

Foreword

Briefly, three things:

First, you'll see that I sometimes refer to 'he' when in fact I'm addressing both male and female readers. I hope you will accept this in good faith – it strikes me as better than endlessly saying 'he or she' or the ungrammatical 'they'. I have also tended to refer to God and Jesus as 'He', with a capital letter, which is normal practice in the Christian church.

Second, please bear in mind that what follows isn't an academic text and so I haven't felt bound to follow citation practices to the letter, although all quoted sources are listed fully in the bibliography.

Third, I assume that you will have some knowledge of the Bible.

As with my first book, *Against Atheism: The Case for God*, this book is dedicated to my three children, George, Charlotte and Henry, and to my godson, Luke Jopling. All of them have enquiring minds. My hope is that it may help them understand the world around them a little better than they do now. I'm also writing for those of my wider family and friends who don't believe: that hardened bunch of atheists, agnostics and sceptics who don't understand faith, in the hope that one day they might.

In the meantime, I would like to say that all the books cited in the bibliography have inspired me, especially those with which I disagree. I make no apologies for quoting from them extensively; they say what they say better than I can. I am eternally grateful for their inspiration. All quotations from the Bible are taken from the New King James Version (NKJV), unless otherwise stated.

I must also thank my family for their support in letting me get this out of my system and on to paper – and especially to my mother for reading the manuscript, correcting my typos and my grammar.

Introduction: a brief guide to this book

If you are persuaded by the arguments for believing in God set out in my book *Against Atheism: The Case for God*, then read on as I explore 'the case for Christ' that Christians believe is rooted in both the Old and New Testaments. This is hotly contested territory. We'll be examining scriptural controversies that atheists exploit in an attempt to make the Bible appear like a piece of creative fiction akin to *The Da Vinci Code*. I'll also scrutinise those claims made by earnest New Testament scholars who regard much of scripture as unreliable historical evidence.

The book starts with the question: did Jesus exist? Some atheists still doubt this, despite historical evidence from non-Christians that exist quite independently of the Gospels. I'll be looking at fascinating references to Jesus from people who didn't believe in Him.

One question we can't escape: was Jesus of Nazareth divine? If He wasn't, then he becomes just another wise man who said good things, and there's no shortage of those. Much hinges on whether the four Gospel writers were eyewitnesses or relating eyewitness accounts. This is a subject that preoccupies modern scholars; we need to separate fact from speculation.

We'll also be looking at the writings of St Paul, from whom Christians derive so much of what they know about Christ. Paul never met the earthly Jesus, so how much did he know about the events describes in the Gospels? If, in fact, he knew a great deal, then that gives us essential clues as to when the Gospels themselves were written.

I'll be delving into the Old Testament, too, to see if there's evidence that – as Christians believe – the coming of Christ was prophesied in these ancient Hebrew texts. You may be surprised by what I've uncovered. Then I move on to another sensitive topic: the mysterious alleged source for the Gospels known as 'Q', from which many modern scholars believe the Evangelists cribbed sections of their work. 'Q' has never been discovered. I'll be asking whether it ever existed in the first place.

Few topics have generated so much biblical speculation as the precise timing of 'the Easter Event' – the passion and crucifixion of Jesus, leading to His resurrection. Again, modern scholars have their own line on this. They think the Fourth Gospel, John, contradicts the Synoptic accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke. But does this 'contradiction' really exist?

What about the Virgin Birth and all the other details of the nativity story that support the belief in the divinity of Jesus? Can they be dismissed as myth? As in the other chapters, I'll be looking at the evidence for the traditional Christian story to see if it is credible.

Part Two of *The Case for Christ* moves on to broader themes. What does it mean to belong to the Christian religion? Does faith make life happier and more fulfilled? I'll be comparing the bedrock statement of Christian belief, the Nicene Creed, to what I call the Scientist's Creed. Is materialism really more 'rational' and better suited to modern ways of thinking than Christianity? You will have to make up your own mind, but in the meantime bear with me as I tell you how I went about testing the case for Christ.

Part One: Biblical evidence and controversies

1. Did Jesus Exist?

'It is even possible to mount a serious, though not widely supported, historical case that Jesus never lived at all, as has been done by, among others, Professor G. A. Wells of the University of London¹ in a number of books including 'Did Jesus Exist?' Although Jesus probably existed, reputable biblical scholars do not in general regard the New Testament (and obviously not the Old Testament) as a reliable record of what actually happened in history, and I shall not consider the Bible further as evidence for any kind of deity'.

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (2006)

In November 2015 the Church of England and the Evangelical Alliance reported that, according to a survey they had commissioned, 40 per cent of British adults did not think that Jesus was a 'real person who actually lived'. Moreover, 22 per cent of respondents stated that Jesus was a 'mythical or fictional character'.

It's no secret that, ever since the demise of the grammar schools, the level of general knowledge in Britain has fallen dramatically. But it is truly appalling that four out of ten of us deny the existence of the most influential human being that has ever walked this planet.

Richard Dawkins (see above) thinks it is possible to mount a serious historical case that Jesus never lived at all. With typical sloppiness, he cites a scholar, G. A. Wells, who did publish a book making this claim but who later changed his mind. Dawkins's own view is that the New Testament references to Jesus can be discounted – he regards the Gospels as little more than Dan Brown-style fiction. This is nonsense: as I shall argue, the New Testament accounts of Christ's life are first-hand witness statements or, in the case of Paul,

¹ The central thesis of this author appears to be that Jesus is a myth. This is then qualified in his later writings to suggest that the hypothetically proposed 'Q' source to all the Gospels may contain sayings of an alleged miracle worker (of course spiced up for effect). Anyway, Wells does now seem to accept some historical Jesus. The adding together of the Pauline Epistles and his (Christ) eulogizing of supernatural tendencies and the sayings of the Galilean preacher in the Hypothetical 'Q' source are added together to get our modern conception of Jesus, a spectacular making of 2+2=7! I don't know of any serious scholar who takes this approach. It is unique and suggestive of a highly fertile and creative mind. I am surprised Dawkins cites it at all, even when saying that on balance he thinks there is a historical Jesus.

draw on eyewitness testimony. For Dawkins, Jesus only 'probably' existed.

But is there really any reasonable doubt that Christ was a historical figure? Even if, absurdly, an atheist decides to discount evidence from the Bible, there are still references to Him by writers living in the Roman Empire during or shortly after His life. Let us take a look at them, beginning with testimony from Roman historians.

Jesus in non-Christian history

Roman, Assyrian and Egyptian Testimony

Tacitus (60–c.120 AD), arguably the greatest of all Roman historians, has left us an account of 'the most terrible and destructive fire that Rome had ever experienced' – the 'Great fire of Rome in July 64 AD. Emperor Nero was accused – almost certainly unjustly – of starting the blaze, which in six days reduced 70 per cent of the city to a mangled wreck. As Tacitus records in his *Annals*, Nero tried to lay the blame for the fire on the 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 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. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed.²

² Tacitus (Annals 15,44), <http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/tacitus/tacitusannals15.html>

Note that Tacitus doesn't regard 'Christus' as a mythical creature: he treats him as a historical figure executed in Judaea at the hands of Pontius Pilate, just as the Gospels tell us. Note also that Christianity was clearly a potent force in Rome as early as 64 AD.

The next Roman text comes from Pliny the Younger, writing in about 112 AD. Pliny was governor of Bithynia, in modern Turkey, and one of the most indefatigable letter-writers in Roman history: it's thanks to his eyewitness account of the eruption of Vesuvius in 79AD (in which his uncle, the historian Pliny the Elder, died) that we know so much about this terrifying event. At the end of his life Pliny wrote to the emperor Trajan asking what to do about people who were accused anonymously of being Christians:

Soon accusations spread, as usually happens, because of the proceedings going on, and several incidents occurred. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ – none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do – these I thought should be discharged. Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as 25 years. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ. They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food – but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.³

Pliny here tells us that some former Christians had renounced their faith – hardly surprising, given the terrible penalties it incurred. But he also says that 'people who are

³ Tacitus (Annals 15,44), <http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/tacitus/tacitusannals15.html>

really Christians' cannot be forced to renounce Christ, whom they regard 'as a god'. Believers were going to their deaths because of their sole allegiance to Jesus – a truly extraordinary thing to do, given that people in the Roman empire at the time were famously relaxed about which god or gods they worshipped. It's inconceivable that they would have done so, at this very early stage in the history of Christianity, if Christ had been a mythical figure. The early Christians knew Jesus was a real person but also divine – and here we have a non-Christian source confirming that they held this belief.

More valuable evidence comes from a sentence in Suetonius's *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, in the section devoted to the emperor Claudius:

Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome.⁴

This expulsion happened in 49 AD. The 'Jews' are of course Christians, the vast majority of whom were still Jewish; the 'disturbances' refer to the very early spread of Christianity. The point to note is that, for Suetonius – writing at about the same time as Pliny – 'Chrestus' or Jesus is unambiguously a historical figure, someone who had died less than a century earlier.

The next example is really intriguing. It is Assyrian rather than Roman in origin. It's taken from a manuscript in the British Museum: the only existing copy, dating from the sixth or seventh century, of a letter written in Syriac shortly after 73 AD by a philosopher named Mara bar ('son of') Serapion to his son, also called Serapion. Mara, who was from Samasota, now Samsat in modern Turkey, tells his son that the Romans who had destroyed his city in 73 AD and taken him prisoner should show wisdom by allowing him to return home:

For what advantage did the Athenians gain by the murder of Socrates, the recompense of which they received in famine and pestilence? Or the people of Samos by the burning of Pythagoras, because in one hour their country was entirely covered with sand? Or the Jews by the death of their wise king because from that same time their kingdom was taken away? For with justice did God make recompense to the wisdom of these three: for the Athenians died of

⁴ http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/Claudius*.html

famine; and the Samians were overwhelmed by the sea without remedy; and the Jews, desolate and driven from their own kingdom, are scattered through every country. Socrates is not dead, because of Plato; neither Pythagoras, because of the statue of Juno; nor the Wise King, because of the laws which he promulgated.⁵

Note that the Jews are 'driven away from their kingdom' – a clear reference to the bloody aftermath of the recent destruction of the Temple in the Siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD, when the Romans captured and occupied the city. Mara was almost certainly not a Christian; he seems to have been a Stoic. Yet he treats as a historical fact the killing by the Romans of a king of the Jews who was viewed in the same breath as Socrates and who was killed before the Temple destruction. Who was this king? No such position existed in occupied Judaea at the time of Jesus or afterwards: Herod Antipas was a 'tetrarch' or Roman puppet and was sent into exile by the Romans, not put to death. I say it can only be the man crucified under the inscription 'INRI' – short for 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'.

Finally, let us look at a strange document that is rarely mentioned by scholars. It is housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and therefore known as the Paris magical papyrus or codex. It dates from the very early fourth century and appears to be the handbook of an Egyptian magician; it certainly includes much earlier texts possibly originating from the time of Christ. The following is from an exorcism used by the cult of Mithras:

I adjure you by Jesus the god of the Hebrews, Jaba, Jae, Abraoth, Aia, Thoth, Ele, Elo, Aeo, Eu, Jiibaech, Abarmas, Jaba-rau, Abelbel, Lona, Abra, Maroia...

Obviously no Jew would have described Jesus as a 'god', and this can hardly be Christian text, either, given all the pagan gods invoked. But there is a revealing parallel with the Acts of the Apostles, which tells us:

Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists took it upon themselves to call the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, 'We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches.' Also there were seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, who did so. And the evil spirit answered and said, 'Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?' Then the man in

⁵ The English translation by W Cureton of 'Spicilegium Syriacum' (1855): http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/spicilegium_9_mara.htm

whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. (Acts 19: 12-16)

The unknown author of the exorcism and the first-century Jewish exorcists are essentially doing the same thing: misusing the name of Jesus in an attempt to call out evil spirits, recognising His supernatural power and, in the case of the Paris magical papyrus, referring to (albeit misunderstanding) His divinity.

Jewish Testimony

Josephus (37 AD – c.100 AD) is one of the most controversial figures in ancient history. He was born as Joseph ben Matityahu and died as Titus Flavius Josephus. He changed his name because, to put it bluntly, he was a Jewish turncoat – a leader of the Jewish resistance who ended his life in comfort serving his former deadly enemies, the Romans.

By any standards Josephus was a historian of the first importance. He is our major non-biblical source of information about the Jewish revolt against Roman rule and also the religious life of Jews in the last days of the Temple. He discusses Pharisees, Sadducees, the High Priests, Herod the Great, Pontius Pilate, John the Baptist – and Jesus of Nazareth.

The account of Jesus' following and execution in Josephus's *Antiquities* is crucial non-Christian evidence for the historical Jesus. The authenticity of parts of it are questioned by scholars who suspect Christians of interpolating passages that confirm Gospel passages. I can't help noting that experts are always quick to question the motives of Christians – but, to simplify matters, I am going to quote two passages from the *Antiquities* whose authenticity is not contested.

In Book 20, Josephus records one of the lesser-known episodes in Christian history, the trial of the apostle James:

But the younger Ananus, who, as we said, received the high priesthood, was of a bold disposition and exceptionally daring; he followed the party of the Sadducees, who are severe in judgment above all the Jews, as we have already shown. As therefore Ananus was of such a disposition, he thought he had now a good opportunity, as Festus was now dead, and Albinus

was still on the road; so he assembled a council of judges, and brought before it the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ, whose name was James, together with some others, and having accused them as lawbreakers, he delivered them over to be stoned.

Josephus clearly does not believe that Jesus was 'Christ', the Messiah. But nor does he think He was a mythical figure. Also, like the authors of the Gospels, he knows that James was His brother.

Now we come to the famous passage in Book 18 in which Josephus describes Jesus. I've removed the alleged Christian additions.

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and many of Greek origin. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.

So here we have evidence that Jesus was a teacher capable of extraordinary deeds, who inspired such love in his Jewish and Gentile followers that they did not forsake Him even when He was crucified by Pontius Pilate at the suggestion of the leaders of the Jewish religion. All of these details are to be found in the New Testament. Yet they are recorded by a contemporary of the Gospel authors who was emphatically not a Christian.

The same is true, of course, of the authors of the Jewish Talmud ('learnings'), a vast compendium of oral and written discourse by early rabbis that forms the basis of Jewish scholarship; in book form, it runs to more than 6,000 pages. At the heart of the Talmud lies commentary on the Mishnah, a compilation of the oral debates and judgments of rabbis put together around 200 AD, at a time when the Jews were worried that they would be forgotten.

The references to Jesus in the Talmud have been the subject of bitter debate between Jewish and Christian scholars. Sections of it contain viciously anti-Christian passages, which were in turn seized on by anti-Semites. One very significant passage is found in the Munich copy of the Babylonian Talmud⁶, which although dating from as late as 1343 is the earliest

⁶ Here it is in full: <http://daten.digitalesammlungen.de/~db/bsb00003409/images/index.html>

full transcript that survives⁷ – and contains references to Jesus that had been censored from other transcripts.

In its commentary on the laws of the Sanhedrin, we find this remarkable passage:

It was taught: On the Eve of Passover they hung Yeshu the Notzri. And the herald went out before him for 40 days [saying]: ‘Yeshu the Notzri will go out to be stoned for sorcery and misleading and enticing Israel [to idolatry]. Any who knows [anything] in his defence must come and declare concerning him.’

Interestingly, someone has tried to wipe out some of these words in the Munich manuscript – possibly because the Jews did not want to be seen as ‘Christ-killers’. ‘Yeshu’ is a derogatory shortening of ‘Yeshua’, the Hebrew for Jesus; ‘Notzri’ means Nazarene. Hanging is a rabbinic penalty – the Talmudic authors knew perfectly well that Jesus was hanged by the Romans in their own style, on a cross, but left this out in order to claim that Jesus died according to their own law.

Note the reference to 40 days: it fits the account in John’s Gospel (11:47-57), which tells us that the Jewish priestly caste⁸ had passed the death sentence on Jesus some time before they persuaded the Romans to execute Him. If Jesus was a condemned man for so long, this could explain the disciples’ anxiety about His visit to Jerusalem and the ‘disappearing acts’, where Jesus vanishes from crowds.

⁷<http://www.tyndale.cam.ac.uk/Tyndale/staff/InstoneBrewer/prepub/Sanhedrin%2043a%20censored.pdf>

⁸ ‘Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, “What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation”. And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us[e] that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish”. Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad. Then, from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death. Therefore Jesus no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there into the country near the wilderness, to a city called Ephraim, and there remained with His disciples. And the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went from the country up to Jerusalem before the Passover, to purify themselves. Then they sought Jesus, and spoke among themselves as they stood in the temple, “What do you think—that He will not come to the feast?” Now both the chief priests and the Pharisees had given a command, that if anyone knew where He was, he should report it, that they might seize Him’. John 11:47-57

Moreover, the Jewish authorities found Jesus guilty of sorcery – that is, of performing supernatural acts (the casting out of demons reported in the Gospels) as opposed to merely pretending to do so, which would not have counted as sorcery.

The Talmud account of the death of ‘Yeshu’ takes us right back to the beginnings of Christianity: as the New Testament scholar David Instone-Brewer points out, the introductory formula ‘it was taught’ is used for rabbis who lived before 200 AD. In the words of Peter Schäfer, Professor of Judaic Studies at Princeton, what we have here is ‘a powerful confirmation of the New Testament Passion narrative’.

We’ve looked at Roman, Jewish, Assyrian and Egyptian texts that, almost without exception, treat the existence of Jesus (and, in several instances, His crucifixion) as matter of fact. Some of them go further – describing him as ‘King of the Jews’ or as a divine figure. Yet none of them are written by Christians. Unless we treat all the authors as ‘delusional’ – Richard Dawkins’s favourite term of abuse – then we are confronted by powerful evidence that the Christ depicted in the Gospels was a historical figure. So the short answer to the short question posed by this chapter is a resounding yes. Jesus did exist.