabitants. Not ideal conditions for the survival of documents – particularly (in Jewish eyes) their less important, non-sacred documents.

(For more on Jewish wars, go to: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish%E2%80%93Roman_wars)



The Arch of Titus in Rome depicts scenes from the sack of the Temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

So is that it? Well, actually no.

Although there are no reliable early documents describing Jesus' life, there are a number of documents describing Jesus' early followers. Here are a few examples.

- **Josephus: 93AD**

Josephus was a Jewish historian. In this book, "The Antiquities" he describes the arresting and execution of a Christian "James, the brother of Jesus".

(See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josephus_on_Jesus)

- **Tacitus: 115AD**

Tacitus was a Roman historian. In his history of Rome, he describes how Nero persecuted Christians for (allegedly) starting the great fire of Rome in 64AD. The reality (as Tacitus describes it) is that Nero himself ordered the fire to be started, to clear land for development. He used the Christians of Rome as scapegoats and had many executed in grotesque manners as a result.

(See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tacitus_on_Christ)

- **Pliny the Younger: 111AD**

In one of his books, Pliny the Younger describes his own persecution of Christians when he was governor of Bithynia in what is now north west Turkey.

(See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pliny_the_Younger)

What do these, admittedly brief, mentions of Christians tell us?

One thing it tells us is that there were sufficient numbers of people who saw themselves as Christians in Rome in 64AD to be singled out for attention by Nero and blamed for the great fire.

Something we can overlook in this well-known historical fact, is that to be a persecuted minority (as the Christians were in Rome in 64AD), there have to be sufficient numbers of this minority to come to the attention of the majority.

To use an example, consider asylum seekers in the UK. There have been people seeking asylum in the UK for many years. However, they have only begun to be seen as a group called "asylum seekers" when the numbers grew significantly in the last few years.

So, the reference in Tacitus tells us that, less than 35 years after Jesus' death, there was a Christian community large enough and vocal enough to be noticed by the emperor and be "worthy" of persecution in Rome.

The Pliny reference tells us that there was also a Christian community "worthy" of persecution (and of note) in north west Turkey towards the end of the 1st century AD.

Does Archaeology Support the Written Historical Evidence?

We set a lot of store in archaeology today. I guess this is because archaeology gives us a direct link to history by producing objects from the past that we can see and touch.

However, does archaeology provide any evidence for Jesus being the Son of God? Does archaeology provide supporting evidence to the places and events described in the Gospels and letters of Paul?



The picture opposite shows the reconstruction of a nail embedded in the foot bone of a crucifixion victim. The smaller item next to it is an actual foot bone and nail found in Palestine. This has been dated to the first century AD. Significantly, this bone was found in a Jewish tomb. What this told archaeologists and historians was that the Romans permitted Jewish crucifixion victims to be buried in accordance with Jewish customs and tradition. Prior to this find, historians had been undecided about the fate of those Jews crucified by the Romans. Many thought that Jewish corpses were just thrown on to the municipal rubbish tip – as was

the fate of non-Jewish crucifixion victims.

This has significance to the death of Jesus. It makes it more likely that He was buried in a tomb – as it says in the gospels.



The picture above shows the results of an archaeological dig in Nazareth. Although this says nothing about the life of Jesus, it has demonstrated that there was a village at the site of present day Nazareth in the first century – as it says in the gospels.



The next picture shows a replica of a Dead Sea scroll. As you probably know, the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947 and are written texts produced by the Essenes – a Jewish sect that existed in 1st Century Palestine. These scrolls contain parts of the Old Testament but also contain texts specifically relating to the life, beliefs and hopes

of the Essenes. The Dead Sea scrolls have no mention of Jesus, however they do help us to understand the history of first century Palestine and the mindset of Jews living at that time. This, in turn, helps us understand certain aspects of the Gospels – particularly relating to Jewish Messianic expectations.

However, we have to be careful with archaeological finds.



Burial practices in 1st century Palestine often involved the body being placed in a rock tomb and left there to allow the flesh to decay. Some time later, the tomb would be opened and the bones that were left would be placed in a box called an ossuary. Often, this ossuary would contain the bones of several members of the same family – thus reuniting family members in death.

The ossuary you see in the picture on the previous page came to light in Israel a few years ago. On the side of the ossuary is an inscription in Aramaic (the language of 1st century Palestine) that reads “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus”.

This find caused a major stir in the archaeological world and was heralded as the most significant find since the Dead Sea scrolls. Unfortunately subsequent investigation has revealed this “find” to be an elaborate hoax.

As there is so much interest in 1st century Palestinian archaeology, there is a market for artifacts from this time. And as any capitalist will tell you, if there’s a market, there will be marketeers - honest or otherwise – to satisfy the demands of the market.

So care needs to be taken in assuming that every archaeological find is genuine.

Care also needs to be taken in not overstating the importance of archaeology in providing evidence for Jesus. I think it’s fair to say that, to date, archaeology has not provided definitive proof that Jesus is the Son of God.

However, what I think we can say is that archaeology has not, to date, provided information that is directly contradictory to the Gospels. In general, the consensus view is that archaeology provides a generally supportive picture of the places and events described in the gospels.

Summary of Part 1

- There is good evidence to say that the Gospels and the letters of Paul were written shortly after Jesus' death.
- As a result of this, it is unlikely that these documents would have been subject to much embellishment due to legends and myths developing around Jesus.
- We can therefore be confident that the Gospels, on the whole, provide a fairly accurate view of the events in Jesus' life and death.
- The historical evidence from inside and outside the bible and from Paul's letters suggests that Christian belief developed very shortly after Jesus death and that it spread very quickly (for a time that had no mass communications) through the Roman Empire.
- We also saw that the Gospels and letters of Paul we read today are most likely to be accurate versions of what was written nearly 2,000 years ago.
- Finally, we briefly mentioned that archeology provides a generally supportive picture of the places and events mentioned in the Gospels.

Part 2: Who was Jesus?

Introduction

The evidential sources described in Part 1 tell us that Jesus' disciples and early Christians believed that Jesus was the Son of God and the Messiah.

Did they mistake a first century, Jewish, teacher, healer, exorcist and miracle worker for something more than He was?

Are Christians today making the same mistake?

In Part 2, we will look more closely for clues within the evidential sources to try and answer these questions.

Was Jesus Convinced that He Was the Son of God?

It's sometimes suggested that, although Jesus saw himself as a teacher and Jewish holy man, He didn't regard himself as the Son of God. Indeed, some have claimed that, as a "good Jew", Jesus would have regarded such a view of Himself as blasphemous!

However, a detailed study of the Gospels suggests that this is not the case.

I guess Jesus' view of Himself as the Son of God is most explicit in the Gospel that was written last – John.

In Part 1, I mentioned that the Gospel of John was the one written last (about 90 AD). If you read John, you'll find that its "style" and the words of Jesus are quite different from the other three Gospels. Christian theology is also more "developed" in John – compared to the other three Gospels. This has prompted some historians and biblical scholars to be more sceptical of the details of John. Their view is that, as John was written once Christianity was more developed, this may have had an influence on the content of John.

Personally, I have some sympathy with this view. That's not to say that the Gospel of John is worthless – it's just that one may have to look carefully through some of the theology to see a clearer picture of Jesus.

So, to address this issue, we will limit our search for evidence of Jesus' view of himself to **Mark's** Gospel.

You will remember from Part 1 that Mark was the Gospel written first (some 30 years after Jesus' death). We aren't certain who wrote Mark, but Gospel tradition states that "Mark" was John Mark, a companion of the disciple Peter.

So, in Mark's Gospel, what clues does Jesus give as to how He views Himself?

- In Mark He forgives sins. In the miracle narratives, Jesus sometimes links the physical or mental affliction of the person about to be healed with the person's "sinfulness". For example, in Mark Chapter 2, Verse 5 He says: "Son, your sins are forgiven" as a precursor to the healing of a paralytic. Now, as any good Jew knew, only God can forgive sins.
(See <http://www.biblestudytools.com/mark/2.html>)

Jesus knew the Jewish scriptures and teachings. In acting this way, He was directly linking Himself with God. In Mark, it says that the Jewish religious authorities also realised this and accused Him of blasphemy as a result.

- He teaches on His own authority. Now, this might appear as a bit of a technicality, but in Judaism, you required two people to conduct religious teaching – one to "witness" what the other was teaching, and vice versa. Jesus however, makes a point of teaching alone. He precedes many of his teachings with the words: "I tell you the truth". "So what?" you might say. Well, any other Jewish teacher in the 1st Century would say something like: "I tell you the truth – and here's another teacher standing next to me that will verify that I'm telling the truth".

So why is this important? A Jewish audience would know that only God can "teach" on His own authority. Again, Jesus is directly linking Himself with God by teaching in this way. Those listening to Jesus clearly recognised this too.

(For examples, see Matthew 7: 28-29, Mark 1: 22 and Mark 1: 27
<http://www.biblestudytools.com/matthew/7.html>,
<http://www.biblestudytools.com/mark/1.html>)

- He refers to God as "Father" or "Abba (Aramaic for "dad" or "daddy"). "So what?" you might say again. Isn't God regularly referred to as

“Father” in the Christian church? It doesn’t mean that Christians believe that God is their actual father.

I guess the problem here is that we are used to the Christian view of having an intimate father / child relationship with God – a relationship modeled on Jesus’ relationship with God. As a result, it’s been common in the last 2,000 years to refer to God as “Father”. However, to first century Jews, calling God “Father” would be blasphemous. Jews weren’t even allowed to speak God’s name out loud (the tetragram YHWH - often pronounced Jehovah).

To refer to God as “Dad or Daddy” (Abba) would be seen by Jews as downright eccentric – as well as blasphemous. Unless, of course, you actually were God’s Son.

(See Mark 14: 36 <http://www.biblestudytools.com/mark/14.html>)

- His miracles had symbolic meaning to those they were performed in front of

You may have seen the 2006 BBC television series, “The Miracles of Jesus”. In this programme, the symbolic importance of Jesus’ miracles is explored. What is demonstrated is that Jesus’ miracles were designed to be pointers for those who saw them to see Jesus in a particular way.

If you have seen the programme, I may be going over old ground here. However, what is clear is that these miraculous events often have similarities to events that are described in the Old Testament relating to such Jewish figures such as Moses, Elijah and Joshua. The view is that, by performing these miracles (or “signs” as they are sometimes called in the gospels) in these particular ways, the Jewish audience who witnessed the miracles would connect Jesus with these Jewish prophets and heroes.

The miracles also suggested to their audience that Jesus is God. I mentioned earlier that Jesus often linked healing to the forgiveness of sins. To His Jewish audience, this was something only God could do.

Another miracle – “The calming of the storm” - also suggested to those who witnessed it that Jesus was God.

In this event, Jesus and His disciples are in an open boat on the Sea of

Galilee when they are caught in a violent storm. As the wind and waves rage and the boat begins to fill with water, Jesus is sleeping at the back of the boat on a cushion (echoing, incidentally, the story of Jonah). The disciples wake Him up shouting: “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?”

Jesus gets up and shouts at the waves: “Quiet, be still”. At this, the storm immediately abates.

Jesus then gives His disciples a hard time for their lack of faith in Him.

At this time, Jews believed that only God had control of the elements. Further, Jews believed that Satan’s home was under the waters of seas and lakes. For Jesus to take control of the wind and waves in this way was a clear sign to His followers that He was God – and that He had control over Satan. No wonder the disciples “were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and waves obey him!”

(See also Mark 4: 35-41. <http://www.biblestudytools.com/mark/4.html>)

I think it’s fair to say that these points do not provide conclusive proof that Jesus is the Son of God. However, they do indicate that it was very likely that He thought of Himself in this way.

Was Jesus Massively Deluded to Think of Himself as the Son of God?

It’s all very well thinking you are the Son of God. There are many people alive today in mental institutions and being cared for in the community that may think something similar.

So, was Jesus also severely deluded to think of Himself in this way?

There’s an interesting chapter in the book “The Case for Christ” I mentioned in Part 1, where Lee Strobel interviews a psychologist who specialises in treating delusional people.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the psychologist says that, from the Gospels, there are no hints or indications that Jesus is exhibiting behaviour associated with people who have mental problems.

As I've suggested previously, I think the best way to assess Jesus' mental state is to read the Gospels for yourself.

When I did this for the first time a few years ago, I was surprised to find some illuminating and awkward glimpses of Jesus' human personality. I guess I was expecting to find a serene, focused, consistent, God-like person. True enough, that Jesus was there. What I didn't expect to find though was clear evidence of Jesus' "human-ness".

For example:

- His anger at a fig tree.¹
- His frustration with the disciples.²
- His weeping at the death of His friend Lazarus, even though He then brings him back to life.³
- His fear the night before His execution.⁴

1. Matthew 21:18-20 <http://www.biblestudytools.com/matthew/21.html>

2. For example. Mark 7: 18. Mark 8: 14-21 <http://www.biblestudytools.com/mark/7.html> and <http://www.biblestudytools.com/mark/8.html>

3. John 11: 32-43 <http://www.biblestudytools.com/mark/8.html>

4. Mark 14: 32-34 <http://www.biblestudytools.com/mark/14.html>

What I found was a clear picture of Jesus as a human being and of being God at the same time and exhibiting behaviour one might expect from both – all mixed together in a rather complex way. What I saw in the Gospels was one of the central themes of Christianity – that "God became man".

What I didn't find though was any erratic, unstable, delusional behaviour. I'm no psychologist, but the human Jesus seemed to me as "normal" as the rest of us.

Did Jesus Unintentionally or Deliberately Mislead His Followers so that they Believed He was the Son of God?

It looks from the Gospels that Jesus saw Himself as the Son of God and the Messiah.

There are no clues in the Gospels to suggest He was massively deluded.

However, what if He unintentionally misled the disciples so that they believed He was the Son of God? What if He sincerely believed He was the Son of God – but was just wrong?

What if the whole thing just “got out of hand” in the whole Messianic and revolutionary fervour of 1st Century Palestine – with Jesus caught in the middle?

Alternatively, what if He deliberately misled the disciples? What if He had some other agenda for saying He was the Son of God? What if all the miracles and healings were actually sleight of hand, deceptions and magic tricks?

Honestly Mistaken?

Earlier, we discussed whether Jesus was severely deluded (mad if you prefer) to think that He was the Son of God. My guess is that we’re all quite comfortable with concluding that it’s unlikely He had “serious mental health problems”.

But what if He unintentionally misled His followers? What if He sincerely believed He was the Son of God – but was just wrong?

This is a common argument put forward by non-Christians. To quote the atheist Richard Dawkins in “The God Delusion” (page 92): “A *fourth possibility, almost too obvious to need mentioning, is that Jesus was honestly mistaken [that He was the Son of God]. Plenty of people are*”.

Well indeed, plenty of people are honestly mistaken about all kinds of things (even me!). It doesn’t make them (or me) mad.

However, what is crucially important here is what one is honestly mistaken about.

If I was to say to you: “I’m a carrot. No really, I’m not kidding, I am a carrot! Now I know it sounds unlikely, what with carrots being vegetables and all. And yes, I know I’m a human being, but believe me I am also a carrot” - what would you think?

The politest thing would probably be that I need to have a bit of sit down and have a drink of water to clear my head (or get back in the vegetable basket).

However, if I was to say to you: “Christmas day’s on a Sunday this year. Yes I know you think it’s a Tuesday but, believe me, I know it’s a Sunday” – what would you think?

You’d probably think that I was mis-informed (it was on a Tuesday when I wrote this, by the way), but you wouldn’t think I was off my head.

So, what am I saying?

I’m saying that there are some things you can be honestly mistaken about that mean you can’t remember something, are misguided, misinformed or ignorant of the facts. In other words, you’re honestly mistaken, but not wrong in the head. However, there are other things that you can be honestly mistaken about (like being a carrot or thinking you’re the Son of God) that also require you to have a screw loose.

In short, if you think you’re God then you’re either wrong in the head or you are God.

Further, if you think you are God and are prepared to do something about it by going on a mission that collects followers, challenges the established religious order and ends up getting you killed (as Jesus did), then you really are wrong in the head – or God.

“The Life of Brian” Effect

But what about the other explanation I mentioned. What if the whole thing just “got out of hand” in the whole Messianic and revolutionary fervour of 1st Century Palestine – with Jesus caught in the middle?

I suppose you could call this “The Life of Brian” effect. I’m sure some of you have seen “Monty Python’s Life of Brian”. In it, Brian – the illegitimate child of a Roman Centurion and Terry Jones - is mistaken by a group of Jewish zealots for the Messiah. Despite his best efforts, everything he says or does makes his growing band of followers believe more strongly that he is the Messiah.

If you haven’t seen the film, it’s a cracking satire on the type of narrow mindedness, bigotry and dogmatism that can give organised religion a bad name. There are also some touching references in the film to the “real” Jesus - who is conducting His mission at the same time as Brian, but is always just off-screen.

So, was Jesus just “caught up in events” like Brian?

As I keep suggesting, if you read the Gospels for yourself, you will see that Jesus was clearly directing the events of His mission.

Jesus didn't need to perform His healings and exorcisms. Jesus didn't need to perform His other miracles. Jesus didn't need to spend days teaching His followers – changing their lives in the process. Jesus didn't need to create the disturbance in the Temple area. Jesus could have apologised, melted away into the crowd and avoided death by crucifixion – but didn't.

It's clear that Jesus knew exactly what He was doing, from the moment He returned from the desert, 40 days after His baptism by John the Baptist.

Did Jesus Deliberately Mislead His Followers so that they Believed He was the Son of God?

So, it's pretty unlikely He unintentionally misled His followers.

However, could he have deliberately misled His followers so that they believed he was the Son of God?

What if all the miracles were just elaborate hoaxes, hypnotism, magic tricks and sleight of hand?

It is possible. You might remember a television programme that was on a few Christmas's ago (“The Magic of Jesus”) where two magicians recreated some of Jesus' miracles.

In his regular TV appearances, hypnotist, illusionist (and ex-evangelical Christian) Derren Brown seems to be able to make people believe all kinds of things.

So could the miracles just have been magic tricks and illusions – perpetrated on simple, 1st Century, Galilean country folk?

In response, for such a proposition to be a likely explanation, you have to ask the following question.

Why would He do such a thing?

As we've shown, Jesus' actions were designed for His followers to see Him as God. We've also shown, we don't have any evidence suggesting He

exhibited delusional behaviour. We've just shown that it's very unlikely that He unintentionally misled His followers. So, by rational deduction, if Jesus is not God, then all we're left with is the possibility that He deliberately misled His followers.

So, if He did this, what would Jesus' motive be for deceiving His followers?

In the past and present, there have been other charismatic leaders who have used deception to gain a political or religious following. What kind of motives did they have for doing such a thing? The motives I can think of for behaving in this way are:

- **The ends justify the means.** There have been many people who were convinced that their political or religious views would make the lives of their followers better. If achieving these ends meant that a bit of deception, double-dealing and ruthlessness was required on those followers, then so be it. Better that some loyal followers suffer, so that the majority gain the benefits.
- **Power over others.** Control over other people is for some people an end in itself. They seem to hunger for the devotion of others. They seem to get some form of kick out of manipulating and controlling people. People like this will do anything to have a following. Simple deception is often the least of their crimes.
- **Fame.** For some people, fame is an end in itself. It's really important for them to come to the attention of others. For these people, it doesn't matter if they are admired or reviled – just so long as they are famous. For people like this, a bit of deception would be a very small price to pay for fame.
- **Attention seeking.** I have friends who knew a woman who pretended to have cancer so that she would get all kinds of attention from her friends, family and work colleagues. She managed to keep the deception up for more than a year. Clearly for this woman – and many other people – a bit of deception to get some attention is seen as necessary.
- **Material gain.** Some people have been motivated to do terrible things for simple material gain. If others have to suffer to achieve this, then it's regrettable but just too bad.

Do we see evidence of these motives in Jesus' mission?

Perhaps one way of answering this is to look at other charismatic figures from the past and present who have gathered together a band of followers and challenged the current political, religious or power structures of the day. Do we see any echoes of their behaviour in Jesus' mission?

Off the top of my head, here are a few charismatic leaders that I can think of:

In the political arena:

- Lenin. The leader of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia.
- Mahatma Ghandi. The leader of the independence movement in India.
- Adolf Hitler. The leader of the National Socialists in Germany.
- Nelson Mandela. The first president of post-apartheid South Africa.
- Mao Tse Tung. The leader of the communist revolution in China
- Pol Pot. The leader of the revolution in Cambodia in the 70's.

Messianic religious cult leaders:

- David Koresh. The charismatic leader of the Branch Davidian Cult. You may remember David Koresh and his followers all died at a siege in Waco, Texas back in 1993.
- Jim Jones. The charismatic founder of the Peoples Temple cult. Jones and his followers set up their community in "Jonestown" in Guyana. They committed mass suicide in 1978.

Other religious leaders:

- Martin Luther. Challenged the accepted Christian orthodoxy of the day and in doing so founded Protestantism in the early 16th Century.
- Joseph Smith. Founder of the Mormon movement in 1830.
- Sun Myung Moon. Founder of the Unification Church (or "Moonies" as they are often known) in 1954.

So was Jesus like any of these characters?

Well if He deliberately misled His followers to justify His ambitions, there would be similarities with Lenin, Mao, Pol Pot and Hitler – who all used similar methods to further their political ambitions. However, Jesus' teachings and message are completely at odds with the political ideas of these ideologues and monsters – and the murderous methods they employed to further these ambitions. To suggest a similarity between them and Jesus borders on the preposterous.

If He deliberately misled His disciples primarily so that He could exert power over them –then there would be similarities with Koresh and Jones.

At first glance, there are a few parallels with Jesus and Koresh and Jones. Charismatic figure, radical teachings, devoted followers, everybody dies proclaiming these beliefs – including the leader.

However, a closer look at these “messianic” figures and this all falls apart.



David Koresh (or Vernon Wayne Howell – his original name) was a high school dropout. He allegedly had an affair with the prophetess of the Branch Davidian cult (then in her late sixties). He assumed leadership of the cult by armed means, advocated polygamy and developed a “harem” in the cult compound – fathering around a dozen children as a result. All the other men on the compound had to be celibate. Former Branch Davidians accuse Koresh of having sex with under-age girls and physically abusing children. Koresh funded the sect by the buying and selling of firearms. The Waco siege was initiated by the US government, who were investigating allegations of illegal firearms and explosives on the cult’s compound. (See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Koresh)



Jim Jones was a Christian preacher who set up his own church based on racially integrated, communist utopian lines. He claimed to be an incarnation of Jesus, Akhenaton, Buddha and Lenin. He was a drug abuser (LSD and marijuana). He was convicted of homosexual soliciting in 1973. People that left his movement made claims of brutal beatings, murders and a mass suicide plan. Jones’ armed guards killed 5 of a group from the US government that had come to investigate human rights abuses at the sect’s compound in Guyana. Shortly afterwards, there was a mass murder at the compound, followed by the suicides of those who were likely to have carried out the killings. Jones was also found dead. (See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Jones)

I’m hard pressed to find any real parallels with the Jesus we find in the gospels and these characters. However, judge for yourself. I pulled the potted biographies I’ve just gone through straight off Wikipedia. Read these for yourself. Read the gospels for yourself. Do the comparisons yourself.

As for the rest? From my researches, I can't find evidence of Mahatma Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther, Sun Myung Moon, and Joseph Smith deliberately misleading their followers for their own ends. You may or may not agree with their political or religious views. Martin Luther had some fairly vehement anti-Semitic views (but frankly no more anti-Semitic than most other people living in central Europe at that time). Joseph Smith's divinely inspired Book of Mormon hasn't really stood up to historical analysis. That said, I think it's fair to say that none of these people are regarded as fundamentally bad men.

However, those leaders that we know who deliberately misled their followers also seem to be capable of a whole lot of other misdeeds as well.

So where does Jesus fit in this picture?

The list of reasons I gave earlier as to why someone might deliberately mislead their followers just doesn't fit with the picture we have of Jesus in the Gospels.

Also, had He been this type of person, I think we might have some evidence of this surviving outside the Gospels - particularly from those who were Jesus' enemies (the Romans and the Jewish authorities). As you know, the easiest way of killing off a fledgling movement is to attack the personal failings of its leader - real or made up.

There is evidence of attack on Jesus' teachings and on the beliefs of Christianity - for example, Tacitus and Pliny who we discussed earlier are particularly dismissive of Christians and Christianity. However, we have no detailed personal attacks on Jesus Himself.

This, I think, is significant.

Summary of Part 2

So, in summary:

- It looks like He thought He was the Son of God.
- It looks like He wasn't mad or delusional.
- It's very unlikely He unknowingly or knowingly misled the disciples to believe He was the Son of God. So, what are we left with?

Maybe, just maybe, He was who He said He was.

At this point, I'm not sure what you will be thinking.

Maybe you're thinking that what you've heard so far sounds pretty plausible. But, perhaps you're thinking: "This all happened a very long time ago. I'm just not sure. I'm certainly not convinced".

I think if I was coming at the information presented in the first two parts of this booklet for the first time, I'd think this.

If what we've been looking at so far was all the evidence for Jesus being the Son of God, I would still think this today.

However, in Part 3, we are going to look at the one event on which the existence of Christianity hangs – the death and Resurrection of Jesus. Is there compelling evidence to support this being an actual historical event?

Part 3: Resurrection – the Evidence

Introduction

In Part 1, we looked at the historical sources for the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus.

In Part 2, we spent some time looking at whether Jesus believed He was the Son of God.

In Part 3, we are going to look at the death and Resurrection of Jesus and ask the question: “is there compelling evidence to support this being an actual historical event?”

As I suggested at the end of Part 2, without the Resurrection, Christianity is meaningless. Later on I’ll try to explain why it’s so important.

Now, you may or may not know the detail of the death and Resurrection of Jesus. So to quickly summarise, I thought it would be useful to return to the list of events in the life of Jesus from the historian, E.P. Sanders book “The Historical Figure of Jesus”.

You may remember from Part 1 that we went through a list of what Sanders referred to as a list of “secure facts” about the life and death of Jesus. As I explained, these “secure facts” are those that the majority of contemporary historians are agreed upon – based on the documentary, archaeological and circumstantial evidence available today.

Let me briefly repeat the last bullet points on Sanders’ list:

- About the year 30 [AD], he went to Jerusalem for Passover.
- He created a disturbance in the Temple area.
- He had a final meal with the disciples.
- He was arrested and interrogated by Jewish authorities, specifically the high priest.
- He was executed on the orders of the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate.

Now in Sanders' book, the list of "secure facts" doesn't end there.

He then goes on to provide what he refers to as: "a short list of equally secure facts about the aftermath of Jesus' life."

Again, these are historical facts that the majority of contemporary historians are agreed actually happened after Jesus' death. These are:

- His disciples first fled.
- **They saw him ([but] in what sense is not certain) after his death.**
- As a consequence, they believed that he would return to found the kingdom.
- They formed a community to await his return and sought to win others to faith in him as God's Messiah.

Now I wonder if you find this last list surprising?

I know I did when I first read it. I was surprised that the accepted historical view of the aftermath of Jesus' life was so close to what I understood to be the biblical view.

So, I guess the purpose of Part 3 is to focus on the second "secure fact" in that list.

- **They saw him ([but] in what sense is not certain) after his death.**

Contemporary historians – both Christian and non-Christian are agreed that "something happened" to convince the disciples that they had seen Jesus after His death.

So what did the disciples see and experience after Jesus' death?

In the rational 21st century, it's difficult to get our heads around the idea of a man dying and coming back to life again three days later. Our medical knowledge, our understanding of biology and physics, our own personal experience all tell us that people just don't come back to life after they die.

So, I guess we tend to think: "surely there's some other explanation"

Well, we will now look at some of the more common alternative explanations and see how they sit with the evidence we have for what happened.

Was Jesus Really Executed?

One explanation could be that it's pretty easy to appear to your disciples after your "death" if you didn't die in the first place.

So, was Jesus really executed? Could He have been taken off the cross before He died, then revived later?

At first glance, this doesn't look too implausible. We've all heard of people who have been pronounced dead – then to everyone's surprise revive some hours or days later in a mortuary or hospital. This kind of thing can occasionally happen today. What about 2,000 years ago when medical knowledge was more primitive? Could the Romans who executed Jesus have made a mistake?

Alternatively, was the whole thing faked? Was the crucifixion somehow stage managed as some form of diversion to allow Jesus to escape?

In response, consider the following.

Historians and archaeologists can tell us quite a lot about Roman, torture and execution techniques. I won't go into the gory details here. There are plenty of books, articles and TV programmes about this very subject. A simple Google search will provide you everything you would need to know (and some beside) about the whole subject.

(If you must, go to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crucifixion>)

What I will say is that our knowledge of Roman torture and execution tells us is that it was very unlikely that anyone survived a Roman crucifixion. There are examples from other historical sources that this did happen – but it was a very rare occurrence.

Even if Jesus had been taken down before He died and the nails taken out of His wrists and feet – He would have been unable to use His hands and He wouldn't have been able to walk. It's very unlikely He would have ever made a full recovery.

Also, He wasn't executed by amateurs. Roman soldiers did the job. They may not have had 21st century medical knowledge – but they knew exactly how to kill someone. That's what they were trained to do. They were professional, career killers.

One argument goes that perhaps the soldiers had been bribed by persons unknown not to kill Jesus. Instead they were to stage-manage a fake execution.

Firstly, this would have been pretty difficult, as it was a public crucifixion - as all crucifixions were. That was the whole point – to act as a warning to others not to disturb the Roman order.

Secondly, if this had been found out, the soldiers would have disobeyed a direct command from the Roman ruler of Palestine, Pontius Pilate. Pilate was not quite the fair-minded weakling he is often portrayed as today. 1st century documentary sources characterise him as a stubborn, irascible and vindictive man who was eventually relieved of his post in Palestine by the Romans for brutality and corruption. Given the reputation the Romans have for brutality and corruption, he must have been going some to be dismissed for this! So, I think it's fair to say that if the soldiers had crossed Pilate, a slow and painful death would have been the inevitable result.

(For more on Pontius Pilate, go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pontius_Pilate. It's been suggested that the Gospels make Pilate weak and indecisive in an attempt to make the events of the death of Jesus more palatable to Roman Christian converts. However, the passage in Luke's Gospel [Luke 13: 1]: "*Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.*" [<http://www.biblestudytools.com/luke/13.html>] suggests someone rather different. Hardly Michael Palin in "Life of Brian"...)

Thirdly, the historical documents we reviewed in our first evening agree that Jesus was tortured and flogged before He was crucified.

In short, just suppose He was able to survive the crucifixion. Just suppose there was some plot to get Him off the cross. What kind of condition would He have been in?

Hardly an impressive sight for the disciples a few days later!

Hardly an inspiration for the disciples to then go and spread the message of a Risen Christ triumphing over death throughout Palestine and the Roman Empire!

So, it's highly unlikely that Jesus survived His crucifixion. It's also highly unlikely that the whole thing was stage-managed either.

However, as you may be aware, the faked crucifixion theory has some popular currency at the moment. If you've read the book or seen the film of

Dan Brown's "The Da Vinci Code" you'll know that one theory is that Jesus didn't die on the cross. Instead, He escaped to southern France, along with His wife, Mary Magdalene. In southern France, their children inter-marry with the Merovingians – thus creating a "holy bloodline" that the Catholic church has been trying to suppress ever since.

This theory is based on an earlier book, by Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln called "The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail"

I could spend time looking at the pros and cons of this theory. However, this would be going over ground well covered in the numerous books and articles written on this subject currently available.

(See **Criticism** section of http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Da_Vinci_Code)

Instead, what I think I can say is that this theory is just that – a theory.

Whilst there are historically factual elements to this theory, other "facts" are ignored. There also is large amount of speculation required to arrive at the conclusions the books and the film make.

If this is an area of interest to you, my suggestion would be to read the reviews, books and articles on the subject – a simple Internet search will get you going.

A review of these items will, I think you'll find, demonstrate why this theory really has no serious takers amongst the overwhelming majority of contemporary historians.

What Happened to Jesus' Body?

So, it would look like it's most likely that Jesus was executed.

But what happened to His dead body?

This is important to consider. Clearly, it would be difficult to explain Jesus being alive after His death if His corpse was still in its tomb.

The Gospel account of what happened to Jesus body is that He was:

- Executed,
- He was prepared for burial and
- Placed in a rock cave tomb.

- On the third day after His death, some of His female followers went to the tomb
- They found the Tomb open and Jesus' body missing.

As we saw in Part 1, although the documentary evidence in the Gospels seems to vary in some of the details of the empty tomb, this event is present in all four Gospels.

Clearly, early Christians believed that His body disappeared from Earth, so that He could come back alive to His followers.

However, are there any other explanations why His body might have been missing from the tomb?

Perhaps the best way of approaching this is to look for a motive. Who could have removed the body from the tomb, and what would be their motive for doing so.

The Romans?

The Romans' main concern was maintaining order in Jerusalem. Their motivation for executing Jesus – as we've seen from EP Sanders list – was in direct response to the disturbance Jesus had created in the temple area.

This disturbance created the unrest the Romans were always seeking to avoid in this very volatile part of their empire.

Now Jesus had some very devoted followers. Perhaps the Romans were concerned that by leaving Jesus' body in the tomb, it would become a shrine to Jesus' and a focal point for further unrest.

This line of thought has some modern parallels.

For example, at the end of the Second World War, the Russians discovered Hitler's body in his burned out bunker in Berlin. However, they destroyed the body so that it could not be buried. Their concern was that Hitler's grave would become a focal point for Nazi sympathisers in the future.

However, what undermines this theory is that very shortly after Jesus' death, His followers are going around saying that He has risen from the dead.

They are making a nuisance of themselves and causing the very disorder the Romans were trying to avoid.

Indeed, the Romans then spent the next 300 years trying to suppress the disorder that developed throughout the Roman Empire as a result of this one event.

So, to nip all this in the bud. To stop all this getting out of hand, if the Romans had taken Jesus' body, would they not have produced it?

A common fate for the corpses of Crucifixion victims was that they were thrown on the municipal rubbish dump and were then eaten by wild animals and dogs. If this is what happened to Jesus, the Romans might not have had the body. However, it would have been a relatively simple thing to publicly state that this is what had happened to the body.

However, we have no direct evidence – or even hints of evidence – that this happened.

We have to conclude that it's unlikely that the Romans were responsible for the empty tomb.

The Jewish Authorities?

Their motive for taking His body - and the counter-arguments are the same as the Romans.

The disciples?

What about the disciples? Would they have a motive for taking Jesus' body from the tomb?

This would also look to be unlikely. I personally can't think of a motive that they might have for doing this.

Also, the disciples believed that Jesus was raised from the dead and were prepared to die for this belief.

In most cases, they did die for this belief.

(See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deaths_of_the_Twelve_Apostles for more details on the deaths of the twelve apostles)

If they had taken the body, why then would they make up the "raised from the dead" story and be prepared to die in defence of that story. It just doesn't make any sense.

Grave Robbers?

To me, the idea that grave robbers stole Jesus' body looks more of a possibility. Grave robbing did occur at that time. Robbers were looking for the valuable goods sometimes buried with a body. In fewer cases, they were looking for the body or body parts – for use in magic rituals.

However, was there anything to steal? The synoptic Gospels mention that Jesus' body was wrapped in a linen cloth. No grave goods are mentioned. Grave robbers usually steal the goods buried with a body. Not the decomposing body itself.

John's Gospel mentions that about 34 kilogrammes of myrrh and aloes were wrapped in the linen cloth around Jesus' body. This would have been worth stealing. However John's Gospel also tells us that Jesus' grave clothes were in the tomb (with the burial cloth neatly folded) when the disciples entered the tomb and found Jesus' body missing. This doesn't fit with the grave robbing theory. If you were robbing a grave of spices wrapped into the linen binding around a dead body, it would make sense to either take the wrapped body from the tomb (to be unwrapped to remove the spices elsewhere), or to unwrap the body in the tomb and take the spices. In the first scenario, there would have been no body or grave clothes left in the tomb. In the second scenario, there would have been an unwrapped body and the grave clothes in the tomb.

(See John 19: 38-42 for the Burial of Jesus <http://www.biblestudytools.com/john/19.html>. See John 20:3-8 for the description of the grave clothes left in the tomb <http://www.biblestudytools.com/john/20.html>)

We know from a few Roman and Greek sources that dead human bodies (or body parts) were used in magic rituals around the Roman Empire. However, the practice wasn't rife and we have no evidence that this occurred within the Jewish part of the Roman Empire. Indeed, Jews would find this kind of behaviour abhorrent. The burial occurred in Jerusalem – the most Jewish of Jewish towns and cities. This makes the concept of a stolen body for the purposes of magic even less likely than if the burial had occurred in (say) Rome or Athens.

So, what happened to the body?

So, it would seem that nobody seems to have a particularly strong motive for either taking the body – or keeping it a secret if they did take the body. Also,

the grave robber theory doesn't seem to fit well with the direct and circumstantial evidence we have.

One final point is worth making on this subject.

The disciples of Jesus were the founders of what we know as Christianity. After the Resurrection, they didn't go to some obscure place miles away from where it had all happened to preach about the Resurrection.

No, they went back to Jerusalem, the very place of Jesus' execution and tomb – the tomb incidentally of a prominent member of the Jewish Council called Joseph of Arimathea. In short, Jesus was buried in tomb whose whereabouts were known to a number of people in Jerusalem.

Fundamental to the disciples' preaching was the empty tomb of Jesus. If this preaching had been false, it would have been clearly evident to the people of Jerusalem. Some people would be bound to know where Jesus tomb was and / or what happened to His body.

The population of Jerusalem at this time was about 80,000. Not a big city – word would have got round. Clearly, it would be very difficult to win converts if one part of their teaching was so evidently false.

(For population of Jerusalem around 30AD go to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Jerusalem)

So, in conclusion, I suppose we can't say that there is any concrete evidence to demonstrate that Jesus' body left earth as the disciples claimed.

However, what is clearer is that His body disappeared - and that those with a vested interest in claiming that it was still on earth (the Romans, the Temple Authorities) couldn't prove that it actually was.

Was Jesus seen Alive by His Followers After His Death?

At the start of this section, I mentioned E.P. Sanders "secure fact" that:

Jesus' disciples "saw him ([but] in what sense is not certain) after his death".

As we saw, Sanders says this because historians are of a majority view that Jesus' disciples "saw" Him after His death.

What historians are less certain about is the “in what sense” part of the statement.

What do the Gospels say that the disciples saw?

- More than one appearance. In the bible there are 11 separate and distinct appearance events described.
- The appearances happen to individuals, groups of people and, in one case, 500 people. These happened over a period of 40 days after Jesus death (with the exception of His appearance to Paul – which happened much later).
- The Gospels are clear that Jesus was with them physically. He could eat, drink, cook, be touched and be conversed with.
- He could appear and disappear at will.
- Often, in the appearance events, the disciples did not seem to immediately recognise the “person” they were with as Jesus.

(For descriptions of Resurrection appearances, go to Matthew 28

<http://www.biblestudytools.com/matthew/28.html>, Mark 16

<http://www.biblestudytools.com/mark/16.html>, Luke 24

<http://www.biblestudytools.com/luke/24.html>, John 20 and 21

<http://www.biblestudytools.com/john/20.html> and 1 Corinthians 15 <http://www.biblestudytools.com/1-corinthians/15.html>)

As I said earlier, in the rational 21st century, it’s difficult to get our heads around the idea of a man dying and coming back to life again three days later. Our medical knowledge, our understanding of biology and physics, our own personal experience all tell us that people just don’t come back to life after they die.

So, are there any other possible explanations for what the disciples saw – other than the Risen Christ?

Did they see a ghost?

For us in the “rational” 21st century, this is about as hard to grasp as seeing the Resurrected Jesus.

However, the descriptions of a “physical” Jesus that could eat, drink and be touched doesn’t sound like a spectral appearance.

Were they subject to some form of hysteria?

The followers of Jesus would have been very distraught after Jesus’ death. That can make people a bit irrational and unstable. Is it possible that seeing

Jesus alive again was all in their mind? Some form of Mass hallucination? The result of their fevered imaginations? Some form of wish fulfillment?

In response to this, our knowledge of psychology tells us that hallucinations are individual occurrences. They aren't something that happens to groups of people at the same time.

(The following is, I think, telling. I tried a Google search on "Hallucination". Up came a number of links to medical websites and a Wikipedia article. I then searched on "Mass Hallucination". Up came a number of websites arguing for or against the existence of Mass Hallucinations in a religious or spiritual context – along with a smattering of conspiracy theory baloney. There was also one Wikipedia and one medical dictionary link. Both re-directed me to "mass hysteria" when I clicked on the link. As I understand it, hallucination is one of a number of known hysterical conditions. Thus, mass hallucination would be one of a number of mass hysterical conditions. However, I couldn't find any reference to mass hallucinations in either article. Why the absence? I'm sure the conspiracy theorists would have a view. The more mundane explanation would be that one can stick the word "mass" next to the word "hallucination" in a sentence – however that doesn't mean that such a thing as "mass hallucination" actually exists.)

Also, there are multiple appearances of Jesus over a period of over 5 weeks to different people and to the same people more than once to be explained.

One could just about imagine a situation where a small group of people grieving in a room together might work themselves up into such an emotional frenzy that they all were able to convince each other that they saw the person they were grieving over.

I guess we have all seen film footage of people having intense ecstatic and religious experiences like this – induced by a charismatic preacher, their emotional condition, hallucinogenic drugs or their ability to go into a self-induced trance.

Could any of the appearance events fit with something like this?

If I'm honest, the circumstances of one or two could. Although if I'm also honest, there is nothing in the Gospel accounts hinting that anything like this actually occurred in the appearance events described.

For the rest, the actual appearance descriptions in the Gospels just don't fit with some form of ecstatic event.

For example:

- Two disciples are walking to a village called Emmaus in broad daylight. They are chatting when suddenly Jesus appears with them (Luke 24: 13-35).
- The disciples are out catching fish on the Sea of Galilee, as they come ashore, Jesus is waiting for them and has cooked breakfast for them (John 21: 1-14).
- Jesus appears to 500 people at the same time (1 Corinthians 15: 6).

As I mentioned above, there are 11 separate appearance events in the documentary evidence we have.

When these are studied and dissected, there is little or no evidence to suggest that “hysteria” played a part in the appearance events experienced by the disciples.

Did the disciples just make it all up?

As I mentioned before, nearly all the disciples met violent deaths proclaiming Jesus as the risen Son of God. They just wouldn't have done this if they had made the whole thing up.

So, “in what sense” did they see Jesus?

- It's unlikely they saw a ghost.
- It's unlikely they suffered some form of hysterical event.
- It's unlikely they made it up.

As I've said a few times in this section, in the rational 21st century, it's difficult to get our heads around the idea of a man dying and coming back to life again three days later. It's pretty implausible.

It just doesn't happen.

But... historians tell us that the disciples “saw” Jesus after His death.

We've looked for various explanations for this.

By deduction, it would seem that the **least unlikely explanation is that they actually saw Jesus alive after His death.**

By deduction, the other explanations look even more “implausible” than this.

Is there any Other Evidence to Support the Resurrection?

Analysis of the evidence we've looked at so far, points to the Resurrection being an actual historical event.

However, is there any other evidence we should consider?

The answer to this is a clear "yes".

Consider the following.

The disciples died for their beliefs

We've touched on this a few pages back. Let's consider this in more detail.

"So what?" you might say. Countless people have died for their beliefs since the disciples.

For thousands of years people have been enthusiastically dying for what they sincerely believe.

From the suffragette Emily Pankhurst to the IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands to the suicide bombers in Iraq, Israel, Afghanistan, to the terrorists involved in the London tube bombings, to the Tolpuddle Martyrs to the Jews in the Spanish Inquisition. These are just a few of the countless numbers of people who have died for their sincerely held beliefs - since the disciples.

However there is one key difference with the disciples.

The disciples sincerely believed that Jesus had died and that they had **personally** met Him after His death.

They sincerely believed that they had personally conversed with Him, eaten with Him and touched Him.

They were prepared to die for this belief.

They weren't prepared to die for an ideology or a set of beliefs passed on to them from some political or religious leader. This clearly could be said of Christian martyrs that came after the disciples – but not of the disciples

themselves. They'd actually seen Jesus alive after His death, were prepared to die - and with one exception did die - proclaiming this.

The Conversion of Sceptics

In the very early days of Christianity, two of the early leaders of "The Way" (as the early Christians called their movement) were people who had been unconvinced that Jesus was the Son of God.

We heard in the first evening about Paul. As Saul, he was a persecutor of Christians. What changed him to a follower of Jesus was meeting Jesus alive on the Road to Damascus some time after His death.

(See Acts 9 <http://www.biblestudytools.com/acts/9.html>)

The other former sceptic and early leader we know of is James – the brother of Jesus.

Jesus wasn't an only child. He had a number of brothers and sisters.

The Gospels indicate that His family – including His mother – were initially quite hostile to His mission. In Mark's Gospel, His whole family (presumably James included) come to stop Him preaching. Mark says: "When his family heard about this [his teaching], they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind"" (Mark Chapter 3, verse 20).

James is not mentioned as a follower of Jesus in the Gospels.

Yet in the early church, James was a leading figure.

Why the change? We are told in Paul's letters (1 Corinthians 15) that he too had seen Jesus after His death. James changed from a sceptic to a believer after seeing the risen Christ.

Changes to Key Social Structures

Why is it that there are Jews today? Jews can trace their origins back to the tribal Middle-East of 3,000 to 4,000 years ago. There were other peoples about at that time. Why is it then that there are no people alive today who would call themselves Babylonians, Ammonites, Assyrians and Hittites?

The answer is in the social structures the make Jews Jews. Jewish people have lived side-by-side with non-Jews for the last 2,000 years – but have

remained distinctly different because of their own customs, laws, eating habits etc.

To Jews, these things are what make them who they are – and are terribly important to them.

Some have viewed the early Christians as another Jewish sect – and, in a sense, they were. However, they were different from the other Jewish sects that existed at that time. These other sects didn't disagree with the fundamentals of Judaism.

The first “Christians” were all Jews. We have clear evidence that shortly after Jesus death, these Jewish Christians rejected many of the foundations of Judaism. As I described earlier, there is biblical evidence that this was very difficult for many of the early Jewish Christians. It also brought with it great personal risk to their lives from the Jews they lived amongst.

(To get a flavour of this transition, see Acts 10, Acts 11 and Acts 15
<http://www.biblestudytools.com/acts/10.html>, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/acts/11.html> and <http://www.biblestudytools.com/acts/15.html>)

What were these changes?

- The Jewish Christians stopped offering animal sacrifice.
- They eventually rejected the belief that keeping Moses' laws (not the 10 commandments, but the other eating, social and sacrifice laws) that Jews believed was the way to be “right” with God.
- They changed their Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday.
- They believed in a Trinity (one God in three forms). This was blasphemy to Jews.
- They believed the Messiah had come. Jews were (and still are) waiting.
- They initiated the new ritual of The Lord's Supper – a ritual that celebrates Jesus' victory over death.

Why did the early Jewish Christians make these changes? Because their leaders had seen Jesus alive after His death, remembered His teachings and were therefore compelled to make these changes.

The Emergence of the Christianity

In Part 1 I described how quickly after Jesus' death, Christianity caught hold and spread through the Roman world.

Why did this happen?

Equally important is why did Christianity survive? All the other religious “fads” we are aware of that existed in the Roman world didn’t survive. Why didn’t Christianity not fizzle out after a few decades?

The answer is The Resurrection.

A core of people witnessed Jesus alive after His death. This core of people were transformed from illiterate fishermen, Jewish zealots, tax collectors and other “ordinary” people to tireless advocates for the risen Jesus.

As we saw earlier, from the EP Sanders’ book:

- They [the disciples] formed a community to await his return and sought to win others to faith in him as God’s Messiah.

They did all this because of the Resurrection. Without the Resurrection there would have been no lasting Christianity. Without the Resurrection I wouldn’t have written this booklet in 2007 – nearly 2,000 years later. Without the Resurrection, you wouldn’t be reading this either.

Conclusion

I started this booklet by making two statements:

- There is a historical and rational basis for Jesus being the Son of God.
- There is a wealth of evidence to support this view.

To end, let’s review what we have looked at over Parts 1 to 3.

- a. I presented evidence demonstrating that the gospels and that most of the letters of Paul are likely to provide an accurate account of Jesus’ life, death and Resurrection.
- b. I presented evidence showing that these documents have been – on the whole – accurately preserved for us and have not been subject to significant accidental or deliberate modification.
- c. I briefly reviewed other historical information that was contemporary to, but outwith the Gospels. This provided information that did not contradict what

was in the Gospels and the letters of Paul.

- d. I presented evidence demonstrating that it was very likely that Jesus saw Himself as the Son of God.
- e. I showed that it was very unlikely that He saw Himself in this way due to some psychological condition.
- f. I demonstrated that it was very unlikely that Jesus deliberately misled His followers so that they believed He was the Son of God.
- g. I presented evidence demonstrating that it was very likely that Jesus was executed and died.
- h. I presented evidence that it was very likely He was buried and that shortly afterwards His tomb was found to be empty.
- i. We looked at the possible reasons for His tomb being empty. I suggested that the least unlikely explanation was that His body was no longer on Earth.
- j. We looked at the historical basis for Jesus' appearances to the disciples. I stated that this is regarded as a "secure fact" by most historians.
- k. We reviewed what it was that the disciples saw. I suggested that the least unlikely explanation was that the disciples saw, met, talked with and ate with Jesus in bodily form after His death.
- l. Lastly, we reviewed the circumstantial evidence for the Resurrection. I suggested that without the Resurrection, it is likely that:
 - the disciples would not have died for their beliefs
 - sceptics like Paul and James would not have been converted
 - a clear separation of Jewish Christians and Judaism would not have occurred
 - the early church would not have emerged and spread so quickly
 - Christianity would not have lasted to this day.

History is rarely an exact discipline. We can rarely say with absolute certainty that something happened in the past at a particular time and that it happened in a particular way. Even today, with mass communication, controversy can rage relating to events that happened last week or a few years ago (for example: John F Kennedy's assassination, Princess Diana's death).

It's the same with Jesus' life, death and Resurrection.

I can't say with **absolute certainty** that the evidence I've presented is 100% correct.

I can't say with **absolute certainty** that Jesus is the Son of God.

But...

What I can say is that Jesus being the Son of God is the most likely explanation of the pretty extensive evidence that we have.

What I can say is that, looked at rationally, the alternative explanations for the evidence are simply far less likely.

I'm sure that some people reading this may agree with my conclusion. However, I'm also sure that some will be thinking: "Isn't this a bit one sided? Christian presents evidence for Christianity in handy booklet form. Surely there's another point of view?"

Frankly, if I'd been reading this when I was an agnostic, I'd be thinking exactly this.

Indeed I did think this when I finished reading the book "The Case for Christ" I mentioned in the introduction to this booklet!

However, my spiritual journey didn't end by reading this book. After I read it, I trawled bookshops for books on atheism. I felt sure that I'd find some atheistic stuff that would blow all this out of the water. I scoured atheist websites. I read detailed, hostile reviews of "The Case for Christ". I listened to and read articles and interviews with well known atheists like Richard Dawkins. I read the New Testament for myself. I read biographies and critiques of Jesus by non-Christians.

I would actively encourage anyone with doubts about the material presented here to do the same.

What was the result of all this research? I think I can summarise this by saying that I was an agnostic then and I'm a Christian now.

Is any of this Important to You Today?

What we haven't discussed in this booklet is Jesus' message – and what it means. What we haven't discussed is why Jesus' message is important to you today. You may or may not be glad to know we're not going to start now.

However, consider this. If Jesus is the Son of God, if Jesus is real, then His message is real too.

In the last 2,000 years, countless lives have been positively transformed by Jesus' message – and don't kid yourselves, if you truly accept Jesus' message (and I'm stressing the words “**TRULY accept**” and “**JESUS' message**”) it's always a positive transformation.

So, in conclusion:

Do you not owe it to yourself to weigh up the evidence and decide what **you** think?

If you do this and decide Jesus is real, do you not owe it to yourself to find out what His message is and start to experience that positive transformation?