

Did Jesus Even Live?

The modern quest, the myth theory, and why virtually no historian doubts that Jesus lived

Before we can ask whether Jesus rose from the dead, whether he is the Son of God, or what his teaching demands of us, we have to face a more basic question — one that occasionally surfaces in a documentary, a viral post, or a late-night conversation: did Jesus of Nazareth ever actually live at all? It is the right place to begin a six-week study of the historical evidence, because everything that follows rests on it. If there was no Jesus, there is nothing to investigate.

This series engages the work of historian and philosopher Gary Habermas, whose *The Historical Jesus* patiently examines what can be known about Jesus from the earliest sources — including evidence outside the New Testament. In this first lesson we take up the hardest version of the challenge head-on, trace two centuries of scholarly searching, and ask honestly where the evidence actually points.

THE QUESTION

Not yet "who was he?" but the prior one: did he exist? We meet the skeptical case at its strongest before answering it.

THE GUIDE

Habermas frames the issue around a simple historical principle: apply to the New Testament the same standards we apply to any other ancient writing.

It would be easy to skip past this question as too obvious to bother with. Most people, believers and skeptics alike, simply assume Jesus existed. But assumptions are a poor foundation for faith, and a thoughtful seeker deserves better than "everybody knows." So we begin where a fair-minded critic would begin — with the possibility that the whole story was invented.

Here is what is striking: even scholars with no interest in defending Christianity regard the claim that Jesus never lived as a misuse of the evidence. Rudolf Bultmann, one of the twentieth century's most skeptical New Testament critics — a man who spent his career arguing that we can know very little about Jesus — still wrote plainly that the question of Jesus' bare existence was settled.

"By no means are we at the mercy of those who doubt or deny that Jesus ever lived."

— **Rudolf Bultmann, in his program of demythologizing the New Testament**

When even the demythologizers grant that much, we are not standing on contested ground. But conviction is not the same as understanding. Let us see *why* the question is settled — and first, how scholarship arrived here at all.

TWO CENTURIES OF SEARCHING

For at least two hundred years, the life of Jesus has been studied, doubted, reconstructed, and studied again. The trail is winding, but a brief tour helps us see that today's confidence in Jesus' existence was hard-won, not naive.

From the late 1700s through the 1800s came what Albert Schweitzer called the "fictitious lives of Jesus" — imaginative reconstructions that filled the Gospels' silences with invented plots. A favorite device was a secret society, often the Essenes, who supposedly stage-managed Jesus' miracles and even nursed him back to health after the cross. Schweitzer dismissed these as "rather a sorry makeshift"; they were built on supposition and added little to serious history.

In 1835, David Strauss shifted the ground. His *Life of Jesus* abandoned the earlier attempts to explain miracles away as misunderstood natural events and treated the Gospels instead as *myth* — narratives clothing transcendent ideas in seemingly historical dress. The mythical approach denied the basic historicity of the Gospels and set the terms for much that followed.

In the early twentieth century, Rudolf Bultmann pressed further with his program of "demythologizing": the supernatural language of the Gospels, he argued, could not be taken literally today but should be reinterpreted for its existential meaning. The historical Jesus receded into the background.

Then came the turn back. In a landmark 1953 lecture, Ernst Käsemann argued that Christian faith actually *requires* some genuine historical content about Jesus — that belief cannot float free of history altogether. His "New Quest" reopened the door. More recently still, the "Third Quest" has emphasized anchoring Jesus firmly in his own time, especially the Jewish world of first-century Palestine. The dominant trend now is to take the historical Jesus seriously, across liberal and conservative lines alike.

Note. Notice the arc: scholarship has swung from invention, to myth, to skepticism, and back toward history. Through all of it, one thing was rarely in dispute — that Jesus lived. As Habermas observes, on the bare question of Jesus' existence "there was little dispute." The real debates were always about *who he was*.

THE MYTH THEORY

Still, the idea that Jesus never existed persists, especially in popular treatments. Its most serious modern advocate has been G.A. Wells, who argued that Jesus may have been at most an obscure figure — and possibly never existed at all, his story patterned after the ancient pagan mystery religions.

Wells's argument hinges on the order of the New Testament books. He claimed that Paul's letters — the earliest writings — say comparatively little about the details of Jesus' earthly life, and concluded that Paul knew almost nothing about a recent historical Jesus. On Wells's

reconstruction, Paul conceived of Christ as "a supernatural being who spent a brief and obscure period on earth," perhaps even centuries earlier. Only in the later Gospels, he argued, was Jesus given a specific time and place. The historical details, in this view, were a late addition — and the figure being worshiped was "little different from the mystery gods of other ancient peoples."

It is an ingenious theory. It is also, as we will see, one that almost no working historian accepts. Even Michael Martin, the one philosopher who followed Wells, ultimately declined to use the thesis in the main body of his own book because it "is controversial and not widely accepted." When the theory's own sympathizers set it aside, that tells us something.

WHY IT COLLAPSES

The myth theory fails on several fronts, but two are decisive. The first concerns historical method. The second concerns the mystery religions themselves.

On method: the historian Michael Grant — no apologist, but a respected classicist who wrote a serious life of Jesus — pointed out that the case against Jesus' existence depends on treating the New Testament by a special, harsher standard than we use for any other ancient document. Apply the ordinary rules of ancient history, and the conclusion is unavoidable.

Michael Grant *Classical historian, Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels*

"...if we apply to the New Testament, as we should, the same sort of criteria as we should apply to other ancient writings containing historical material, we can no more reject Jesus' existence than we can reject the existence of a mass of pagan personages whose reality as historical figures is never questioned."

By ordinary historical standards, denying Jesus would mean denying scores of ancient figures no one doubts.

On the mystery religions: the supposed pagan parallels do not hold up under scrutiny. There is no clear, early evidence of a dying-and-rising mystery deity *before* the late second century AD — well after the Christian message was already being proclaimed. Whether those later cults borrowed from Christianity or not, it makes no sense to claim the earliest Christians were inspired by teachings that postdate them. Further, the mystery gods were not historical persons at

all, which stands in sharp contrast to the early Christian insistence that their claims rested on real events and real witnesses. And the mystery religions had little influence in first-century Palestine, where Christianity was born.

On this last point Grant is again blunt, naming it a major problem with Wells's thesis:

Michael Grant *On the mystery-religion theory of Christian origins*

"Judaism was a milieu to which doctrines of the deaths and rebirths of mythical gods seems so entirely foreign that the emergence of such a fabrication from its midst is very hard to credit."

The dying-and-rising god is alien to the Jewish world Jesus and his first followers came from.

- 1 No clear, early evidence exists of a dying-and-rising mystery deity before the late second century AD — later than the Christian message itself.
- 2 The mystery gods were not historical persons; Christianity insisted from the start that its claims rested on solid, factual underpinnings.
- 3 The mystery religions had little influence in first-century Palestine, the Jewish setting in which Christianity actually arose.
- 4 The earliest source, Paul, names Jesus' contemporaries — Peter, John, and James "the Lord's brother" — and points to hundreds of eyewitnesses still living when he wrote.

A WRITER WHO CARED ABOUT THE FACTS

There is a deeper irony in the myth theory. The earliest Christians were not floating in mythical timelessness — they were anchoring their claims in checkable history. We see this nowhere more clearly than in the opening words of Luke's Gospel, where the author pauses to explain exactly what kind of book he is writing: an orderly account, drawn from eyewitnesses, set down so the reader may know the truth with confidence.

GREEK NEW TESTAMENT · LUKE 1:1-4

1 Ἐπειδὴ περ πολλοὶ ἐπεχείρησαν ἀνατάξασθαι διήγησιν περὶ τῶν πεπληροφορημένων ἐν ἡμῖν πραγμάτων, 2 καθὼς παρέδωκαν ἡμῖν οἱ ἀπ' ἀρχῆς αὐτόπται καὶ ὑπηρέται γενόμενοι τοῦ

λόγου, **3** ἔδοξε καὶ μοι παρηκολουθηκότι ἄνωθεν πᾶσιν ἀκριβῶς καθεξῆς σοι γράψαι, κράτιστε Θεόφιλε, **4** ἵνα ἐπιγνῶς περὶ ὧν κατηχήθης λόγων τὴν ἀσφάλειαν.

ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION · LUKE 1:1–4

1 Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, **2** just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, **3** it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, **4** that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

ΑΣΦΑΛΕΙΑ

asphaleia · "certainty, security, firm footing"

The word literally pictures something that will not slip or stumble — solid, reliable, sure ground. Luke does not write so that Theophilus may have warm feelings or inspiring myths, but so that he may have *asphaleia*: settled assurance grounded in what really happened. The same root gives us the modern word "asphalt" — a surface made to be firm underfoot.

Two details deserve attention. First, Luke writes in the manner of an ancient historian — naming his method (careful investigation, orderly arrangement) and his sources (those who "from the beginning were eyewitnesses"). Second, his stated purpose is the opposite of myth-making: not to inspire vague devotion but to ground the reader in certainty. A community inventing a timeless savior-god has no need of eyewitnesses, no need to "follow all things closely," no need for the firm footing of fact. Luke writes precisely because the events were real and could be verified.

THE REAL QUESTION

So we can lay the first question to rest. By the ordinary standards of history, Jesus of Nazareth lived. The myth theory survives in popular imagination but not in the judgment of historians — including those with no faith to defend. The data point one direction, and they point clearly.



Working historians who deny that Jesus existed — the claim is regarded as a misuse of the evidence

But notice what settling the first question opens up. "Did he live?" was never really the interesting question. The interesting questions are the ones a real historical person forces on us: *Who was he? What did he claim? What did he do? How did he die — and did he rise?* Those are the questions that have echoed for two thousand years, and they are the questions we will spend the next five weeks pursuing through the evidence.

Over this series we will examine the earliest sources — including a creed older than the New Testament books that contain it — what non-Christian writers like Tacitus and Josephus recorded, what archaeology has uncovered, and finally the event on which the whole Christian claim stands or falls. We begin, as a fair historian would, by clearing away the easy dismissal. The harder, richer, more wonderful question is still in front of us.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the question "Did Jesus even exist?" remains popular in conversation and online, even though historians treat it as settled? What makes a claim feel persuasive apart from the evidence behind it?
2. Michael Grant argues that denying Jesus' existence requires applying a special, harsher standard to the New Testament than to other ancient writings. Why is consistency of method so important in history — and in how we weigh any claim?
3. The mystery-religion theory collapses partly because the supposed pagan parallels come *after* Christianity, not before. How does paying attention to dates and timelines protect us from being misled by surface similarities?

4. Luke says he wrote "that you may have certainty" (Luke 1:4). What does it tell us that the earliest Christians cared about eyewitnesses and careful investigation rather than timeless myth?

5. If the question "Did he live?" is settled, the real question becomes "Who was he, and did he rise?" Which of those questions matters most to you right now, and why?

CLOSING PRAYER

Father of truth, we thank you that our faith does not rest on rumor or wishful thinking, but on real events in real history — a Son who truly lived, walked, taught, suffered, and was buried in a particular time and place. As Luke wrote so that we might have certainty, give us minds willing to ask hard questions and hearts honest enough to follow the evidence where it leads. In these weeks ahead, draw us past the question of whether Jesus lived to the greater question of who he is, and meet us there. We ask it in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. Amen.

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