

The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ

Craig B. Esvelt, D.Min

Introduction: Was he just another Jewish prophet, or was he a social revolutionary? Was he another one of the world's great religious and ethical teachers, finding his peers among the likes of Krishna, Buddha, Confucius, or Mohammed, or was he just an ordinary but noble man to whom his eager followers credited preposterous feats? Perhaps, as some New Agers claim, he spent many of his younger years in India sitting at the feet of Eastern gurus and became one of many "enlightened ones" that have graced history. Some have claimed that he did not exist at all, but was a fabrication of the early Christian's--a mythical hero who embodied their ideals. Or, as Christians have claimed, was he the very incarnation of God, who alone offers salvation and eternal life? Just who *was* Jesus? One thing is certain: no other person has impacted history as much as this prophet from Galilee, and whereas other religions stand on their ethical/spiritual teachings, Christianity stands on its founder. One can dismiss the *person* of Buddha from Buddhism, and still be a Buddhist. Likewise, Mohammed can be extracted from Islam or Confucius from Confucianism, and the respective religions can remain intact. But one cannot separate Jesus Christ from Christianity without destroying it. This lesson and the next will focus on the unique person of Jesus Christ--who he really is--and what it means to all of us.

Jesus as a Historical Figure

Incredibly, some have attempted to dismiss Jesus Christ as a historical figure altogether, calling him nothing more than a concocted fable of the early Christian church. Yet the historical evidence for the man Jesus is conclusive!

- Historical Support from Non-Biblical Sources -

- Cornelius Tacitus, a Roman historian and government leader (A.D. 55-?), refers to the death of Christ under Pontius Pilate and the existence of persecuted Christians in Rome (*Annals* XV.44).
- Lucian, a satirist of the second century, scornfully spoke of Christians and of Christ, who was "the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced this new cult into the world . . ." (*The Passing Peregris*)
- Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37-?), a Jewish historian enlisted by the Romans, who had previously been a Pharisee and served as a commander of the Jewish forces in Galilee, wrote that Jesus was "a wise man . . . a doer of wonderful works," who was condemned to crucifixion by Pilate and "appeared to them (his disciples) alive again the third day." (*Antiquities*. xviii.33)
- The Jewish Talmuds--early commentaries of Hebrew civil and canonical law--refer to Jesus as an illegitimate child

Additional Notes

Jesus himself placed a critical value on the issue of who he was and what people ought to think of him. In John 8:24 he said, ". . . unless you believe that *I am he* you will die in your sins."

of Mary who performed signs and miracles and beguiled the people, then was crucified.

- Other early writers and figures of the second century such as Seutonius (*Life of Claudius* 25.4), Pliny the Younger (*Epistles* X.96), Tertullian (*Apology*, V2) and Justin Martyr (*Apology* 1.48) refer to Jesus Christ or his followers.

It is significant to note that many of these sources were impartial and others (e.g., Talmudic writers, Pliny the Younger) were outright hostile to the Christian faith. If they had known that Jesus was not a historical figure, they surely would have indicated so!

- Historical Support from Biblical Sources -

There are twenty-seven New Testament documents representing at least seven different authors (four of whom were writing from first-hand experience) which depict the life, words, or actions of Jesus Christ.

- The historical accuracy of the Bible documents has **never** been successfully refuted (see Lesson 4)
- It is not reasonable to believe that the New Testament writers would fabricate and promote lies when such a position usually cost them persecution and death!

F.F. Bruce, Rylands late professor of biblical criticism and exegesis at the University of Manchester rightly said,

"Some writers may toy with the fancy of a 'Christ-myth,' but they do not do so on the ground of historical evidence. The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar. It is not historians who propagate the 'Christ-myth' theories." (The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable? (Downers Grove, Ill., Intervarsity Press, 1972), p. 119

Jesus Christ as a Personal Figure

By far, most of the criticism against Christianity's credibility has *not* come from questioning the existence of Jesus but rather from those who insist that the New Testament (and, therefore, orthodox Christianity) has given us a distorted image of what the person Jesus was really like. Popularized around the turn of the 20th century by Albert Schweitzer's search for "the historical Jesus," the notion that Jesus was merely a charismatic Jewish teacher to whom his overly-zealous followers falsely attributed certain fantastic words and deeds has repeatedly surfaced among liberal scholars.

- The Jesus of the Critics (a god made in man's image) -

Guided by naturalistic presuppositions (i.e., a strong anti-

supernatural bias), critics have challenged the historical accuracy of the gospels. Some of their reasoning is as follows:

- A supposed late authorship of the gospels. Some argue that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John did not write the gospels, but writers of the late 1st or early 2nd century wrote word-of-mouth traditions of the church and borrowed their names.
- The traditional accounts of Jesus handed down by early Christians were highly (and subjectively) embellished and distorted explanations of what Jesus actually said and did. Oral traditions, myths, and historical accounts of Christ and his followers constructed and exaggerated by the "creative community" of the early church were ultimately compiled and arranged by *redactors* (editors) to produce the gospel records.
 - In 1985 a team of media-minded "scholars" known as the Jesus Seminar was organized for the expressed purpose of countering what they believed were "dictatorial tactics" used by fundamentalists. Not surprisingly, this group (stacked heavily with theological liberals) concluded that fully 82 percent of what the four gospels ascribe to Jesus is inauthentic, and much of the rest is in doubt.
 - Their new, improved "Jesus of history" looked more like a Greco-Roman philosopher, a watered-down sage who could threaten no one.
- The gospel writers had "theological motives" (biases) and so their historical testimony is untrustworthy.
- The discovery of the "Gospel of Thomas" documents in 1945 (Egypt) necessarily revises the image of Christ.

- The Defense of the Gospels Trustworthiness -

Conservative scholars have thoroughly and successfully answered opinions such as those above. Indeed, there is "scholarship" on both sides of the issue, and one's conclusions usually are derived more from *presuppositions* than scholarship per se. In response to the above, other scholars maintain:

- There is good reason to believe that, in fact, the actual gospel writers *were* Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, who wrote from a first-hand eyewitness or close secondhand knowledge of Jesus.
 - Early church tradition without exception attributed the gospels to these writers. The early church Father, Irenaeus, for example, affirmed the traditional authorship of the four gospels. He was a disciple of

One of the main reasons for giving the gospels a late date is an anti-supernatural bias. Jesus' prediction of the fall of Jerusalem (Matt. 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21) *before* the actual event in A.D. 70 seems far-fetched to those who deny his deity and supernatural abilities.

This view, known as "form criticism," assumes that the gospels are neither historic nor authentic, but were editorial constructions of the early Christian community, composed to meet the needs of preserving and explaining their faith.

- Polycarp who had been disciplined by the apostle John.
- The fact that none of the gospel writers mentioned the events of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. (obviously a significant event) indicates that their accounts were probably written before.*
- It is difficult, if not preposterous, to imagine that gross embellishments could have found their way into the gospel accounts within so short a time (i.e., within a few decades after Christ). Certainly the early enemies of the Christian faith, viz., the Jews and Romans, could have silenced such fabrications, calling upon other eye-witnesses to dispute false claims by the early church.
- "Passionate witnesses" (e.g., those with "theological motives") do not necessarily distort the evidence; in fact, in their attempts to gain credibility with their audience they are often extremely careful to record the facts. Note the accurate records of the survivors of the Holocaust.
- The so-called Gospel of Thomas has been recognized by *most* careful scholars as a spurious Gnostic document of the 2nd century (if it was trustworthy, why was it not used by any of the modern scholarly translators of the NASB, NIV, NKJV, ESV, etc. bibles which were all done since the "Gospel of Thomas" was discovered?!).

*Nor does the Book of Acts, written by Luke *after* his gospel, record the intense persecution of the church by the Roman emperor Nero in the mid-sixties; Luke's attitude toward Rome is generally favorable.

Note: If the traditional accounts of Jesus were only fabrications, the apostle Paul would not have been able to say to Festus and Agrippa, "I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner." (Acts 26:26)

Review Lesson 5 re: The Gospel of Thomas

Jesus Christ as a Unique Figure

If Jesus were the unique Son of God, incarnated in human flesh, one could reasonably *expect* him to manifest traits unique to humanity, such as being fore-announced prophetically (Lesson 4), virgin born, a miracle-worker, able to exercise power over nature and death (resurrection), and having a lasting and universal influence. The incredible claims that he made about himself also set him apart from any other religious leader, for no other great figure of history (e.g., Buddha, Mohammed, Moses, Confucius, etc.) ever claimed to be anything but a normal man.

- His Unique Claims to Divinity -

Some have said that Jesus never claimed to be God, yet Scripture clearly shows that Jesus was unique in claiming to be Deity incarnate *and* convincing a large portion of the world that he was (and is) God.

- Direct claims to divinity
 - Jesus, under oath, claimed to be the Messiah, Son of the blessed One, at his trial (Mark 14:61-64)
 - He claimed equality with God the Father (John 5:17-18; 10:30-33; 14:9). The Jews themselves recognized

Christ's claims to deity on these occasions, for they accused him of blasphemy and tried to kill him.

- He claimed pre-existence as the divine God, using the divine name--"I AM" (John 8:58 with Exodus 3:13-14)
- He said that he was due the same honor as that given to God (John 5:22-23)
- He received and accepted worship (Matt. 14:33, John 20:27-29) which he knew belonged to God alone (Luke 4:8)
- Indirect claims to divinity
 - Jesus claimed to be able to forgive sins (Mark 2:5-7, Luke 7:48-49), and according to Jewish law this right was reserved for God alone.
 - He claimed to be THE way to salvation (not "a" way), THE infallible source of truth, and THE author of life, and that no one could enter heaven apart from him (John 14:6). This strong, unequivocal statement of his exclusiveness clearly rules him out as being merely "one of the many paths to God" as so many assert.

Some liberal scholars claim that Jesus was not implying that he was deity; others hold that Jesus was only claiming the same sort of divinity ("oneness with God") that any Eastern mystic would insist we all possess. The fact that Jesus *was* claiming special divinity is clearly revealed by the fact that the Jews themselves assumed that he was and sought to kill him for this "blasphemy," and Jesus made no effort to excuse himself or correct them of any misconception on their part!

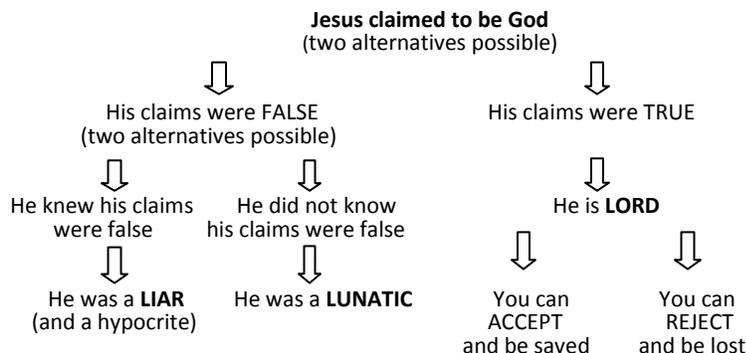
The **Hindu Vedas** said, "Truth is One, but the sages speak of it in many different ways."
 The **Buddha** said, "My teachings point the way to attainment of the truth."
Mohammed said, "The truth has been revealed to me."
Jesus Christ said, "I AM the truth."

- His Unique Confrontation to All -

Normally, that any rational, respected individual would make such claims as those above is unthinkable! Regarding the unique person and claims of Jesus Christ, the late C.S. Lewis, Cambridge professor and one-time agnostic, wrote:

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God' . . . A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic--on a level with a man who says he's a poached egg--or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice . . . You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great moral teacher. he has not left that open to us. He did not intend to." (Mere Christianity (New York, The McMillan Co., 1952), p. 40.

Logically, one is faced with a "trilemma" in resolving the *claims* of Jesus with his *person*: Was he **Lord, liar, or lunatic**?



- Was he a *LIAR*?
If he was a liar, then he was also a *hypocrite*, since he told others to be honest while he himself was living a lie, and he was also *devilish* because he encouraged others to trust him for their eternal destiny which ultimately brought them persecution. He was also a *fool* because his claims led to his own death.
 - But even skeptics and antagonists of Christianity through the centuries have credited Jesus with qualities of genius, moral perfection, virtue, and strength--an ideal representative of humanity.
 - It stretches the bounds of credibility that someone who lived as Jesus lived, taught as he taught, and died as he died could not have been a liar!
- Was he a *LUNATIC*?
Jesus epitomized calmness and self-possession.
 - He evidenced a mild, practical spirit, simplicity of language in revealing truths of religion, good sense, and insight into the nature of man--qualities not consistent with a deranged or deluded mind.
 - It is inconceivable that millions of people for the past 2,000 years could have based their lives on the claims of a lunatic!

Conclusion: He is *LORD*! And because he is Lord--and God's unique incarnate Son--his words are true for EVERYONE and he has a rightful obligation to be worshiped by every individual.

"If you were to take the sum total of all authoritative articles ever written by the most qualified psychologists and psychiatrists on the subject of mental hygiene . . . if you were to combine them and refine them and clean out the excess verbiage . . . if you were to take the whole of the meat and none of the parsley, and if you were to have these unadulterated bits of pure scientific knowledge concisely expressed by the most capable of living poets, you would have an awkward and incomplete summation of the Sermon on the Mount and it would suffer immeasurably in comparison. Here rests the blueprints for successful human life with optimum mental health and contentment." - Dr. J.T. Fisher, psychologist A Few Buttons Missing (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1951), p. 273

Practical project for the week:

Ask some non-believing acquaintances who they think are the greatest religious figures in history, then ask them what they think makes these individuals unique. Share with them that only Jesus Christ made claims of being God, and confront them with the "trilemma." (Note: if they say they do not believe the biblical testimony about Jesus, you can share some of this week's material and also that from lesson 4).