

Did Jesus Actually Exist?

Introduction:

1. One of the many attacks against Christianity and the validity of the Bible is that Jesus Christ never even existed.
 - a. Albert Schweitzer said "Jesus never had an existence."
 - b. One of the founders of our nation, Thomas Paine, said Jesus was not a real person.
2. This accusation truly cuts to the core of belief in the Bible.
3. If Jesus did not exist, then there is no justification for Christians or Christianity.
4. If Jesus did not exist, the entire NT is useless!
5. If Jesus did not exist, we have wasted our lives in studying about Him.
6. The purpose of today's lesson is to examine the evidence for the existence of Jesus Christ.

I. **The Gospel records show the existence of Jesus Christ.**

- A. Intellectual honesty demands that all ancient documents be treated as historically accurate until proven otherwise.
 1. This is the standard used for all other historical records.
 2. It is this standard that gives us an enormous part of our knowledge of history.
 3. We know of wars and dates from history because of documents and inscriptions.
 4. The Bible should be given the same assumption of authenticity.
 - a. It is an ancient document.
 - b. It claims to be a reliable historical account.
 - c. It has NEVER been proven false by archaeology or other historical documents.
- B. The gospel records all attest to the existence of Jesus.
 1. His birth is recorded (Matthew 2:1).
 2. His earthly parents are described (Luke 2:48).
 3. His friends are mentioned (Matthew 10:1-4).
 4. Many of His teachings are recorded (Matthew 5-7).
 5. He was hungry (Matthew 4:2).
 6. His hometown is mentioned (Luke 2:52).
 7. His trials are recorded (John 18-19).
 8. His death is described (Mark 15:24-37).
 9. His burial is recorded (Mark 15:42-46).
- C. The gospel records were written by reliable historians.
 1. Matthew was a disciple of Jesus Christ.
 - a. Matthew wrote, giving his occupation: a tax collector (Matthew 10:3).
 - b. If Matthew was not a reliable historian, he would have left that bit of information out.
 - 1) Tax collectors were seen as traitors to the Jewish people because they took money from Jews and paid it to Rome.
 - 2) Matthew's primary purpose in writing was to show the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah.

- 3) If Matthew was willing to lie about anything in his writing, he would have lied about his occupation.
 - 4) Lying about his occupation would have taken away some animosity towards his writing by the Jews.
 - c. Being a disciple (one of the 12 apostles) of Jesus Christ, Matthew had first-hand knowledge of the things he wrote.
 - d. He was an eye-witness to the life and teachings of Jesus.
2. Mark was a companion to two different apostles.
- a. Mark was a nephew of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10); Barnabas was a close associate of the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 4:36) as well as a close friend of Paul (Acts 9:26-28).
 - b. Mark was with Paul on his first missionary journey (Acts 12:25), though not on the second (Acts 15:37-39).
 - c. Mark was requested to come to Paul while he was in prison (II Timothy 4:11).
 - d. Mark was also a companion of Peter (I Peter 5:13).
 - e. The church in Jerusalem gathered at his mother's house, indicating that he was possibly familiar with all the apostles (Acts 12:12).
 - f. Some believe Mark mentions himself in Mark 12:51-52, which—if true—would have Mark following Jesus while he was on earth.
 - g. The evidence shows that Mark would have been a person who could easily ascertain the facts from multiple eyewitnesses, and may have even been an eyewitness to many of the events himself.
3. Luke was a dedicated historian and a companion of an apostle.
- a. Luke declares that his gospel account came from eyewitness accounts (Luke 1:2).
 - b. He declares that he writes because he has "**perfect understanding**" of the events
 - 1) ASV says "**have traced the course of all things.**"
 - 2) This is to say that Luke claimed to have done extensive research to make sure his account was true.
 - c. He states that his account is trustworthy (Luke 1:4).
 - d. He was a travelling companion of the apostle Paul (Colossians 4:14, II Timothy 4:11).
 - e. His second book (Acts) has been said to be written by a "**historian of the first-degree**" by a man who was an atheist intent on proving Acts false (Sir William Ramsay).
 - f. Because of his historical reliability (especially seen in the people and places mentioned in Acts), Luke gains instant credibility as a historian.
 - g. Though Paul was not an apostle during the lifetime of Jesus, he was likely in Jerusalem during much of Jesus' ministry, and would have been able to pass on eyewitness accounts as well.
4. John was one of Jesus' most trusted and beloved apostles.
- a. He is called "**the disciple whom Jesus loved**" (John 21:20-24).

- b. He was one of the first disciples to follow Jesus after His baptism (Mark 1:16-20, possibly John 1:35-41).
- c. He was one of only three (the others being James and Peter) who were chosen to see Jesus transfigured (Luke 9:28-36).
- d. He was one of the three taken to keep watch while Jesus prayed (26:36-38).
- e. He was possibly at the trial of Jesus (John 18:15).
- f. He was at the cross while Jesus was dying (John 19:25-27).
- g. He claimed to teach only what he heard, saw, examined, and touched (I John 1:1-4).
- h. John was an eyewitness, a companion with Jesus during his entire ministry, and would be in a perfect position to write about the life of Jesus.

II. Early Christian writers attest to the truth of the existence of Jesus.

- A. The epistles of the apostles state that Jesus truly existed.
 1. Paul spends an entire chapter dealing with the resurrection of Jesus (I Corinthians 15).
 - a. In order for one to be raised from the dead, he had to have died.
 - b. In order for one to have died, he would have to have been alive.
 - c. Paul, therefore, asserts that Jesus lived.
 2. Paul states that Jesus came to earth as a man and died on a cross (Philippians 2:5-8).
 3. John states that he was an eyewitness to Jesus (I John 1:1-4).
 4. Peter describes being on the mount of transfiguration with Jesus (II Peter 1:16-18).
 5. Jude condemned those who denied Jesus as Master (showing He existed – Jude 4).
 - a. He spoke of the apostles of Jesus Christ (showing he believed in the truth of the gospel accounts – Jude 17).
 - b. He called himself the brother of James (likely James, the brother of Jesus – Matthew 13:55).
 6. James calls himself a servant of Jesus Christ (James 1:1), and was likely the brother of Jesus (Galatians 1:19).
- B. The post-Biblical writings of Christians show that Jesus actually existed.
 1. Christianity had spread across the Roman Empire, and it was being fought tooth and nail by the leaders of Rome.
 2. Still, Christians wrote in order to convince the heathen (Jews and Gentiles) that Jesus was indeed the Christ.
 3. Justin Martyr wrote trying to convince Trypho (a Jew) that Jesus was the Christ prophesied about in the OT, and that he was resurrected (indicating He had actually lived).
 4. Papias claimed to get some of his information from those who were disciples of Jesus Himself, as well as from those who studied under the 12 apostles.
 5. Quadratus spoke of knowing some of those who were healed or raised from the dead by Jesus and His disciples, showing a historical belief that Jesus existed.

III. Non-Christian writings prove that Jesus existed.

A. Josephus mentions Jesus Christ as a real person.

1. In *Antiquities of the Jews*, he states, ***“About this time came Jesus, a wise man, if indeed it is appropriate to call him a man. For he was a performer of paradoxical feats, a teacher of people who accept the unusual with pleasure, and he won over many of the Jews and also many Greeks. He was the Christ. When Pilate, upon the accusation of the first men amongst us, condemned him to be crucified, those who had formerly loved him did not cease to follow him, for he appeared to them on the third day, living again, as the divine prophets foretold, along with a myriad of other marvellous things concerning him. And the tribe of the Christians, so named after him, has not disappeared to this day.”***
 - a. Some textual critics say that part of that quote was added or embellished by later Christian scribes in order to make their case for Jesus.
 - b. Other manuscripts have been found which read differently, but still they mention Jesus: ***“At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus, and his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon their loyalty to him. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive. Accordingly they believed that he was the Messiah, concerning whom the Prophets have recounted wonders.”***
2. In another passage of the book (one which is not disputed), he mentions James, the brother of Jesus.
 - a. ***“Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned.”***
 - b. Josephus did not believe in Jesus as the Christ, but fully acknowledged that there was a man named Jesus who was crucified (as in the earlier passage) that was called by many “Christ.”
3. This report is from a Jew, who was opposed to Christianity; yet, he still admits that Jesus was a real person.

B. Pliny the Younger mentions followers of Christ.

1. Pliny was a governor of sorts in Bithynia shortly after the first century.
2. He wrote to the emperor asking what to do with the Christians, and stating what he had been doing up to that point.
3. In a letter to the emperor Trajan, he stated, ***“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***

twenty-five years. They all worshiped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ."

4. For some to be a follower of Christ, even at a time in the past, they must have believed He was a real person.
- C. The Talmud says that according to early rabbis, Jesus was a transgressor in Israel which led the people astray, claiming not to destroy the Law, but to add to it.
1. This is a Jewish source, which was very hostile to Christianity.
 2. They still admitted Jesus was an actual person.
- D. Tacitus, a Roman historian (wrote in 116), admits Jesus existed.
1. He said: "***Nero fastened the guilt of starting the blaze 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.***" (*Annals*)
 2. The Roman Empire persecuted the Christians, but they also were very aware that Jesus was an actual person.
- E. Suetonius (*Lives of the 12 Caesars*) describes an event involving Christians.
1. "***As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them [the Jews] from Rome***".
 2. This event has its Biblical parallel in Acts 18:2 – "***And found a certain Jew named Aquilla, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome), and come unto them.***"
 3. At this point in time (AD 49), Christianity was viewed by many as a sect of Judaism.
 4. Because of the riots which came about from the Jews persecuting the Christians, all Jews were forced to leave Rome.
 5. That there were Christians 19 years after Jesus died is confirmed by historical record.
 6. This shows that less than two decades after His death, people believed Jesus was a real person, and that belief had spread all the way to Rome from Jerusalem.
- F. Lucian, a satirist (AD 125-180), acknowledges the belief that Jesus was a real person around 100 years after His death.
1. "***The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day — the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account... You see, these misguided creatures start with the general conviction that they are immortal for all time, which explains the contempt of death and voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them; and then it was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws.***"

2. He shows that he is not in agreement with the actions of the Christians, but he does acknowledge that Jesus lived and was crucified.
- G. Mara bon Sarpion alludes to Jesus.
1. This man was in prison, and wrote a letter to his son asking him to pursue wisdom (approximately 73 AD).
 2. ***What advantage did the Athenians gain from putting Socrates to death? Famine and plague came upon them as a judgment for their crime. What advantage did the men of Samos gain from burning Pythagoras? In a moment their land was covered with sand. What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise king? It was just after that that their kingdom was abolished. God justly avenged these three wise men: the Athenians died of hunger; the Samians were overwhelmed by the sea; the Jews, ruined and driven from their land, live in complete dispersion. But Socrates did not die for good; he lived on in the teaching of Plato. Pythagoras did not die for good; he lived on in the statue of Hera. Nor did the wise king die for good; he lived on in the teaching which he had given.***
 3. The only person who fits the description of the “wise king” is Jesus.
 - a. This would fit in perfectly with the time period in which this letter was written.
 - b. Jesus was well-known as “the King of the Jews,” for Pilate even had heard of it before meeting Jesus.
 4. This is a non-Jewish, non-Christian reference to the existence of Jesus, written in the first century!

Conclusion:

1. Did Jesus really exist?
2. The consensus of historical writings says that He did.
3. Both friends and foes of Christianity speak in favor of His existence, all within 100 years (some even earlier) of His death.
4. One admitted unbeliever in the Jesus of the Bible admits that ***“It was a group of French philosophers during the French Revolution in the late 18th century who first suggested that Jesus was a mythical character”*** and ***“The vast majority of historians and theologians have always believed in the reality of Jesus' life.”***
5. We can have confidence that Jesus Christ did indeed exist!
6. We do not follow cunningly devised fables!
7. What are you doing with Jesus?
 - a. Are you with Him or against Him?
 - b. You cannot be neutral!
 - c. Come to Jesus today!