

## Did Jesus Really Exist? 1/9/21

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, biblical scholars have been wrestling with the question of whether the **real Jesus** behind the stories we have about him in the Gospels could be discovered through historical research.

If so, they wondered, what would we discover and how might it affect modern faith?

Maybe Jesus wasn't who his followers claimed him to be. Maybe he was just another rabbi, or – even worse – a **charlatan**.

Efforts to uncover the **man behind the myth** eventually became known as "The Quest for the Historical Jesus."

Eventually, this quest led to controversy as speculation regarding the true identity of Jesus turned into success on the silver screen.

Think, for example, of Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*, or more recently Dan Brown's *The Davinci Code*.

Both elicited controversy, largely because they entertained the possibility that Jesus **succumbed to temptations of the flesh**.

Not only did he have dirty dreams! He was married, the suggestion of which infuriated conservative Christians across denominations.

Decades before the outcry, mid-twentieth century theologians had already developed a much more **restrained response**.

To them, while the search for the historical Jesus had value, its proponents could never be entirely certain.

All they offered was conjecture.

What we can know, however, is the present experience of Christ through faith –

he who comes to us through song and sacrament as well as through what Paul Tillich called the "biblical picture of Christ" which has had a transformative effect on generations of believers and continues to do today.

Tillich's response to The Quest for the Historical Jesus was so popular in the 1940s and 50s that it led to a joke my seminary professors were **still telling** in the late 1990s.

It goes something like this:

An archeological dig in the Holy Land unearthed the bones of Jesus Christ. The evidence was compelling, even irrefutable.

After repeatedly checking his information, the head of the team of archeologists became certain that he had found the **corpse of Christ**.

Obviously this meant he could not have been resurrected as Christians have always believed.

Stunned, he called the only person he could think of who was recognized as the head of world Christianity, the pope.

After much discussion, the pope began to understand just how strong the evidence was, and decided that he would need to call together the leadership of all the Christian denominations to come to terms with this astonishing discovery.

“Who,” he asked his advisors, “is the **greatest Protestant theologian now living?**”

They replied, “Paul Tillich.”

And so the pope telephoned Tillich, carefully describing the way the bones had been found and how convincing the archeological evidence appeared to be.

After he spoke, there was then a long silence on the other end of the line.

“Do you understand what I am saying?” the pope finally asked.

“Ah,” said Tillich, “So there really was a Jesus after all” (Fred Sanders, “Old Joke Comes True,” accessed at <https://scriptoriumdaily.com/old-joke-comes-true/>, 1-8-22)

### **The Situation has Changed**

One of the reasons this joke was funny was that at the time, few critical scholars seriously doubted if Jesus the man truly existed.

The question, as the theologians insisted, was **not *whether he lived but who he was.***

Was he truly the Christ of God, the messiah? Or was he merely a just another rabbi?

Did he possess a special relationship with God or was he a phony, a charalton, a fraud?

Today, however, the question has changed.

While the vast majority of critical biblical scholars assume Jesus existed, the internet suggests otherwise.

Type in a Google search the question “Did Jesus exist?” and you will be amazed:

- According to history.com, for example, a 2015 survey found that an astonishing 22% of adults in England did not believe Jesus was a real person
- Because of the increasing popularity of the view that Jesus never existed, scholars have given them a label. They call them “mythicists.”
- Over time, but especially within the past few years, entire volumes have been produced that either deny the historical Jesus or, in the case of Bart Ehrman’s *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*, confirm it.

### One Example

Bart Ehrman is fascinating.

He was raised as an evangelical Christian.

After pursuing a doctorate in biblical studies, however, he abandoned his faith.

He now identifies as an atheist and teaches as a historian and biblical scholar at Duke University. He has written a number of best-selling books on the New Testament and early Christianity.

What makes Ehrman so intriguing is how **vociferously** he defends the **historical existence of Jesus – as an atheist!**

Over the next few minutes, I will share with you an easy way to remember how Ehrman supports the existence of the historical Jesus, how it relates specifically to Jesus’ baptism by John, and why – finally – it matters!

But let’s start with the sources themselves.

What information do we have about Jesus?

As you know, we have four gospels.

All were written in the first century, which is important.

Mark was the earliest, Luke and Matthew relied in part on Mark to give their accounts of Jesus, and John was the latest.

Next we have the various writings of the New Testament, particularly the letters of Paul, which contain references to Jesus’ life.

Outside of the New Testament, finally, we have early Jewish and Roman sources that refer to Jesus, which are more reliable than skeptics often let on.

In short, we have more literature referring to Jesus than just about any other historical personage of his era.

True, we have no archeological evidence that Jesus existed, but – as Ehrman points out – the same goes for 99.99% of all the people who lived in the world at the time!

So, what do the writings of the New Testament tell us?

### Ehrman's "Formula"

As a historian, Ehrman relies upon a special method for determining the truth of whether something happened.

I summarize it as EMC...squared.

Let's start with E

This letter stands for "earliest sources"

When someone tells a story, historians will tell you that it is reasonable to favor the earliest accounts as more likely true

That makes sense, right?

When Dan Brown indicated in *The Davinci Code* that Jesus was married, his account relies upon a hint in a document written almost **two hundred years** after Jesus died!

Imagine if someone spread a rumor about you...two centuries from now!

That's hardly a reliable source.

So what are the **earliest sources**? ...

Answer: Paul's letters, the first of which appeared between just twelve and fifteen years after Jesus was likely crucified.

These letters contain references to various accounts and "traditions" Paul **received** from the inner-circle of Jesus' followers in Jerusalem, including his appearances to men like Peter after he died as well as the words he shared with his followers during their last supper together.

This means, through Paul, we have access to the **earliest strands of the Jesus movement** that were in circulation nearly a generation before he wrote his letters.

Our next letter is **M**, which stands for "multiple attestation."

The idea here is simple: the more people you have who refer to an event as happening, historians will tell you, the more likely it happened.

If 100 people tell you they saw William Shatner in church today, you would be more inclined to believe it than if one person told you, correct?

That's **multiple attestation**.

Let's go back to Jesus' last supper.

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul writes: "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me'" (vv. 23-24).

Sound familiar?

This story, along with almost exactly the same words of Jesus, appears in **three other gospels** – Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

You might think also of the story where Jesus "multiplies" a small amount of fish and bread to feed 5,000 people.

That story, which I interpret as referring to the "miracle" of people sharing, appears in all four gospels.

Once again, multiple attestation.

After E and M, we come to the first of our two C's: contextual credibility.

This is a fancy way of saying that Jesus was likely **considered** to be a healer or exorcist since other people of the time, both pagan and Jewish, were viewed in the same way.

The last "C" of our formula stands for **criterion of dissimilarity**.

Here we have the sharpest tool in the historian's toolbox.

Listen closely:

"If a tradition of Jesus is dissimilar to what Christians telling the stories would have wanted to say about him (e.g., that he was baptized, or that he came from Nazareth, or that one of his closest followers betrayed him)," Ehrman writes, "then it is probably authentic" (*A Brief Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 160).

Think about it:

Why would the early followers of Jesus invent stories they would subsequently have to explain away?

Consider our Gospel reading for today:

Luke tells us that John baptized Jesus.

Well, **why on earth would Jesus, whom his followers believed to be superior to John, need to be baptized by John?**

What a contradiction!

Luke has John, therefore, explicitly state that he is **inferior to Jesus**, that he merely baptizes with water while Jesus will baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit!

Why?

Because the account **works against the bias of the Christian writers**.

It doesn't make sense.

So, they have to explain it.

To offer another example:

Why would the early Christians make up the story that Jesus was crucified?

As I have said many times, this was the most **abhorrent, shameful way to die** in the Roman world.

What kind of messiah would be killed this way?

Who would follow such a failure?

No wonder Paul has to go to **great lengths** to make sense of it: the crucifixion, he acknowledges, was a **total scandal**, "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23).

Yet through it, Paul reasons, God has opened up to us a new way of experiencing Him, one that requires faith given the circumstances, one where God is hidden in, with, and under suffering and tragedy.

For Paul to invent an absurdity and then try to explain it makes no sense.

The crucifixion is arguably the greatest "proof" that Jesus existed.

So, there you have it: EMC...Squared.

By privileging the **earliest accounts**, events that are accounted for by **multiple sources**, descriptions that **resonate** with the way people thought about others at the time, and by highlighting stories that would have worked against the prevailing Christian bias, Ehrman's conclusion seems totally reasonable:

Jesus existed.

Objective historical methods demonstrate it.

Add to that the fact that we have sources outside of the New Testament that refer in the first century, as in the case of a historian named Josephus, to "Jesus-who-is-called-messiah," and you have a compelling case for Christ assembled, in the case of Ehrman, by an atheist.

The irony is rich.

## Implications

So, who cares? Why does this matter?

Here's my hope:

First, by showing how a scholar independently arrives at the logical conclusion that Jesus existed, we may be more inclined to **trust the New Testament** as reliable.

People saw something in Jesus.

They recorded it, and they died for it.

Why would so many of them die for him **if he never lived?**

The fact, secondly, that Jesus lived establishes something more:

it shows us that here, in and through a concrete real human being, our separation from God was overcome.

Salvation entered history, freeing us from our selfishness by opening for us a whole new way of life which we commemorate today in the baptism of Jesus.

Third and finally, the devil is in the details.

They don't matter.

Maybe Jesus helped feed 500 instead of 5,000.

What matters is that events like these occurred.

Something took place.

**Something happened!**

And that something changed human history not only forever, but for the good.

And all God's people said....

AMEN.