

Understanding Jesus: Five Ways to Spiritual Enlightenment

In this workshop, philosopher Peter S. Williams gives an overview of the interdisciplinary apologetic for Jesus developed in his latest book: *Understanding Jesus: Five Ways to Spiritual Enlightenment* (Paternoster, 2011). Peter will sketch out a cumulative case for understanding Jesus in the Christian manner composed of five arguments used by Jesus and his disciples.

Peter S. Williams studied philosophy at Cardiff University (BA), Sheffield University (MA) and at the University of East Anglia in Norwich (MPhil). He then spent three years as a student pastor at Holy Trinity church Leicester before moving to Southampton to work alongside the Christian educational charity Damaris Trust (www.damaris.org), where he is 'Philosopher in Residence'. Through his work with Damaris, he leads over 30 Philosophy and Ethics conferences for sixth form students each year, as well as undertaking various writing projects, speaking and broadcasting engagements. Peter is also Assistant Professor in Communication and Worldviews at Gimlekollen School of Journalism and Communication in Norway. His publications include *A Sceptic's Guide to Atheism: God Is Not Dead* (Paternoster, 2009), *Understanding Jesus: Five Ways to Spiritual Enlightenment* (Paternoster, 2011) and the forthcoming *C.S. Lewis vs the New Atheists* (Paternoster).

'The historical quest for the historical Jesus has ended; the interdisciplinary quest for the historical Jesus has just begun.' - Bernard Brandon Scott¹

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¹ Bernard Brandon Scott, cited by James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy, 'The Quest for the Historical Jesus: An Introduction', in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (ed. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy; SPCK, 2010), p. 41.

II. The Rhetorical Context of Three ‘Buzz’ terms:

A. Understanding

B. Enlightenment

C. Spirituality

Spirituality

Practices (Orthopraxy: Actions)



Attitudes (Orthopathy: Attitudes)



Worldview (Orthodoxy: Beliefs)

The academic process of coming to understand reality involves a ‘hermeneutical dialogue’ between:

1. **Spirituality** (including worldview)
2. **Criteria of Theory Choice** (applies both to data assembly & explanation)
3. **Data**
4. **Interpretation and/or Explanation** (deductive or inductive)
 - Multiple strands of evidence feed into a ‘cumulative case’

III. Trusting the Biblical Testimony to the Historical Jesus

cf. Peter S. Williams, 'The Gospels: Who Wrote What When?' www.damaris.org/cm/podcasts/589 & 'The Gospels: Do We Have Now What They Wrote Then?' www.damaris.org/cm/podcasts/590

A. *Richard Swinburne*: 'It is a basic principle of knowledge... called the principle of credulity, that *we ought to believe that things are as they seem to be, until we have evidence that we are mistaken.*'

B. *H.H. Price*: 'accept what you are told, unless you see reason to doubt it.'²

1. **Intuitive Trust**

2. **General Reliability** - judged by standard historiographical criteria

3. **Particular Reliability** – judged by standard 'criteria of authenticity'

IV. The First Way – Jesus' Self-Centred Teaching (cf. Mark 14:61-64, cf. Matthew 26:64)

cf. Peter S. Williams, 'Who Did Jesus Think He Was?' www.damaris.org/cm/podcasts/631

A. **Indirect Evidence** – The beliefs of the early Christians

B. **Direct Evidence** – Jesus' *explicit* and *implicit* claims to deity

V. The Second Way – Jesus' Dynamic Deeds (cf. John 14:11; John 10:25; Luke 13:32)

cf. Peter S. Williams, 'The Miracles of Jesus' www.damaris.org/cm/podcasts/503

A. A 'Miracle' is:

An event wherein a created reality achieves an end that lies beyond its inherent nature, that's best explained as caused (directly or indirectly) by a special application of God's willpower and which therefore signifies something of God's character and/or purposes.

² H.H. Price, quoted by Charles Taliaferro, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Blackwell, 2001), p. 272.

Miracle	Type	Mark	Matthew	Luke	John
In all four gospels					
1. Feeding 5,000 people	Nature	6.35f.	14.15f.	9.12f.	6.5f.
In three gospels including John					
2. Walking on water	Nature	6.48f.	14.25f.		6.19f.
3. Peter's mother-in-law	Healing	1.30f.	8.14f.		4:38f.
4. Roman centurion's servant	Healing (at a distance)		8.5f.	7.1f.	4:47f.
In all three synoptic gospels					
5. Man with leprosy	Healing	1.40f.	8.24f.	5.12f.	
6. Paralyzed man	Healing	2.3f.	9.2f.	5.18f.	
7. Man with shrivelled hand	Healing	3.1f.	12.10f.	6.6f.	
8. Calming the storm	Nature	4.37f.	8.23f.	8.22f.	
9. Gadarene demoniac(s)	Exorcism	5.1f.	8.28f.	8.27f.	
10. Raising Jairus' daughter	Revivification	5.22f.	9.18f.	8.41f.	
11. Haemorrhaging woman	Healing	5.25f.	9.20f.	8.43f.	
12. Demon-possessed boy	Exorcism	9.17f.	17.14f.	9.38f.	
13. Two blind men	Healing	10.46f.	20.29f.	18.35f.	
In two gospels (Mark and Matthew)					
14. Canaanite woman's daughter	Exorcism (at a distance)	7.24f.	15.21f.		
15. Feeding of 4,000	Nature	8.1f.	15.32f.		
16. Fig tree withered	Nature	11.12f.	21.18f.		
In two gospels (Mark and Luke)					
17. Possessed man in synagogue	Exorcism	1.23f.		4.33f.	
In two gospels (Matthew and Luke)					
18. Blind, mute, and possessed man	Exorcism		12.22	11.14	

B. Q reports that when John the Baptist was in Herod's jail suffering *embarrassing* doubts about Jesus, he sent messengers asking 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?' (Matthew 11:2) Jesus replied: 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor' (Matthew 11:4-5; cf. Luke 7:22; Isaiah 35:5-6; Isaiah 61:1). Jesus was arguing:

1. If someone does X-kinds of actions then they are the Messiah
2. I do X-kinds of actions
3. Therefore, I am the Messiah

C. John proclaimed Jesus Messiah (cf. Matthew 3:1–15; John 1:19–34) and Jesus identified John as the messenger prophesied by Malachi 3:1 (cf. Matthew 11:10 and Luke 7:27). Matthew 3:3 and Luke 3:4–6 both apply the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3 to John. Hence we see the entailment of Jesus’ reply to John:

1. Jesus is the Messiah
2. The Messiah is Divine (see also Isaiah 9:6 and Psalm 110:1)
3. Therefore, Jesus is Divine

VI. The Third Way – Jesus’ Resurrection (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:3-5)

cf. Peter S. Williams, ‘Jesus’ Resurrection: Worldview, Data and Explanation’
www.damaris.org/cm/podcasts/453

A. ‘Minimal Facts’ Approach

1. The common structure and content of the disciples’ testimony to Jesus’ resurrection is firmly established by the *parallel, multiple, independent testimonies* contained within the pre-Pauline creed of 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, the Pre-Markan passion narrative of Mark 15:37-16:7; Peter’s Pentecost sermon in Acts 2:23-32 and Paul’s sermon in Acts 13:28-31.
2. [Data] *N.T. Wright*: ‘Historical investigation... brings us to the point where we must say that the tomb previously housing a thoroughly dead Jesus was empty and that His followers saw and met someone they were convinced was this same Jesus, bodily alive though in a new, transformed fashion...’³
3. [Explanation] *N.T. Wright*: ‘the historian may and must say that all other explanations for why Christianity arose and took the shape it did are far less convincing as historical explanations than the one the early Christians themselves offer: that Jesus really did rise from the dead... the sort of reasoning historians characteristically employ – inference to the best explanations, tested rigorously in terms of the explanatory power of the hypothesis thus generated – points strongly toward the bodily resurrection of Jesus.’⁴
4. *Antony Flew*: ‘I don’t think it’s possible to offer any satisfactory naturalistic account of what happened.’⁵

³ N.T. Wright, ‘Jesus’ resurrection and Christian Origins’ in Paul Copan & William Lane Craig (ed.’s), *Passionate Conviction: Contemporary Discourses on Christian Apologetics* (B&H Academic, 2007)

⁴ *ibid*, p. 136-137.

⁵ Antony Flew, John F. Ankerberg (ed.), *Resurrected? An Atheist & Theist Dialogue* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 29.

5. *C.S. Lewis*: ‘Any theory of hallucination breaks down on the fact... that on three separate occasions this hallucination was not immediately recognized as Jesus (Lk 24:13-31; Jn 20:15; 21:4).’⁶

VII. The Fourth Way – Jesus and Fulfilled Prophecy (cf. 1 Peter 1:10-11; Isaiah 53; Psalm 22)

cf. Peter S. Williams, ‘Jesus and Fulfilled Prophecy’ www.damaris.org/cm/podcasts/456

- A. *Thomas V. Morris*: ‘A single successful prediction about a remote or unlikely event can be just a lucky guess, a shot in the dark that just happened to hit its target. But the more successful predictions of that sort a person is able to make, the less likely we are to be fully satisfied with just ascribing it all to luck. At a certain point we have to hypothesize some explanation for the success, some connection... responsible for the otherwise highly improbable accuracy.’⁷
- B. We can *conservatively* estimate Jesus had c. 1 chance in 182,580, million, million, million (1 in 1.8×10 to the power of 23) of fulfilling *just 27* OT prophecies by chance.
- C. That’s comparable to your chances of successfully picking, at random and on your first attempt, a single pre-specified grain of sand *out of all the grains of sand on the planet!*

VIII. The Fifth Way – Jesus and Contemporary Experience

cf. Peter S. Williams, ‘Religious Experience’ www.damaris.org/cm/podcasts/636

- A. N.T. Wright: ‘Christians have claimed from the very beginning that, though Jesus is no longer walking around Palestine and available for us to meet him and get to know him in that sense, he is indeed “with us” in a different sense, and that we can indeed get to know him in a manner not wholly unlike the way we get to know other people.’⁸
- B. This claim is supported by a multi-stranded argument from 1) Christian religious experience combined with the principles of credulity and testimony, 2) the close analogy between religious and perceptual experience, and 3) the ‘best explanation’ argument from the spiritual transformation of those who live as Jesus’ disciples. The

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (Fount), chapter 16.

⁷ Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Eerdmans, 1992), p. 165.

⁸ Tom Wright, *Simply Christian* (SPCK, 2006), p. 81.

public evidence of changed lives is joined by publically available evidence concerning 4) miraculous ‘words of knowledge’, 5) angelic/demonic encounters, and 6) physical healings closely associated with prayers offered in Jesus’ name.

IX. Conclusion

The Christian understanding of Jesus is that *the self-understanding of the historical Jesus is true*. Jesus’ self-understanding was inextricably bound up in his spirituality, a spirituality simultaneously expressed and vouchsafed in word and deed. Jesus’ implicit and explicit claims placed him in the category of the divine as understood within the Jewish religious tradition. This forces us to grapple with the incongruities that result from affirming any of the limited range of consequent explanatory options, besides acknowledging Jesus as divine, in the light of everything else we know about his moral and intellectual character. Jesus’ symbolic miraculous (and non-miraculous) deeds cohere with his teaching about himself and the kingdom of God. Across the board, numerous aspects of Jesus’ personal history correspond with both the general tenor and specific, unlikely predictions of Old Testament prophecy. The specified complexity of this correspondence provides warrant for a design inference that supports Jesus’ self-understanding. Finally, various aspects of contemporary Christian religious experience round out the cumulative case for believing that Jesus really is who he claimed to be. On the basis of a global consideration of these five ‘ways’ to understanding Jesus, I am personally convinced that David Hume’s ‘desire’ and ‘expectation’ that ‘Heaven’ would be pleased to afford us ‘some more particular revelation to mankind’⁹ has been met in Jesus, the true source of spiritual enlightenment.

⁹ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (ed. Norman Kemp Smith; Bobbs-Merrill, 1947), p. 227.

Recommended Resources

Peter S. Williams' Podcast Channel www.damaris.org/cm/podcasts/category/peterswilliams

Peter S. Williams, 'Archaeology and the Historical Reliability of the New Testament'
www.bethinking.org/bible-jesus/advanced/archaeology-and-the-historical-reliability-of-the.htm

William Lane Craig: Reasonable Faith www.reasonablefaith.org

Gary R. Habermas www.garyhabermas.com

Paul Barnett, *Finding the Historical Christ* (Eerdmans, 2009)

Paul Barnett, *Messiah: Jesus – the Evidence of History* (IVP, 2009)

Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Eerdmans, 2006)

Paul Rhodes Eddy & Gregory A. Boyd. *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Baker Academic, 2007)

Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (IVP, 2007)

Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Eerdmans, 2005)

Dean L. Overman, *A Case for the Divinity of Jesus: Examining the Earliest Evidence* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009)

Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Zondervan, 2007)

Richard Swinburne, *Was Jesus God?* (Oxford University Press, 2008)

Peter S. Williams, *Understanding Jesus: Five Ways to Spiritual Enlightenment* (Paternoster, 2011)