

“How Can We Know Jesus?”

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Well, it’s Christmas time. And that means we are going to hear a lot about Jesus. It seems that every year, someone makes a new claim about him. Every year, about this time, a new article in *Time* magazine or in *National Geographic* or a television program on the *History* channel or the *Smithsonian Channel* tells us about the “real Jesus.” This year, a new book called *The Lost Gospel* claims that a “lost” text states that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene.¹ Never mind that this text was written in the sixth century—five hundred years after Jesus died—and that it doesn’t actually have the names of Jesus and Mary in it, but refers to Joseph and Aseneth (mentioned in Gen. 41:45), and that it wasn’t actually lost and that it isn’t actually a gospel. No, those are just inconvenient little details. Really, now we’ve found the real Jesus. You just have to learn how to decode the text.²

This claim is nothing new. In 2012, Karen King, a professor at Harvard, claimed that she found a document that referred to Jesus’ wife. It turns out this document dates to the eighth century. It barely amounts to anything, given that it’s a scrap that’s three inches wide, with some broken text that apparently has Jesus saying, “My wife . . .”³ Could he be referring to the church, the bride of Christ? Is this another fabrication about Jesus? Or was he really married? How can we know?

Last year, the news was not that Jesus was married, but that he was only a Jewish revolutionary, certainly not God, who wanted to overthrow the Roman Empire, or so Reza Aslan told us in his book, *Zealot*.⁴ According to Aslan, the New Testament of the Bible does not consist

¹ Simcha Jacobovici and Barrie Wilson, *The Lost Gospel: Decoding the Ancient Text That Reveals Jesus’ Marriage to Mary the Magdalene* (New York: Pegasus, 2014).

² Robert Cargill, “Review of ‘The Lost Gospel’ by Jacobovici and Wilson,” November 10, 2014, <http://robertcargill.com/2014/11/10/review-of-the-lost-gospel-by-jacobovici-and-wilson/> (accessed December 11, 2014). See also the other articles about Jacobovici on Cargill’s website.

³ The whole text can be read in Emma Green, “The ‘Gospel of Jesus’s Wife Is Real: What Now,” *The Atlantic*, April 10, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/04/the-gospel-of-jesus-wife-is-real-what-now/360487/> (accessed December 11, 2014). Other articles about this discovery include: Joel Bade and Candida Moss, “The Curious Case of Jesus’s Wife,” *The Atlantic*, November 17, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/12/the-curious-case-of-jesus-wife/382227/> (accessed December 11, 2014); Charlotte Allen, “She’s Back: Jesus’ Wife—Again,” *The Weekly Standard*, December 8, 2014, Vol. 20, no. 13, http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/she-s-back_820226.html, (accessed December 11, 2014).

⁴ Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Random House, 2013).

of historically reliable documents. He simply asserts, “The New Testament is not a historical document.”⁵ In his book, he claims that “the Bible is replete with the most blatant and obvious errors and contradictions.”⁶ Many others make similar claims. Are they right?

Jesus is surely the most written-about figure in history. And since Jesus is so compelling, and such a perennial subject of interest, it’s no surprise that everyone tries to get Jesus on their team. For example, New Age spiritual teachers like to write about Jesus, reducing him to—you guessed it—a New Age spiritual teacher.⁷ And many of the claims about Jesus are irreconcilable—they are completely different. It seems that everyone wants a Jesus who is just like them, who reflects their interests and values, who champions their causes. But perhaps the real Jesus is someone who is so unlike us that we have to stop and take notice. Perhaps Jesus is someone we could never make up, someone who demands our attention, and even our worship.

Today, I begin a sermon series called, “Who Is Jesus?” My goal is to try to show what the Bible teaches about Jesus, why it is historically accurate, and why we should believe it. Some of us believe that the message of Jesus we find in the Bible is true. Some of us may not. Some of us may want to believe it, but have doubts. Wherever you stand on this issue today, I want you to consider what the Bible says and, before rejecting it, consider whether it’s true. You can’t reject that which you don’t know. That’s like a child saying, “I don’t like broccoli,” when he’s never tasted it. In the case of Jesus, you have to look at the actual evidence before deciding what you believe and why you believe it. Make a decision about Jesus, yes, but don’t make a poorly-informed, ignorant decision.

So, the question today is: How can we know Jesus? The Christian claim is that Jesus was born around 5 B.C. and died in either A.D. 30 or 33.⁸ That means Jesus lived about two thousand

⁵ Belinda Luscombe, “10 Questions for Reza Aslan,” *Time*, August 5, 2013, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2148151,00.html> (accessed December 11, 2014).

⁶ Aslan, *Zealot*, xix. For a devastating critique of Aslan, see Allan Nadler, “What Jesus Wasn’t: *Zealot*,” *Jewish Review of Books*, August 11, 2013, <http://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/449/reza-aslan-what-jesus-wasnt/> (accessed December 11, 2014). Scholars who reviewed the book point out Aslan’s historical errors: Craig Evans (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/august-web-only/zealot-reza-aslan-tells-same-old-story-about-jesus.html?paging=off>); Darrell Bock (<http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/when-scholarly-skepticism-encounters-jesus-christ/>); Gary Manning (<http://www.thegoodbookblog.com/2013/aug/04/a-response-to-zealot-by-reza-aslan/>); John Dickson (<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2013/08/09/3822264.htm>); and Joseph Loconte (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-loconte-phd/reza-aslan-zealot_b_3707276.html).

⁷ Deepak Chopra, *Jesus: A Story of Enlightenment* (New York: HarperOne, 2009); Deepak Chopra, *The Third Jesus: The Christ We Cannot Ignore* (New York: Harmony, 2009).

⁸ Scholars debate which year, since either year is possible.

years ago. So, in order to know who Jesus is, we have to consider how we can know anything from two thousand years ago.

In order to understand ancient history, we have to keep a few things in mind, things that should be very obvious. The first thing we need to consider is that we don't have direct access to the past. We're like detectives who come upon a crime scene. We can't see what happened directly, but we can do our best to make sense of all the clues that we see around us.⁹

The second thing we need to keep in mind is that the time of Jesus was long before the time of photographs and videos. It was before the time of the Internet, typewriters, electricity, and even the movable-type printing press, which was developed in the fifteen century. It was a time before television and radio and anything that resembles the modern newspaper.

If you want to know what happened in ancient history, you have to look at two things: artifacts and writings.¹⁰ Artifacts are the type of things that archaeologists typically deal with: the lost Ark, the Holy Grail, Nazis—you know, Indiana Jones-type stuff. To be serious, archaeologists often deal with the remains of ancient cities and towns. They find buildings, pottery, coins, inscriptions, and so forth. Another type of evidence is writing. We can look at histories and letters to figure out what happened in earlier times.

With Jesus, we don't have much in the way of artifacts. We don't have his personal items, or the cross he was crucified on, or the tomb he was buried in. We shouldn't expect to find his possessions, because he was an itinerant teacher without his own home. Also, early Christians didn't have the means—the power or the money—to secure the cross or the tomb or other objects that might be physical proof of Jesus' life and deeds.¹¹ In fact, it seems like they weren't interested in that sort of thing at all. Early Christians were much more interested in

⁹ According to philosopher William Lane Craig, “while the historian does not have direct access to the past, the residue of the past, things that have really existed, is directly accessible to him” (*Reasonable Faith*, 3rd ed. [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008], 226).

¹⁰ “The evidence which the historian uses will include texts, as well as artifacts, and here, too, his reconstruction will be limited by the data” (Ibid., 229).

¹¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 327: “Short of some spectacular documentary find of new papyri or parchments of notes someone took on Jesus' messages or accounts of his deeds traceable to the first half of the first century (or to something Jesus himself penned!), archaeology will never help us demonstrate that Jesus really did or did not do or say something that the New Testament Gospels claim.” However, Blomberg adds, “archaeology can demonstrate that the places mentioned in the Gospels really existed and that customs, living conditions, topography, household and workplace furniture and tools, roads, coins, buildings and numerous other ‘stage props’ corresponded to how the Gospels describe them. It can show that the names of certain characters in the Gospels are accurate, when we find inscriptional references to them elsewhere” (ibid.). Examples of place names include the synagogue in Capernaum (Mark 1:21), the pool of Bethesda (John 5:2), the pool of Siloam (John 9:7), and Jacob's well (John 4). Individuals include Simon of Cyrene, Pontius Pilate, and Caiaphas.

telling others what they had witnessed. Therefore, we must turn to writings to learn more the real Jesus.

Let's consider some aspects of ancient writing. As I said, this was before computers, typewriters, and the printing press. Everything that was written had to be written by hand, and if you wanted copies, well, those had to be written by hand, too. And it's not like you could go to Staples and buy a ream of paper and some pens. People wrote on a primitive form of paper called papyrus, which was made from slices of reeds, which were cross-hatched and dried. Or they wrote on leather scrolls. Either way, writing materials were scarce and expensive. It was usually better for people to spread news orally—by memorizing it and speaking it to others.

Now, there are some basic facts of ancient writing that we must deal with. One, a lot of ancient history is lost to the sands of time. Papyrus documents were fragile and could deteriorate. Things happen over time that can destroy writings: fires, floods, wars, sunlight, humidity. Two, there was often a delay between historical events and the writing of history. This is odd for us because events that happen now are broadcast almost instantly over the Internet and on cable news stations. But that didn't happen in the ancient world because it took so long to write and copy writings. Again, it was faster and more efficient to speak news than write it. Three, ancient historians didn't tend to write history the way it's written now. They were accurate, but they weren't as concerned about being as precise as historians are today. They tended to form and shape their histories to emphasize certain themes. They wanted to get the facts right, but it was more important to capture the essence of an historical figure or event than to be concerned with precise numbers.

Let me illustrate those first two points. A lot of ancient historical documents may be lost, so we have relatively few in number. Consider this: the Roman Emperor for most of Jesus' life, the one who reigned when Jesus died, was Tiberius (A.D. 14-37). He was the most powerful man in the world at that time. He reigned for over twenty years. And there are only four written sources about him from the first two hundred years after his death.¹² By comparison, the amount of sources we have regarding Jesus is pretty stunning. We may wish we had more sources, but what we have is a lot, and we have to examine the evidence we have, not the evidence we don't.

¹² Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Jesus Outside the New Testament: What Is the Evidence?" in *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 215: "If one wonders why there are not more Roman sources for Jesus, we need to realize that for the reign of Tiberius there are only four sources: Suetonius, Tacitus, Velleius Paterculus (a contemporary), and Dio Cassius (c. A.D. 230)."

The second point I made regarding ancient history is that there is normally a gap in time between events in the past and historical writings that tell us about them. That's true whether the history is about Caesars or Christ. It's typical for a few decades to elapse before an event is captured in writing. That is true for Roman historians like Suetonius and Tacitus, and it's true for the writers of the New Testament. The difference is that many of the writers of the New Testament were eyewitnesses to the events they write about. And if they weren't eyewitnesses, they had access to eyewitnesses.

Now, as we turn to writings about Jesus, we can see that there are a few different categories of writings. There are early writings and late writings, and there are non-Christian writings and Christian ones. Generally, the earlier the writing, the more historically accurate it is considered. There are many later writings concerning Jesus, but I don't think it's hard to see that these writings—like the scrap of papyrus about Jesus' alleged wife—aren't trustworthy documents. You don't want to put much stock in them, if you put any stock in them at all. It's best to focus on the earlier writings about Jesus, the ones that occurred within the first century or so.

First, let's take a quick look at the early non-Christian mentions of Jesus. I want to do this for two reasons: One, to show that we have records of Jesus outside of the Bible. This is important because some people claim that Jesus didn't even exist, which in light of all the evidence is simply absurd.¹³ Two, what we see in these documents actually corroborates certain elements of the Christian claims regarding Jesus. So let's look at them.

One source is the Jewish historian Josephus (c. A.D. 37-c.100), who lived in Palestine, was a Pharisee, and was involved in the Jewish War against Rome, which began in A.D. 66. After being captured by the Romans, he joined their side and became a Roman citizen. It was after this time that he wrote his histories of the war and of the Jewish people. Josephus mentions Jesus twice. One short reference to Jesus comes in his *Jewish Antiquities*. In describing the martyrdom

¹³ Even Bart Ehrman, who has made a career out of casting doubt on the reliability of the New Testament, argues that Jesus is indeed an historical figure. See Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2013). Still, the claim that Jesus is only a mythic figure persists, particularly on the Internet and in "documentaries" such as *The God Who Wasn't There* (2005) and *Zeitgeist* (2007). For a refutation of the claims made in *Zeitgeist*, see Mark W. Foreman, "Challenging the *Zeitgeist* Movie: Parallelomania on Steroids," in *Come Let Us Reason*, edited by Paul Copan and William Lane Craig (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2012).

of James, he states that this apostle was “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ.”¹⁴ We have no indications that Josephus became a Christian, but he acknowledged that Jesus was called Christ, or Messiah, by some people.

There is a longer reference to Jesus in the *Antiquities* that provides us more information. However, it seems that some Christians added to this text, in order to create a stronger witness for Jesus. One attempt to recreate Josephus’s actual words is as follows:

At this time there was a wise man called Jesus, and his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. Many people among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive. Accordingly, he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have reported wonders. And the tribe of the Christians, so named after him, has not disappeared to this day.¹⁵

At a minimum, it seems that Josephus was aware that Jesus was regarded as a virtuous wisdom teacher who had disciples, who was crucified, whose disciples did not abandon him, and who was reported to have appeared to his followers. If Jesus had been a false Messiah and he had been put to death without rising from the grave, his followers would have abandoned the cause.¹⁶

Roman historians also wrote about Jesus. Suetonius (c. A.D. 70 – c. 160) wrote a history of the lives of many of the Roman emperors, the Caesars. He wrote about how Emperor Claudius (reigned A.D. 41-54) expelled Jews from Rome in A.D. 49., an event also referenced in Acts 18:2. “He banished from Rome all the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of one Chrestus.”¹⁷ We don’t know for sure, but it’s possible that Suetonius thought that Christ was a person causing a problem in Rome. What happened was that early Christians were preaching Christ in Rome, and this caused controversy among some Jewish people. We do know that Suetonius referred to Christians during the time of Emperor Nero (A.D. 54-68). He

¹⁴ Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 20.200, in *The Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987).

¹⁵ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.63-64, quoted in Paul L. Maier, “Did Jesus Really Exist?” in *Evidence for God*, edited by William A. Dembski and Michael R. Licona (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 145.

¹⁶ Gamaliel, a Pharisee, says something very similar in Acts 5:33-39.

¹⁷ C. Suetonius Tranquillus, *Claudius* 25, in *Suetonius: The Lives of the Twelve Caesars; An English Translation, Augmented with the Biographies of Contemporary Statesmen, Orators, Poets, and Other Associates*, edited by Alexander Thomson (Medford, MA: Gebbie & Co., 1889).

writes, “He likewise inflicted punishments on the Christians, a sort of people who held a new and impious superstition.”¹⁸

Another Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus (A.D. 56-117) also wrote of Christians and Christ. After a fire broke out in Rome in A.D. 64, people were looking for someone to blame, and even the emperor, Nero, came under suspicion. Tacitus reports that Nero blamed the fire on Christians:

Consequently, to get rid of the report, 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 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 Judæa, 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.¹⁹

Tacitus traces the origins of Christianity to “Christus,” an obvious reference to Jesus Christ, who lived during the time of the Roman emperor, Tiberius, and who suffered death (“the extreme penalty”) under Pontius Pilate. Notice also that Christianity was “checked for the moment” after Jesus’ death, only to break out again. This detail harmonizes with what we know from the Bible: after Jesus’ death, the disciples were hiding. Even after his resurrection, the disciples did not do any public teaching. The disciples didn’t make much noise in Judea or beyond until after Jesus ascended to heaven and after they received the promised Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Christian proclamation began with Peter’s speech in Acts 2, after which three thousand people came to faith in Jesus. In the final chapter of Acts (Acts 28) Paul is preaching in Rome. The Christian message spread quite quickly in the thirty years after Jesus’ death and resurrection.

One more Roman witness will suffice. Pliny the Younger (A.D. 61-c.112) was a Roman senator and the governor of Bithynia (part of modern-day Turkey). In one of his letters to Emperor Trajan (reigned A.D. 98-117), he mentions that he persecuted certain Christians, forcing them to abandon their faith. At one point, he describes their Christian worship:

¹⁸ C. Suetonius Tranquillus, *Nero* 16, in *Suetonius: The Lives of the Twelve Caesars; An English Translation, Augmented with the Biographies of Contemporary Statesmen, Orators, Poets, and Other Associates*, ed. Alexander Thomson (Medford, MA: Gebbie & Co., 1889).

¹⁹ Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals* 15.44, edited by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb, < <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0078%3Abook%3D15%3Achapter%3D44>>.

They met on a stated day before it was light, and addressed a form of prayer to Christ, as to a divinity, binding themselves by a solemn oath, not for the purposes of any wicked design, but never to commit any fraud, theft, or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble, to eat in common a harmless meal.²⁰

This passage, written around A.D. 111, shows that Christians worshiped Jesus “as to a divinity.”

We could also mention Mara bar Serapion, a Syrian Stoic philosopher writing shortly after A.D. 73, who makes a reference to the Jews murdering their “Wise King.”²¹ And the *Babylonian Talmud*, Sanhedrin 43a, apparently refers to Jesus when it says: “It was taught: On the eve of the Passover Yeshu (the Nazarene) was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, ‘He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Anyone who can say anything in his favor, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.’ But since nothing was brought forward in his favor he was hanged on the eve of the Passover!”²² That is a bit of polemical writing by Jews who didn’t believe Jesus was the Messiah. They claimed he tried to lead Israel astray. That writing comes later, perhaps from the fifth century. But the charges made against Jesus are captured by the second century Christian writer, Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 100-c.165), in his *Dialogues with Trypho*: “For they dared to call Him a magician, and a deceiver of the people.”²³ The Talmud does not deny that Jesus performed miracles and that he was “hung” on a cross at the time of Passover—details presented also in the Bible.

That’s really all that non-Christians wrote about Jesus in the first hundred years after his life. None of those details deny what we read in the New Testament. In fact, these documents tell us that Jesus was known for doing miraculous works, that he had a following, that he died at the hands of Pontius Pilate, and that his followers continued to meet and worship him. Reza Aslan

²⁰ Pliny the Younger, Letter 97: *To the Emperor Trajan*, <http://www.bartleby.com/9/4/2097.html> (accessed December 12, 2014).

²¹ "A Letter of Mara, Son of Serapion", translated by B. P. Pratten, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume VIII: Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: The Twelve Patriarchs, Excerpts and Epistles, the Clementina, Apocrypha, Decretals, Memoirs of Edessa and Syriac Documents, Remains of the First Ages*, edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 737.

²² I have combined some different translations of this passage, using what is presented by Yamauchi, “Jesus Outside the New Testament: What Is the Evidence?”, *Jesus Under Fire*, 214, and adding the last sentence from *Babylonian Talmud*: Tractate Sanhedrin, Folio 43a, http://www.come-and-hear.com/sanhedrin/sanhedrin_43.html#43a_34 (accessed December 12, 2014).

²³ Justin Martyr, “Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 233.

claims that the only two facts we can know about Jesus is that he had a following and was put to death by the Romans.²⁴ But we've already seen that Aslan is wrong.

However, it's clear that these non-Christian sources give us a limited amount of information. To learn more about Jesus, we have to turn to the Bible.

Over the next few months, we're going to spend a lot of time in the New Testament, particularly in the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. A lot of claims are made against the New Testament. Some people claim these are not historically reliable documents. Some claim they were written too late in time to capture accurately what Jesus did and said. Others claim that the early church edited out of the Bible certain other Gospels that told different stories about Jesus. These claims are simply false. Here are some reasons why we can trust the New Testament.

The New Testament writers claimed to write historical documents. For the sake of time, I'll use just one example. We heard how the Gospel of Luke begins. It's worth reading that again. Here is Luke 1:1-4:

¹ Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.²⁵

The writer states a few things. He says that others have written accounts of Jesus' life, the subject of the book he is writing. These accounts were passed down from eyewitnesses to others, such as the writer, who himself was not an eyewitness. He claims that he investigated everything and has now created an "orderly account" for someone named Theophilus.

Luke is the longest book in the New Testament, and it has a sequel, the book of Acts. We know this because Acts is also addressed to Theophilus, and it begins with a mention of a previous book, also about Jesus (Acts 1:1-2). Despite what some skeptics say, we are certain that Luke, a physician and an associate of the apostle Paul (see Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philemon 24), wrote these books. Why? Even though the name "Luke" isn't mentioned in the body of the text, his name has been attached to these documents from the beginning of Christian history. The

²⁴ Aslan, *Zealot*, xxviii.

²⁵ Unless otherwise noted, the Scripture quoted herein is taken from the New International Version (1984).

earliest copy of this Gospel that we have has the title “according to Luke” attached to it.²⁶ Also, the earliest Christians writing after the Bible was written, the so-called “church fathers,” indicated that these books were written by Luke.²⁷ So, we have confidence that we know who the author is.

We also know that Luke used very elegant Greek. This is the writing of a well-educated person.²⁸

We also know that Luke was accurate. The historical details recorded by Luke in his Gospel and in Acts, such as the names of political leaders and the titles used for those leaders in various places, are accurate. That may not seem impressive until we understand that in different localities, leaders had different titles, and Luke had no access to extensive reference works, much less the Internet.²⁹ New Testament scholar Colin Hemer has identified eighty-four facts in Acts 13-28 that have been confirmed by historical and archaeological evidence, showing that Luke was a very careful historian.³⁰

The Gospels are not the stuff of legend. They are very restrained, even when they are describing very amazing events. Contrast that with other books, written in the late second century, that are not in the Bible. For example, in the *Gospel of Peter* (which wasn't written by Peter, who had died a hundred years or so earlier!), at the resurrection, two men and Jesus come out of the tomb, followed by a cross. The heads of two men reach up to heaven, and the head of Jesus reaches above the heavens. And then, of course, the cross speaks!³¹ But the real Gospels aren't like that at all.

That leads me to another point: the Gospels were written within a lifetime of Jesus' death and resurrection. Let's stay with the example of Luke. Some skeptics assume Luke was written

²⁶ Andreas Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 260. The manuscript is P^{75} .

²⁷ Consider Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1: “Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews³ in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.”

²⁸ Köstenberger et al., *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 258.

²⁹ On the historical accuracy of Luke, see F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 6th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1981), 80-93.

³⁰ Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990). These facts are listed in Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 256-59.

³¹ *Gospel of Peter* 10.

at the end of the first century, perhaps fifty to seventy years after Jesus' death.³² They assume that because in Luke's Gospel, Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman Empire, which happened in A.D. 70. Some people assume that is impossible, so they believe that Luke was writing "prophecy" after the fact.³³ But that should be a warning against relying on our presuppositions, what we assume to be true though we haven't actually proven it.

The best evidence for the date of Luke is actually two-fold. First, in 1 Timothy, Paul seems to quote Luke 10:7 and call it "Scripture" (1 Tim. 5:18). Of course, some skeptics don't think Paul wrote 1 Timothy; they claim it was written later. But all the evidence we have says that Paul wrote 1 Timothy, and Paul died in Rome as a martyr, sometime between 64 and 67. So, Luke had to be written earlier. Second, Luke's second volume, Acts, ends rather abruptly with Paul a prisoner in Rome. We know that Paul was imprisoned twice in Rome. The first time was between 60 and 62. Later, he was arrested again and was beheaded. The apostle Peter also died in Rome around the same time. There was also a major fire in Rome in 64, which led to increased persecution of Christians. And the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70. Why aren't any of these events recorded in Acts if Luke wrote after them? The best answer is that Luke wrote before they happened.³⁴ So Luke probably wrote Acts around 62. He wrote Luke sometime earlier. And virtually every scholar agrees that Luke used the Gospel of Mark as one of his sources, which means Mark was written even earlier.

You may wonder why we have trouble dating books in the ancient world. The problem is that they weren't time stamped or dated the way documents are now. As I said earlier, historians at that time didn't write history the way we do now. That doesn't mean they weren't accurate, however.

³² Aslan, *Zealot*, xxvii: "Two decades after Mark, between 90 and 100 C.E., the authors of Matthew and Luke, working independently of each other and with Mark's manuscript as a template, updated the gospel story by adding their own unique traditions, including two different and conflicting infancy narratives as well as a series of elaborate resurrection stories to satisfy their Christian readers."

³³ The technical name for writing prophecy after an event has occurred is *vaticinium ex eventu* (Latin: "prophecy from the event").

³⁴ See the argument for an early date of Luke in Köstenberger, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 261-64. It is very possible that part of Luke's intention in writing Acts is to present Christianity as a religion that would not bring harm to the Roman Empire, and to show that Paul acted innocently (Paul makes a defense of his actions a few times in the book). Thus, Acts is a "trial brief" proving his innocence, written in advance of his hearing before Caesar, which is the reason why Paul went to Rome in the first place, though the trial is not mentioned in Acts (since the action of the book ends before the trial took place). See John W. Mauck, *Paul on Trial: The Book of Acts as a Defense of Christianity* (Nashville: Nelson, 2001).

Here's another reason why we should trust the New Testament. We have more manuscripts and older manuscripts of the New Testament than any other document from that time. It is the best-attested document of the ancient world, by far. Here's a general rule regarding ancient documents: The more manuscripts we have, and the closer they are in time to the original documents, the greater our confidence is that we have an accurate representation of the originals. We now have over 5,700 Greek manuscripts of parts or all of the New Testament, more than 10,000 Latin Vulgate manuscripts, and more than 9,300 other early translations. The earliest manuscript evidence we have comes thirty to fifty years after the original writing, and the earliest complete manuscript, the Codex Sinaiticus, was written around A.D. 350, less than three hundred years after the last book of the New Testament was written.³⁵

Now, that may not seem very impressive, but let us compare these figures to other historical works of the same era. The Roman historian Tacitus's two major works, the *Histories* and the *Annals* were written around A.D. 100, and they exist in incomplete form in only two manuscripts from the ninth and the eleventh centuries. We have only eight manuscripts of *History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides, written in the fifth century B.C., and the oldest manuscript is dated around A.D. 900, some thirteen hundred years later. Julius Caesar's *Gallic War* was written around 50 B.C., and we have only ten manuscripts, the oldest of which dates around nine hundred years later.³⁶ Yet no one doubts that these writings are historically reliable, and they certainly don't doubt that the Peloponnesian War or the Gallic War actually happened.

There are many other reasons to trust the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. I don't have time to explain them all, but if you visit our website, wbcommunity.org, and go to the "Media" tab, you can read some articles I have written about the trustworthiness of the New Testament and alleged errors or contradictions in the Bible. You can also go to the "Sermons" page and read this manuscript, which has more information in it than I have time to present right now. However, here are two quick reasons: the New Testament contains too many things—some of which are potentially embarrassing—that no one would make up if they were fabricating a story. Also, the New Testament was written by several people over a fifty-year span, from different places and to different places. That means it wasn't the product of some conspiring

³⁵ Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 33.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 34; Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 135; Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 235.

person or group of people. The early church didn't have power or the ability to control their message.

But I do want to address one last issue. There's been a lot of talk regarding other, so-called "lost gospels" that are not in the Bible. The idea is that somehow these gospels were hidden by the Church, because they were controversial. Dan Brown popularized his idea in his novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. One of his characters, Sir Leigh Teabing, makes this extraordinary claim: "More than *eighty* gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusion—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John among them." Furthermore, he states, "The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great."³⁷ This is wrong on both counts. There are fewer than thirty "gospels," or written accounts of Jesus. And Constantine certainly did not determine the content of the Bible. The Council of Nicaea in 325 did not determine which books are in the Bible. That is simply bad history.

The only accounts of Jesus' life that were written in the first century are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—the Gospels of the Bible. Other "gospels" such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Judas* and the *Gospel of Peter* were written at the end of the second century, over a hundred years after Jesus' death. They weren't written by Thomas, Judas, and Peter, who were already dead. They are clearly false.³⁸ I already mentioned the talking cross of the *Gospel of Peter*. The *Gospel of Thomas* is a collection of 114 alleged sayings of Jesus. Here's the last one: "Simon Peter said to them: 'Let Mary go away from us, for women are not worthy of life.' Jesus said: 'Lo, I shall lead her, so that I may make her a male, that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself a male will enter the kingdom of heaven.'" Anyone who has read the New Testament knows how ridiculous that statement is. The *Gospel of Judas* portrays Judas as a hero. This wasn't a "lost gospel." In 180 Irenaeus dismissed it as a fictitious history.³⁹ After the *Gospel of Judas* was published in English translation in 2006, Adam Gopnik wrote a review of it in *The New Yorker*. He said that these gospels "no more challenge the basis of the Church's faith than the discovery of a document from the nineteenth

³⁷ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 251.

³⁸ For evidence that these "gospels" are later fictions, see Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006).

³⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.31.1.

century written in Ohio and defending King George would be a challenge to the basis of American democracy.”⁴⁰

These claims that make the news and circulate on the Internet should serve as a warning. Anyone can assert something. Anyone can make a truth claim. Usually, the more scandalous the claim, the more attention it receives. But truth claims need to be backed by evidence, and the claims that Jesus is a myth, or that these false gospels were hidden by the Church, or that people added legendary material to the Bible simply aren't true. If you follow the evidence, you'll find that there are excellent reasons to believe the Gospels are historical documents.

So now the question is, are you willing to read those Gospels and consider what they say? As we continue through this series on Jesus, we'll examine key aspects of Jesus' life and works. We won't cover every single thing Jesus is recorded as saying and doing, but we'll consider the key claims of Christianity and wonder if they can be true. If you are a Christian here today, please know that I want you to be confident that you can trust what the Bible says about Jesus. I want you to understand better who Jesus is. I want you to understand why he matters. If you are not a Christian, if you haven't put your faith in Jesus yet, I want you to consider that the evidence for the Jesus of Christianity is far greater than you may have assumed. I want you to be confident that you can know who Jesus is. All I ask is that you take time to learn who he is. Please keep coming to this church throughout this series so you can learn more.

Often, the problem is not with the evidence, with the facts and how they have been traditionally interpreted. Often, the problem is with ourselves and our desires. We don't think things are true because we simply don't want them to be true. If you can't believe that the Jesus of the Bible is true, examine yourself to see if there's anything that keeps you from believing. Do you simply not want Jesus to be who the Bible says he is, the King and Lord of the universe? Perhaps you don't want such an authority over your life. Or perhaps you don't think there's a God or an afterlife: when you die, you die, and that's it. But how do you know? If you're skeptical of the Bible, perhaps you should also be skeptical of your skepticism. When it comes to Jesus, there's simply too much at stake. Given the claims of Christianity—that our eternal destiny lies in the hands of Jesus—we must realize that we shouldn't come to the question of Jesus lightly. Take time. Weigh the evidence. Think it through.

⁴⁰ Adam Gopnik, “Jesus Laughed,” *The New Yorker*, April 17, 2006, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/04/17/jesus-laughed> (accessed December 13, 2014).