

Getting at Jesus: Responding to Neo-Atheist Nonsense about the Jesus of History

The so-called new atheist movement has popularised an extreme scepticism about Jesus and the New Testament. This seminar will equip you to understand and respond to this scepticism. We'll examine and discuss such topics as: how the new atheists do history, the possibility and knowability of miracles, the historical reliability of the canonical gospels, criteria for historical authenticity, Jesus' existence, self-understanding and miracles (including the resurrection), and how the new atheists fail to rebut the case for the Christian understanding of Jesus.

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I. The Jesus of Faith vs. the Christ of History

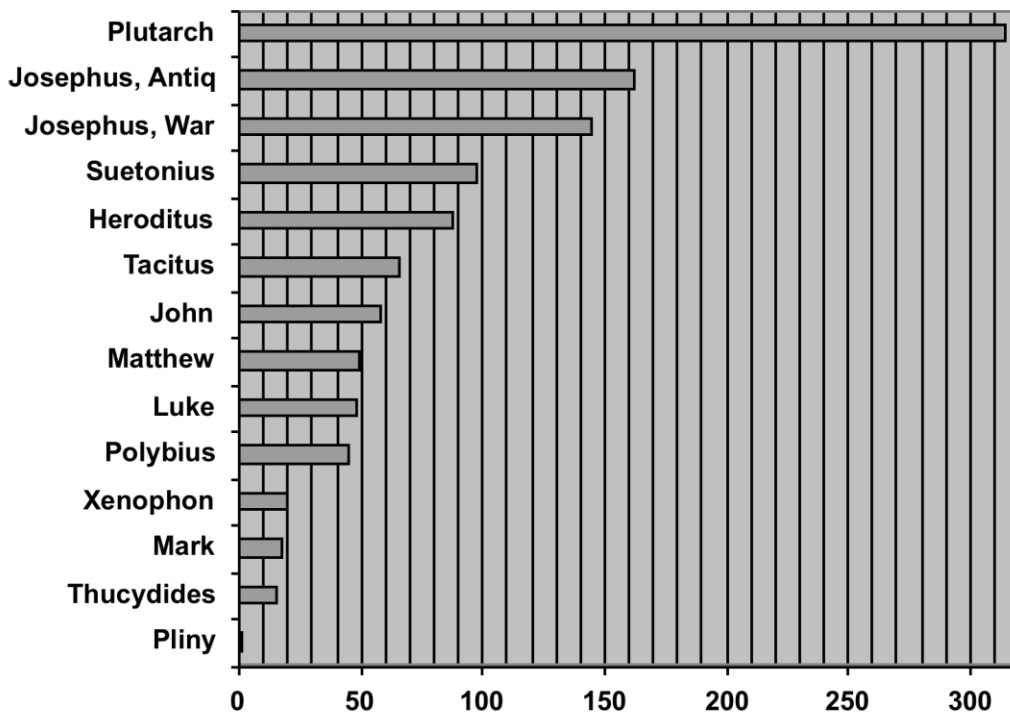
- A. There are three basic approaches to drawing a line of demarcation between the 'Jesus of history' and the 'Christ of faith' (although these approaches can be mixed):
 - a. *The metaphysical approach* - miracles can't happen
 - b. *The epistemological approach* - miracles can't be known
 - c. *The definitional approach* - miracles can't be mentioned within 'history' as a subject

- B. Some atheists, including neo-atheist, attack Christianity by wielding scientific-sounding demands for evidence (on the false assumption that Christians have no evidence) whilst actually rejecting miracles on philosophical, *a priori* grounds. This is a double standard.
- C. The so-called ‘Jesus of history’ is actually a Jesus of faith in various *a priori* constraints upon history.
- D. There’s no good reason why the so-called ‘Christ of faith’ should not also be the ‘Christ of history’ if the evidence supports this conclusion.

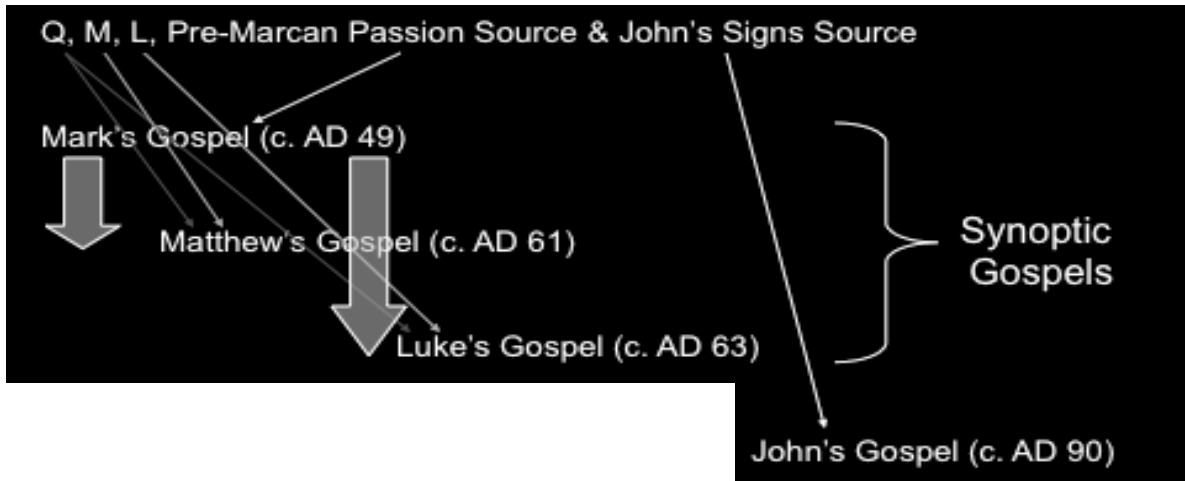
II. **The NT Gospels**

A.

Average Gap Between Events and Report

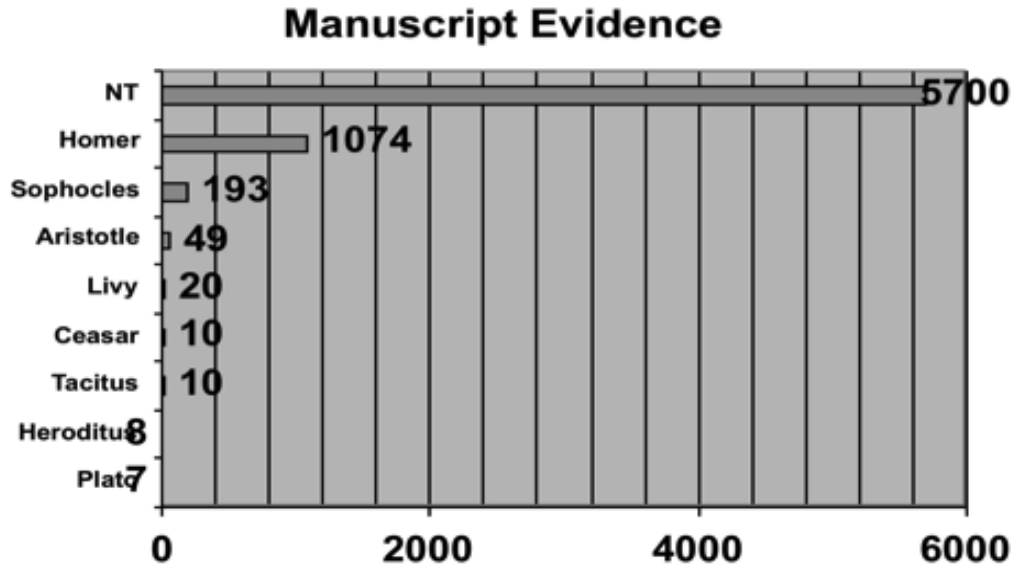


- B. Bart Ehrman: “We have numerous, independent accounts of his life in the sources lying behind the Gospels...”

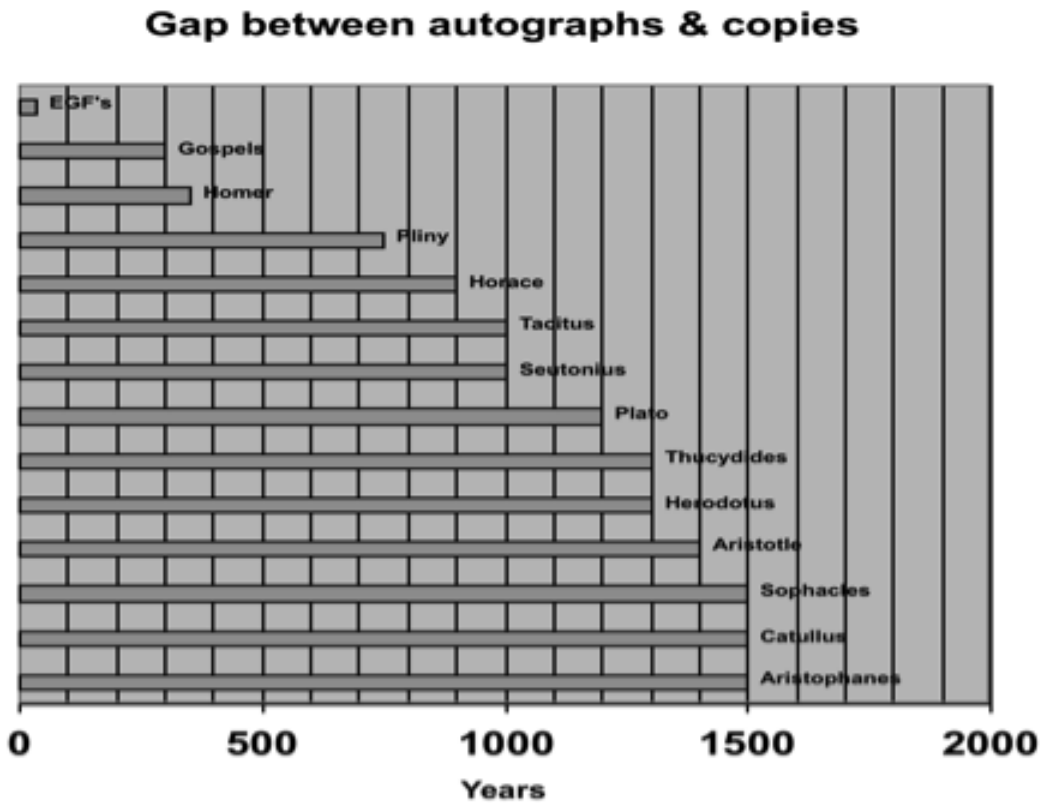


- a. Paul Barnett: “‘Q’ texts are cited or echoed in letters of Paul written in the mid-fifties” - *The Birth of Christianity: The First Twenty Years* (Cambridge; Eerdmans, 2005.)
- b. D.C. Allison: “Paul knew materials from Mark, materials common to Luke and Matthew (“Q”), material unique to Luke (“L”) and perhaps materials unique Matthew (“M”)”
- c. At least some of the elements of Mark; Q, L, and M existed within twenty years of the historical Jesus

- C. This chart compares just the *Greek* MS evidence for the NT text with the *total* manuscript evidence for other ancient texts (including the next closest, which is Homer's *Illiad*).

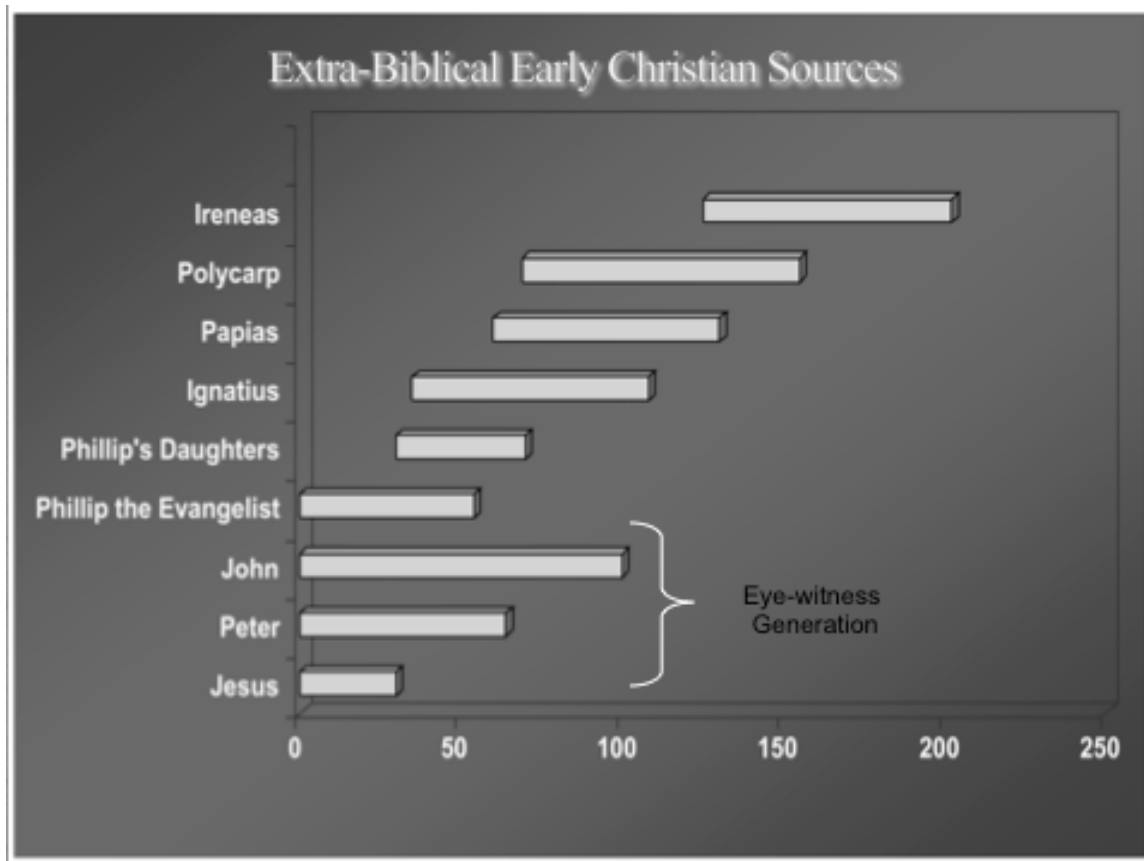


- D.



III. Two Modern Myths About Jesus

A. Did Jesus Exist?



- a. **Bart Ehrman:** ‘Whether we like it or not, Jesus certainly existed.’ - www.huffingtonpost.com/bart-d-ehrman/did-jesus-exist_b_1349544.html

- b. **Geza Vermes:** ‘Jesus was a real historical person. In my opinion, the difficulties arising from the denial of his existence, still vociferously maintained in small circles of rationalist “dogmatists”, far exceed those deriving from its acceptance.’ - *The Resurrection* (Penguin, 2008), p. 1

B. High Christology

a. Miracles of Jesus that appear in more than one gospel.

1. Every category of miracle performed by Jesus is attested by multiple, early, independent sources. Even *specific* miracles are attested in this way.
2. This testimony includes eyewitnesses' reports (John/Matthew/Q), and follows close upon the reported events by comparison with most other works of ancient history.

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 shriveled hand	Healing	3.1f.	12.10f.	6.6 f.	
8. Calming the storm	Nature	4.37 f.	8.23 f.	8.22 f.	
9. Gadarene deomoniac(s)	Exorcism	5.1 f.	8.28 f.	8.27 f.	
10. Raising Jairus' daughter	Revivification	5.22 f.	9.18 f.	8.41 f.	
11. Haemorrhaging woman	Healing	5.25 f.	9.20 f.	8.43 f.	
12. Demon-possessed boy	Exorcism	9.17 f.	17.14 f.	9.38 f.	
13. Two blind men		10.46 f.	20.29 f.	18.35 f.	
In two gospels (Mark and Matthew)					
14. Canaanite woman's daughter	Exorcism (at a distance)	7.24 f.	15.21 f.		
15. Feeding of 4,000	Nature	8.1 f.	15.32 f.		
16. Fig tree withered	Nature	11.12 f.	21.18 f.		
In two gospels (Mark and Luke)					
17. Possessed man in synagogue	Exorcism	1.23 f.		4.33 f.	
In two gospels (Matthew and Luke)					
18. Blind, mute, and possessed man	Exorcism		12.22	11.14	

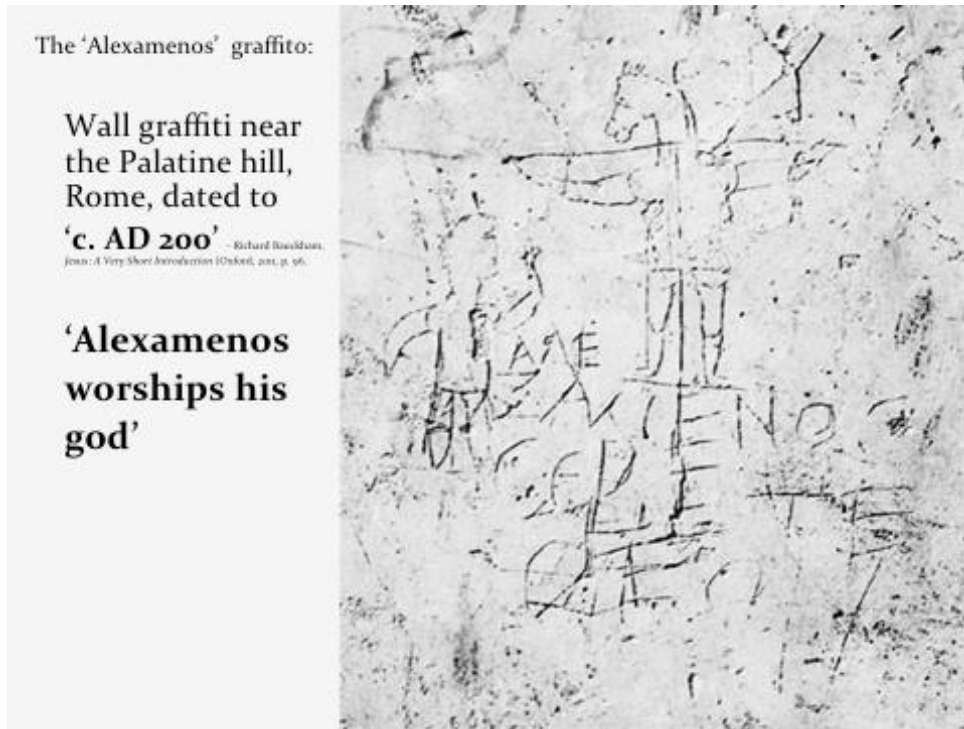
C. Dura Europos Baptistry, c. 235 AD:



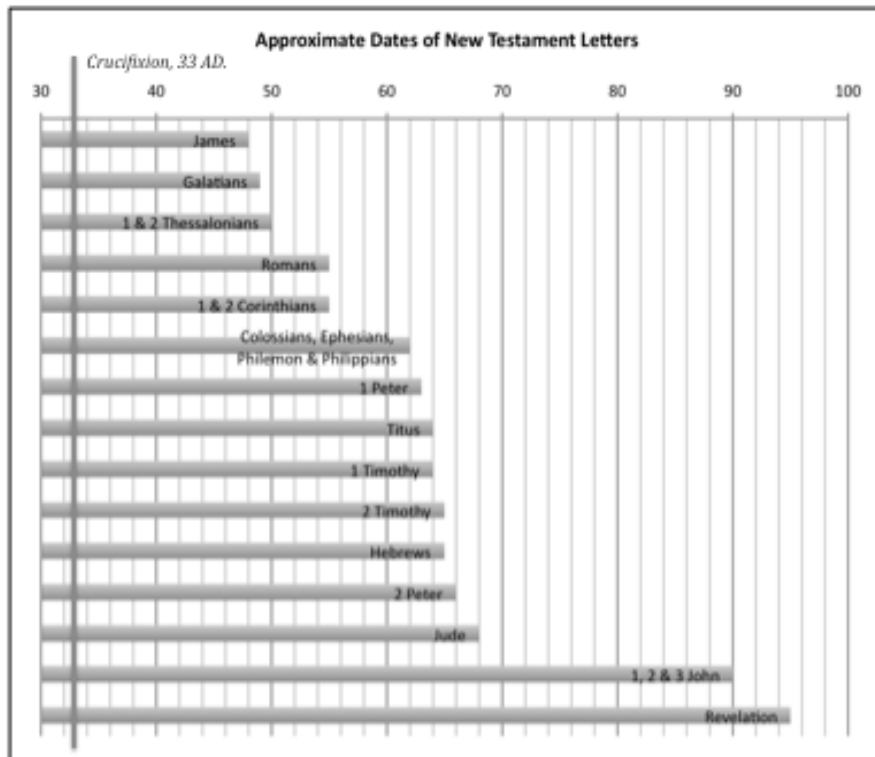
D.



E.



F.



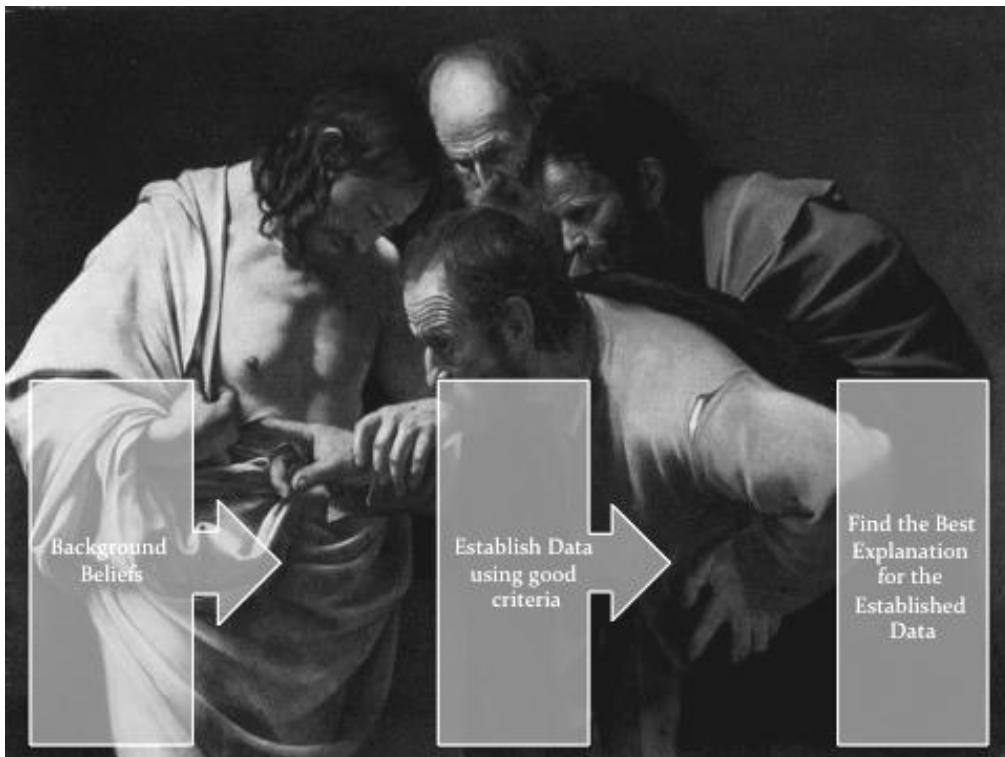
- G. **Ben Witherington:** ‘Jesus was prayed to and worshipped from the very beginnings of early Christianity, something Jews (and all the earliest Christ followers were Jews) would only do if they believed that person was part of the divine identity... the earliest Christology was very high Christology...’ - ‘News Weak - The Problems with Kurt Eichenwald’s screed entitled “The Bible: So Misunderstood it’s a Sin”’
- H. The undisputed letters of Paul – 1 Thessalonians, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon and Romans - were written before the end of the 50’s AD and demonstrate that **‘a concept of a divine Jesus was already present... within sixteen to twenty years after the crucifixion.’** - J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Baker, 1987), p. 148.
- I. **J.P. Moreland:** ‘Paul’s letters contain a number of creeds and hymns [e.g. Rom 1:3–4; 1 Cor. 11:23 ff.; 15:3–8; Phil. 2:6–11]... they often translate easily back into Aramaic, and they show features of Hebrew poetry and thought-forms. This means that they came into existence while the church was heavily Jewish and that they became standard, recognized creeds and hymns well before their incorporation into Paul’s letters.’ - *ibid*, p. 148–149. These creeds and hymns **‘consistently present a portrait of a miraculous and divine Jesus who rose from the dead... the idea of a fully divine, miracle-working Jesus who rose from the dead was present during the first decade of Christianity.’** - *ibid*, p. 149.

IV. Who Was Jesus? Engaging the Trilemma

- A. **C.S. Lewis:** ‘A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg - or he would be the devil of hell. You must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us.’ – *Mere Christianity* (Fount).

V. The Resurrection of Jesus

- A. **Lawrence Krauss:** ‘the point about the resurrection is that there’s no evidence of it!’ - www.reasonablefaith.org/life-the-universe-and-nothing-is-it-reasonable-to-believe-there-is-a-go#ixzz3H4X5fb9F
- B. **Geza Vermes:** ‘the idea of the resurrection of the dead was a latecomer in Jewish thought [and] it occupied only a small area of the broad religious canvas of late Second Temple Judaism. The New Testament completely altered the vista and changed the perspective. In it the individual resurrection of one Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, predominates. It is set in time and space and integrated into history... The situation is profoundly perplexing and the historian must come to grips with this puzzle.’ – *The Resurrection*, p. 65-66.



C. 1 Corinthians 15:3-9:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance, 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 [Peter],
and then to the twelve.

Then he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time,
most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.

Then he appeared to James,
Then to all the apostles.

And last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

- D. **Atheist Gerd Ludemann:** ‘the elements in the tradition are to be dated... not later than three years after the death of Jesus...’ – quoted by Habermas, *The Risen Jesus & Future Hope* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), p. 79.
- E. **Atheist Michael Goulder** believes this testimony ‘goes back at least to what Paul was taught when he was converted, a couple of years after the crucifixion.’ - quoted by Habermas, *The Risen Jesus & Future Hope* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), p. 79.
- F. **James D.G. Dunn:** ‘This tradition, we can be entirely confident, was formulated as tradition within months of Jesus’ death.’ – *Jesus Remembered*, vol. 1 of *Christianity in the Making* (Eerdmans, 2003), p. 825.
- G. **Ulrich Wilkens** agrees this material ‘indubitably goes back to the oldest phase of all in the history of primitive Christianity.’ - quoted by Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus & Future Hope* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), p. 79.
- H. **Robert L. Reymond:** ‘1 Corinthians 15:3b-5 is based on *early, Palestinian* eyewitness testimony...’ - *Faith’s Reasons for Believing* (Mentor, 2008), p. 149.
- I. **Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide** agrees that 1 Corinthians 15:3ff ‘may be considered as a statement of eyewitnesses...’ - *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective* (Ausberg, 1983), p. 99.
- J. The outline of Jesus’ death and resurrection can be established from the *multiple, independent* and *early* testimonies of: the early creed in 1 Corinthians 15:3–5; the pre-Markan passion narrative of Mark 15:37–16:7; Peter’s Pentecost sermon recorded in Acts 2:23–32 and an early sermon by Paul recorded in Acts 13:28–31.
- K. Of speeches in Acts, **James D.G. Dunn** comments ‘Luke has sought out much earlier material and has incorporated it into the brief formalized expositions which he attributes to Peter, Stephen, Paul, etc.’ **Bart Erhman** concurs: ‘the speeches in Acts are particularly notable because they are, in many instances, based... on oral traditions... these speeches incorporate materials from the traditions about Jesus that existed long before Luke put pen to papyrus.’ - *Did Jesus Exist?*, p. 109 & 111.

Acts 2:23–32 Peter’s Pentecost sermon from AD 33.	1 Corinthians 15:3–5 Early creed, c. AD 33-36.	Mark 15:37 – 16:7 Pre-Markan passion narrative, c. AD 37.	Acts 13:28–31 Paul’s sermon in Pisidian Antioch, c. AD 45.
you . . . put him to death by nailing him to the cross.	Christ died...	Jesus breathed his last.	they asked Pilate to have him executed.
David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day [Peter thereby implies Jesus’ empty tomb].	he was buried...	Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb...	they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb.
God has raised this Jesus to life...	he was raised...	He has risen!	But God raised him from the dead...
we are all witnesses of the fact.	he appeared...	He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him...	for many days he was seen by those who had travelled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem.

L. Multiple & Independent Sources for Resurrection Appearances

Place	Witnesses	Notes types of interaction	Biblical Reference
Empty Tomb	Mary Magdalene	Saw and talked with Jesus (perhaps touching him)	John 20:11-18 (cf. Mark 16:9)
Empty Tomb	Mary Magdalene and the other Mary	Saw, heard, and touched Jesus	Matthew 28:1-10
Emmaus Road	Two individuals	Saw and talked with Jesus	Luke 24:13-23 (cf. Mark 16:12)
Unspecified	Peter	Saw Jesus	1 Corinthians 15:5 & Luke 23:34
Unspecified Room	Ten disciples	Saw and talked with Jesus	1 Corinthians 15; Luke 24: 36-49 & John 20:19-23
Unspecified Room	Eleven disciples	Saw, talked with, and touched Jesus	Luke 24:33-43; John 20:24-30 (cf. Mark 16:14-20)
Along the Sea of Galilee (Tiberias)	Seven disciples	Saw and talked with Jesus	John 21:1-25, cf. Mark 16:7
Unspecified mountain in Galilee/Unspecified	Eleven disciples	Saw and heard Jesus	Matthew 28:16-20; Acts 1:3-8, cf. Mark 16:7
Unspecified	500 individuals at	Saw Jesus	1 Corinthians

	once		15:6, cf. Mark 16:7
Unspecified	James (the brother of Jesus)	Saw Jesus	1 Corinthians 15:7
Road to Damascus	Paul	Saw and heard Jesus	1 Corinthians 15:8 & Acts 9:1-19

- a. I've put references to Mark chapter 16:9 ff. in brackets as this text doesn't appear in the earliest manuscripts; but Mark 16:7 clearly implies at least one group resurrection appearance.
- b. Jesus was reportedly seen on at least ten occasions. In eight of these occasions it is also reported that people *heard and/or talked* with Jesus.
- c. On at least two occasions it's reported that people *touched* Jesus.
- d. At least seven reports concern appearances to *groups*.
- e. We've *multiple independent sources* for *at least* two individual and three *group* appearances.

Recommended Resources

www.peterswilliams.com

YouTube Playlists @ www.youtube.com/user/peterswilliamsvid/playlists?view=1&flow=grid

William Lane Craig: Reasonable Faith www.reasonablefaith.org

Gary R. Habermas www.garyhabermas.com/

Michael Licona <http://risenjesus.com/>

Last Seminary www.lastseminary.com/

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

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

- *Messiah: Jesus – the evidence of history* (IVP, 2009)

Blomberg, Craig L. *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, second edition (IVP, 2008)

Bock, Darrell L. & Daniel B. Wallace. *Dethroning Jesus* (Thomas Nelson, 2007)

- & Robert L. Webb (ed.'s). *Key Events In The Life of the Historical Jesus* (Eerdmans, 2010)

Copan, Paul & William Lane Craig (ed.'s). *Contending With Christianity's Critics: Answering New Atheists & Other Objectors* (B&H Academic, 2009)

Craig, William Lane. *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision* (David C. Cook, 2010)

- & Chad Meister (ed.'s). *God Is Good, God Is Great: Why Believing in God Is Reasonable and Responsible* (IVP, 2009)

- & J.P. Moreland, ed. *The Blackwell Companion To Natural Theology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009)

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

Gilson, Tom & Carson Weitnauer (ed.'s). *True Reason: Confronting the Irrationality of the New Atheism* (Kregel, 2013)

Geivett, R. Douglas & Gary R. Habermas (ed.'s). *In Defence of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History* (Apollos, 1997)

Glass, David H. *Atheism's New Clothes* (Apollos, 2012)

Larmer, Robert A. *The Legitimacy of Miracle* (Lexington, 2014)

Licona, Michael R. *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Apollos, 2010)

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

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

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

Swinburne, Richard. *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Clarendon Press, 2003)

Wallace, J. Warner. *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates The Claims Of The Gospels* (David C. Cook, 2013)

Williams, Peter S. *A Faithful Guide to Philosophy: A Christian Introduction to the Love of Wisdom* (Paternoster, 2013)

- *C.S. Lewis vs. the New Atheists* (Paternoster, 2013)

- *Understanding Jesus: Five Ways to Spiritual Enlightenment* (Paternoster, 2011)

- *A Sceptic's Guide to Atheism: God Is Not Dead* (Paternoster, 2009)

Wright, N.T. *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (SPCK, 2003)