

Who do Men say That I am?

The un-inventability of Jesus The Christ



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Summary

The main records of the life and actions of Jesus Christ are in the New Testament. These indicate a unique person unlike anyone else, someone whose teaching and example were unusual in their day, who died and rose from the dead and who promised to return.

Many have suggested that the accounts of Jesus were simply invented. However, there are many problems with this idea. This article considers some of the witnesses to the life of Jesus from outside the New Testament. It also poses the question of who would have invented the person of Jesus Christ.

The two main groups of people in the area of the Gospel writings were the Jews and the Greeks. However, Jesus is well away from the ideas of either group. Jews looked for a legal scholar who would interpret the law in an especially righteous way, and for a hero who would lead them to victory against the Romans and to independence of Gentile empires. Jesus did not do either of these. He emphasised the general principles of the Law of Moses against the detailed codification of this law into regulation. He spoke out against violence and taught that men should cooperate with one another rather than rebel.

The expectation of the Greeks was of a hero who would show great physical beauty, strength and stamina who would dominate his world. Such heroes are described by Philostratus and by Celsus; they are used as a comparison with Jesus to show how much better Greek paganism could hope to be than Christianity. Jesus was clearly not invented by a Greek.

If Jesus was not invented by any of the groups around the early church, then he must have lived in the way that the New Testament described. There is no other way to account for the content of the Gospels or the other New Testament writings.

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Sooner or later all of us have to address the question posed by Jesus to his disciples during the three years prior to his crucifixion at the hands of the Roman and Jewish authorities: “Who do men say that I am?” (Mark 8:27-33) It is a most interesting and searching question. Then, as now, people were faced with an person teaching and behaving, in a manner that did not conform to the accepted system of the time and culture. Jesus questioned the traditional thinking about the nature of life, salvation and how it might be achieved. Almost everyone with whom he came into contact was changed in some way for good or bad. Jesus work was regarded as such a challenge to society that the leaders of Jewish government felt sufficiently threatened to collaborate with the Romans, whom they detested, to bring about his execution.

The life and teachings of Jesus still challenge our individual and cultural thinking today. If we follow his thinking and teaching carefully our behaviour towards ourselves, others and God will be very different to those around us. Jesus taught that marriage was for life, that we should love our enemies, that seeking wealth for its own sake means that God does not have priority in our lives. The concepts laid out in the beatitudes (see box) do not represent the general behaviour of most societies in our world today.

Who was this man who provoked such reactions and who still commands a response? His name has been known for generations all over the world. His understanding of what life is really about and why we exist at all has been ignored and altered. Many people have died defending what they believed to be his truth. The big question which still remains after two thousand years of history is, was he who he claimed to be, the Son of God, come to bring life and salvation by enabling us to repair our relationship with God, or was he the biggest fraud and con man that the world had ever known? The claim that he was just a good man and humane teacher will not suffice as a middle way of assigning Jesus a place in history. Had that been the case, an ability to heal people, feed them and keep the Law of Moses at no cost to society would not have earned such hatred, for, caring rarely results in the anger of government. So the question remains, was Jesus the Son of God and the only person through whom salvation can be gained or was he, as the Pharisees claimed after his crucifixion, a “Deceiver”?

The debate about Jesus has been aired many times since his day. The issues boil down to two main arguments, firstly did he exist historically and secondly, if he did exist, was he more than just an itinerant Jewish preacher and a good man whose life and activities have been exaggerated to mythological proportions?

The Reality of Jesus

The belief that Jesus is a fictional character with no factually proven historical existence has gained greater prominence and momentum in recent times because of the extensive

The Beatitudes

These are a core part of the teaching of Jesus and are recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. They indicate qualities that should be present in followers of Jesus, and promise that the people who show these qualities will be blessed.

- 3 *Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
- 4 *Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.*
- 5 *Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.*
- 6 *Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.*
- 7 *Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.*
- 8 *Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.*
- 9 *Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.*
- 10 *Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
- 11 *Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.*

(Matthew 5:3-11)

This was not only radical in content, but also in form. Instead of giving a set of rules and rituals for living, this describes the kind of person one should try to be. No-one had taught in these terms before.

Attitudes to Jesus among the authorities of his day.

During the early stages of his ministry Jesus was treated with a certain amount of curiosity by the religious establishment of his day, but soon they had rejected his teaching and were prepared to put him to death. Clearly they did not accept his teaching as true. Their stated position is shown in Matthew 27:63 where they call him a “deceiver”.

The conflict between Jesus and the local religious establishment which led to his death clearly shows that the teaching of Jesus was not what the Jewish religious establishment expected in a Messiah.

development of historical skills of evidence, significance and reliability of material and artefacts from earlier civilisations. The nature of proof required to enable thoughtful people to accept evidence as unchallengeable needs to be greater in volume and deeper in detail than might have been the case in earlier generations. Can then, the material existence of Jesus be proved from reliable primary sources and do those sources stand up to challenge in the wider debate about what Jesus did, said and claimed to be.

Evidence external to the Bible for the existence of Jesus relies on two primary historical sources and a third source which may be regarded as primary or secondary

evidence. Firstly, Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian who lived from approximately AD 37-100, immediately after the events recorded in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. He wrote extensively about Jewish history, having been involved in some of the political upheavals of the ruling factions before going completely over to being an administrator for the Romans in Rome. Secondly, Tacitus, a Roman writer lived a little later (56 to 120AD). While not an immediate observer of the life of Jesus, he lived during the establishment and persecution of the early Christians and the destruction of Jewish state and Temple in 70AD. Tertullian, another acknowledged authority of Jesus historical veracity, is much later, 160- 225AD, but there are earlier Christian writers outside the Bible who refer to Jesus. In modern terms Tertullian is regarded as a secondary source because of his late appearance to the evidential scene, though given the time lapse, he is still regarded as close to the events of the early Common Era.

There is further very detailed primary historical evidence of Jesus’ existence from the four Gospel writers and letters from Paul (formerly called Saul), who also claimed direct association with him. The reliability of their witness will also be considered.

Is the Account of Jesus Invented?

If the historical existence of Jesus can be established, there remains the question of whether the claims for what he said and did and who in reality he was, can be substantiated. We are familiar with the idea of the hero who is found to have feet of clay, in their characters and also morally or physically; Alexander the Great, Lord Byron and modern bankers come to mind. Was it possible to take a good man and create an aura around him that made him greater than all men in history before or since, without someone investigating and finding irrefutable evidence that the claims were false or extensively mistaken? Finally did someone, or a group of people, set out to

Church Witnesses to Jesus outside the Bible

Name	Date of writing	Where
Clement of Rome	c96AD	Rome
Ignatius of Antioch	100-110AD	Asia Minor
Polycarp of Smyrna	108AD	Asia Minor
Justin Martyr	155-161AD	
Irenaeus of Lyons	c180AD	Gaul
Clement of Alexandria	195-203AD	Alexandria
Tertullian	197-208AD	N. Africa
Cyprian of Carthage	c250AD	N. Africa
Hippolytus	c250AD	Rome

There were many writers who mention Jesus in some detail, but who wrote after the New Testament was complete. The table above shows some of these. The writings of these people show that Jesus existed, and by quoting from the New Testament show that it was already completed and accepted as authoritative before they wrote.

create a massive deception by inventing a character, poor, perfect, willing to sacrifice his life for others with nothing to gain for himself, and, promising eternal life to his followers if they also chose to behave like him? Who could have thought up such a person and persuaded large numbers of people in society then, and all over the world since, to accept him in the way that history has declared to be the case?

In order to attempt to answer these questions the nature of the historical evidence and the societies from which information comes, Jewish and Gentile, of the period will be considered together with an examination of the background and ideas of leaders, writers and philosophers. The methods by which evidence and information was collected and collated about contemporary events and what aspirations both societies had about political leaders and saviours should be will also be assessed.

The historical evidence for the physical existence of Jesus is the most important to establish. Without this information other issues are irrelevant except as philosophical speculation about an ideal man able to rid humans of all that they dislike about the existence in which they find themselves, death, war poverty and various kinds of evil.

Josephus

Flavius Josephus is the most important of the written witnesses, external to the Bible, who mentions Jesus. His twenty or more books were published around 93AD and include an autobiography. They provide a detailed and extensive history of the area in and around the Roman controlled states of the Middle East. He has variously been called as both a reliable and an unreliable witness to the events of his time; reliable, because Josephus' writings about the period are extensive and detailed. Most of his work has been corroborated by other writers, historians and documents. Unreliable, because he is regarded by some readers as being biased towards a Roman imperial interpretation of the events he recorded. Finally there are a few people who believe that aspects of Josephus' writings, especially his references to Jesus, were "doctored" at a later period and therefore what he says about the existence of Jesus cannot be taken as accurate. There is an extensive literature on this subject which is thoroughly reviewed in an article by Christopher Price of CADRE¹. A summary of the issue is

Flavius Josephus

Josephus was born in Jerusalem to a priestly family and was among the higher reaches of Jewish society when the Romano-Jewish war broke out in 66AD. He was sent to command the Jewish rebels in Galilee and was commander of the rebels at the siege of Jotapata, after which he was captured by the Romans. He saved his life by declaring that Vespasian would become emperor and was then attached to Vespasian's household.

In his new position he wrote four works which explained his own position and tried to reduce the hatred of Jews after the war by giving a history of the war, including the reasons behind its start, and a picture of the history and culture of Jews. He also wrote a biography.

His book on the history of the Jewish People (Antiquities of the Jews) contains a reference to John the Baptist and two references to Jesus. There is a possibility that the longer of these references has had minor alterations by copyists, but in general it seems to reflect Josephus' view of Jesus.

available at biblethink.org.uk/page26.html (a longer discussion appears in <http://www.biblethink.org.uk/pdfdocs/Long/NonBibFp.pdf>).

The general conclusion that it is very unlikely that Josephus references to Jesus are manufactured within the document and that Josephus believed that what he recorded about Jesus was historically accurate information. Given that Josephus is regarded as a precise historian of other events it is unreasonable to suggest that he was inaccurate in the information given about Jesus and Jesus' brother James to whom he refers also. Josephus is known to have been in Jerusalem at the time of the death of the apostle James, an event to which he makes reference.

The establishment of Josephus as an accurate historian is a significant link in confirming the historical existence of Jesus and while he provides strong ancient evidence external to the Bible there is the evidence of Tacitus and Tertullian to be assessed.

Tacitus

Tacitus overlaps part of Josephus lifetime, but is further removed from the events of the very early first century that Josephus records. His writing style was brief and his Latin Prose compact, but as a politician from the Senate his writing also offers penetrating insights into the psychology of power politics. He grew up in the provinces, probably in northern Italy or *Gallia*. In his *Annals* there is a passage which refers to Christ, Pontius Pilate, and to a mass execution of Christians by Nero after a six-day fire that burned much of

Rome in July 64 AD². His references to Christians have drawn attention because they are a rare non-Christian reference to the foundations of Christianity, the execution of Christ described in the gospels, and to the persecution of Christians in 1st-century Rome. Most academics believe these references to the Christians to be authentic in spite of some who have challenged his accuracy of Pilate's status while in Judea. What can be learned from his writings with confidence is that Christianity originated in Judea and that it had spread effectively to Italy by the time of Nero. Something or somebody had been the starting point of a movement which had relatively quickly gained sufficient momentum to challenge the serenity of the Emperor.

Tertullian

Tertullian lived from about 160-225 AD. He was a prolific early Christian author and according to Church tradition was born and raised in Carthage, then in the Roman province of Africa, now known as Tunisia. He is the first Christian author to produce an extensive body of Christian literature in Latin. Very little reliable evidence exists about his life, most of what is known about him comes from minor references in his own writings. He is thought to have been the son of a Roman centurion, a trained lawyer, and an ordained priest. His conversion to Christianity took place about 197-198 AD.

Tertullian

Tertullian is an obscure figure. It is thought that he was born in Carthage and that he became a lawyer, but much of his life is simply unknown. However, he wrote some 60 or 61 books which deal with developments in theology of his time. He is one of the people involved in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, a full formulation of which was produced at the start of the fourth century.

Tertullian wrote mainly in Latin; he is considered to be the earliest of the Latin fathers and made a considerable impact on the theology of the Western church. In the latter part of his life he joined the Montanists, a heterodox group who emphasised personal experience.

Cornelius Tacitus

Tacitus was an upper-class Roman who married the daughter of Agricola, the conqueror of Britain. He wrote a number of books, one of which ("Annals") includes a paragraph about Christians in its account of the reign of the emperor Nero. This includes a reference to Jesus:-

Christus, from whom the name [Christian] had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius 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, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. (Annals 15.44)

There is no doubt that this passage originated with Tacitus and that it remains unchanged since it was written. It confirms the existence of Jesus and goes on to describe the horrors of the persecution of Christians under Nero.

His writings are among the most important contributions to our early knowledge of Christianity at the end of the second century. Of all that he wrote, thirty-one works still exist, together with fragments of more compositions. Some fifteen documents are lost, some as recently as the 9th century. His writings contain a well developed theology about Jesus, his life, mission, death and resurrection and demonstrates that Christianity was a mature, well organised movement by the end of the first century. We can also reliably accept that while persecution of Christians was still widespread, Tertullian's notes

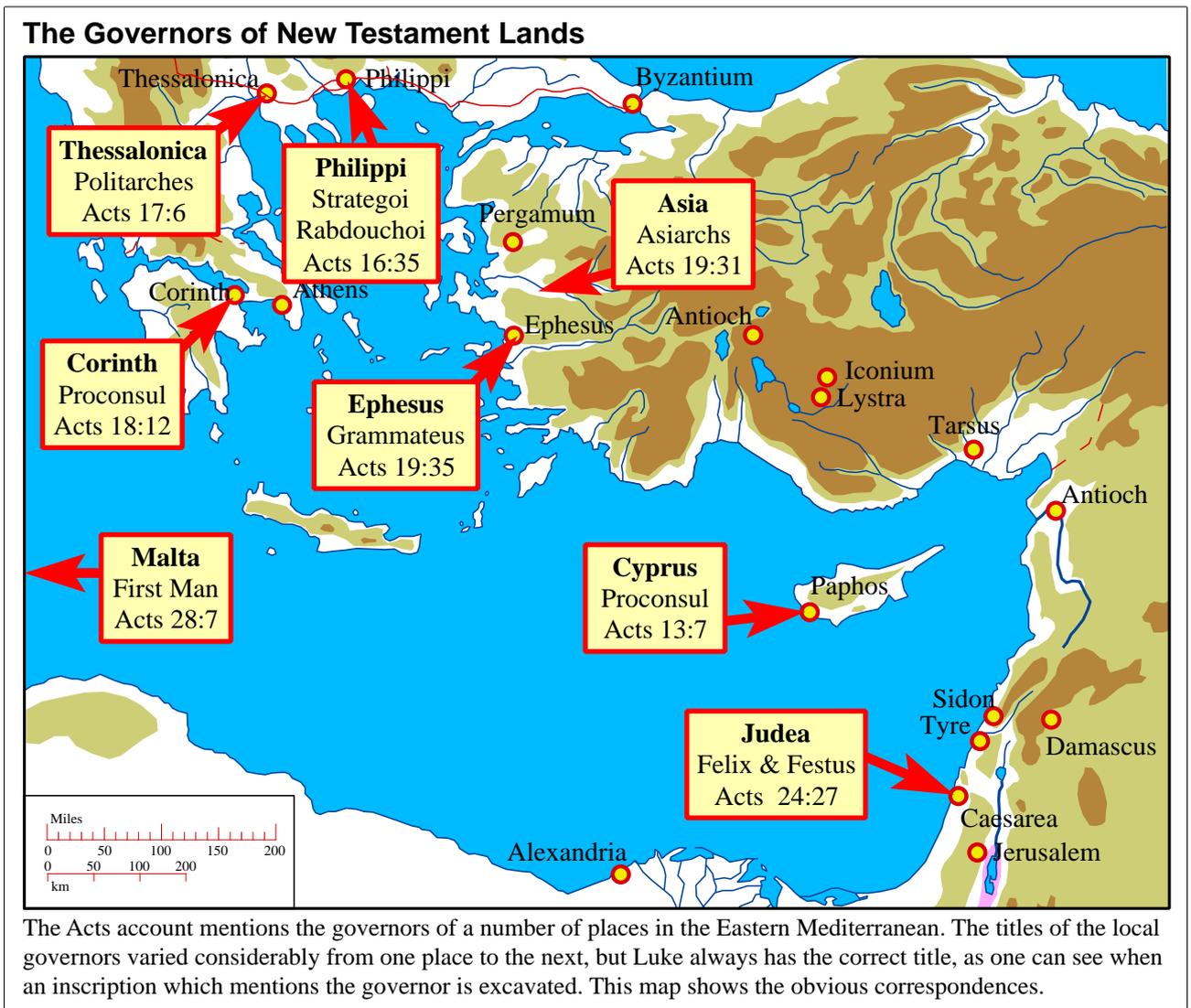
that they were growing in number and influence. None of this evidence proves the historical existence of Jesus, but it does show that increasingly large numbers of people across several countries, many of them well educated, in professional positions, believed that they had been give sufficient evidence to accept that Jesus had not only lived and died but that he was now alive again with an important part in their lives. They were even ready to die for such beliefs. What Tertullian contributes to any debate about the existence of Jesus is evidence of the substantial, continuing growth and consolidation of Christianity as a movement. and that the people who had joined the movement accepted that Jesus was actual person.

Quotation from Tertullian

The more you mow us down, the more numerous we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.

(Apology, 50.13)

The other primary evidence about the historical existence of Jesus is internal to the Bible, from the four Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. There are also the writings of the Apostle Paul to analyse. These men, with the exception of Luke, all claimed to have met with Jesus. Matthew and John wrote of their close professional friendship with him. Paul, writing no more than 16 years after the event, claimed to have met Jesus following the ascension into heaven (Galatians 1:11-12). It has been claimed that from an historical perspective all these “witnesses” are suspect because they were followers of Christianity. However, even biased evidence may contain accurate



Bias and the Gospels

All the eyewitness accounts of the life of Jesus are from his followers. This is sometimes represented by critics as evidence of bias and this allows them to ignore the accounts. However, the other, and more likely interpretation of the fact is that those who saw the evidence of Jesus' resurrection were convinced by it. Some of those involved (Paul and James the brother of Jesus) were opposed to Jesus until after the resurrection.

The problem is that almost all historical evidence comes from eyewitnesses with an involvement in events. For example, most of the eyewitness accounts of the first world war come from soldiers on one side or the other; these were naturally biased, but no-one would ignore their evidence because of it.

information and from an historical perspective cannot be discounted since their witness will reveal significant information about the circumstances of the period, place and events. Even a strong bias does not mean the witnesses are lying but as in any examination of evidence, be it historical or legal if the witness is telling the truth however biased their words may be and however odd their statements may seem, they may well be telling the truth.

The most significant internal biblical evidence from an outsider's viewpoint is provided by Luke who was a gentile and possibly a doctor. He gives considerable historical information which can and has been checked against evidence of the period external to the Bible.

For example, in the book of The Acts of the Apostles Luke refers to the ruling authorities in a number of different cities and provinces in the Eastern Roman Empire. It was characteristic of the empire that each town had its own system, and there was no central record of all the governmental systems and titles in use in different places. However, some of the designations of the ruling people were recorded on inscriptions and some of these have been found by archaeologists. Where we know what the local titles were, Luke is always exactly correct (see box on previous page).

Luke uses information about people, places and status within the Roman administrative system throughout his Gospel and the Book of Acts which he is also believed to have written. His factual information has been challenged in the past, but is now recognised by Historians of the period as being accurate.

The Letters of Paul

Some of what is known of Saul (Paul) of Tarsus comes from Luke who was Paul's good friend and probably his doctor. It is Luke who first introduces Paul to the world in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 7:8) and Luke is last heard of as being with Paul in Rome in 62AD where Paul held for some time and then released. Paul had been educated by the best minds in the Jewish world but refuted orthodox Jewish teaching and practice that after he claimed to have had a meeting with Jesus during a Journey to Damascus.

There is no doubt that something happened to Paul during that journey. He left Jerusalem a fully observant orthodox practitioner of Judaism

The Apostle Paul

Paul was born in Tarsus in Cilicia of Hebrew parents. He was initially called Saul by his parents. Having received a Greek education he moved at some point to Jerusalem where he studied under Gamaliel, one of the principal Jewish scholars of the time.

Immediately after the resurrection of Jesus, Paul was among the people who persecuted the new Christian community. He was present at the stoning of Stephen, the first disciple to be killed for his faith. He then went on to Damascus to pursue Christians who had fled there to escape persecution in Jerusalem.

On the way he met the risen Jesus and was compelled by this experience to accept the Gospel. Baptised in Damascus Paul proclaimed the Gospel in Arabia and Judea before being sent to Cilicia to escape persecution. In 47AD he went on a missionary journey to Cyprus, where he made his first Gentile converts. Here he took the name Paul, and then went on to travel extensively in the eastern Mediterranean area, proclaiming the Gospel.

He was arrested in Jerusalem in 57AD and after a while sent to Rome for trial. He remained in captivity in Rome until 62AD when he was released and undertook another journey before being arrested in late 63AD and again imprisoned in Rome. He would still have been in prison when the fire of Rome occurred in 64AD and was probably among the first to die in Nero's persecution of Christians.

who was prepared to use the death penalty against Christians. He arrived in Damascus such a changed man that the Jewish authorities spent the next two and a half decades pursuing him across the Roman world, trying to have him killed because they saw him as a major threat to their authority and to the continued existence of the Jewish way of life. Paul was willing to be persecuted in this way and undergo a catalogue of tragedies in his life following this event and for which he was finally executed by the Roman authorities sometime about 64AD. As he said himself:-

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.
(1 Corinthians 15:9)

It seems unlikely that Paul and other very early Christians would have continued with their challenge to authority unless they believed that they had undergone the experiences they describe.

Equally there were witnesses to Paul's dramatic meeting on the Damascus road, as there were to

several other events described on the Day of Pentecost and at other times. Jewish leaders were not likely to spend time and money attacking largely uneducated men and women if they could demonstrate that a lie was being perpetrated. Their frustration appears to have stemmed from an inability to show that no deception was being practised. All that was done was openly achieved in public and neither psychology or magic could be evidenced to show falsehood.

Paul's Problems

These were recorded for us by Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians, written in 55 or 56 AD:-

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

(2 Corinthians 11:24-28)

It is important to remember that this letter was written part way through Paul's career. He later suffered far more dangers and hardships and in the end was imprisoned and finally killed for his beliefs and his actions in proclaiming them.

Paul Persecutes Christians

The effect that Paul had on the new Christian community was severe. The effect that he had in the early persecutions is described in the Acts of the Apostles in these terms:-

But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. (Acts 8:3)

He describes this in his own words:-

For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. (Galatians 1:13)

It is clear that the change from one who persecuted the church and did his best to reduce it to nothing to one who enthusiastically proclaimed its message and founded new congregations throughout the world had to be precipitated by something. Paul tells us that this was when he met the risen Jesus.

He describes this in his own words as:-

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

(1 Corinthians 15:8,9)

The Motivation of the Gospel Writers

The other Gospel writers also show elements that cover a range of attitudes and social practices from the period, a number of which are substantiated in the writing of Josephus and other secular books. Matthew was a tax collector. This was a very unpopular post although lucrative. Why leave it to follow a myth or to assist in the creation of a lie which made no money at all? He could and did speak in his Gospel for the mass of the population through what he described and recorded. John, on the other hand reflected and looked at Jewish thinking and philosophy. Mark's Gospel is a staccato record of events and factual material which is either true or not. The point at issue here is whether it would have been possible for these disparate writers to have created a narrative from such diverse perspectives with little or no serious error having written at different times, in different places and with different objectives in their records. It is most unlikely. Modern policing recognises that witnesses to a crime or accident will

find it difficult to make their evidence totally consistent even in a short period. Historians know that getting a rounded picture of an event or person requires a range of evidence to paint a balanced picture. The Gospel writers provide that balance. The probability of a fiction is further eroded because many of the facts recorded in those books have, over two millennia, been established by secular historical sources. Whatever one wants to believe about the nature and purpose of Jesus' life, the overwhelming direct and circumstantial evidence from both secular historians such as Josephus and Tacitus and additional verified material from the Gospel writers is that, a man called Jesus was born and lived around the period 6-33 AD and that eventually he was killed by crucifixion.

The Gospel Writers

The backgrounds of the four Gospel writers is well known. These backgrounds indicate the kind of bias that one might expect from them.

- **Matthew:** Was a tax collector from Galilee. He had sacrificed respect and a place in the Jewish community (where tax collectors were hated) in order to earn money. One would not expect him to create a fictional account which would reduce or eliminate his wealth.
- **Mark:** was the son of a wealthy family in Jerusalem who would have had to abandon his place in society to proclaim the Gospels
- **Luke:** A Gentile (non-Jewish) doctor who accompanied the Apostle Paul on some of his journeys. His style of writing shows a high degree of education and he has a very clear interest in absolute historical accuracy.
- **John:** Fisherman from Galilee. Had connections in the household of the high priest which he would lose by his involvement with the new Christian community.

The Unique Claims of Jesus

So, Jesus existed. So did many other people from the Caesars to the poor of the world, living short lives often in extreme hardship. Across the world at different times and places and in varying cultures there have been great, wise and important men and women. Is Jesus different because he was different or have the claims made for him been exaggerated far beyond those made for other great leaders such as Pharaohs, King Solomon, Buddha or Mohammad? The Pharaohs claimed to be gods, but died none the less, King Solomon was said to be the wisest man who ever lived but he too died. Buddha was respected as a great teacher offering a wisdom of human thought for his friends and followers. Muhammad said he was the last prophet of God. Each of these men influenced their day and generation out of all proportion to their societies, but finally each died. None of them claimed to be the Son of God except Jesus and only Jesus claimed that he would be resurrected from the dead immediately and live forever. None of them could apparently perform the type of miracles that Jesus performed. It is to the credit of the hostile Jewish authorities of Jesus day that through gritted teeth, they accepted that the miracles completed by Jesus, such as the raising of Lazarus from the dead after four days, were done by the power of God. No other person in history³ has been able to do this.

There are a number of differences in the claims of these great men (and others) to those made by Jesus as recorded in the New Testament and through his followers later. They largely revolve around the following doctrines:-

The Claims and Teaching of Jesus

- *But he remained silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" And Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."* (Mark 14:62)
 - *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* (John 14:6)
 - *From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.* (Matthew 16:21)
 - *When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.* (Matthew 25:31,32)
 - For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, (Matthew 6:14)
- These are extraordinary claims which would not fit well with the expectation of Jesus' time.

- That he was the only begotten Son of God.
- That he was sent by God to be the only path through which humans can achieve reconciliation with God.
- That he would die and be raised back to life after three days to live forever never dying again.
- That he would establish on the earth a Kingdom involving all nations on behalf of God when those people who tried to live lives following the example of Jesus would also achieve immortal life.
- That we should forgive people who wrong us.

Major Divisions in the Ancient World

In the first century AD there was a major division between Jews (who tended to speak Hebrew and Aramaic and kept themselves separate) and Greeks, who were the overwhelming majority of the population of the Levant.

Jewish culture was based on the Old Testament, the worship of one God which was centred in the Temple in Jerusalem, and on the detailed observance of the Law of Moses.

Greek culture was based on philosophy, in which ideas were debated and judged by their logical relationship to previous ideas. Gods were considered to be either part of the creation or as purely allegorical.

The friction between the two communities was great and caused a series of wars from 165BC to 135AD.

The New Testament Background

Either the claims made by Jesus are true or they are the invention of clever or misguided people. His lifestyle itself was not one that endeared him to his Jewish counterparts⁴, but neither was it a existence that would have appealed to gentiles as typified by Greek and Roman philosophy. Jewish people could not believe that he was their Messiah. His attitudes and behaviour did not seem to fit with the picture they had created from their prophetic writings of a powerful warrior leader like King David or the Maccabees. Non Jewish people saw his thinking as an insurmountable stumbling block to their philosophies and material way of life. Since the middle of the first century Jews and Gentiles have claimed that the other group created the fiction of the Jesus of the New Testament.

The Jewish Background

Jewish people were in expectation of a Messiah and King at about the time Jesus was born. Josephus describes the volatility and violence of Jewish life, culture and religious expectations graphically in his authoritative book, *The Jewish war*⁵. Most of the Jewish Leaders described in his writings had been members of leading Jewish families, educated according to the beliefs, style and conventions of the time. They were often people determined to see their own dynasties enhanced and preserved. They frequently had extensive military training. By the time of Jesus birth the Roman Empire had occupied the land, albeit putting puppet Kings such as Herod Antipas as figurehead monarchs in place and politicising the role of the High Priest. The descendents of Aaron and Levi no longer controlled this critical function in what was still essentially a theocracy. The constant political infighting of the ruling groups together with xenophobia and the all pervasive power of the Pharisees created a powerful ruling oligarchy. They used much of their religious power to create class driven division, between the educated and wealthy groups in society and the rest of the population who were largely poorly educated agricultural workers. The structure and friction resulting from this volatile and fragmented society encouraged the view that a strong leader (a Messiah?) was needed to restore a measure of stability to society, remove the power of the Romans and reduce the burden of religious regulations imposed by the Rabbis in the Talmud. This detailed ring fencing of the Law of Moses was intended to prevent the people from reverting to the idolatry which had been the perceived cause of the exile to Babylon. However, by the time of Jesus it had also become a powerful political weapon to control the lower classes and reduce many of them to servitude which they could not escape. It is interesting to note that when Jesus was preaching across Israel/Palestine, the ordinary people “heard him gladly”. (Mark 12:37)

Jewish Groups

At the time of Jesus there were a number of different groups active in Judea, all of whom had slightly different outlooks. These groups included:-

- **The Sadducees:** These were mainly from the upper reaches of Judean society. They denied the validity of parts of the Old Testament and did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Instead they based their religious observance on keeping the prescribed rituals in the Temple in Jerusalem.
- **The Pharisees:** These played down the importance of sacrifice in the temple and concentrated on the observance of the detail of the Law of Moses everywhere. The synagogues were usually pharisaic, where the Old Testament could be studied and the Law discussed. Modern Judaism descends from the Pharisees.
- **Zealots:** These refused to allow themselves to be ruled by Gentiles like the Romans, whose laws did not come from God. They were prepared to take very violent measures to oppose Gentile rule, an attitude which led to the Judeo-Roman wars and ultimately to the removal of Jews from Judea, Samaria and Galilee.
- **Essenes:** These are a mysterious group who may correspond to the Dead Sea Scrolls sect. They withdrew from society and lived a contemplative life. They were wiped out in the war of 66-73AD

The distinction between the ruling elite of Judea and Jesus could not have been greater. They had wealth, possessions and power. They saw themselves as separate from the public, especially tax collectors and immoral women and believed that whether they were Pharisee or Sadducee they were superior in every way (see box below).

Jesus, by contrast, had no possessions or money. He treated all with respect, even when he criticised as he did the Pharisees. Jesus did not try to raise an armed group; he did not try to overthrow the Roman occupying forces. He took no part in local or national politics, though political figures found themselves drawn to him, whether for good as in Nicodemus (John 3:1-21) or in attempts to destroy his work as the Pharisees and Herodian plot to kill Jesus after he healed a man on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-6). When Jesus was finally arrested Peter cut off the servant of the High Priest's ear, but Jesus still refused to endorse any form of violence; indeed he healed the ear (Matthew 26:50-55). As John Lennox notes, Pilate found it difficult to understand when Jesus said his kingdom belonged to another world⁶.

Jesus could not be challenged on political or military grounds. What about religious grounds? The Jewish religious groups tried on several occasions (already noted) to challenge his thinking. According to the Gospels, Jesus told them, using a basic coin, that Caesar was due his taxes, (not a populist sound bite) and that various forms of self denial would be pleasing to God⁷. He was blunt in demonstrating that they had annulled God's will and laws by their insistence on the rules of their tradition, later on codified in the Talmud (Mark 7:5-13)⁸.

Jesus' view of how life should be lived was never going to make him a popular leader among the chattering classes of his day; his message served to unite the disparate groups through hate not agreement. How could self denial bring about the independent glory that had been Israel under David and Solomon? As Caiaphas put it:

You know nothing at all! You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish. (John 11:49,50)

Whether they realised it or not their vision of Messiah was of a military man who would deal with practical issues that concerned them. They were not thinking about sin, atonement and eternal life. Jesus

Superiority of the Jewish Religious Leaders

The Pharisees and Sadducees were the pre-eminent religious scholars of their day (and possibly of all time). However, this intellectual pre-eminence led them to consider themselves above the ordinary people and to despise them.

The attitude of the Pharisees, in particular, is shown by the way that they referred to the other people in the area:-

The Pharisees answered them, "Have you also been deceived? Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed." (John 7:47-49)

The belief that they were superior to other men led the pharisees to discount others and to describe them as "sinners", and hence as untouchable. This attitude appears in Matthew 10:10-13 and Luke 7:37-39.

Jewish Expectations

The Jewish community was expecting a Messianic figure who would lead them to victory and throw off the rule of the Gentile Romans and Greeks who essentially controlled their entire existence.

A messiah who was killed by the Romans would certainly be outside anything that Jews could accept. In addition Jesus taught that it was the spirit of the Law of Moses rather than the detailed regulations that were important and that salvation was through a new Gospel. No Jewish source could have considered this teaching to be appropriate.

was not, or ever could have been, a Jewish hero in the terms that were expected. If Jesus had been a fictional creation of some very imaginative and original thinkers it seems highly unlikely that they would have made so much effort to design a character so at odds with the rest of society. Jesus was not the sort of fictional creation that would have drawn interest and followers acceptable to the influential in the Jewish world of the Roman period. Since Jesus was not a fictional personal, the Jewish leaders regarded him first as an irritation and then as a threat. The rest is history!

The Gentile Background

If Jesus was not a hero that Jewish people understood and accepted, how might he have fitted into a Gentile world? Was he the sort of leader that Greek philosophers or Roman writers might have imagined to develop and change their world?

Two centuries before the birth of Jesus the Greeks had developed their own system of heroes, the gods. Led by Zeus, a pantheon of gods for love, war, power and well being had emerged with the growth of the Greek Empire. They supposedly lived on Mount Olympus where they engaged in all manner of conflict, infidelity and squabbling. The physical power of Hercules was partnered by the lustful temptations of Artemis and the warring nature of Ares. The stories of these characters and their interaction with humans were much loved, and still attract interest as demonstrating aspects of human behaviour. Did any of them behave in the manner of Jesus? Some stories showed acts of caring or great bravery, but not sinless self denial to the point of death and since they were meant to be the “immortals” they could not sacrifice themselves for others. Jesus would not have been welcome as a fictional character on Mount Olympus.

Greek Philosophy

Would Jesus have been welcome among Greek philosophers, a very serious group of challengers to his doctrines? As a result of conquest and trade, Greek philosophy influenced many areas of the Mediterranean world in the three centuries prior to the birth of Jesus. Jewish religious thinking had absorbed Hellenistic concepts in the centuries following the return from exile in Babylon and modern western organisational and thinking patterns and the questioning base of modern scientific method all result from Greek philosophical ideas.

Socrates and Plato, who lived in the 4th century BC and who are the cornerstones of Greek Philosophy, contended that the material world is only a shadow of the higher reasoning of the mind. They introduced the use of questioning, logic and knowledge as mechanisms to understand deeper thinking. They used their methods to reach into what they believed was the good of the individual, the state, (more important than the individual) and finally the “soul” which they believed to be immortal.

Greek Religion

The classical and pre-classical Greeks had a set of gods who were held to govern various natural phenomena and to meddle in the affairs of men. The gods were responsible for good and bad luck, for matters of the heart, for illness, and for the fates of mankind.

However, the Greek gods were part of the universe. They had beginnings and family relationships. They were not the original creators of the world, which was held to be eternal.

The Greek gods provided no moral guidance to humanity; on the contrary they were often dishonest, they fought, seduced, betrayed one another and generally acted disgracefully. On the other hand they tended to be physically impressive, with the kinds of bodies that would be expected in statues. Greeks would expect these features from an Son of God.

Greek Philosophy

By the time of the New Testament the ideas of Greek philosophy were considered to be a standard element of every literate man's education. The original schools of philosophy were by this time diluted to some extent and most schools believed a mix of ideas from the classical schools, Aristotelian in logic but using the ideas of spiritual forms from Plato. The ideas of an eternal, uncreated, universe and of an immortal soul were ingrained everywhere.

The two most popular schools of philosophy in the early part of the first century AD were the Stoics and the Epicureans. Both of these had decided that the gods of Greece either did not exist or had no interest in human affairs. The Stoics believed that what happened was inevitable and should simply be endured without complaint, but in spite of this they believed that the pleasures of life should be enjoyed.

The Epicureans concentrated on the fact that random events were likely to happen to anyone at any time and therefore decided that the only thing that could be done was to enjoy life as much as possible while one was able to do so.

Given beliefs in the absence of the divine and the existence of an immortal soul, matters like the resurrection of the dead were considered extremely foolish to the Greeks of the first century.

Their lives and thinking resulted at a later date in the establishment of the Epicurean and Stoic thinkers.

Epicureans believed that higher thinking was achieved through experience of the good things of life, food music and relationships, while the stoics were stern disciplinarians who wanted detailed structures and a simplistic self denial form of living. These very influential individuals and groups recognised that the mind and what might be loosely termed "spiritual" issues, good, evil, justice together with the state of national and family life, were possibly even more important than the material well being found in food clothes and shelter, necessary though these are to survival. The danger in their thinking lay in discussion of "deeper" concepts becoming an end in itself and the failure to recognise that their philosophies would not create a society without evil or death. Paul challenged the importance of philosophy in his letter to Christians at Corinth when he wrote:

Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him. (1 Corinthians 1:20,21)

Paul answers his own question and summarises most of the arguments that have been considered about Jesus from then until now:-

Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength (1 Corinthians 1:22-23)

It can be argued that a correlation exists between some of the ideas of Greek philosophy and the Beatitudes recorded in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus' conceptual understanding of how the Law of Moses should be applied in "spirit" as well as by the letter can be summarised as putting God first, others after that, to show love of God to others, self comes last. This would have been an idea that at least some of the Greeks would have appreciated, but Jesus enhances those concepts so that they become at once more material and more profound than anything Socrates or Plato ever suggested. After suggesting that being meek, hungering for righteousness, being merciful or turning the other cheek is beneficial to humans he relates each aspect to God and salvation:

3 *Blessed are the poor in spirit,* *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
4 *Blessed are those who mourn,* *for they will be comforted.*
5 *Blessed are the meek,* *for they will inherit the earth.*

- 6 *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*
7 *Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*
8 *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*
9 *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*
10 *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*
(Matthew 5:3-10)

Another difference between Greek philosophers and that of Jesus is that Jesus' teaching gives no instruction about how individuals should relate to the local and national rulership around them. He is concerned purely to give instruction about an individuals relationship with God and after that how we should relate to our fellow men.

The point at issue is that Jesus is solely interested with eternal destiny for the individual. However much Socrates, Plato and the others, who had tried over a long period, to consider weightier, spiritual matters they had not got beyond natural life, physical and mental. They understood evil but not sin, they considered life after death but not resurrection. Paul brought this subject into sharp focus during his visit to Athens sometime around AD 55. It was the Epicureans and the Stoics who encountered him on Mars Hill and took him to the Areopagus. For them it was an opportunity to hear a new idea, but resurrection was a concept they could not come to terms with and they sneered. (Acts 17:32) It was fine to have an after-life away from the body, but physical resurrection seemed ridiculous. It is interesting how many people have a similar difficulty today, but resurrection is the focal point of Christianity. That Jesus was the Son of God and who was raised from the dead, is the doctrine which sets Christianity apart from all other religions on the planet. It was his own belief in that status and destiny that made him a greater thinker than Greek philosophers; he went far beyond what Socrates considered fundamental to human thinking. Human destiny is tied up with salvation of the body, mind and spirit. Jesus was not in the mould of Greek philosophy, no Greek playwright or poet would have created a character such as Jesus, it would have been received as comedy, which from salvations viewpoint is really tragic.

Conclusion

A reasonable consideration of evidence about Jesus concludes that he was an historical figure who lived and died around AD 30. Christians believe that God, his Father raised him from the dead because of the sinless life he had led and that he will continue to fulfil God's will and purpose when he sets up God's Kingdom on the earth. Jesus was an aberration to Jewish thinking and to the culture of his day. His life and teaching caused laughter to Greek and Roman thinkers and one cannot escape the thought that a similar reaction to Jesus is still a common response some two thousand years later. He was not and is not the kind of hero or leader wanted by people in his lifetime and few are willing to consider his ideas and teaching carefully now. The life and work of Jesus has always been at odds with what most humans see as worthwhile life, Matthew Parris⁹ suggests that not even the Church finds him an easy man to work with.

Who do men say that Jesus is? Some will cling to the view that he never existed and that he is a mythical creation of stories and history. The balance of probability and historical evidence is against them. People are reluctant to accept Jesus for who he claimed to be, possibly because the real Jesus makes us uncomfortable and brings a challenge to us and a sense of responsibility to him and to God. Accepting the challenge of the real Jesus is a hard step to take. Jesus is an uninventable character. His words and actions challenge every aspect of our thinking and our lives He does not fit into anyone's party, but that is because he is the leader of his own, the only one which will count eternally.

Footnotes

1. Price C. (2004) “Did Josephus refer to Jesus? a thorough review of the Testamonium Flavium”, (<http://www.bede.org.uk/Josephus.htm#biblio>) cited September 2013
2. The fullest early account of this fire and of the persecutions that followed are in the Annals by Tacitus. This describes the fire, the opprobrium that was heaped on Nero because of it, and the persecution he visited on the Christian community in an attempt to divert the blame for the fire onto them. A fuller discussion is found in Thorpe (2013) “Jesus in Ancient documents” which can be found at:- <http://www.biblethink.org.uk/pdfdocs/Long/NonBibFp.pdf>
3. Elijah and Elisha also raised the dead by the power of God. However, these were people who had only expired shortly before. Lazarus was raised from the dead after four days in a tomb, and in this the miracle is unique.
4. The background to the war between the Jews and the Romans 66-73AD is described by Josephus in his book “The Jewish War”. He gives an account of earlier tension and violence between Romans and Jews and places the responsibility for this squarely on the shoulders of the people that he describes as “brigands”, “madmen”, “desperados” and “bandits”. These are the words of invective he has in store for violent nationalists like the Zealots, the Sicarii and men like John of Gischala. Jesus did not fit in with the behaviour of these extremists.
5. Citations in this article are from “The Works of Flavius Josephus”, Translated by William Whiston.
6. Lennox, John (2012) “How God is encountered through science”, Lentern talk, BBC Radio 4, 14th March 2012. John Lennox is Professor of Mathematics at the University of Oxford, and has written several books on the existence of God.
7. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7) and especially the beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) summarises the moral demands that Jesus makes on his followers.
8. The Pharisees used oral traditions to interpret the Law of Moses and to decide how one should behave over a wide variety of circumstances. This set of traditions was codified as the Mishnah at the end of the second century and other traditions were added to it later to form the Jewish Talmud.
9. Matthew Parris, (2006) “If Jesus did not exist the Church would not invent him.” Matthew Parris is a political columnist for the London Times newspaper.