

Week 4: Jesus - Myth or Messiah?

Objective:

Evaluate the historical evidence for Jesus' existence and identity, and affirm that Jesus is not a mythological figure but the promised Messiah, Son of God, and Savior.

Introduction - 5 minutes

Opening question: "Who do people say Jesus is today?"

- Common answers:
 - A great moral teacher
 - A prophet or revolutionary
 - A myth
 - A wise rabbi
 - God in the flesh
- Follow-up question: "Which of these do you hear most often - and why?"
- Emphasize the weight of this question
 - **Matthew 16:13-17** When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.
 - Jesus wants no ambiguity or ambivalence – notice he asked the question twice, wanting them to nail down a stance.
 - This is the same thing we have been talking about – 1 Peter 3:15
- Goal: To show that Jesus is a real, historical person and the divine Messiah.
- Before we can answer who Jesus is, we must answer something more basic: Did we get reliable information about Him at all? Christianity rises or falls on history.

Historical Evidence for Jesus - 10 minutes

- Clarify the historical standard:
 - We judge ancient history by the same criteria for everyone – there should be no special rules for the Bible.
 - Three historical questions historians ask:
 - Do we have many sources?
 - Are they early?
 - Do hostile witnesses confirm them?"
- Section 1: How many sources? Let's look at the amount of evidence

- New Testament manuscripts (from AD 125 – 15th century)
 - 5,800+ Greek manuscripts
 - 10,000+ Latin manuscripts
 - 9,300+ early translations (Coptic, Syriac, Armenian)

Work	Approx. date written	Approx. surviving manuscripts	New Testament has more by	NT has ~X times as many
New Testament (Greek)	AD 50–100	~5,800	—	—
Homer - <i>Iliad</i>	c. 750 BC	~1,800	~4,000	~3×
Plato - Dialogues	c. 400 BC	~250	~5,550	~23×
Julius Caesar - <i>Gallic Wars</i>	c. 50 BC	~240	~5,560	~24×
Tacitus - <i>Annals</i>	c. AD 100	2 (nearly complete)	~5,798	~2,900×

- Homer - *Iliad*
 - Often cited as the best-attested non-biblical ancient work.
- Plato - Dialogues
 - Cornerstone of Western philosophy.
- Julius Caesar - *Gallic Wars*
 - Direct historical autobiography taught in schools.
- Tacitus - *Annals*
 - Premier Roman historian, shockingly thin manuscript base.
 - In fact, it is our main source for early Roman emperors – and it only survives in essentially two medieval manuscripts.
- *We have more manuscripts of the New Testament than of Homer, Plato, Caesar, and Tacitus combined.*
- No other ancient text comes within an order of magnitude of the New Testament.
 - All that, and remember Lee Strobel “The Case for Christ”: even skeptical scholars affirm that the NT text is 99.5% textually pure, with the remaining 0.5% consisting of spelling or word-order differences - not doctrinal content.

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- Section 2: How early?

Work	Approx. date written	Earliest surviving manuscript	Approx. time gap
New Testament (Greek)	AD 50–100	c. AD 125–150 (e.g., Rylands P52)	~25–50 years
Homer – <i>Iliad</i>	c. 750 BC	c. 400 BC	~350 years
Plato – Dialogues	c. 400 BC	c. AD 900	~1,300 years
Julius Caesar – <i>Gallic Wars</i>	c. 50 BC	c. AD 900	~950 years
Tacitus – <i>Annals</i>	c. AD 100	c. AD 900–1100	~800–1,000 years

Summary: So, before we even open the Bible and read it devotionally, by historical standards we already know something: *we are not dealing with legendary material.*

- Section 3: Now, what do outside, hostile sources say?
 - Non-Christian sources mention Jesus (remember, these are “hostile” sources; they had no incentive to promote Christianity)
 - **Tacitus**, Roman senator & historian (Annals 15.44, AD 116), describes Nero’s persecution of Christians after the Great Fire of Rome (AD 64): Confirms Jesus was executed under Pontius Pilate.
 - **Josephus**, Jewish historian, not a Christian (Antiquities 18, AD 93-94): Mentions Jesus, His teaching, crucifixion, and followers.
 - Antiquities 20: “James, the brother of Jesus who is called Christ”
 - **Pliny the Younger** (Roman governor of Bithynia) (Letter to Emperor Trajan, AD ~112): Early Christians meeting regularly, worshiped Christ “as a god.”
 - **Suetonius** (Lives of the Twelve Caesars, AD 120): Mentions Claudius (AD 41-54) expelling Jews from Rome due to disturbances over Christ. Confirms early Christian-related unrest in Rome within decades of Jesus’s death.
 - **Lucian of Samosata** (a 2nd century Greek satirist): In one of his works, he wrote of the early Christians as follows: “The Christians ... worship a man to this day - the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account.... [It] was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws.

- Lee Strobel insight:
 - Jesus is among the best-attested figures of the ancient world.
 - The question is not whether Jesus existed, but who He was.
- Archaeology supports the New Testament's cultural and political context, as talked about last lesson. Compare evidence to other historical figures.

Figure	Earliest Sources After Death	Number of Sources	Hostile Sources?	Historical Consensus
Jesus of Nazareth	20–60 years (Paul, Gospels); 60–90 years (Tacitus, Josephus, Pliny)	Many (Christian + non-Christian)	Yes (Tacitus, Pliny, Josephus)	Virtually unanimous
Alexander the Great	~300–400 years later (Arrian, Plutarch)	Few	No	Unquestioned
Socrates	~40–70 years later (Plato, Xenophon)	Very few	No	Unquestioned
Hannibal	~50–70 years later (Polybius)	Few	Mixed	Unquestioned
Julius Caesar	Contemporary + later	Many	Some	Unquestioned
Tiberius Caesar	Decades later	Few	Some	Unquestioned

Summary point:

If we accept Alexander, Caesar, or Socrates, consistency demands we accept Jesus.

Jesus in the Gospels - 7 minutes

If Jesus is real, and if our sources are early, abundant, and reliable, the next question is unavoidable: **What do those sources actually say about Him?**

- Jesus claimed divine authority:
 - “Before Abraham was born, I AM” (John 8:58)
 - In a very literal sense, ‘I existed before Abraham.’
 - Also reminiscent of Moses asking God who sent him (Exodus 3:14)
 - “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30)
 - Echoes the Shema (the basic confession of Judaism) in Deut. 6:4 (Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.)
 - John 14:6 Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”
 - John 20:28 Thomas calls Jesus “My Lord and my God.” Jesus accepts it.

- Demonstrated authority over:
 - Nature - Mark 4:39 “He rebuked the wind and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ ... and there was a great calm.”
 - Sin - Mark 2:5-12 “Son, your sins are forgiven... The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.”
 - Demons - Mark 5:6-13 Legion recognizes Jesus’ authority before being cast out.
 - Death - John 11:43-44 Lazarus raised from the dead.
- He taught with unparalleled authority
 - Mark 1:22 - The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.
 - They were impressed because other teachers often simply cited the opinions of earlier teachers

At this point, the question isn’t historical anymore - it’s logical.

- C.S. Lewis (Mere Christianity): “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher.”
 - Lewis’s reasoning leaves only three options (often called the **trilemma**):
 - Liar - knowingly false → no moral authority
 - Lunatic - sincerely mistaken → no moral authority
 - Lord - his claims are true → legitimate authority
 - If Jesus is not the first two, then the third follows - and his authority is grounded in who he is, not merely in the wisdom of his teachings.
 - Lord, liar, or lunatic?

Teaching emphasis:

- Jesus does not leave open the option of being merely a good teacher.
- Rather, He forces a decision to be made
- Moral teachers say ‘here is a good way to live.’ Jesus says ‘Follow me.’

Messianic Prophecy - 7 minutes

If Jesus really believed He was the Messiah, the next question is fair: Does His life match what God promised beforehand?

Prophetic examples:

- Micah 5:2 (700 BC) - Messiah born in Bethlehem → Matthew 2
- Isaiah 53 (700 BC) - Suffering Servant → Crucifixion
- Psalm 22 (1000 BC) - Crucifixion imagery before crucifixion existed

And there are many, many more!

- Born of a Virgin - Isaiah 7:14 → Matthew 1:18-25
- Ministry in Galilee - Isaiah 9:1-2 → Matthew 4:12-17
- Triumphal Entry - Zechariah 9:9 → Matthew 21:1-11
- Betrayed for 30 pieces of silver - Zechariah 11:12-13 → Matthew 26:15

Depending on how you count them, there are 50-300 messianic prophecies

- “Fingerprint” analogy:
 - Prophecy functions cumulatively, not as isolated proof-texts.
 - Just as in matching fingerprints, one match could be chance; dozens are not.
- Illustration: (show of hands) how many people born in January? In the 80’s? In Fort Worth? In Harris Methodist?
 - Each one of those on its own is nothing special, but together they are
- Mathematician Peter Stoner calculated:
 - Fulfilling 8 prophecies = 1 in 10^{17}
 - Fulfilling 48 = 1 in 10^{157}
 - Scientists estimate there are about 10^{80} atoms in the entire universe. A chance of 1 in 10^{157} is so small that even if every atom God created stood for one possibility, we would still be short by 77 zeros.

Is Jesus a Myth? - 5 minutes

At this point, some will say: ‘This all sounds impressive - but maybe Jesus was just a myth that grew over time.’ So let’s test that explanation.

- Myth theory claims Jesus was borrowed from pagan gods (Horus, Mithras, Osiris).
- But good explanations explain all the data, not just some of it.
- Myth Characteristics
 - No specific time/place
 - Evolve over centuries
 - Supernatural elements universal to the mythos
- Compare to Jesus narrative
 - Jesus is rooted in real time, geography, and historical figures.
 - Eyewitness testimony was present from the beginning.
 - Crucifixion under Pontius Pilate (verifiable, from previous lesson)
 - Early creeds (1 Corinthians 15) date within a few years of the crucifixion.

Judaism was the least likely soil for inventing a dying-and-rising divine Messiah.

- If the Jesus story were mythological, it would have emerged anonymously and gradually - but instead it arises precisely in one place, time, and from eyewitness communities.

Conclusion:

Myths grow slowly and anonymously. Christianity exploded immediately and publicly.

Responding to Doubts - 6 minutes

Guiding principle: We don't argue people into faith - we remove intellectual barriers.

- Objection: "We can't trust the Gospels."
 - Response:
 - Early dating
 - Multiple eyewitnesses
 - Exceptional manuscript evidence
- Objection: "Jesus never claimed to be God."
 - Response:
 - His words (John 5:18; 10:30)
 - His actions (forgiving sin, accepting worship)

Application & Encouragement - 5 minutes

- Christianity is grounded in real events, not fables
 - **2 Peter 1:16** For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.
- Lewis: "Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance."
- Reflection: "If Jesus really is who He claimed to be, what response makes sense?"

Assignment: Read John 11 for next week — the power of the resurrection.

Class Discussion - 5 minutes

1. Why do people prefer to see Jesus as a myth or moral teacher?
2. What evidence strengthens your confidence in Jesus' identity?
3. How would you respond to someone who says Jesus was just a good teacher?

Next Week... The Resurrection: Evidence & Power