

CAN WE TRUST THE BIBLE'S CLAIMS ABOUT CHRIST?

A summary of the book, 'The Case for Christ'

Thousands of highly educated people have become convinced of the claims about Christ once they open-mindedly explored the facts for themselves. One such person is Lee Strobel.

Strobel was a highly successful investigative journalist for the Chicago Tribune. He was trained to approach any claim in a highly rational way, always surveying carefully the evidence before coming to a conclusion on any matter.

When his wife became a Christian, and he observed the positive impact it made on her life, he was persuaded by her to at least explore the facts about Christ for himself. After years of exploration, he became convinced that the facts of Christ held up under the most penetrating scrutiny.

He wrote a book, 'The Case for Christ', which retracted and expanded upon his several-year journey from atheism to Christianity. In it he interviewed thirteen leading experts on the historical evidence for Jesus Christ. This booklet is his own summary of that book.

Can the biographies of Jesus be trusted?

I once thought the gospels (of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) were merely religious propaganda, hopelessly tainted by overactive imagination and evangelistic zeal. But Craig Blomberg of Denver Seminary, one of the country's foremost authorities on the biographies of Jesus, built a convincing case that they reflect eyewitness testimony and bear the unmistakable earmarks of accuracy. So early are these accounts of Jesus' life that they cannot be explained away as legendary invention. "Within the first two years after his death," Blomberg said, "significant numbers of Jesus' followers seem to have formulated a doctrine of the atonement, were convinced that he had been raised from the dead in bodily form, associated Jesus with God, and believed they found support for all these convictions in the Old Testament." A study indicates that there was nowhere near enough time for the legend to have developed and to have wiped out a solid core of historical truth.

Do the biographies of Jesus stand up to scrutiny?

Blomberg argued persuasively that the gospel writers intended to preserve reliable history, were able to do so, were honest and willing to include difficult-to-explain material, and didn't allow bias to unduly colour their

reporting. The harmony of the gospels on essential facts, coupled with divergence on some incidental details, lends historical credibility to the accounts. What's more, the early church could not have taken root and have flourished right there in Jerusalem if it had been teaching facts about Jesus that his own contemporaries could have exposed as exaggerated or false. In short, the gospels were able to pass all eight evidential tests, demonstrating their basic trustworthiness as historical records.

Were Jesus' biographies reliably preserved for us?

World-class scholar Bruce Metzger, professor emeritus at Princeton Theological Seminary, said that compared with other ancient documents, there is an unprecedented number of New Testament manuscripts and that they can be dated extremely close to the original writings. The modern New Testament is 99.5 percent free of textual discrepancies, with no major Christian doctrines in doubt. The criteria used by the early church to determine which books should be considered authoritative have ensured that we possess the best records about Jesus.

Is there credible evidence for Jesus outside his biographies?

"We have better historical documentation for Jesus than for the founder of any other ancient religion." Said Edwin Yamauchi of Miami University, a leading expert on ancient history. Sources from outside the Bible corroborate that many people believed Jesus performed healings and was the Messiah, that he was crucified, and that despite this shameful death, his followers, who believed he was still alive, worshiped him as God. One expert documented thirty-nine extra-biblical ancient sources that corroborate more than one hundred facts concerning Jesus' life, teachings, crucifixion, and resurrection. Seven secular sources and several early Christian creeds concern the deity of Jesus, a doctrine "definitely present in the earliest church," according to Dr. Gary Habermas, the scholar who wrote *The Historical Jesus*.

Does archaeology confirm or contradict Jesus' biographies?

John McRay, a professor of archaeology for more than fifteen years and author of *Archaeology and the New Testament*, said there's no question that archaeological findings have enhanced the New Testament's credibility. No discovery has ever disproved a biblical reference. Further, archaeology has established that Luke, who wrote about one-quarter of the New Testament, was an especially careful historian. Concluded one expert: "If Luke was so painstakingly accurate in his historical reporting (of even minor details), on what logical basis may we assume he was credulous or inaccurate in his reporting of matters that were far more important, not only to him but to others as well?" Like, for instance, the resurrection of Jesus - the event that authenticated his claim to being the unique Son of God.

Is the Jesus of history the same as the Jesus of faith?

Gregory Boyd, a Yale- and Princeton-educated scholar who wrote the award-winning *Cynic Sage or Son of God*, offered a devastating critique of the Jesus Seminar, a group that questions whether Jesus said or did most of what's attributed to him. He identified the Seminar as "an extremely small number of radical-fringe scholars who are on the far, far left wing of New Testament thinking." The Seminar ruled out the possibility of miracles at the outset, employed questionable criteria, and some participants have touted myth-riddled documents of extremely dubious quality. Further, the idea that stories about Jesus emerged from mythology fails to withstand scrutiny. Said Boyd: "The evidence for Jesus being who the disciples said he was ... is just light years beyond my reasons for thinking that the left-wing scholarship of the Jesus Seminar is correct." In sum, the Jesus of faith is the same as the Jesus of history.

(At the time of the writing of *The Case for Christ*, the Jesus Seminar was the most popular pseudo-academic attack on the deity of Jesus. Subsequently, the Dan Brown novel, *The Da Vinci Code* has delivered an even more popular attack on belief in the deity of Christ. But again, the attack is pseudo-academic. See www.friends-first.com and click on Tough Q's on the top bar and click on 'Is Da Vinci Code true?' for a response to this.)

Was Jesus really convinced he was the Son of God?

By going back to the very earliest traditions, which we've seen to be unquestionably safe from the legendary development, Ben Witherington III, author of *The Christology of Jesus*, was able to show that Jesus had a supreme and transcendent self-understanding. Based on the evidence, Witherington said: "Did Jesus believe he was the Son of God, the anointed one of God? The answer is yes. Did he see himself as the final Messiah? Yes, that's the way he viewed himself. Did he believe that anybody less than God could save the world? No, I don't believe he did." Scholars said that Jesus' repeated reference to himself as the Son of Man was not a claim of humanity, but a reference to Daniel 7:13-14, in which the Son of Man is seen as having universal authority and everlasting dominion and who receives the worship of all nations. Said one scholar: "Thus, the claim to be the Son of Man would be in effect a claim to divinity."

Was Jesus crazy when he claimed to be the Son of God?

Gary Collins, a professor of psychology for twenty years and author of forty-five books on psychology-related topics, said Jesus exhibited no inappropriate emotions, was in contact with reality, was brilliant and had amazing insights into human nature, and enjoyed deep and abiding relationships. "I just don't see signs that Jesus was suffering from any known mental illness," he concluded. In addition, Jesus backed up his claim

to being God visiting this planet through his sinless character, miraculous feats of healing, astounding demonstrations of power over nature, unrivaled teaching, divine understanding of people, and with his own resurrection, which was the ultimate evidence of his deity. While the incarnation - the fact that God became man, the infinite became finite - stretches our imaginations, prominent theologian D.A. Carson pointed out that there's lots of evidence that Jesus exhibited the characteristics of deity. Based on Philippians 2, many theologians believe Jesus voluntarily emptied himself of the independent use of his divine attributes as he pursued his mission of human redemption. Even so, the New Testament specifically confirms that Jesus ultimately possessed every qualification of deity, including omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, eternity, and immutability.

Did Jesus - and Jesus alone - match the identity of the Messiah?

Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, prophets foretold the coming of the Messiah, or the Anointed One, who would redeem God's people. In effect, dozens of these Old Testament prophecies created a fingerprint that only the true Messiah could fit. This gave Israel a way to rule out imposters and validate the credentials of the authentic Messiah. Against astronomical odds - one chance in a trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion, trillion - Jesus, and only Jesus throughout history, matched this prophetic fingerprint. This confirms Jesus' identity to an incredible degree of certainty. The expert I interviewed on this topic, Louis Lapidus, is an example of someone raised in a conservative Jewish home and who came to believe Jesus is the Messiah after a systematic study of the prophecies. Today, he's the pastor of a church in California and former president of a national network of fifteen messianic congregations.

Was Jesus' death a sham and his resurrection a hoax?

By analyzing the medical and historical data, Dr. Alexander Metherell, a physician who also holds a doctorate in engineering, concluded Jesus could not have survived the gruesome rigors of crucifixion, much less the gaping wound that pierced his lung and heart. In fact, even before the crucifixion he was in serious to critical condition and suffering from hypovolemic shock as the result of horrific flogging. The idea that he somehow swooned on the cross and pretended to be dead lacks any evidential basis. Roman executioners were grimly efficient, knowing that they themselves would face death if any of their victims were to come down from the cross alive. Even if Jesus had somehow lived through the torture, his ghastly condition could never have inspired a worldwide movement based on the premise that he had gloriously triumphed over the grave.

Was Jesus' body really absent from his tomb?

William Lane Craig, who has earned two doctorates and written several books on the Resurrection, presented striking evidence that the enduring symbol of Easter - the vacant tomb of Jesus - was a historical reality. The empty grave is reported or implied in extremely early sources - Mark's gospel and a creed in First Corinthians 15 - which date so close to the event that they could not possibly have been products of legend. The fact that the gospel reports that a woman discovered the empty tomb bolsters the story's authenticity, because a woman's testimony lacked credibility in the first century and thus there would have been no motive to report they found the empty tomb if it weren't true. This site of Jesus' tomb was known to Christians, Jews, and Romans, so it could have been checked by skeptics. In fact, nobody - not even the Roman authorities or Jewish leaders - ever claimed that the tomb still contained Jesus' body. Instead, they were forced to invent the absurd story that the disciples, despite having no motive or opportunity, had stolen the body - a theory that not even the most skeptical critic believe today.

Was Jesus seen alive after his death on the cross?

The evidence for the post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus didn't develop gradually over the years as mythology distorted memories of his life. Rather, said renowned Resurrection expert Gary Habermas, his resurrection was "the central proclamation of the early church from the very beginning." The ancient creed from 1 Corinthians 15 mentions specific individuals who encountered the risen Christ, and Paul even challenged first-century doubters to talk to these individuals personally to determine the truth of the matter for themselves. The book of Acts is littered with extremely early affirmations of Jesus' resurrection, while the gospels describe numerous encounters in detail. Concluded British theologian Michael Green: "The appearances of Jesus after his death are as well authenticated as anything in antiquity.... There can be no rational doubt that they occurred."

Are there any supporting facts that point toward the resurrection?

Professor J.P. Moreland presented circumstantial evidence that provided some strong documentation for the Resurrection. First, the disciples were in a unique position to know whether the Resurrection happened, and they went to their deaths proclaiming it was true. Nobody knowing and willingly dies for a lie. Second, apart from the Resurrection, there's no good reason why such skeptics as Paul and James would have been converted and would have died for their faith. Third, within weeks of the Crucifixion, thousands of Jews became convinced Jesus was the Son of God and began following him, abandoning key social practices that had critical sociological and religious importance for centuries. They believed they risked damnation if they were wrong. Fourth, the early sacraments of Communion and Baptism affirmed Jesus' resurrection and deity. And fifth, the miraculous emergence

of the church in the face of brutal Roman persecution “rips a great hole in history, a hole the size and shape of Resurrection,” as C.F.D. Moule put it.
In conclusion

Taken together, I concluded that this expert testimony constitutes compelling evidence that Jesus Christ was who he claimed to be - the one and only Son of God. The atheism that I had embraced for so long buckled under the weight of historical truth.

For the details that support this summary, please refer to Lee Strobel’s ‘The Case for Christ’ (2000. Publisher: Zondervan).

If you want to explore another source for answers to questions about Jesus see www.y-Jesus.com.