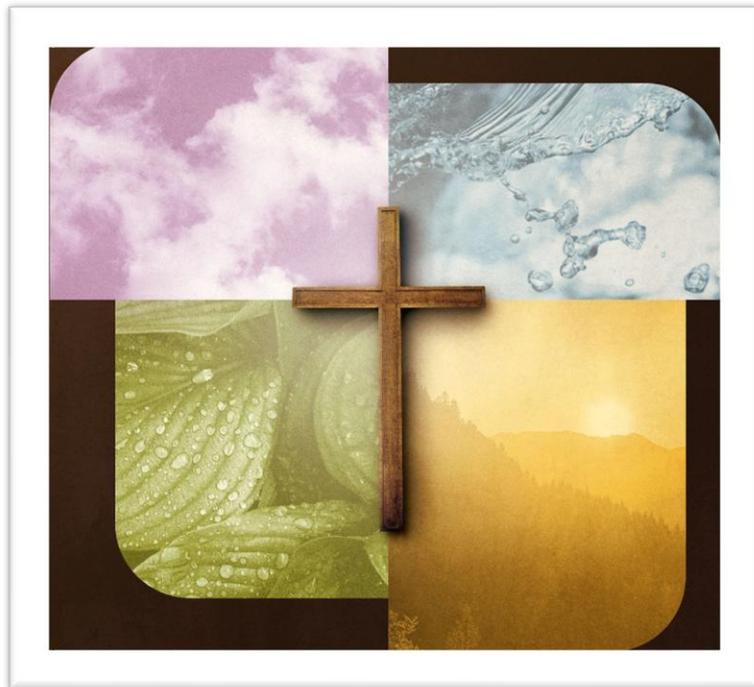


Can We Trust the Gospels?

Introduction to Apologetics

Point of Life Church



CAN WE TRUST THE GOSPELS?

A Historical and Faith-Building Study for Believers

Point of Life Church (Introduction to Apologetics)

INTRODUCTION

Many people today assume that the Bible is unreliable, that the Gospels were written long after Jesus, or that Christian beliefs were invented by church leaders centuries later. Others struggle personally with doubts about whether the Gospels can be trusted as historical documents.

This study is designed to address those questions with clarity, humility, and faith. It will explore the historical foundations of Christianity, the origins of the Gospels, early Christian history, and the resurrection of Jesus. The goal is not simply to win debates, but to strengthen faith, deepen understanding, and equip believers to have thoughtful conversations with others.

Christian faith is not blind faith. It is trust rooted in what God has done in history.

WEEK 1

CHRISTIANITY IS A HISTORICAL FAITH

Chapter Overview

Many religions are based on personal spiritual experiences, philosophical ideas, or moral teachings. Christianity is unique because it makes a bold historical claim: **God acted in real history through Jesus Christ.**

This chapter explores what it means to say Christianity is a historical faith and why the resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of Christian belief.

Historical Anchor Timeline

AD 30 — Jesus' death and resurrection in Jerusalem

1. Christianity Begins With Events, Not Just Ideas

Most belief systems begin with teachings or philosophies. Christianity begins with an event.

Jesus of Nazareth lived in first-century Israel. He taught publicly, gathered disciples, healed the sick, challenged religious leaders, and was crucified by Roman authorities. After His death, His followers claimed He rose from the dead and appeared to them.

These are not private mystical experiences. They are **public claims about public events.**

The apostle Paul made this clear when he wrote:

“If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.”
— 1 Corinthians 15:17 (NASB)

Christianity does not survive as a metaphor or inspirational philosophy. It stands or falls on what happened to Jesus.

2. The Resurrection as the Foundation of Christianity

The resurrection is not a minor detail in Christianity. It is the cornerstone.

If Jesus rose from the dead, then His claims about God, forgiveness, eternal life, and His own identity matter profoundly. If He did not, Christianity collapses.

This makes Christianity unusual among religions. It invites investigation. It does not ask people to believe something that cannot be checked historically.

3. The Gospels as Ancient Biography

The books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are called the Gospels. They are not modern biographies, but they belong to an ancient genre known as **bios**, or biography.

They include:

- Names of rulers (Caesar Augustus, Tiberius, Pontius Pilate)
- Real places (Nazareth, Capernaum, Jerusalem)
- Travel routes and social customs
- Eyewitness claims and named disciples

Ancient myths usually begin with vague language like “long ago” or “in a distant land.” The Gospels begin with specific times and places. This signals that the authors intended to record real history.

Sidebar: Why Historical Details Matter

Historians trust documents that include verifiable details. The Gospels contain hundreds of geographic and historical details that can be checked against archaeology and other ancient sources.

4. Faith and History Together

Christian faith involves trust, worship, prayer, and spiritual experience. But it is also grounded in history. Faith is not believing without evidence; it is trusting what God has done.

When believers understand the historical grounding of Christianity, it strengthens confidence, deepens worship, and provides stability during doubt.

For the Church Today

The church proclaims not just ideas, but events. Every sermon about Jesus points back to what He did in history—His life, death, and resurrection.

For Your Faith

When doubts arise, remember that Christianity is anchored in history. Faith is trust in a real God who acted in real time.

For Conversations With Skeptics

If someone says, “Christianity is just a philosophy,” you can say:

“Christianity claims God acted in history through Jesus. The resurrection is a historical claim, not just a spiritual idea.”

Key Takeaways

- Christianity is rooted in real historical events.
 - The resurrection is the foundation of Christian faith.
 - The Gospels read like ancient biographies, not myths.
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My Questions About This Topic

How This Strengthens My Faith

WEEK 2

WHEN WERE THE GOSPELS WRITTEN?

Chapter Overview

A common claim is that the Gospels were written centuries after Jesus, allowing legends to develop. This chapter explores when the Gospels were written, why those dates matter, and how early dating strengthens their historical reliability.

Historical Anchor Timeline

AD 30 — Jesus' death and resurrection

AD 60–70 — Gospel of Mark

AD 60–80 — Gospels of Matthew and Luke

AD 80–95 — Gospel of John

1. Why Dating the Gospels Matters

In history, the closer a document is written to the events it describes, the more reliable it is considered.

A biography written during a person's lifetime or shortly afterward is far more trustworthy than one written centuries later.

The Gospels were written within the first century, while eyewitnesses and critics were still alive.

2. Estimated Dates of the Gospels

Most scholars—Christian, Jewish, and secular—place the Gospels within these ranges:

- **Mark:** AD 60–70
- **Matthew:** AD 60–80
- **Luke:** AD 60–80
- **John:** AD 80–95

Even skeptical scholars agree that the Gospels were written within the first century.

This means they were written **within 30 to 60 years of Jesus' death and resurrection.**

Sidebar: What “Early” Means in History

In ancient history, a source written within a lifetime of the events is considered extremely early. Many accepted ancient sources were written hundreds of years later.

3. Luke as a Historian

Luke begins his Gospel with a historian’s introduction:

“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us... it seemed fitting for me... to write it out for you in consecutive order.”

— Luke 1:1–3 (NASB)

Luke explains that he investigated eyewitness accounts and earlier sources. This shows early Christians cared about preserving accurate information.

4. Why Legends Could Not Easily Develop

Legends usually take centuries to develop. The Gospels were written while:

- Eyewitnesses were still alive
- Jesus’ family and disciples were known
- Critics could challenge false claims

This environment makes large-scale legend-making unlikely.

5. Comparison With Other Ancient Sources

Historians trust many ancient biographies written long after events, such as:

- Alexander the Great — biographies written 300–400 years later
- Julius Caesar — biographies written 150–200 years later

By comparison, the Gospels are remarkably early.

For the Church Today

Understanding when the Gospels were written helps believers confidently teach that Christianity is not based on centuries of myth-building.

For Your Faith

Knowing the Gospels were written early can strengthen trust in Scripture and deepen confidence in Jesus' story.

For Conversations With Skeptics

If someone says, "The Gospels were written hundreds of years later," you can say:

"Most scholars agree the Gospels were written within the first century, within living memory of Jesus."

Key Takeaways

- The Gospels were written within the first century.
 - Early dating means eyewitnesses could confirm or challenge claims.
 - Compared to other ancient sources, the Gospels are extremely early.
-

My Questions About This Topic

How This Strengthens My Faith

WEEK 3

EYEWITNESSES AND THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

Chapter Overview

One of the strongest reasons historians trust the Gospels is their connection to eyewitnesses and the continuous chain of people who preserved their testimony. Christianity did not emerge in a vacuum. The teachings about Jesus were passed down through identifiable people who lived close to the events themselves.

This chapter explores who wrote the Gospels, how they were connected to eyewitnesses, and who the early church fathers were.

Historical Anchor Timeline

AD 30 — Jesus' death and resurrection

AD 60–95 — Gospels written

AD 90–180 — Early church fathers write and quote the Gospels

1. Who Were the Gospel Authors?

The Gospels are traditionally attributed to:

- **Matthew**, one of the twelve apostles
- **Mark**, a companion of the apostle Peter
- **Luke**, a companion of the apostle Paul and investigator of eyewitnesses
- **John**, one of the twelve apostles

These attributions are supported by early Christian testimony, not late medieval tradition.

Matthew and John were direct eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry. Mark and Luke were closely connected to eyewitnesses and recorded their testimony.

2. Mark and Peter's Eyewitness Testimony

Early Christian writers such as Papias and Irenaeus stated that Mark recorded the preaching of the apostle Peter. Peter was one of Jesus' closest disciples and an eyewitness to His life, death, and resurrection.

This means the Gospel of Mark reflects firsthand testimony from someone who walked with Jesus.

3. Luke as an Investigative Historian

Luke was not one of the twelve apostles, but he traveled with the apostle Paul and interviewed eyewitnesses. He begins his Gospel by explaining his method:

“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us... it seemed fitting for me... to write it out for you in consecutive order.”

— Luke 1:1–3 (NASB)

Luke carefully researched his material, similar to ancient historians of his time.

4. John the Eyewitness Disciple

John, one of the twelve apostles, wrote the Gospel of John. He explicitly claims to be an eyewitness:

“This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true.”

— John 21:24 (NASB)

John's Gospel includes personal details that suggest firsthand knowledge of events, locations, and conversations.

5. Who Were the Early Church Fathers?

After the apostles, the next generation of Christian leaders are called the **early church fathers**. These were pastors, bishops, and teachers who preserved apostolic teaching and quoted the Gospels.

Key early church fathers include:

- **Clement of Rome** (c. AD 95)
- **Ignatius of Antioch** (c. AD 110)
- **Polycarp of Smyrna** (c. AD 110–155)
- **Papias of Hierapolis** (early second century)
- **Justin Martyr** (c. AD 150)
- **Irenaeus of Lyons** (c. AD 180)

These men quoted the Gospels, defended Christian beliefs, and preserved the teachings of the apostles.

Sidebar: Why the Early Church Fathers Matter

The early church fathers form a historical bridge between the apostles and later Christianity. Their writings show what Christians believed and read in Scripture within one to two generations of Jesus.

6. Continuity of Teaching

The chain of transmission looks like this:

Jesus → Apostles → Disciples of Apostles → Early Church Fathers → Later Church

This continuous line shows that Christianity was not reinvented centuries later. The same core teachings appear consistently across generations.

7. Why Eyewitness Connection Matters

Historians prefer sources connected to eyewitnesses. The Gospels are either written by eyewitnesses or by those who carefully recorded eyewitness testimony.

This places the Gospels in a strong historical position compared to many other ancient sources.

For the Church Today

Understanding the eyewitness origins of the Gospels helps the church teach Scripture with confidence. Christianity is grounded in real people who encountered Jesus.

For Your Faith

Knowing that the Gospels come from eyewitnesses or their close companions can strengthen trust in Jesus' story and deepen confidence in Scripture.

For Conversations With Skeptics

If someone says, “The Gospels were written anonymously long after Jesus,” you can say:

“The Gospels are connected to eyewitnesses and their companions, and early Christian leaders quoted them within one generation of Jesus.”

Key Takeaways

- Matthew and John were eyewitness apostles.
 - Mark and Luke recorded eyewitness testimony.
 - Early church fathers preserved and quoted the Gospels early.
 - There is no historical gap for Christianity to be invented later.
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My Questions About This Topic

How This Strengthens My Faith

WEEK 4

MANUSCRIPTS, TRANSMISSION, AND THE RELIABILITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Chapter Overview

A common objection is that the Bible has been changed over time through copying errors and church editing. This chapter explains how manuscripts were copied, how scholars evaluate them, and why we can trust that the New Testament we have today reflects the original writings.

Historical Anchor Timeline

AD 30 — Jesus' death and resurrection

AD 60–95 — New Testament writings composed

AD 125–225 — Earliest New Testament manuscripts

AD 300s — Nearly complete New Testament codices

1. What Is a Manuscript?

A **manuscript** is a handwritten copy of a document. Before the printing press, all books were copied by hand on papyrus or parchment.

The original writings of the New Testament authors are called **autographs**. No autographs survive for most ancient documents, including the New Testament. Instead, historians rely on copies.

This is normal for ancient history.

2. How Many New Testament Manuscripts Exist?

The New Testament is one of the best-attested documents in ancient history. Scholars have identified:

- Over **5,000 Greek manuscripts**
- Thousands more in Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and other languages
- Thousands of quotations in early Christian writings

This far exceeds the manuscript evidence for most ancient works.

Sidebar: Manuscripts Compared to Other Ancient Works

For many ancient authors, historians rely on fewer than 10 manuscripts, often written centuries after the original. The New Testament has thousands of manuscripts, some within a century of the original.

3. Early New Testament Manuscripts

Some key early manuscripts include:

P52 (Rylands Fragment of John)

- Dates to around **AD 125–150**
- Contains part of John 18
- Found in Egypt, showing early spread of the Gospel

P66 and P75

- Date to late second or early third century
- Contain large portions of the Gospels
- Show strong agreement with later manuscripts

These manuscripts bring us very close to the time of the original writings.

4. What Are Textual Variants?

Because manuscripts were copied by hand, differences exist between copies. These differences are called **textual variants**.

Most variants involve:

- Spelling differences
- Word order changes
- Minor omissions or additions

The vast majority of variants do not affect meaning. Very few affect translation, and none change core Christian doctrines.

5. How Scholars Reconstruct the Original Text

Scholars use **textual criticism** to compare manuscripts. If a reading appears in many early manuscripts from different regions, it is likely original.

The large number of manuscripts allows scholars to detect copying mistakes and reconstruct the original text with high confidence.

Sidebar: Why More Manuscripts Are Better

If only one manuscript existed, corruption would be impossible to detect. Thousands of manuscripts from different places make large-scale corruption virtually impossible.

6. Did the Church Change the Bible?

Some claim the church edited the Bible for power. Historically, manuscripts were copied and circulated across many regions—Rome, Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor—before any centralized church authority existed.

No single group could secretly change all copies everywhere. Differences can be detected precisely because manuscripts are widespread.

For the Church Today

Understanding manuscripts helps believers confidently teach that the Bible has been faithfully preserved.

For Your Faith

Knowing how carefully Scripture was transmitted can strengthen trust in God's Word.

For Conversations With Skeptics

If someone says, "The Bible has been changed," you can say:

"We have thousands of manuscripts from different regions, and scholars can compare them to reconstruct the original text with high confidence."

Key Takeaways

- The New Testament is one of the best-attested ancient documents.
 - Manuscript differences are mostly minor.
 - Many manuscripts increase confidence in the original text.
 - Large-scale corruption would be historically impossible.
-

My Questions About This Topic

How This Strengthens My Faith

WEEK 5

EXTERNAL EVIDENCE AND HONEST REPORTING IN THE GOSPELS

Chapter Overview

Some people assume the Bible is the only source that mentions Jesus. In reality, **non-Christian historians and Roman officials also wrote about Jesus and early Christians**. These external sources are important because they confirm key facts about Jesus from outside the Christian movement.

This chapter explores these sources and explains why certain honest and embarrassing details in the Gospels strengthen their credibility.

Historical Anchor Timeline

AD 30 — Jesus' death and resurrection

AD 93 — Josephus writes about Jesus

AD 112 — Pliny the Younger describes Christian worship

AD 116 — Tacitus records Jesus' execution under Pontius Pilate

1. Why External Sources Matter

Historians prefer multiple independent sources. When a claim appears in friendly sources, hostile sources, and neutral sources, it becomes historically stronger.

The Gospels are Christian sources, but they are not alone. Jewish and Roman writers confirm key elements of Jesus' life and early Christianity.

2. Josephus: A Jewish Historian

Flavius Josephus was a Jewish historian writing around AD 93. He mentioned Jesus and early Christians in his works.

Josephus confirms that:

- Jesus was a real person
- He was crucified

- His followers continued after His death

Josephus was not a Christian. His writings reflect a Jewish perspective, which makes his testimony historically valuable.

3. Tacitus: A Roman Historian

Tacitus was a Roman historian writing around AD 116. He recorded that:

- Jesus (Christus) was executed
- The execution occurred under Pontius Pilate
- Christianity spread from Judea to Rome

Tacitus was hostile to Christianity, calling it a superstition. Hostile testimony strengthens historical credibility.

4. Pliny the Younger: A Roman Governor

Pliny the Younger, a Roman governor, wrote to Emperor Trajan around AD 112. He described Christians gathering to worship Christ “as a god.”

This shows that early Christians worshiped Jesus as divine within the first century—long before later church councils.

Sidebar: Why This Matters for Belief in Jesus’ Divinity

Some claim Christians invented Jesus’ divinity centuries later. Roman sources show Christians worshiped Jesus as God within decades of His death.

5. The Criterion of Embarrassment

Historians use the **criterion of embarrassment**. If a document includes details that would be embarrassing or difficult for the author, those details are more likely to be true.

The Gospels include many such details:

- Peter denies Jesus (Mark 14:66–72)
- The disciples flee at Jesus’ arrest (Mark 14:50)
- Women discover the empty tomb (Mark 16:1–8), even though women’s testimony was often discounted in ancient culture

These details are unlikely to be invented propaganda.

6. Honest Reporting in the Gospels

The Gospels portray the disciples as confused, fearful, and flawed. If the early church were inventing heroic legends, they likely would have removed these details.

Instead, the Gospels present a realistic portrayal of human weakness and divine grace.

For the Church Today

The church does not rely only on its own writings for historical grounding. External sources confirm that Jesus lived, was executed, and was worshiped by His followers.

For Your Faith

Knowing that non-Christian sources confirm Jesus' existence and execution can strengthen confidence in the Gospel accounts.

For Conversations With Skeptics

If someone says, "The Bible is the only source about Jesus," you can say:

"Jewish and Roman historians also wrote about Jesus and early Christians, confirming key facts about His life and death."

Key Takeaways

- Non-Christian sources confirm Jesus' existence and execution.
 - Early Christians worshiped Jesus as divine within decades of His death.
 - Embarrassing details in the Gospels support honesty, not legend.
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My Questions About This Topic

How This Strengthens My Faith

WEEK 6

THE CANON, CHURCH COUNCILS, AND MYTHS ABOUT THE BIBLE

Chapter Overview

Many people believe church leaders decided what would be in the Bible hundreds of years after Jesus, often imagining political agendas or secret meetings. This chapter explains how the New Testament canon developed, what church councils actually did, and why popular myths about the Bible's origins are historically inaccurate.

Historical Anchor Timeline

- AD 30 — Jesus' death and resurrection
 - AD 60–95 — Apostolic writings circulated
 - AD 150 — Gospels read in Christian worship (Justin Martyr)
 - AD 180 — Irenaeus affirms four Gospels
 - AD 325 — Council of Nicaea
 - AD 367 — Athanasius lists the 27-book New Testament
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1. What Is the Canon?

The word **canon** comes from a Greek word meaning “rule” or “measuring rod.” In Christianity, the canon refers to the collection of books recognized as Scripture.

The church did not create Scripture; it **recognized** which writings carried apostolic authority.

2. How Early Christians Recognized Scripture

Early Christians recognized Scripture using several criteria:

Apostolic Connection

Was the book written by an apostle or a close companion of an apostle?

Consistency With Apostolic Teaching

Did the book agree with what Christians already believed about Jesus?

Widespread Use in Churches

Was the book read and used in churches across the Roman world?

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John met all three criteria.

3. What Did Church Councils Do?

A common myth is that church councils decided what books would be in the Bible.

The **Council of Nicaea (AD 325)** did **not** decide the New Testament canon. Nicaea debated who Jesus is, responding to claims that He was not fully divine.

Lists of New Testament books appear later, such as **Athanasius' list in AD 367**, but these lists reflect what churches were already using.

Sidebar: Recognizing vs. Creating Scripture

The church functioned like a librarian cataloging books that already existed, not an author writing new books.

4. Constantine and the Bible Myth

Some claim Emperor Constantine invented Christianity or chose the books of the Bible. Historically:

- Christianity existed for nearly 300 years before Constantine
 - Christians were persecuted and martyred long before him
 - Constantine legalized Christianity; he did not invent it
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5. What About Other “Gospels”?

Some writings, such as the **Gospel of Thomas**, are often mentioned in documentaries and novels.

These writings:

- Were written later (often second or third century)
- Reflect different theology, often influenced by Gnosticism
- Were not widely used in early Christian worship

The early church rejected these writings because they did not meet apostolic criteria.

6. Did the Church Change the Bible?

Manuscripts were copied and circulated across many regions long before centralized church authority existed. No single group could secretly change all copies everywhere.

For the Church Today

Understanding how the Bible was recognized builds confidence that Scripture is not a medieval invention but a collection of early apostolic writings.

For Your Faith

Knowing Scripture's history can strengthen trust in God's Word during doubt and questions.

For Conversations With Skeptics

If someone says, "The church decided what would be in the Bible," you can say:

"The early church recognized writings connected to the apostles that were already being used. Councils confirmed what Christians had been reading for centuries."

Key Takeaways

- The canon was recognized, not created.
 - Nicaea debated Jesus' nature, not the Bible's books.
 - Constantine legalized Christianity; he did not invent it.
 - Later gospels were rejected because they lacked apostolic origin and early use.
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My Questions About This Topic

How This Strengthens My Faith

WEEK 7

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS AS A HISTORICAL CLAIM

Chapter Overview

Christianity stands or falls on one historical claim: **Jesus rose from the dead**. This chapter explores early resurrection testimony, eyewitness evidence, and how historians evaluate alternative explanations.

Historical Anchor Timeline

AD 30 — Jesus' death and resurrection

AD 30–35 — Early resurrection creeds and eyewitness proclamation

AD 60–95 — Gospels written

1. Why the Resurrection Matters

The resurrection is central to Christianity. Paul wrote:

“If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain.”

— 1 Corinthians 15:14 (NASB)

Christianity does not survive as a moral philosophy without the resurrection. It claims God acted in history to defeat death.

2. Early Resurrection Creed

Paul records an early Christian creed:

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.”

— 1 Corinthians 15:3–5 (NASB)

Scholars widely agree this creed dates to within a few years of AD 30.

3. Eyewitness Testimony

The resurrection accounts include:

- Women discovering the empty tomb
- Appearances to disciples and groups
- Paul's claim of more than 500 witnesses (1 Corinthians 15:6)

Eyewitness testimony is central to historical investigation.

4. The Empty Tomb

If the tomb had not been empty, opponents could have ended Christianity by producing the body. Instead, the movement spread in Jerusalem.

Women are recorded as the first witnesses, which supports authenticity since women's testimony was often discounted in ancient culture.

5. Transformation of the Disciples

Before the resurrection, the disciples fled in fear. Afterward, they boldly proclaimed Jesus' resurrection despite persecution. This transformation requires explanation.

6. Evaluating Alternative Explanations

Hallucinations

Hallucinations are typically individual experiences, not shared group experiences.

Stolen Body or Conspiracy

A conspiracy requires many people to maintain a lie under persecution without recanting.

Legend Development

The resurrection was proclaimed too early for centuries-long legend development.

Wrong Tomb

Authorities could have corrected the error by producing the body.

Each alternative fails to explain all the evidence.

7. Historical Faith and Living Faith

The resurrection is both historical and theological. Because Jesus rose, Christians believe in forgiveness, new life, and future resurrection.

For the Church Today

The resurrection shapes worship, ethics, and mission. Christianity proclaims hope rooted in history.

For Your Faith

When doubt arises, remember Christianity rests on a public event proclaimed by eyewitnesses.

For Conversations With Skeptics

If someone says, “The resurrection is a myth,” you can say:

“The resurrection was proclaimed within a few years of Jesus’ death by eyewitnesses who were willing to suffer for that claim.”

Key Takeaways

- Christianity stands or falls on the resurrection.
 - Resurrection belief was proclaimed extremely early.
 - The disciples’ transformation requires explanation.
 - Alternative explanations fail to account for all evidence.
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My Questions About This Topic

How This Strengthens My Faith

APPENDIX A

MASTER HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

Overview

This timeline places Jesus, the Gospels, early Christian leaders, manuscripts, and church councils in historical context. It helps visualize how close Christian sources are to the events they describe.

Master Timeline

- AD 30** — Jesus' death and resurrection
 - AD 30–35** — Early resurrection creeds and eyewitness preaching
 - AD 60–70** — Gospel of Mark written
 - AD 60–80** — Gospels of Matthew and Luke written
 - AD 80–95** — Gospel of John written
 - AD 95–180** — Early Church Fathers quote and defend the Gospels
 - AD 125–225** — Earliest Gospel manuscripts (P52, P66, P75)
 - AD 325** — Council of Nicaea
 - AD 367** — Athanasius lists the 27-book New Testament canon
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Key Timeline Events Explained

AD 30 — Jesus' Death and Resurrection

The central event of Christianity. Jesus was crucified under Roman authority and His followers proclaimed His resurrection in Jerusalem.

AD 30–35 — Early Resurrection Proclamation

Early Christian creeds and preaching about the resurrection circulated within a few years of Jesus' death.

AD 60–95 — The Gospels Written

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John recorded eyewitness testimony within the first century.

AD 95–180 — Early Church Fathers

Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, Papias, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus quoted the Gospels and defended Christian beliefs.

AD 125–225 — Early Manuscripts

The earliest fragments and manuscripts bring us within one to two generations of the original writings.

AD 325 — Council of Nicaea

Christian leaders debated the nature of Christ's divinity, not the contents of the Bible.

AD 367 — New Testament Canon Listed

Athanasius recorded the 27 books of the New Testament already in widespread use.

For Your Faith

This timeline shows there is no hidden century where Christianity was invented. The faith developed in a continuous historical line from Jesus to the global church.

APPENDIX B

SKEPTIC CONVERSATION CHEAT SHEET

Overview

This guide provides brief, respectful responses to common objections about Christianity and the Bible. Use these statements as starting points for thoughtful conversations.

Common Objections and Responses

? “The Council of Nicaea changed the Bible.”

Response:

“Nicaea debated who Jesus is, not which books belong in the Bible. The Gospels were already used as Scripture for centuries.”

? “Constantine invented Christianity.”

Response:

“Christianity existed and was persecuted long before Constantine. He legalized it; he didn’t invent it.”

? “Other gospels were suppressed.”

Response:

“Those writings appeared later and were not widely used in early churches like Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.”

? “The Bible was changed over time.”

Response:

“We have thousands of manuscripts from different regions, which makes large-scale changes impossible to hide.”

? “The resurrection is a legend.”

Response:

“The resurrection was proclaimed within a few years of Jesus’ death by eyewitnesses.”

Conversation Tip

Be gentle, not defensive. Apologetics is about loving people with truth.

APPENDIX C

GLOSSARY OF KEY APOLOGETICS TERMS

Apostolic

Connected to the apostles or their close companions.

Canon

The recognized list of books considered Scripture.

Creed

A summary of beliefs memorized and recited by early Christians.

Early Church Fathers

Christian leaders from the late first to early third centuries who preserved apostolic teaching.

Manuscript

A handwritten copy of an ancient document.

Textual Variant

A difference between manuscripts due to copying.

Textual Criticism

The scholarly discipline that compares manuscripts to reconstruct the original text.

Christology

The study of who Jesus is (His nature and identity).

Gnosticism

A second-century movement emphasizing secret knowledge and often denying Jesus' bodily resurrection.

Bios

The ancient Greco-Roman genre of biography, which the Gospels resemble.

APPENDIX D

RECOMMENDED READING AND RESOURCES

Introductory Level

- **Peter J. Williams**, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*
 - **Lee Strobel**, *The Case for Christ*
-

Intermediate Level

- **Richard Bauckham**, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*
 - **Gary Habermas & Michael Licona**, *The Resurrection of Jesus*
-

Academic Level

- **F. F. Bruce**, *The Canon of Scripture*
 - **Bruce Metzger & Bart Ehrman**, *The Text of the New Testament*
-

Online Resources

- Bible.org
- ReasonableFaith.org
- The Gospel Coalition (articles on canon, manuscripts, and resurrection)

APPENDIX E

The Talmud

Talmud and Jesus: A Historical & Apologetics Guide

Point of Life Church

This guide examines references to Jesus in the Jewish Talmud and compares them with the Gospel accounts. Although the Talmud is hostile toward Christianity, it provides important historical corroboration by treating Jesus as a real and influential historical figure.

1. What Is the Jewish Talmud?

The Jewish Talmud is a collection of rabbinic legal discussions, interpretations, and debates concerning Jewish law, ethics, and daily life. It is not part of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), but represents post-biblical rabbinic tradition. It preserves what Judaism calls the Oral Torah—teachings believed to have been passed down orally alongside the written Law.

Structure of the Talmud

- Mishnah (c. AD 200): A codified collection of Jewish laws.
- Gemara (c. AD 200–500): Rabbinic commentary and debate on the Mishnah.

Mishnah + Gemara = Talmud

2. When Was the Talmud Written?

The Mishnah was compiled around AD 200. The Gemara developed between AD 200–500, with the Babylonian Talmud reaching its final form by approximately AD 500. These writings reflect post–Second Temple Judaism and were composed centuries after the life of Jesus.

3. Why the Talmud Matters Historically

Although hostile toward Christianity, the Talmud is historically valuable because it treats Jesus as a real historical person. Rather than denying His existence, it attempts to explain Him away. In historical study, hostile sources are among the strongest forms of corroborating evidence.

4. Key Talmudic References to Jesus

Sanhedrin 43a — Execution of Jesus

This passage states that Jesus (Yeshu) was executed on the eve of Passover and accused of sorcery and leading Israel astray. In Jewish legal language, “hanged” refers broadly to execution and aligns with Roman crucifixion.

Sanhedrin 107b / Sotah 47a — Jesus and His Teacher

These passages portray Jesus as a student who departed from accepted rabbinic authority and gathered followers, assuming His historical existence and influence.

Shabbat 104b / Sanhedrin 67a — Sorcery Accusation

These texts attribute Jesus' deeds to sorcery. Importantly, they do not deny that extraordinary deeds occurred but attempt to explain their source in non-divine terms.

5. What the Talmud Does NOT Say

The Talmud never claims Jesus was mythical, invented, symbolic, or unknown. It consistently treats Him as a real figure whose influence required theological rebuttal.

6. Gospel and Talmud: Comparison of Historical Claims

<u>Historical Claim</u>	<u>Gospel Accounts</u>	<u>Talmudic References</u>
Jesus existed	Affirmed throughout all four Gospels	Assumed and treated as real
Public ministry	Teaching, miracles, and disciples	Acknowledged through accusations
Miraculous deeds	Attributed to divine authority	Explained as sorcery
Disciples/followers	Twelve disciples and many followers	Portrayed as leading others astray
Jewish opposition	Religious leaders opposed Jesus	Rabbinic hostility preserved
Execution	Crucifixion under Roman authority	Execution ("hanged")
Timing of death	During Passover season	On the eve of Passover

7. Apologetics Significance

The disagreement between the Gospels and the Talmud is not about whether Jesus existed, but about who He was. If Jesus were a legend, His opponents would deny His existence rather than debate the source of His power. The Talmud's hostile explanations unintentionally affirm the core historical framework of the Gospel narratives.

Conclusion

Rather than undermining the Gospel accounts, the Jewish Talmud strengthens them historically. Its hostile references confirm Jesus as a real, influential figure who was executed near Passover and remembered for extraordinary deeds—precisely the picture presented in the New Testament.

Gospel and Talmud Agreement

Both sources affirm that Jesus existed, was executed near Passover, had disciples, performed remarkable deeds, and was opposed by Jewish leaders. The disagreement lies in interpretation, not historical reality.

Apologetics Takeaway

If Jesus were a legend, His enemies would deny His existence rather than debate the source of His power. The Talmud unintentionally strengthens the historical credibility of the Gospels.

Discussion Questions

1. Why are hostile sources like the Talmud valuable in evaluating historical claims about Jesus?
2. What stands out to you most about what the Talmud confirms regarding Jesus' life and death?
3. How does the Talmud's acknowledgment of Jesus challenge the claim that He is a myth?
4. Why do you think Jesus' opponents explained His deeds as sorcery rather than denying them?
5. How does this information strengthen your confidence in the Gospel accounts?

APPENDIX F

RESURRECTION OF JESUS: HISTORICAL & BIBLICAL REFERENCE

This appendix expands the study - Can We Trust the Gospels - by providing a unified, comprehensive reference on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is designed for both participants and leaders as a historical, biblical, and apologetic resource, reinforcing the reliability of the Gospel accounts.

F.1 Biblical Timeline: Resurrection to Pentecost

- Resurrection to Ascension: 40 days (Acts 1:3)
- Ascension to Pentecost: 10 days (Acts 2:1)

Jesus' bodily appearances occur during the 40-day period following the resurrection. Pentecost marks the empowerment of the church, not an appearance of the risen Christ.

F.2 Exhaustive List of Post-Resurrection Appearances

1. Mary Magdalene — John 20:11–18; Mark 16:9
2. Other Women — Matthew 28:8–10
3. Simon Peter — Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5
4. Emmaus Disciples — Luke 24:13–35; Mark 16:12–13
5. Apostles (Thomas Absent) — Luke 24:36–43; John 20:19–23
6. Apostles (Thomas Present) — John 20:24–29
7. Sea of Galilee — John 21:1–23
8. Great Commission (Galilee) — Matthew 28:16–20
9. James (the Lord's brother) 1 Corinthians 15:7
10. Over 500 Witnesses — 1 Corinthians 15:6
11. Final Teaching — Luke 24:44–49; Acts 1:3–5
12. Ascension — Luke 24:50–53; Acts 1:6–11

F.3 Gospel Harmonization Timeline (40 Days)

Day 1 (Resurrection Morning): Women at the tomb — Matthew 28; John 20

Day 1 (Midday): Simon Peter — Luke 24:34

Day 1 (Afternoon): Emmaus Road — Luke 24:13–35

Day 1 (Evening): Apostles (Thomas absent) — Luke 24:36–43

Day 8: Apostles (Thomas present) — John 20:24–29

Following Weeks: Galilee appearances — Matthew 28; John 21

Later: Appearance to over 500 — 1 Corinthians 15:6

Day 40: Ascension — Acts 1:6–11

F.4 Early Creedal & Apostolic Witness

- 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 — Early resurrection creed
- Acts 2:32 — Peter’s Pentecost proclamation
- Acts 4:33 — Apostolic witness with power
- Acts 10:40–41 — Eyewitness emphasis
- Acts 13:30–31 — Public resurrection testimony

F.5 Historical & Apologetic Significance

The resurrection accounts demonstrate:

- Multiple independent witnesses
- Multiple locations (Jerusalem and Galilee)
- Multiple group sizes (individuals to large crowds)
- Physical interaction (touching wounds, eating)
- Early proclamation within years of the event

These factors strongly counter explanations such as hallucination, legend development, or conspiracy and support the historical reliability of the Gospel accounts.

F.6 Small Group Reflection & Discussion (Optional)

1. Why is it important that Jesus appeared to many people over an extended period of time?
2. Which resurrection appearance strengthens your confidence in the Gospels most, and why?
3. How do the resurrection accounts respond to common skeptical objections?
4. Why does Paul emphasize eyewitness testimony in 1 Corinthians 15?
5. How should the historical resurrection shape Christian faith, mission, and hope today?

APPENDIX G

ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES THAT CONFIRM NEW TESTAMENT DETAILS

Archaeological Discoveries That Confirm New Testament Details

For much of modern history, critics questioned whether certain people, places, and details recorded in the New Testament were historically accurate. In several cases, skeptics argued that these details were invented or legendary because no external evidence had yet been discovered. Over time, archaeology has repeatedly confirmed that the New Testament writers accurately described real historical settings.

This handout highlights key examples where disputed New Testament details were later confirmed through archaeological discoveries.

1. Pontius Pilate – Roman Prefect of Judea

New Testament Reference: Matthew 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 18–19

Dispute:

For many years, skeptics claimed Pontius Pilate was a fictional or exaggerated character because no Roman inscriptions naming him had been found.

Archaeological Discovery:

- Discovered in AD 1961
- Location: Caesarea Maritima
- Artifact: Limestone inscription

The inscription explicitly names “Pontius Pilatus, Prefect of Judea.”

Significance:

- Confirms Pilate was a real historical figure
- Confirms his official Roman title
- Confirms the Gospel accounts place Jesus’ trial in the correct political context

2. The Pool of Bethesda – Jerusalem

New Testament Reference: John 5:1–9

Dispute:

Critics once claimed the Pool of Bethesda was symbolic or fictional, arguing no pool with five porticoes had ever existed.

Archaeological Discovery:

- Excavations conducted in the late 19th century (1880s)
- Further confirmed through 20th-century excavations
- Location: Near the Sheep Gate, Jerusalem

Archaeologists uncovered a pool complex consisting of two large basins with four surrounding colonnades and one central colonnade—matching John’s description of five porticoes.

Significance:

- Confirms John’s precise knowledge of Jerusalem’s layout
- Supports early dating of the Gospel of John
- Demonstrates historical accuracy rather than theological symbolism

3. Nazareth – Jesus’ Hometown

New Testament Reference: Matthew 2:23; Luke 1–4

Dispute:

Some scholars once argued Nazareth did not exist in the first century because it was absent from major Roman records.

Archaeological Discoveries:

- Excavations throughout the 20th century
- Significant findings published in the 1950s–2000s

Archaeological evidence includes first-century homes, storage pits, agricultural installations, and tombs dating to the time of Jesus.

Significance:

- Confirms Nazareth was a small first-century Jewish village
- Explains why it was insignificant to Roman historians
- Aligns with the Gospel portrayal of Nazareth’s obscurity

4. Caiaphas the High Priest

New Testament Reference: Matthew 26:57; John 18:13–28

Dispute:

Some questioned whether the high priest Caiaphas named in the Gospels was historical.

Archaeological Discovery:

- Discovered in AD 1990
- Location: Jerusalem
- Artifact: Ornate ossuary

The ossuary bears the inscription “Joseph son of Caiaphas.”

Significance:

- Confirms the identity of the high priest involved in Jesus’ trial
- Aligns with Jewish historian Josephus
- Strengthens the historical reliability of the Passion narratives

5. Luke’s Accuracy in Acts

New Testament Reference: Acts of the Apostles

Dispute:

Luke was once accused of being careless with political titles and Roman administration.

Archaeological Discoveries:

- 19th–20th century inscriptions across the Roman world
- Notable example: Erastus inscription in Corinth (discovered 1929)

Archaeology has confirmed Luke’s use of precise local titles such as politarchs, proconsuls, and asiarchs.

Significance:

- Demonstrates Luke’s careful historical method
- Shows familiarity with local governance
- Reinforces Acts as a reliable historical source

Conclusion

These discoveries do not attempt to prove theological claims such as the resurrection. Instead, they demonstrate that the New Testament writers accurately recorded historical people, places, and events. Time and archaeology have repeatedly favored the Gospel accounts rather than their critics.

Christian faith is rooted not in myth, but in real history.

APPENDIX H

A Converging Historical Witness to Jesus and the Gospels

Overview

Christianity is not grounded in a single document, tradition, or type of evidence. From the first century onward, multiple independent lines of historical testimony converge on the same central reality: Jesus of Nazareth lived in history, was crucified, and was proclaimed risen from the dead.

This appendix serves as a post-study review and reinforcement, drawing together the major strands explored throughout this study to show how they collectively undergird the historical credibility of the Gospels.

1. Secular and Non-Christian Historical Sources

Several early writers outside the Christian movement refer to Jesus and the rise of Christianity.

Tacitus (c. AD 116), a Roman historian openly hostile to Christianity, records that Christus was executed under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius.

Pliny the Younger (c. AD 112), writing to Emperor Trajan, describes Christians gathering regularly to sing hymns to Christ “as to a god.”

Flavius Josephus (c. AD 93) refers to Jesus as a real historical figure, acknowledges His execution, and notes the continuation of His followers.

These non-Christian sources confirm that:

- Jesus lived in first-century Judea
- He was executed under Roman authority
- His followers rapidly spread after His death
- Jesus was worshiped very early as divine

Because these witnesses were not Christians—and in some cases were critical of Christianity—their testimony carries particular historical weight.

2. The Gospels and the Centrality of the Resurrection

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John present detailed accounts of Jesus’ life, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection within a known historical and geographical framework.

At the heart of the Gospel message stands the resurrection. Christianity does not treat the resurrection as a metaphor or spiritual idea, but as a public, historical claim involving an empty tomb, named eyewitnesses, and multiple appearances.

3. Early Apostolic Writings Before the Gospels

Some of the earliest Christian documents predate the completed Gospels.

Paul's letters (AD 48–65) and writings associated with Peter and James already proclaim Jesus' death, resurrection, and divine identity.

4. Jewish Tradition and the Talmud

Later Jewish writings preserved in the Talmud reflect continued awareness of Jesus and His impact.

5. Archaeology and the Historical World of the Gospels

Archaeological discoveries continue to affirm the historical setting of the New Testament by confirming people, places, and cultural practices described in the Gospels.

Conclusion

Christian faith is not blind belief—it is trust rooted in what God has done in real history.

FINAL STUDY REFLECTION PAGE

Looking Back: What Holds It All Together

Reflection Questions:

1. Which line of evidence strengthened your confidence in the Gospels the most?
2. How has this study shaped the way you think about faith and history?
3. When doubts arise, what truth from this study do you want to remember most?
4. How might this understanding help you in conversations with others?

Personal Takeaway:

One sentence I want to carry forward from this study: