

Jesus - Fact or Fiction?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 March 2014

Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 0 0] We are starting a three-part series looking at the identity of Jesus. And so this week we're looking at Jesus, fact or fiction. Well, the world has an enduring fascination with Jesus, don't they?

The Western world at least. Because nearly 2,000 years after he walked this earth, people are still talking about him, and not just in the church. Even people who don't believe in him quote him.

So you probably recognize these. Turn the other cheek. Do unto others what you would have done to you. Love your enemies. And Hollywood can't seem to stop making films about him.

At last count, there were 20, more than 20. Here, look, see if you can guess some of these movies and see if you can get in before Jenny Pakula does. This one?

Last Temptation of Christ, correct? Next one? No. Godspell, yep. And the last one? Jesus of Montreal.

[1 : 1 3] I suspect some of you might not have been born at the time the films were made. Whereas Doug was. Yet, at the same time, this story of Jesus constantly comes under attack.

So every few years, another set of scholars would appear on TV, refuting the claims of the Bible. There are other Gospels, they say. The Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, of Peter.

And if you had the SBS on last night, there was even the Gospel of Jesus' wife. And in 2007, there was a documentary, The Lost Tomb of Jesus, claiming to have found, shock, horror, the remains of Jesus.

So with all this floating around, and much of it you can find on the internet, what are we to make of all this? Is it possible to work out facts from fiction and to know what Jesus really did and said?

Now, I know many of you probably think, Mark's going to say the Bible is true. He's, you know, part of the establishment. He's a pastor. He's paid to defend the Bible.

[2 : 1 8] Well, that may be where I do end up. But I'm not just going to assert that tonight. Instead, I want to look at this question, not firstly as a question of faith, but as a question of history.

And to do that, I'm going to look at it the same way historians do. To use the same tools they use, so that when you see another documentary on TV, let's say, you can sort of work it out for yourself.

Now, you've all heard of the three R's in education. Reading, writing, arithmetic. Only one spelt with R as a start. Well, one Christian historian, Michael Lacona, has coined the three R's for history.

Three steps which historians use to do their work. And they are on the screen. Relevant sources, responsible method, and restrained results.

And so that's the framework I'm going to use tonight to look at this question. So first, we'll look at the relevant sources for Jesus' life. Second, we'll consider the responsible methods that were used, or that are used, in order that third, we can arrive at restrained results.

[3 : 30] Results, that is, that are consistent with the sources. So you've got an outline there, and that you might be able to follow, or fill in the blanks, as it were. First, relevant sources.

Now, there are numerous sources which are relevant to our investigation of Jesus. So first and foremost, we have the four Gospels. But we also have the rest of the New Testament, even though they don't give a lot of detail about Jesus' life.

Things he did, that is, or said. To that, we add the writings of the earlier Christian fathers who quoted the New Testament, but also described events during Jesus' time.

And then secular sources as well. So for example, the Jewish historian Josephus, and others like Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny the Young. Now, these were pagan writers, so they don't say much about Jesus, except to say that he existed, he was put to death, and that a new religion among Jews arose because of him.

And then finally, we include the Gnostic Gospels as well, the ones that I mentioned earlier, Thomas, Mary, and so forth. Now, remember, at this point, we're just gathering the sources, the relevant sources.

[4 : 41] How reliable these sources are will form part of the next step. Now, before we move on, I want to say one thing about relevant sources. And that is to say that often when we say the four Gospels, people imagine that there are four original documents sitting in some ancient museum somewhere, the original Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the ones that they actually wrote on.

Well, that's not the case. We don't have the originals anymore. But what we do have are thousands and thousands of copies of these documents. Some are complete.

Some are fragments. Some are written in the original language of Greek. But others are translated into Latin, Coptic, or Syriac. And they were discovered across the Roman world.

All told, there are more than 5,700 Greek manuscripts in total, and about 19,000 if you include the other languages as well. And these manuscripts have variations in them.

And if you were here last year when we did a similar series, I did a talk on the credibility of the Gospels where I looked at what is called textual criticism, which has enabled scholars to work out what the originals said based on these copies so that we have, to a very large degree, to a very high level of confidence, confidence in what the Gospels actually said.

[6 : 06] So for all intents and purposes, when we talk about the four Gospels, we can talk as though we do have the originals. And the same goes for the rest of the New Testament. So now once we've gathered all the relevant sources, which now serve as the evidence for the life of Jesus, the next step then is to sift through them to piece the facts together.

So some scholars have likened this piece of work to working on, let's say, a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle, where you only have 250 pieces.

And you've lost the cover, so you don't know what the final outcome looks like. And to add to that, perhaps some 50 of that 250 pieces don't belong to that puzzle in the first place, although you don't know which 50.

Studying history is a bit like that, and it's a bit like watching an episode of CSI as well. You don't have all the evidence, and what you do have may be conflicting, and some of it may be untrue.

So what historians need is a set of criteria to work out what evidence is true and what is false. Which bits of the data to give more weight to. Now, we don't have time tonight to go through all of them, but I'll mention a few so you just get a sense of how it works.

[7 : 24] And the first criterion I want to touch on is that of proximity. That's closeness to the event. That is, the closer the written account is to the actual event, the more reliable it's considered to be.

So eyewitnesses' accounts are considered best, but so are accounts that are written within the lifetime of eyewitnesses. Why is that? Because they can then be refuted by eyewitnesses if they were untrue.

So all the four Gospels and the entire New Testament rate very favorably on this criterion because they were written in the first century AD when many of the eyewitnesses would still have been alive as the letters started to circulate around in the community.

And just as a side point, have you ever noticed that none of the four Gospels actually describe the resurrection? That is, they describe the before, they describe the death, and they describe the after, that is, the appearances to the disciples and the empty tomb.

But the actual resurrection itself is never described. That to me is strong suggestion that these are eyewitnesses' account. Because if the resurrection is the most important event in your book and you are making things up, then surely you would be describing it in great detail, wouldn't you?

[8 : 43] And yet none of the Gospels do that because none of them actually saw Jesus rise from the dead. Now the Gnostic Gospels, on the other hand, are dated to about the 2nd or 3rd century AD, if not later.

And so they're not considered to be eyewitness accounts. Now it's not to say that everything in it is false, but if there is a conflict between sources, then all things being equal, greater weight is given to the earlier or the eyewitness source.

And that's the same in a court of law, isn't it? Eyewitness accounts have greater weight than 2nd or 3rd hand accounts. The 2nd principle that I want to touch on is that of multiple attestation.

That is, greater weight is given when the event is confirmed by multiple independent sources. Now on this principle, we don't treat the entire New Testament as a single source.

Each Gospel writer is treated as a different source and so is Paul and so are the other writers in the New Testament. That's because the New Testament is not a single book. with one single human author, but multiple books and letters written by different authors in different places, independently of each other.

[9 : 58] So many of the key events in Jesus' life actually have multiple independent sources. His birth, his baptism, his miracles, his crucifixion, and his resurrection are all described in various different sources within the New Testament as well as outside it.

Again, this is similar to a law court. If you have two witnesses recount the same event, a crime, let's say, without colluding, you know, they describe the same details of what the weapon was, what the alleged criminal did, then the court is likely to find the details to be true.

Now, it's important to say here that just because there are minor discrepancies, discrepancies, that does not negate key or important facts. So, for example, if a witness A says that he saw the criminal pull the gun from his right pocket, while witness B said he pulled it from the back, and yet both of them said they shot the victim, just because they don't agree where the gun came from doesn't mean that they don't agree or it isn't true that the criminal actually shot the victim.

In fact, historians say that if there are discrepancies like this, minor ones, it actually shows that there have not been collusion between the witnesses because if the details match too perfectly, often that could mean that the witnesses have made up the stories together.

Now, the third principle we're moving on to is that of self-embarrassing testimony. That is, people don't usually lie about things that embarrass them. People lie to look good.

[11 : 36] They don't lie to look bad. So on that account, Peter's denial of Jesus is likely to be true. Likewise, when one disciple after another showed their ignorance during the Last Supper, that's also likely to be true.

In fact, if you read the Gospels, the general impression you would get of the disciples is that they are clueless and lacking in faith. So if the disciples really wanted to make things up, they're not going to likely invent these details to make themselves look bad.

A fourth and related principle is that of adversarial testimony. That is, when an enemy or someone who is neutral attests to an event, an event by which they stand to gain nothing or, worse, to lose from it.

If they do that, then their testimony is likely to be true. So that's why references to Jesus by non-Christian sources like Josephus are valuable because these people have nothing to gain from reporting about Jesus.

Well, there's more that we could go into but we don't have a lot of time so that's where we'll stop. But historians use these and other criteria to weigh up each piece of evidence. And when there is a conflict, then they need to use this sort of criteria to determine which is more likely to be true.

[12 : 56] Now, of course, details are interrelated. So if you believe one detail is true, that also has an impact on other details so that you form a picture, a coherent picture, that ties all the details together consistently.

Also, if you discover that one author, let's say a gospel writer, is consistently true, then you have a greater confidence in the trustworthiness of that author for the entirety of its writing.

So, for example, many years people had doubted the historicity of John's gospel. For instance, they said no evidence of the pool that he described in John chapter 5, the one which John says has five colonnades.

So many people thought that the gospel was actually written later, after Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70. Then what happened in the 19th century was that archaeologists found a pool fitting this exact description.

And I think I've got a picture of it there. Yeah, you can see the five columns. And so, it showed that the gospel, based on this evidence, was actually written, particularly chapter 5, by someone who knew Jerusalem before its destruction.

[14 : 07] Because once it was destroyed in AD 70, that was gone. And as a result of that, we have greater confidence that what John says elsewhere in his gospel is also accurate.

Well, once we've applied our method, and that can be quite a long and time-consuming process, then the final step is to reconstruct the events using the findings from our investigation.

Here, what's needed is restrained results. That is, determining the facts based just solely on evidence, irrefutable evidence, and not embellishing it or extrapolating wildly from one piece or two pieces of evidence into a big story.

So, I'll illustrate with two contrasting examples. The first is the lost tomb of Jesus. If you've watched the show, what it does is it casts doubts on the resurrection of Jesus by claiming to have found Jesus' grave.

Perhaps. And they even say that perhaps. But what do they, how do they do this? On what basis do they do that? based solely from the inscriptions on the tomb boxes.

[15 : 17] These boxes were accidentally discovered by construction workers in 1980. There are about ten boxes, but the ones that are relevant, one box had it Aramaic, Jesus, son of Joseph, inscribed on it.

Well, another was in Greek and said, Maryene Mara, which they've now taken to mean, or they've thought to mean, Mary Magdalene. And then there was another box which said, Judas, son of Jesus.

Now, they also did some DNA tests on the two boxes, the Jesus and the Mary box, and they found that they weren't from the same mother. Now, it's a big leap, isn't it, to go from those bare facts to then saying that these were the bones of Jesus Christ and the other person was his wife, Mary Magdalene, and they had a son called Jesus together.

Because, I mean, there are other possibilities, aren't there? First, Jesus and Joseph are very common names during those times. So, Jesus, son of Joseph, is not an uncommon combination.

Secondly, the fact that both persons didn't share the same mother doesn't mean they're married, right? It could be an aunt or mother-in-law or a cousin. That would have still worked. And there is simply no evidence to say that Mary Magdalene was ever known as Maryamne in Greek.

[16 : 36] The Gospel of Phillips does refer to Mary Magdalene as Maryamne, but that was written in the 4th century AD. So, to go from a couple of facts like that and build up a whole picture and then say, oh, Jesus didn't rise from the dead is not what we call restrained and responsible results.

By contrast, Michael O'Connor, which I've quoted before, and Gary Habermas have written a book showing that the resurrection of Jesus can be argued as the best explanation solely on five minimal facts.

And these minimal facts are so-called because they are widely accepted to be true even by skeptics. So, four of them are universally accepted while the fifth, not quite universal, is accepted by some 75% of scholars.

So, what are these facts? Well, first, that Jesus died by crucifixion. That is, he really died, not fainted, not passed out. He really died. Second, that Jesus' disciples believed he rose and appeared to them.

So, in 1 Corinthians 15, in the passage, in the verses just before the passage that was read, Paul notes that he just, it's not just the 12 that Jesus appeared to, but more than 500 others as well.

[17 : 56] Now, notice that the minimal fact is not that Jesus appeared to them, but that the disciples believed that he did. Of course, as Christians, we believe that Jesus did appear, but this is what is meant by restrained results.

That is, the facts are described in the bare minimum and not extrapolated beyond what the evidence suggests. Third, is the sudden conversion of Paul, someone who was violently opposed to Christians and then overnight became a Christian because Jesus appeared to him.

Fourth, the skeptic James, and we had that quiz question, half-brother of Jesus, is converted. And not only that, he was subsequently martyred for his faith in Jesus.

And this is attested by Josephus, the Jewish historian. And finally, the fifth one, the empty tomb. That is, the fact that no one could produce Jesus' body or find a tomb with his body in it.

And so, Habermas and Lacona argue that just using these facts alone, the conclusion that has the most explanatory power is the one that Jesus rose from the dead.

[19 : 06] It's the explanation that best ties all the five facts together coherently. So, other theories have been advanced, including the one that you find in Matthew, even, chapter 28, and verse 13, which the chief priest made up, that the disciples stole the body, or the disciples, another theory is that the disciples were hallucinating when Jesus appeared to them, or that the disciples went to the wrong tomb.

The problem with these and other explanations is that even though it may explain one or two of the minimal facts, it can't explain all of them. So, the stolen body may account for the empty tomb, but you have to argue what about the disciples' appearances to disciples?

they would have had to be lying in order for that to be true, but who would be willing to die for a lie? And then how about Paul's conversion?

That doesn't explain that either. And then the hallucination theory may account for the appearances, but what about the empty tomb? And what about the appearance to Paul? So, if you go through all the theories, none of them quite explain all the five facts without you trying to shoehorn the facts into place.

It is only the resurrection that is able to account for the five facts together. But if that's the case, you might ask, why do people keep trying to come up with alternatives?

[20 : 35] Why don't they just accept the resurrection? Well, I think it's because the resurrection involves a miracle, by which I mean it requires us to accept a cause outside the material or natural world, whereas all other exploration seeks to find a naturalistic cause.

And so, here's where we need to say a word about biases and presuppositions and worldviews. All of us have them, and people often think it's only Christians that are biased, but scientists are objective.

But that's not true. We're all influenced by our background and our culture, and we bring our worldview, our presuppositions, to everything that we look at. People look for other explanations because one of the presuppositions, which is unproven, is an entirely naturalistic worldview, one that cannot accept miracles.

So look, for instance, at these two sets of statements. On the left there, it says, there is no creator, miracles can't happen, and Jesus did not rise from the dead. On the right we have, there is a creator, exactly the opposite, miracles can happen, and Jesus rose from the dead.

Now both sets of statements are internally consistent, aren't they? If taken together. And if you have been brought up in the left-hand column, thinking miracles can't happen, then that's where you are.

[22 : 03] But if God does exist, then actually miracles can happen, can't it? The right-hand column is just as consistent as the left.

But you have to notice that in those two sets of statements, there's only the first two on each that are essentially assertions.

That is, they are presuppositions that cannot be proven directly. It's only the third statement that is actually open to human investigation and observation.

The problem is that often we don't realize our own presuppositions, what they are and how they are stopping us looking at the evidence objectively. Friends, I really can't stress this enough and that is the fact is that we need to work out the facts of Jesus.

And we need to do it in a way which is not clouded by our presuppositions. We're not reading a novel here or watching a movie where if you want to believe, that's fine, if you don't, the show ends and you go home.

[23 : 10] What we believe about Jesus has life or death consequences. If Jesus just turned up on the scene 2,000 years ago, died and somehow rose miraculously and then disappeared, well, you know, we could all think, this is a great magic show, round of applause everyone, and then get back to our lives, can't we?

But the fact of the matter is, Christians not only believe that Jesus came and died and rose again, but also that God spent thousands of years before that event preparing for it.

That's what the Old Testament is all about. And Jesus himself did the same for two years before his death, telling his disciples what's going to happen, why it's going to happen, and then after he rose from the dead, teaching them some more.

And so this event, this resurrection, did not happen in a vacuum. It happened in the context of what God has been saying before and after the event. All this so that the world knows why he came, why the world needs him to come, and that is to deal with our sin, our wrongdoing, and all that's wrong with this world and with us.

So history does matter, even for those of us who believe. Because if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then that reading that Paul, we read from Paul in 1 Corinthians, is absolutely right.

[24 : 37] Our faith is futile. We are dead in our sins. The Christian faith is not just a way of life or a set of principles to live by or to live up to. No, at its very center, it is about what God has done for us in Jesus.

And this is the one thing that we need to put our trust in. And it is a fact in history. It is a fact that we need to contend with. If it's not true, then we are to be most pitied, as Paul says, for we are living a lie.

But if Jesus did rise from the dead, then the converse is also true. Jesus says so himself in John chapter 15 and verse 22. If I had not come and spoken to them, they, that is the world, would not be guilty of sin.

But now they have no excuse for their sin. Now that I've spoken, we don't have an excuse for our sin. So if you've heard about Jesus, and all of you have tonight, then sitting on the fence is no longer possible.

Ignorance is no longer an excuse. Well, friends, it may be that you need to do more work, investigation, that's absolutely fine. We've got a book table out there that have books that are helpful that you might want to pick up and read.

[25 : 57] Or we're also running a course straight after Easter called Christianity Explored, tailored specifically for people with questions of this kind. But whatever it is, this is evidence, the evidence that we've got in the Bible demands a verdict of us.

God has the solution for all that's wrong in our lives, and it is well supported, as I've argued, by history, by the evidence in history. What the Bible says about Jesus is true.

So you are right, I have ended up here by claiming the truth of the Bible. But that doesn't mean that it is not true.

And so I want to urge you, if you have not thought about it, to give serious time and effort to it. Because if Jesus has really done what he's done, then why wouldn't you put your trust in him?

should believe it.