

1. *Jesus Did Exist*

Despite New Testament scholars being in agreement that Jesus of Nazareth existed, since the mid-eighteenth century it has been popular to question whether he was an actual person. Bart Ehrman, a professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, summarized this point:

None of this [Jesus didn't exist] literature is written by scholars trained in New Testament or early Christian studies teaching at the major, or even the minor, accredited theological seminaries, divinity schools, universities, or colleges of North America or Europe (or anywhere else in the world). Of the thousands of scholars of early Christianity who do teach at such schools, none of them, to my knowledge, has any doubts that Jesus existed. (Ehrman 2)

While there is not much evidence outside of the New Testament to substantiate Jesus as a historical person,¹ the internal evidence within its pages is compelling.

Saint Paul

It is sometimes estimated that as little as three percent of the Jews living in Roman Palestine during the time of Jesus were literate—and Saint Paul was certainly among them (Hezser). He was Jewish born and a Roman citizen with a first rate education. He studied at the Gamaliel rabbinical school in Jerusalem under the highly esteemed scholar Gamaliel, who was one of the greatest rabbinical teachers of the first century (Acts 22:3).

We start this discussion with Paul because he wrote his epistles and died by 65 AD—before *any* of the four Gospels were written. Although the Gospels reworked sources that are now lost, Paul's writings are the earliest surviving Christian witness. Throughout his writings, Paul is convinced that Jesus was a real person. In his epistles, Paul mentions this about Jesus of Nazareth:

¹ Among the few important extant secular statements is one from Roman senator and historian Tacitus (56-117 AD). Writing about the great fire that ravished Rome during Nero's reign in 64 AD, Tacitus said: "Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty [death] during the reign of Tiberius [14-37 AD] at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome" (Tacitus, *The Annals* 15:44. His sixteen volume work covered the period of Roman history from 14-68 AD).

- His birth (Galatians. 4:4)
- That he was a Jew and direct descendant of King David (Romans 1:3)
- That he had brothers, one of them named James (1 Corinthians 9:5; Galatians 1:19)
- That his ministry was to the Jews (Romans 15:8)
- That he had twelve disciples (1 Corinthians 15:5)
- That he was a teacher (Paul taught some of his teachings—see 1 Corinthians 11:23-25, cf. Luke 22:19-20; also, 1 Corinthians 9:14, cf. Luke 10:7)
- His belief that he died for our sins (1 Corinthians 15:3)
- That he had the Last Supper on the night he was handed over to the authorities (1 Corinthians 11:23-24)
- That he was killed at the instigation of Jews in Judea (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16)
- That he died by crucifixion and was buried (1 Corinthians 2:2; 15:4)
- His belief that he was resurrected from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:4)
- And, that Paul personally knew people who said that they knew the resurrected Christ (1 Corinthians 15:5-8; Galatians 1:18-19)

Paul said he “received” this list of Christ’s teachings, but didn’t say from whom he learned them (1 Corinthians 15:3). However, he gives some hints in Galatians 1. He reported that before his conversion, “I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it” (Gal. 1:13). Then, while on the road to Damascus, Paul says that God “was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles”; but, he continues:

I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas [Peter] and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord’s brother. (Gal. 1:15-19)

This brief sketch provides a rough timeline of Paul's early adult life. We know he converted sometime after Christ's death around 29-32 AD,² but before 40 AD. This latter date is based on 2 Corinthians 11:32, where Paul states that King Aretas of the Nabateans tried "to arrest me" for being a *Christian* while in Damascus. King Aretas died around the year 40, so Paul converted in the 30s (Tomasino). When Paul's timeline is analyzed, it appears he converted just a few years after the death of Jesus. After his conversion, he spent three years in the desert. After those three years, he visited Peter and James in Jerusalem and "received" the teaching traditions that Paul would later write in his letters to various Christian churches and individuals throughout the Mediterranean area.

Paul has a spiritual witness of Christ before he traveled to Jerusalem; at Jerusalem, he heard first-person witnesses, Peter and James, speak about Jesus's life and teachings. Paul could not ask for better teachers. Peter was closer to Jesus than any other apostle, and James was both an apostle and a sibling of Jesus. Can we get any closer to an eyewitness report than this? *If Jesus never lived—James would know!*

Paul's writings are not just about Jesus the man, or about Christ, but about Jesus Christ who bridges both humanity and divinity. While at Jerusalem, Paul heard first-person witnesses, and he shared what he received, that the resurrected Christ

... appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Cor. 15:5-8)

The phrasing of these appearances, known only through Paul's letter to the Corinthians, were likely one of the earliest Christian confessions (Campbell 12-13). In this text, we gain insight into the teachings formulated and recited among Christians in Jerusalem shortly following the death of Jesus.

While nothing further is known in scripture of Peter or James's one-on-one experience with the risen Christ, a letter written by Ignatius could possibly be interpreted as Peter's visitation. Ignatius was the second bishop of Antioch of Syria who became a Christian martyr around 110 AD. He knew second-

² Contrary to common belief, scholars believe that Jesus was actually born around 4 BC, although the exact year is contested. Herod the Great died in 4 BC, and Jesus was said to be born during his reign.

generation disciples of Jesus, but not likely the Apostles themselves—although there is a tradition that Ignatius knew John. In a letter to the church at Smyrna shortly before his death, Ignatius wrote:

When He [Jesus] came to Peter and his company He said to them, 'Lay hold and handle me, and see that I am' ... and straightway they touched Him, and they believed. ... And after His resurrection He ate with them and drank with them as one in the flesh. (Lightfoot 55, 83)

We also have some information regarding James's one-on-one encounter with the risen Christ. In the gospel of the Hebrews, a non-canonical Jewish Christian work, the resurrected Christ appears to his brother James and says:

Bring a table and bread.... He [Jesus] took the bread and blessed it and brake it and gave it to James and called unto him: My brother, eat thy bread, for the son of man is risen from among them that sleep. (Hennecke 1:165)

Recall that James was the unbelieving brother of Jesus, who converted after seeing his resurrected brother. James became an apostle and is believed to have been a leader in the church at Jerusalem (Galatians 1:19; Mark 6:3; cf. John 7:3-5; 1 Corinthians 9:5).

Paul was surely strengthened by these important interviews with Peter, James, and others who were the first Christians. And he undoubtedly used this information from Peter and James, especially their testimonies, for his favorite missionary theme—the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Four Gospels

According to detractors, the oral traditions that became the four Gospels are unreliable. One simply cannot trust that Jesus existed, they say, because these documents appeared so late in the first century. It is true that scholars typically date Mark around 65-70, Matthew and Luke about 80-85, and John around 90-95 AD. Critics also say that Jesus and his Apostles spoke only Aramaic, but the four Gospels were written in Greek; besides they were "unschooled" or illiterate and couldn't have written them anyway (Acts 4:13).

The decriers have misrepresented how the gospels came to be. Notice what the author Luke writes at the very beginning of his gospel:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I *too* decided to write an *orderly account*. (Luke 1:1-3, my italics)

It is true that Christian communities received oral traditions of Jesus that came from “eyewitnesses” of these important events. But it is also essential to understand that these early oral teachings were written down long before the final authors of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John penned their gospel narratives. In other words, they had written material to work with that went back decades before the four Gospels appeared in finished form. The anonymous writer of Luke is saying at the start of his gospel that he was not entirely satisfied with what he had read, including the first of the four written narratives—the Gospel of Mark. For him, Mark’s gospel was neither complete nor was it adequately organized. So he wrote “an orderly account” of the events in Jesus’s life, and then added the Acts of the Apostles, with emphasis on the ministries of Peter and Paul.

The Gospels of Mark and Matthew show a similar pattern as Luke. The early church father Papias [ca. 60-130 AD]—who knew the disciples of the Apostles, but probably not the Apostles themselves—said this of Mark:

When Mark was the interpreter of Peter, he wrote down accurately everything that he recalled of the Lord’s words and deeds—but not in order. For he [Mark] neither heard the Lord nor accompanied him; but later, as I indicated, he accompanied Peter who used to adapt his [Jesus’s] teachings for the needs at hand, not arranging, as it were an orderly composition of the Lord’s sayings. (Eusebius 3:39)

What Mark “wrote down” was really Peter’s memoirs. Peter spoke Aramaic, so when traveling to Rome or elsewhere in the Roman Empire, he took along the Greek speaking Mark as his translator. Mark’s compilation of Peter’s teachings and reminiscences about Jesus were then passed around to the various early Christian communities. Eventually Mark’s written memoirs of Peter became one of several written sources for whoever was the final author of Mark. This author honored Mark by calling his narrative after him.

Furthermore, here is what Papias said about the Apostle Matthew: “And so Matthew composed the sayings in the Hebrew tongue [Aramaic], and each one

interpreted [or translated] them to the best of his ability” (Eusebius 3:39). As a tax collector for the Roman Empire, Matthew could both read and write, so he also wrote down the oral teachings of Jesus. Later the author of the Gospel of Matthew used the apostle’s manuscript, and perhaps material from Mark and Luke’s gospel—plus other early writings. But in the end chose to honor Matthew for his early writings and called his narrative after Matthew.

In summary, we see that Jesus’s oral teachings were, as Luke’s Gospel and Papias observed, written down early and passed around to various Christian communities. Later on these writings became the four Gospels of our Bible. The Jesus deniers’s claims, that the life and teachings of Jesus are not reliable because they came from oral traditions over a long passage of time, are not convincing. Paul’s early interviews with Peter and James (Jesus’s sibling), plus the historical provenance of the four Gospels, establish there was a Jesus of Nazareth.

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