

**Tough Questions.  
Helping thinkers believe, and believers think.**

**Talk 4 title: Wasn't Jesus a great man, not some divine Saviour?**

(Written by Terran Williams, Common Ground Church)

So we're in a series, called 'Tough Questions.' We're doing our best to *help thinkers believe and believers think*. And we're doing it by answering some of the main doubts and objections with regard to the Christian faith. These are questions that both believers and non-believers have – and they deserve an answer.

Today, we're answering this tough question: 'Wasn't Jesus a great man, not some divine Saviour?' Just to set your expectation, this talk is more a lecture than a sermon – but I'm sure if you're curious about these things, it will be a *riveting* lecture. It's packed with the good stuff, so get ready for something that both stretches your brain and makes your heart thump...

Let's turn to Matthew 16:13...

13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" 14 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17 Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

Let's pray: 'Jesus, you teach here that none of us can see who you really are unless 'it is revealed by your Father'. Well, if that's the case, I pray you give us eyes to see who you really are. Help those who already know you to become more rooted in their faith in you. And help those who don't know you to see you as you really are. Amen.'

Jesus asked a simple question. 'Who do you say I am?' The disciples spin out three common answers to that question that were doing their rounds in his day. Jesus was so unique that people did not just ask, 'Who is he?' but 'What is he?' Some in that culture postulated that he was a re-incarnation of Elijah or John the Baptist.

And ever since then – for 2000 years – people have kept coming up with different theories about who Jesus is. If you're a Christian who keeps in touch with popular thought about Jesus, chances are – like me – you have felt a kind of spiritual vertigo – that sense of disorientation or even panic that comes when someone attacks the credibility of your faith in a way you can't immediately answer. If you haven't, you probably will – and soon.

That's because the Bible's version of Jesus is currently under a widespread and vociferous attack by militant atheists, radical scholars, popular authors, and others in bestselling books, TV documentaries, and on the internet. One reporter said: "It seems like it's open season on Jesus!" One of the most popular examples is Dan Brown's bestseller 'The Davinci Code' which comes up with no less than *three conspiracy*

*theories about Jesus all of which suggest that to believe Jesus is the divine Saviour is to have the wool pulled over our eyes:*

**1. Conspiracy theory 1: He is a copycat.** In its pages, Da Vinci Code says that Jesus as the Bible presents him is a made up plagiarization of earlier mystery religions. Brown writes, ‘Nothing in Christianity is original. The pre-Christian God Mithras—called the Son of God and the Light of the World—was born on December 25, died, was buried in a rock tomb, and then resurrected in three days.’(The Da Vinci Code, Dan Brown 2003, p. 232)

Does that sound familiar? On the surface, it seems like strong evidence that Christianity stole its beliefs about Jesus from Mithraism. Well, let’s look at the other side of the story. We’ll go down the list of supposed parallels between Mithras and Jesus...

- Brown and others claim that Mithras was born of a virgin in a cave. When you go back to the original myth, you find that Mithras actually emerged fully grown out of a rock – and he was wearing a hat! There was no virgin and no cave.
- Brown and others say Mithras was born on December 25. Okay, but so what? The Bible doesn’t tell us the date that Jesus was born. Some think it was in the spring; others think it was in January. It wasn’t until centuries later that Christians chose Dec. 25 as the date to celebrate his birth because it was close to the Winter Solstice when there were many pagan celebrations and Christians hoped to influence those celebrations for Christ. So there’s no parallel between Mithras and Jesus here either.
- Brown and others say Mithras was a traveling teacher with 12 disciples. No, he was supposedly a god, not a teacher, and the Iranian Mithras had one follower while the Roman Mithras had two – not 12.
- Brown and others say Mithras sacrificed himself for world peace. No, he didn’t! He was known for killing a bull. He didn’t sacrifice himself for anything or anyone.
- Brown and others say Mithras was buried in a tomb and resurrected after three days. No, there’s no record of any belief regarding the death of Mithras, and hence there was no resurrection at all.

My point? The parallels between Mithras and Jesus evaporated when they were put under the light of scrutiny. And here’s the clincher: Scholars have now established that the Mithras mystery religion as we know it didn’t even exist in the West until after Christianity! So Christianity couldn’t have stolen its beliefs from it. If anything the reverse is true!

Have you heard of the documentary ‘Zeitgeist’. It makes a similar claim: that Jesus is a plagiarization of Horus, from the Egyptian mystery religion. I don’t have time to counter it here. Why not go to our website and click on Tough Qs for an answer. Suffice to say, ‘Zeitgeist, claiming to be based on scholarship, uses the most dubious scholarship.’

**2. Conspiracy theory 2: He is an upgrade.**

‘Because (emperor) Constantine upgraded Jesus’ status almost four centuries after Jesus’ death, thousands of documents already existed chronicling His life as a mortal
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man. To rewrite the history books, Constantine knew he would need a bold stroke. From this sprang the most profound moment in Christian history. . . . Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible (p. 234)

Brown and others claim that Jesus was merely a good man, but only 4 centuries later did Christians start to believe that he was divine. There are several problems with this criticism...

- We have manuscripts of the New Testament that predate Constantine by 100s of years that affirm that the church worshipped Jesus as divine. To give but one example, in the letter to the church at Philippi, the apostle Paul clearly affirms Jesus' status as deity—as the very Creator of the universe: 'Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-7).
- You might say: 'Ah but that's in the Bible. Is there anything outside the Bible that proves that Christians believed Jesus to be divine from the earliest times. Absolutely. To give but one example, Pliny the Roman governor of Asia Minor writes a letter in AD112 mentioning Christians. Listen to his description of them: 'They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god.' Christians have always believed Jesus was divine.

### **3. Conspiracy theory 3: He is incomplete.**

Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned" (p. 234)

Brown and others claim that the so-called 'lost' gospels which were discovered in Egypt in 1944, including the gospels of Thomas, Mary, Mathias, Philip and Judas for example – should also be in the Bible – not just Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These so-called gospels paint a very different Jesus to the gospels in the Bible. Hence the claim that the Bible's version of Jesus is incomplete. But there is one major problem with this claim...

These were written between 100 and 300 years after Jesus lived! In contrast, the Bible's gospels were written within decades of the events of Jesus by eyewitnesses and interviewers of the eyewitnesses. 1. The so-called lost gospels are written by a non-Jewish Gnostic cult, who liked the idea of Jesus but instead of trying to record history turned him into a non-Jewish Gnostic teacher. In other words it's pretty much like the modern New Ager retelling the story of Jesus and claiming that he said things like, 'I have discovered that I am Christ – and you too need to discover that you are Christ.' It's completely non-historical and imaginative. 2. And neither Judas nor Thomas nor Mary wrote these gospels. They were long dead. It's called pseudopigraphy, when a person ascribes their work to a famous person in the hope it lends credibility to their work. 3. Also, in them Jesus is not even Jewish. He's a Gnostic, a religion that only came about a century after he lived! My point? The four gospels are historical documents about Jesus whereas these so-called lost gospels are completely non-historical.

**Summary so far:** The Bible's version of Jesus is NOT a copycat, nor an upgrade, nor incomplete. Rather, it's a real description of a real person who lived 2000 years ago.

Even if there weren't many non-Christian historical sources that describe Jesus as a person of history – which there are! - the 27 historical documents that make up the New Testament weave together to form an amazingly credible historical source about Jesus.

But why is it that so many so-called 'scholars' keep on attacking the Bible's description of Jesus? Let me ask you another question. Why do no scholars attack ancient historical sources about, say Julius Caesar or Augustus – for which there is far far less corroboration than there is for Jesus? It's because the facts about Julius Caesar and Augustus don't really threaten me in anyway. But the Bible's claims about Jesus totally get in my face. They tell me to make him my Lord and Saviour. They affirm that Jesus truly is worthy of your life's devotion. It's this conflict of interest about Jesus that so easily drives one to attack and undermine historical sources and facts that otherwise one would have had no problem accepting – coming up with wild conspiracy theories like the one's postulated in the Da Vinci code for example.

Now, let's get back to today's question: 'Wasn't Jesus a great man, not some divine Saviour?' The facts of history assert two things: 1. Jesus own disciple's believed Jesus was God. That's because ... 2. Jesus claimed to be God. On several occasions he even went so far as to accept worship. So the question is, are the disciples right? Or perhaps were they deceived? And was Jesus right about himself? Or perhaps was he deluded?

*For the rest of my message, let me give you three lines of evidence that support the claim that Jesus was more than just a good man, but really is the divine Saviour...*

**1. One line of evidence that Jesus really is the divine Saviour is his fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.**

Did you know there are over 200 prophecies about the coming Messiah in the Old Testament. Here's a sample of what they predict...

*Details about the Messiah's entrance...*

- That he would one day come to the world – born as a child.
- But he would be no ordinary child – because his name would be 'Immanuel', which means 'God with us' – in other words he would be the divine God-Man.

*Details about the Messiah's life...*

- He would live a sinless life.
- He would live a life marked by suffering.
- He would not look physically more impressive than anyone

*Details about the Messiah's ministry...*

- He would have tremendous wisdom – teaching people what life is really all about.
- He would do lots of miracles – healing the blind, enabling the lame to walk, even raising the dead.
- He would come into Jerusalem – announcing himself as king – but the weird thing is that instead of sitting on a war-horse, he'd be riding a donkey

*Details about the Messiah's death...*

- He'd be betrayed by a friend for 30 shekels – the 30 shekels would be used to buy a field called 'The Potter's field'
- He would be beaten severely
- People would gamble for his clothes
- He would have his hands and feet pierced
- He would be killed through torture.
- His death would be no ordinary death – somehow through this death he would accomplish salvation – one prophecy says 'the punishment that brings us peace with God will be upon him' – in other words, somehow 'God will take the sins of the world, put it upon him and punish it there – so that we could have the chance to go free and be right with God'

*Details about the Messiah's resurrection...*

- But amazingly, after dying – he would rise from the dead victorious.
- And his victory would be proclaimed by messengers across the whole world – changing millions and millions of lives for those who believe.
- Ultimately – in a cosmic moment called Judgment Day – he would wrap up human history as we know it, deal with every bit of evil in his world, and purge the world of all tears and suffering and death and poverty- and usher in the new heavens and the new earth.

So, who could this Messiah be? There's only one contender, right? It's Jesus. Skeptics have three common objections to the claim that Jesus fulfilled all these prophecies...

*Objection 1: The Old Testament prophecies were put in after Jesus lived his life – making it look like he fulfilled them.* That's impossible. We have copies of the whole Old Testament, except the book of Esther, dating back to before Jesus was even born.

*Objection 2: 'It's just a co-incidence that Jesus fulfilled these prophecies.'* Did you know that a famous Mathematics Professor called Peter Stone, took 8 of the prophecies about the Messiah, and got 100s of students to calculate the odds of a man fulfilling these 8 prophecies. You know what the odds were? 1 in 10 to the power of 1021. Let me help you picture that – it's like piling R5 coins 60 metres high across the whole world, marking one of those coins with a purple dot. Getting someone who is blindfolded to pick out a single coin – and the chances of that man picking up the coin with the purple dot are the same chances as a single man in history fulfilling just 8 of those prophecies. Well, Jesus fulfilled far more than just 8! Co-incidence? I think not.

*Objection 3: 'Jesus faked being the Messiah by trying to fulfil the prophecies.'* The problem with that is: how did he manipulate his birth and death? The Old Testament prophecies describe where he would be born. And one prophecy said that the Messiah would be born in a small town called Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). Where was Jesus born? That's right. You can't control when and where you are born. And who was Jesus born to? About 30 prophecies say the Messiah would be a physical descendant of king David – and guess whose blood Jesus was born with? The blood of David. And you can't control how you will die. One prophecy (1000 BC, Psalm 2) says that the Messiah would have his hands and feet pierced. Did you know that only 300 years later the Persians invented crucifixion – a way of executing people through piercing hands and feet. And you know how Jesus died, right? *My point? Prophecy fulfilled is*

*a very strong line of evidence to support the claim that Jesus really was and is the divine Saviour.*

**2. Another line of evidence that Jesus *really* is the divine Saviour is his resurrection from the dead.**

We don't have time to examine the many lines of evidence for Jesus' resurrection. Why not read chapter 12 of Tim Keller's Reason for God for a quick summary of some of the evidence?

Suffice to say that since day 1 in the history the church, there has been one central message: 'Jesus is alive as Lord. After all, he conquered the grave.' The disciples of Jesus proclaimed this and the church was born. Now, many skeptics today claim that the disciples were creating a hoax – in order to start their own religion. But the problem is that virtually all of them were executed for their claim. All they needed to do was say, 'It is a lie.' And their life would be spared. But they declared Christ's resurrection till their dying breath. In the words of Blaise Pascale, 'I believe those witnesses who get their throat cut.'

William Lane Craig, Research Professor of Philosophy at Talbot School of Theology in La Mirada, has written several books on the historical evidence for the resurrection. By way of conclusion he writes, 'We can state as a matter of *history* that (1) after his crucifixion Jesus of Nazareth was interred in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea, (2) the tomb of Jesus was found empty by a group of his women followers on Sunday morning, (3) various individuals and groups of people on multiple occasions and under different circumstances saw appearances of Jesus alive after his death, and (4) the original disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection was not a result of their faith in him or of wishful thinking, but that, on the contrary, their faith was the result of their having come to believe in this resurrection. These are the facts. The question is, how do you explain them?'

He then tells a story of how – when these facts are presented, the skeptic faces a desperate situation. He says, "A few years ago I had debate on the resurrection with a professor at the University of California who had written his doctoral dissertation on the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. He did not deny the facts of Jesus' honorable burial, the empty tomb, his resurrection appearances, or the origin of the disciples' faith. Rather his only recourse way to try to explain them away by some new theory. He argued that Jesus must have had an unknown, identical twin brother who was separated from him at birth, and who showed up in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion, stole Jesus' body, and then showed himself to the disciples, leading them to mistakenly infer that Jesus rose from the dead. I won't bother you with how I went about refuting the theory; but I think this example is instructive because it shows to what desperate lengths the skeptic has to go to avoid the resurrection of Jesus. In fact, the evidence is so good that one of the world's leading Jewish theologians, the late Pinchas Lapide, declared himself convinced on the basis of the evidence that the God of Israel raised Jesus from the dead.'

Kenneth Scott Latourett, a tremendous Yale historian, 'Why among all the cults and philosophies competing in the Roman-Greco world did Christianity succeed and outstrip all others? Though it had greater persecution than all the others? And less backers from influential people? How did it overcome and outlive the very empire

that sought to uproot it? It is clear that at the beginning of Christianity there must have occurred a vast release of energy, perhaps unequalled in our history, without which the future course of Christianity is inexplicable.' He goes on to say that only the witnessed resurrection of Jesus could account for this 'vast release of energy'.

*My point? His resurrection from the dead is a very strong line of evidence to support the claim that Jesus really was and is the divine Saviour.*

### **3. A final line of evidence that Jesus *really* is the divine Saviour is his uniqueness.**

*a. Think of the uniqueness of his claims.* Jesus once said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life – no one comes to the Father but through me.' He claimed to be Ultimate Reality itself. To not have him is to be blind to Reality. And he claimed to be worthy of our life's devotion. He told us to follow him and give him everything. Now, many people have claimed to be God. But how many have lived a life that aligned to that claim? None, but Jesus.

The author of the book, 'The world's great religions' writes: 'There have only been 2 prominent and influential figures in history for whom the data of their lives was so tremendous and beautiful that people did not just ask, 'Who are you?' but 'What are you?' It was Buddha and Jesus.'

But there's a difference between Buddha and Jesus. Buddha would say, 'Don't look to me – look to my Dharma. My Dharma (ie teachings) can save you.' Jesus said, 'Don't just look to my teachings. Look to me. I can save you.'

*b. Just think of the uniqueness of his teachings:* 100 years ago, GK Chesterton says this better than I can:

'If I found a key on the road, and discovered it fit and opened a particular lock at my house, I would assume most likely that the key was made by the lock maker. And if I find a set of teachings set out in pre-modern oriental society that has proven itself of such universal validity that it has fascinated and satisfied millions of people in every century, including the best minds in history and the simplest hearts, that it has made itself at home in virtually every culture, inspired masterpieces of beauty in every field of art, continues to grow rapidly and spread and assert itself in lands where a century ago the name of Jesus Christ was not even heard; if such teaching so obviously fits the locks of so many human souls, in so many times and so many places, are they likely to be the work of a deceiver or a fool? In fact it is more likely that they were designed by the Heart Maker.'

*c. Just think of the uniqueness of his life.* John Watson says this better than I can:

'No one has yet discovered the word Jesus ought to have said, none suggested the better word he might have said.' Look at Jesus in the gospels. He is always surprising you and taking your breath away. He's better than you can imagine. He is full of surprises, but they are all the surprises of perfection. He surprised us by combining qualities never before combined: Tenderness without weakness. Strength without harshness. Humility without the slightest lack of confidence. Holiness and unbending convictions without the slightest lack of approachability. Power without insensitivity. Passion without prejudice. The harshest challenge on the self-satisfied, yet the most

winsome kindness to the broken and the marginal. Never inconsistent. Never a false step. Never a jarring note.

PT Forsythe aptly says: 'If God be not thus, he is less than the God we crave and less than the God the world needs.'

*d. And think of the uniqueness of his impact.* Almost every historian puts Jesus Christ as one of the 3 most influential people who have ever lived. Many put him as number 1. But what were the odds of him making this kind of global impact? Philip Brookes says this better than I can...

'He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village where he worked in a carpenter's shop until he was thirty. Then for three years, he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book, held an office, had a family, nor owned a home. He never went to college, visited a big city, nor travelled more than 200 miles from his birth-place. He was only 33 when the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. His executioners gambled for his garments, his only property. When he was dead they laid his body in a grave borrowed through the pity of a friend. But twenty centuries have come and gone and today he is still the central figure of the human race. All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that have ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of mankind on this earth as much as this solitary man.'

Remember what Jesus said in the Bible verses we read at the beginning? 'On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.' On what rock? On the rock of the revelation that Jesus is really the divine Saviour. Based on that claim, he made a promise that his church would grow and grow and grow – because he really is who he said he is. Surely the dramatic growth of the church – now numbering 2,3 billion (1 in 3 people on the planet), growing faster now than ever before – surely this is one more evidence for the claim he is who he said he was? You want evidence that Jesus is the divine Saviour? It may just be *you*. Has your life been radically changed through faith in Christ? Well, your not alone. So have the lives of millions.

*My point? Jesus is absolutely unique. In his claims. In his teachings. In his life. In his unlikely impact. If ever there was a man who was actually God incarnate, surely it was him. No one else in history comes close to qualifying.*

**So let me sum up what I've said.** There are three lines of evidence that support the claim that Jesus was more than just a good man, but really is the divine Saviour... 1. Prophecy fulfilled. 2. Miraculous resurrection. 3. Mindboggling uniqueness.

**Here's my conclusion:** I am the first to admit that it's difficult to believe that God became a human. But – when all the evidence of Jesus Christ is explored – it's harder to believe that he didn't. *Let me say that again.* It's difficult to believe that God became a human. But – when all the evidence of Jesus Christ is explored – it's harder to believe that he didn't

**One more thought. I've offered three lines of evidence that Jesus is God. But I haven't offered an explanation to this key question: why would God become a human anyway?** This is important because many people say, 'I'm interested in God but why do I have to know about Jesus to know about God?'

*One reason God became a human is so that we would have an accurate picture of the kind of God he is.* How do we answer the question: 'What is God like? The answer to that question depends on whom you ask. It is fascinating how people begin to describe God as a bigger and better version of themselves. So for conservatives, God is conservative (surprise!); for the liberals, God is liberal; for intellectuals, God is clothed in abstractions and complexities; while for the uneducated God is down-to-earth and a simple kind of guy. For the military man, God tends to be about power, while for the bureaucrat God is about policies. For the artist, God has a wildness and a beauty that inspires and attracts; while for the engineer God's beauty is in predictability, stability, and definition – opposite qualities from those loved by the artist. For the social worker, God sides with the poor and oppressed; while for the entrepreneur God rewards diligence and cleverness. The chauvinist's God is strong, virile, male; if you ask the feminist about God, he or she will tell you, 'well, first of all, She is...' We could telescope this out to larger perspectives too – how the Western view of God reflects Western sensibilities, the Eastern reflects Eastern ones, and views of tribal cultures and subcultures reflect their own distinct views.

Now imagine you are God. (If this comes easily, we should be worried!) What do you do about all these versions of You, made in human images? Of course, there is an element of truth in nearly everyone's image of You. But on the other hand, each has its serious distortions, its imbalances, its gaps, its excesses, its voids.

So what if you decide to pour Yourself into a human being who would walk into the middle of all the projections and expectations people have created to explicate You, and in this person You embodied a true, full, dynamic, pure and undomesticated image of Yourself? If you were to do that, wouldn't you want to lead people – from Jewish shepherds in their fields to 'pagan' Eastern astrologers (as the Christmas story recounts), from prostitutes to priests, from military generals to political revolutionaries, from blue-collar fisherman to white-collar scholars (as the Gospels recount) – to this person, so they could get a balanced, and accurate and inspiring window into Your heart, mind and being? Well that's precisely what he did. God wants to be known – and now through this act of self-revelation, he can be. Look at Jesus and you're looking at what God is like.

*Another reason God became human is that only a sinless human could redeem sinful humanity.* And only God is sinless. Only a unfallen saviour dying on a cross could rescue a fallen world.

**Let me invite you to respond.** Remember Jesus' question to his disciples: 'What about you? Who do you say I am?'

- If, before you arrived today, you believed he is the divine Saviour. Then I hope this talk has deeply re-inforced your faith, giving you the rational basis for trusting in him. No, you're not crazy to believe in Jesus.

- If however you arrived today, not believing him to be the divine Saviour, or perhaps just not sure, well I hope I've given you something to think about. If that's you, can I suggest two next steps: 1. What about reading the gospel of Mark or John? Get an understandable translation – like the ESV or the NIV or perhaps a paraphrase like The Message. 2. As you read it, pray this prayer: 'God, I'm not sure about Jesus. If he really is more than a man please open my eyes to see that.' I really hope you find what you're looking for?
- That said, perhaps there are some of you who, while I have spoken have sensed Christ opening your eyes to who Jesus is. Well, there's no time like the present. Can I suggest you put your faith in him here and now. Let me lead you in a simple prayer of faith... *'Jesus, like Peter did, I put my faith in you and say, 'Surely you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. You died on the cross for my sins, and were raised from the dead as Lord. Here and now I put my faith in you. Be my Lord. Be my Saviour. Amen.'*

Sources

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- Terran Williams' talk from The God Sessions: 'Who is Jesus and does it matter'
- Brian MacLaren book, 'More ready than you realize'
- Tim Keller's 'The Reason for God, ch 13'