

The Jesus of History

Rich Nathan
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The Real Jesus
Luke 1:1-4

Back in 1804, Thomas Jefferson bought two copies of the King James Bible and took them back with him to the White House. But he didn't buy the Bibles to read or study during his morning devotions. Instead, over the course of several nights, he took a razor to the pages of the gospels and cut out every passage referring to Jesus' miracles, the virgin birth, the resurrection, or anything else that hinted at the supernatural.

It turned out that President Jefferson kept only one out of every 10 verses in the gospels. He published these in a book titled *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth*. In Jefferson's book, he portrayed Jesus as a philosopher who spent his time wandering around Galilee, speaking in parables and offering people proverbs about life. Over the centuries, people have remade Jesus according to their own tastes and their own preferences.

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Remaking Jesus

Tom Wright, one of the world's foremost New Testament scholars, said this:

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“Every month or two some publisher comes up with a blockbuster saying that [Jesus] was a New Age guru, an Egyptian Freemason or a hippy revolutionary. Every year or two some scholar or group of scholars comes up with a new book full of imposing footnotes to tell us that Jesus was a peasant Cynic, a wandering wordsmith or the preacher of liberal values....

The day I was redrafting this for publication, a newspaper article appeared about a new controversy, initiated by animal-rights activists, as to whether Jesus was a vegetarian.

It wouldn't be America unless Jesus was co-opted by corporate America and repackaged as a marketing genius. Nearly a century before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words were used as a voice-over to sell Dodge Ram trucks during the Super Bowl, an advertising executive Bruce Barton wrote a bestselling book titled *The Man Nobody Knows*. Barton portrayed Jesus as the founder of modern business and the most successful advertising man the world has ever known. Barton said that Jesus' sayings showed extraordinary understanding of the principles of modern advertising.

Of course, Americans aren't the first group of people to try to make Jesus in our own image – according to the preferences of our culture and according to our tastes. Back in the Middle Ages, Jesus was regularly remade into a medieval knight, complete with shining armor riding a war horse into battle against Satan.

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Picture of Knight Jesus

These days it's easy to find stories about Jesus being a closet Buddhist.

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Picture of Buddhist Jesus

Some Buddhists claim that Jesus spent time in Kashmir in India from ages 12-30, the so-called missing years that the Bible doesn't write about. Certain Englishmen claim that Jesus visited England during those 18 missing years. And Mormons claim that Jesus visited America after his resurrection. On top of all of this, not only do people remake Jesus' into a philosopher or vegan or marketing executive, people even reshape what Jesus must have looked like.

Megyn Kelly told viewers on Fox News a few years ago that

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"Just because it makes you uncomfortable doesn't mean it has to change – Jesus was a white man."

I remember the first time Marlene took me to her church. In the fellowship hall they had this picture:

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Sallman's head of Christ

Probably some of your grandparents had this print above their fireplaces. When I saw the picture in the fellowship hall at this little church, I asked Marlene, "Who's that?" And she said, "That's Jesus!" I said, "That guy doesn't look Jewish! He looks like he should be wearing wooden shoes and standing by a windmill."

Koreans have remade Jesus into their own image:

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Korean Jesus

So have Africans:

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African Jesus

It's almost certainly the case that Jesus would not have been blond or blue-eyed or fair skinned. Based what we know from first century Galilee, here's what one scholar wrote:

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"If Jesus was a normal first century Galilean Jew overall then we can arrive at a general image of Jesus as an average man: he was probably around 5'5" tall, somewhat slim and reasonably muscular, with olive-brown skin, dark brown to black hair and brown eyes. He was likely bearded (but not heavily, or with a long beard), with shortish hair (probably not well kept) and aged 30 at the start of his mission. His precise facial features will, nevertheless, remain unknown."

Given the probable description from the scholar, it's easy to imagine that if he showed up in an airport today he probably would be pulled aside for extra screening since he certainly looked Middle Eastern. Have you ever wondered what the Real Jesus actually looked like? It's interesting that there is not one word about Jesus' appearance in the New Testament. And we don't get any drawings or paintings of Jesus for several centuries after his death and resurrection. I wonder if, in the wisdom of God, God deliberately kept the writers of scripture from describing what Jesus looked like.

A wise Presbyterian minister back in the 1880's warned his church not to trust popular images or paintings of Jesus, saying this:

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“If he were particularized or localized – if, for example, he was made a man with a pale face – then the man of the ebony face would feel that there was a greater distance between Christ and him than between Christ and his white brother. Instead because the Bible refused to describe Jesus in terms of racial features, his gospel could appeal to all. Only in this way could the Church be a place where the Caucasian and [Asian] and African sit together at the Lord’s table, and we all think alike of Jesus and we all feel that he is alike our brother.”

But not only has the Real Jesus been remade to fit people’s cultures and preferences – there is a growing ignorance about Jesus.

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Ignorance about Jesus

I was reading this story of a professor of World Religions who was flying back to Chicago from Minneapolis. He was talking to his seatmate who was a corporate executive out in California. She was going to Chicago to visit her boyfriend at the University of Chicago. She herself was a graduate of Dartmouth College, which is an Ivy League school. This seatmate asked this guy what he did for a living and he told her that he taught World Religion at a public university. Then he joked that some of his undergraduate students couldn’t put Jesus and the Apostle Paul in the proper chronological order. He started to

talk about the challenge of teaching undergraduates. The woman said, “Who is this Apostle Paul that you’re referring to?” And initially, he thought she was joking. He was going to respond with some witty comeback when he realized that she was completely serious. Here was a very well educated woman who attended one of America’s elite colleges and she had never heard of the Apostle Paul.

There is, in America, a growing almost complete ignorance about any of the people that we read about in the Bible, and almost a complete ignorance about the Real Jesus. That’s why books like *The Da Vinci Code* can sell millions and millions of copies claiming that it’s a historical fact that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and they had children together. There are literally millions of people who believe this is true. There are umpteen number of websites devoted to the idea that Jesus was a space alien who came from another planet to teach us the way to live.

There are so many different pictures of Jesus and such a mind-blowing array of stories about who he is and what he came to do. Is it possible to peel back the layers of all of this and discover the Real Jesus? Who was this person, Jesus of Nazareth, who has inspired so many different interpretations? That’s what I want to explore over the next 6-7 weeks in a series that we’ve titled “The Real Jesus”. Today, as we begin this series, I want to briefly explore the Jesus of History. Let’s pray.

92% of Americans believe that Jesus was a real person. There's a slight dip among Millennials, but even among Millennials in America, 87% of Millennials believe that Jesus was a real person. There was a real human being named Jesus about whom all these stories are written. In England, and I assume in much of Europe, 40% of people are not sure if Jesus ever existed. If you have ever heard or read anything by the so-called new atheists, people like Richard Dawkins, they are forever writing that Christianity is based upon an enormous fraud and that Jesus never existed.

How do we know that the man Jesus we read about in the Bible actually existed?

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The existence of Jesus

How do we know if Jesus ever really existed? Well, one thing, Jesus is not just referred to in the Bible. We read of Jesus in historical documents outside the Bible

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Jesus outside the Bible

There are references to Jesus by Roman historians like Tacitus and Pliny, and in Jewish sources like Josephus and Rabbi Eliezer. I talked about some of these references in the Real Jesus video series which you'll only be able to watch if you join a Real Jesus small

group. This is the last week for you to sign up to HOST a group. You can still join one of the small groups. I go through some of the historical references in Roman and Jewish writings outside the Bible. Lots of people don't know that we can learn quite a bit about Jesus outside the New Testament. From strong historical sources outside the Bible, here's what we know:

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- He existed as a man.
- He was called Christos in Greek which is a translation of the Hebrew, Messiah.
- He was Mary's son.
- He had a brother named James.
- He did miracles [some ancient sources consider him to be a magician or a sorcerer]
- He won over both Jews and Greeks as followers.
- Jewish leaders of the day expressed unfavorable opinions about him.
- Pontius Pilate rendered the decision that he should be executed.
- His execution was by crucifixion.
- He was executed during Pontius Pilate's governorship over Judea.

That's all from sources outside the Bible. This was very much like the list a person would construct if they read the gospels in the New Testament.

Now, listen, if you're talking with someone who has read some of the writings of the new atheists and they say, "This Jesus that you're talking to me about never actually existed. This is all made up. It's all a myth." Here's what you can say, "The ancient world in which Christianity emerged wasn't an inclusive or tolerant world. Christianity was offensive to the majority of Jews and Romans, including the Roman government."

If Jesus never existed, the most obvious line of attack against Christianity in the ancient world would have been this: "You Christians believe a story that is total fiction. Jesus never actually existed." But no one, no critic of Christianity whether Jesus or Roman, in the centuries after Jesus, ever said this. There are lots of attacks on Christianity and lots of attacks on Jesus in the ancient world, but there is not one word, not one line, in which anyone alleges that Jesus didn't exist, that he was total fiction. This to me is one of the strongest arguments raised with someone who doubts Jesus' existence or isn't sure.

We considered Jesus outside the Bible, now let's look at what the Bible says about the Jesus of history.

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Jesus in the Bible

I'd like us to consider the witness of Luke.

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The witness of Luke

Here's what we read:

Slide Luke 1:1-4

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ²just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³With 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, ⁴so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

From the earliest times, this gospel was called the Gospel according to Luke. Luke was a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul during Paul's last missionary journey. Now,

Luke tells us in Luke 1:1:

Slide Luke 1:1

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us

In other words, he expressly says that his was not the first written account of Jesus' life and teachings. We don't know what other accounts he's referring to, but many people believe that at least one of the written accounts that he's referring to is that of the gospel writer, Mark. He tells us in verses 2-3 that he was not an eyewitness. He wrote his accounts based upon other eyewitnesses. We'll talk about eyewitnesses in just a moment. But Luke tells us in verse 3 that he carefully investigated the stories of Jesus before writing his gospel. We know from the book of Acts that Luke would have been in Jerusalem from about 56 AD to 59 AD while Paul was in prison awaiting trial under a Roman governor.

So, Luke would have had two or three years to interview people and to write his gospel. He said that he carefully investigated. He took a long and careful look at what people were saying and he decided to write an orderly account:

Slide Luke 1:3

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,

He organized the material he learned – probably not precisely chronologically – but in a clear and logical way. Why should we trust Luke's account? He tells us that he carefully investigated. How good of an historian is Luke? How trustworthy is his gospel? Back in the late 19th century and the early 20th century, there was a man named Sir William

Ramsay. Ramsay was an archeologist and a skeptic of the Bible. He taught at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland and Ramsay believed that the Bible writers made facts and stories up in order to suit their purpose. He believed in particular that Luke's writings, which included the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, were full of errors. To prove this as an archeologist, he went to Asia Minor, which today we would call Turkey, to investigate the book of Acts.

Ramsay knew that he couldn't prove or disprove whether any of the miracles recorded by Luke occurred. But he could show that Luke was a sloppy historian. And facts that could be verified – geographical facts, historical facts, political facts – would allow him to discredit the rest of Luke's writing. What occurred was that Sir William Ramsay this famous archeologist and skeptic came back to England as a believer. He found that every one of Luke's facts checked out. For example, Luke used specific political terminology that no one thought was accurate, but Ramsay the archeologist discovered various inscriptions and verifying Luke's account. His description of Paul's sea journey was precise in describing how the winds blew in the Mediterranean. Ramsay concluded that Luke was a remarkably reliable historian and that we can trust his accounts.

Luke tells us in verse 2 that his careful investigation was based upon eyewitness accounts.

Slide Luke 1:2

just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

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The witness of eyewitnesses

A witness is someone who was present at the time of the incident and is able to give evidence regarding what they've seen or heard. It's in this sense that the apostles were witnesses to Christ. Originally, Jesus chose 12 apostles to be eyewitnesses regarding what he said and did and, especially eyewitnesses of his resurrection. But after Judas committed suicide, there was a gap that needed to be filled to bring the number of apostles back up to 12. Peter stated the qualifications of a person to be chosen.

Here's what he said:

Slide Acts 1:21-22

²¹Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, ²²beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."

You'll notice that there are two qualifications about the apostle and witness. First, that he had to be in the physical company of those who were with Jesus from the beginning of his public ministry until his ascension. And second, they must be an eyewitness to the resurrection of Jesus as one who actually saw him alive.

In the book of Acts, Peter repeatedly calls himself a witness.

Slide Acts 2:32

God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.

Slide Acts 3:15

You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.

Slide Acts 10:40

⁴⁰but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

The gospels were not written by fiction writers sitting in their homes 1,000 miles away from the event they were writing about. The gospels were written by eyewitnesses or people who were basing their accounts on eyewitnesses.

Now in a sermon I can only make a few brief remarks about this, but for any of you who wish to pursue the subject more thoroughly, the very best book on the subject of the eyewitness testimony contained in the gospels is a book by one of the world's leading New Testament scholars, Richard Bauckham. It is titled *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*.

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Jesus and the Eyewitnesses by Richard Bauckham

We have a few copies of it in our bookstore. It is a big book and is definitely not for everyone! But for a few of you, who like to wade through the very best of recent scholarship regarding the reliability of scripture there is probably no better book than *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*.

On a more popular level, for the vast majority of folks, there is a nice smaller book written a few years ago titled *Is the New Testament History?* By Paul Barnett.

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Is the New Testament History? By Paul Barnett

Why should we believe that the Bible reliably communicates to us about the Real Jesus, what he said, his crucifixion and his resurrection? Because it is based on eyewitness accounts. Read with me in Luke.

Slide Luke 24:17-23

17He asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?” They stood still, their faces downcast.

18One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

19“What things?” he asked. “About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.

20The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him;

21but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place.

22In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning

23but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive.

Now what Bauckham points out in his book and he marshals an enormous amount of historical evidence towards this end is that at the time the gospels were written, the four biographical accounts regarding Jesus – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – there were still very many well-known living eyewitnesses to Jesus’ teaching and life. Many of these named people were in the early churches and could serve as ongoing sources and

guarantors of the truth of what was being written in the gospels and the rest of the New Testament. Let me share just one example.

In this account that we read about in Luke there is this man named Cleopas. Bauckham points out that he is almost certainly the same person as Clopas, whose wife, Mary, appears among the women at the cross in the book of John.

Slide John 19:25

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

Clopas is a very, very rare Hebrew name. The Greek form of the name is Cleopas. And it is so rare that we can be virtually certain that this is the same Cleopas who, according to an early church historian, was the brother of Jesus' father, Joseph. In other words, Cleopas was Jesus' uncle. Not only Jesus' uncle, but Cleopas was the father of Simon, Jesus' first cousin, who became the leader of the Jerusalem church following the martyrdom of James, Jesus' brother.

The bottom line is this. Cleopas, the man we are reading about here in Luke 24, didn't just disappear into the mists of history. He remained active in the Jerusalem church and his son became the leader of the church. So there was an opportunity for people in the church to actually go to the folks about whom these stories were written and ask them,

“Did this really happen? Is this what happened to you, Cleopas?” “Simon, is this what your father told you – that he met Jesus on a road to Emmaus?”

See, this stuff is based on eyewitness testimony of people who were actually in the early churches, not made up people in a faraway place at some other time.

Bauckham has dozens of illustrations like the one I raised regarding Cleopas. But you know, most events in history, even if they are true, don't really change us very much. For example, I could present you with a tremendous amount of evidence concerning where Abe Lincoln was born and where he moved to as an adult and how he became President. Even if you agreed with this evidence you might say, “So what?” How does this change my life? Who really cares?” There are lots of things that happened in history that you may believe occurred that have no impact on your life. But the Real Jesus is different. Because the Real Jesus is not just a person in history – as a result of his resurrection, he's alive today! The Real Jesus is changing lives today. So we not only have the witness of historians outside of the Bible and the eyewitnesses in the Bible, we have the witness of changed lives today.

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The witness of changed lives

I want to show you a video of a woman in our church named Roxi Larsen whose life was changed by an encounter with the Real Jesus.

Video

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