

TACTICAL TUESDAY

Was Jesus Really the Son of God?

Following the Historical Evidence Behind the Most Consequential Claim
Ever Made About Jesus of Nazareth

By [Chaplain Todd DuBord \(M.Div.\)](#)



The First Time Jesus Ever Got My Attention

Long before I compared ancient manuscripts, studied religious history, learned the arguments surrounding the Resurrection, or asked whether Jesus' claims could withstand serious historical scrutiny, Jesus first entered my intellectual world in a much more ordinary way—through a television screen.

I grew up in an atheist household. Christianity was simply not part of the intellectual furniture of my childhood. My father grew up in a strict French Catholic home and departed an atheist. I remember as a boy, Christmas revolved around Santa Claus, presents, decorations, family traditions, and all the excitement surrounding December. Easter meant colored eggs, candy, and the Easter Bunny. That's it.

Somewhere behind those holidays was a religious figure named Jesus, but I had no meaningful understanding of who He was or why anyone would organize an entire religion and life around Him. Religion belonged, in my youthful thinking, to an earlier stage of human development. Ancient people had gods because ancient people did not yet have modern science. Religion was inherited mythology, and modern people supposedly knew better.

At least, that was the assumption. I had not actually investigated Christianity carefully enough to reject it. I simply assumed somebody else (much smarter than me) already had, and I inherited the conclusion without ever really testing the evidence for myself.

Then, around the end of the 1970s and beginning of 1980, I encountered what I remember as a television presentation connected with the film *In Search of Historic Jesus*. I would later learn that the film contained speculative material and religious influences I would not endorse today, including claims well outside mainstream historical-Jesus scholarship. But its importance in my story is that it prompted questions I would later pursue answers for; **it was that, for the first time, it made me seriously ask the question: Who was Jesus of Nazareth—and could He really have been the Son of God?**

The timing could hardly have been more remarkable. During the summer of **1979**, I had met the young woman who would eventually change my life and become my wife, **Tracy**, at Bass Lake, Ca.—a much larger love story she would share 40 years down the road after a massive mental breakdown and hospitalization at MeetYouAtTheDock.com*. At the time, however, I was still an atheist and Tracy was a Christian. It did not take her very long—about a month, as I remember it—to recognize that the direction of my life, my beliefs, and some of the moral assumptions flowing from them were not exactly pointing where she wanted her own life to go!

That mattered more than I probably understood at the time. Tracy had spoken to me about Jesus, but to me He was still largely a religious name belonging to a world I did not understand. Then suddenly, not long afterward, I was sitting in front of a television watching people investigate this same Jesus as a figure of history.

As I watched the television show, the connection began forming in my mind: **This is the guy Tracy has been telling me about. But who is He? What did He actually do? Why does she believe in Him? Why do people call Him the Son of God?** I was not yet prepared to accept her answer, but for perhaps the first time I was interested enough to investigate the question for myself. Jesus stopped being merely part of **her** faith and became a historical problem **I** wanted to understand.

That personal intersection—meeting Tracy and then unexpectedly encountering Jesus as a historical figure—gave the question an urgency it probably would not otherwise have possessed. I still had no intention of becoming a Christian, but curiosity had gotten through the door, and once that happened the questions began multiplying. I didn't know one could seek answers in churches.

For perhaps the first time, Jesus stopped being a vague religious figure standing somewhere behind Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. He became, if only in my imagination, **a man who possibly lived in history**. I began wondering who He really was, and over the next few years: why people were still arguing about Him almost two thousand years after Rome had executed Him, why His death had failed to extinguish His movement, and why kings, philosophers, scientists, skeptics, artists, martyrs, scholars, ordinary laborers, presidents, prisoners, and entire civilizations had been unable simply to leave Him behind.

Most puzzling of all, why were people saying something about this man that they did not ordinarily say about Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Muhammad, or other great teachers? They were saying **He was God's Son**. I thought, what does that mean?

Eventually I would learn that Christianity's claim was even more astonishing than that phrase first sounded. Historic Christianity does not mean merely that Jesus was a particularly favored human being whom God affectionately called His "son." It claims that the eternal Son entered human history, took human nature upon Himself, died for sinners, and bodily rose from the dead. The theological term **Incarnation** means that God the Son truly became human without ceasing to be divine.

As an atheist teenager, I knew none of those distinctions, but the question had been planted. If Christianity was making claims this enormous, were they merely inherited folklore? Had Jesus actually existed? What did the earliest historical sources say about Him? Did Jesus Himself claim extraordinary authority, or did later Christians put those words into His mouth? Did His followers gradually turn an ordinary rabbi into God? Was Christianity borrowed from Egyptian and Persian mythology? Did Jesus remain dead while legends accumulated around His grave?

Those were exactly the questions I eventually wanted answered. The television program that first stirred my curiosity would not become the foundation of my faith; **the evidence would have to do that.**

Over the decades that followed through my undergraduate and graduate degrees. That investigation expanded far beyond the identity of Jesus. I eventually examined whether the universe itself points beyond matter, whether materialism adequately explains life and biological information, whether archaeology supports or undermines the historical setting of Scripture, whether the Bible can withstand comparison with the sacred writings of other religions, and whether the world's major faiths are really describing the same God and the same truth. Several of those investigations eventually became studies of their own:

- [The Scientific Evidence for God](#)
- [The ERRORS in Evolution—Scientists Speak Up](#)
- [The RECENT TOP 10 Archaeology PROOFS of the BIBLE](#)
- [How the Bible Truly Compares with Other Sacred Writings](#)
- [Do All Religions Lead to the Same Truth—and the Same God?](#)

This present investigation belongs to that same larger evidence trail. If there is good reason to believe a Creator exists, if the biblical world repeatedly proves historically rooted rather than mythological, if the Bible itself stands up under comparison with the world's other sacred writings, and if the major religions make genuinely different claims about God, salvation, and ultimate truth, then the question of **Jesus' identity** becomes unavoidable: **Who was He really—and was He truly the Son of God?**

From Curiosity to an Investigation

As I moved from curiosity into serious study as a young intellectual adult, I discovered that Christianity does something rather dangerous for a religion if it is fabricated: **it ties its central claims to history.** Jesus is placed in Galilee and Judea under identifiable rulers. He is connected with Herod, Caiaphas, Pontius Pilate, Jerusalem, the Temple, Roman crucifixion, and the Passover world of first-century Judaism. Christianity claims He spoke publicly, gathered followers publicly, was executed publicly, and that His followers very shortly afterward publicly proclaimed Him risen.

Those claims invite examination rather than retreat from it. That is why this *Tactical Tuesday* is not an argument that says, "Believe first and stop asking questions." It is the continuation of the question that

first captivated a skeptical young man decades ago: **Who was Jesus of Nazareth—and was He really the Son of God?**

Nearly forty years ago, while working through these same issues in an earlier study, one historical framework particularly helped organize my investigation. **N. T. Wright (born 1948)**, British New Testament historian and theologian, former Bishop of Durham, and former Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St Andrews, has argued that any serious reconstruction of Jesus must explain several connected realities: What kind of documents are the Gospels? How did Jesus relate to first-century Judaism? What was He trying to accomplish? Why was He executed? And why did the early Christian movement arise afterward in precisely the form that it did? ([N. T. Wright, Who Was Jesus?: Jesus and the Victory of God.](#))

That framework remains valuable because a theory may explain one piece of Jesus while failing completely to explain the others. A reconstruction that explains His Jewish preaching but cannot account for His execution is incomplete. A theory that explains the Crucifixion but cannot account for the sudden emergence of Resurrection proclamation is incomplete. A theory that explains the earliest Church but cannot account for Jesus' relationship to Judaism is incomplete. **The whole historical puzzle has to fit.**

More than forty years later, that question has hardly disappeared. In fact, our previous *Tactical Tuesday* investigation, [How Jesus TRULY Compares with Other Religious Leaders](#), brought me almost full circle to the question that first fascinated me as an atheist. After comparing Jesus with Zoroaster, Buddha, Confucius, Laozi, Mahavira, Socrates, Muhammad, Guru Nanak, and Moses, I found that their teachings, missions, understandings of God, views of salvation, and claims about themselves could not honestly be collapsed into one generic category called “religious leaders.”

The comparison became especially striking when we reached **Jesus Christ (c. 5 BC–AD 30; AD 33 remains another major chronology for the Crucifixion)**. Zoroaster pointed toward Ahura Mazda, Buddha toward awakening, Confucius toward moral cultivation, Muhammad identified himself as God's human messenger, Guru Nanak directed humanity toward the One, and Moses remained the servant and prophet of Yahweh (the Hebrew name for God). Jesus, however, repeatedly placed **His own Person** at the center of the answer—claiming authority to forgive sins, identifying Himself as the Way and the Resurrection, speaking of an existence preceding Abraham, and interpreting His approaching death as a ransom for others.

That investigation ended near Caesarea Philippi in Israel with the question recorded in **Matthew 16:13–17**. Jesus first asked His disciples what everyone else was saying about Him: **“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”** They supplied the respectable answers of their generation—John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, perhaps another prophet. Then Jesus moved from public opinion to personal judgment and asked, **“But who do you say that I am?”** Peter answered, **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”** ([Matthew 16:13–17.](#))

The previous Evidence Trail established that Jesus does not fit comfortably into the category occupied by the other great religious leaders. This investigation asks the much harder question that naturally follows: **Was Peter right? Was Jesus really the Son of God?**



Evidence Trail 1: How Does America See Jesus?

Twenty centuries after Caesarea Philippi, Americans are still answering Jesus' question, **“Who do people say that I am?”** What makes the modern answer especially fascinating is that Jesus remains extraordinarily popular even in an increasingly secular culture. Barna reported in 2023 that **71 percent of U.S. teens and adults held a positive opinion of Jesus**, while its research also found that large numbers continued to describe a personal commitment to Him as important in their lives. ([Barna Group, “Openness to Jesus Isn’t the Problem—the Church Is,” 2023.](#))

More recent Barna research suggests that personal commitment has actually increased. In its **2025 State of the Church** research, Barna reported that **66 percent of U.S. adults said they had made a personal commitment to Jesus that remained important to them**, compared with 54 percent in 2021. Barna noted that younger adults were contributing significantly to the increase. ([Barna Group, “Belief in Jesus Rises, Fueled by Younger Adults,” 2025.](#))

That is remarkable in a culture where formal religious affiliation and confidence in institutions have changed substantially. **Jesus Himself remains remarkably difficult for Americans simply to dismiss.**

But liking Jesus and agreeing about **who Jesus is** are two very different things. An earlier nationwide Barna study aimed directly at that question found that **92 percent of American adults believed Jesus was a real historical person, but only 56 percent identified Him as God**. Another 26 percent described Him as a religious or spiritual leader comparable to Muhammad or Buddha, while 18 percent said they were uncertain about His divinity. ([Barna Group, “What Do Americans Believe About Jesus? 5 Popular Beliefs.”](#))

Gallup provides an illuminating historical comparison. In 2002, **George H. Gallup Jr. (1930–2011)** reviewed roughly a quarter century of Gallup polling and reported that approximately **eight in ten Americans had consistently described Jesus as God or the Son of God**. Gallup also cautioned, however, that Americans did not necessarily mean the same thing by those words: some embraced the historic Christian understanding of Jesus as truly divine, while others understood His relationship to God more loosely. ([George H. Gallup Jr., “Who Is Jesus?”, Gallup, 2002.](#))

Taken together, these polls reveal something fascinating. America has hardly abandoned Jesus. Millions admire Him, identify with Him, pray to Him, follow Him, or regard Him as one of history’s greatest moral and spiritual figures. Yet underneath that admiration lies profound disagreement about **who He actually is**. In fact, in talking to Americans the last 40 years, I can truly say that most people (and I mean most) don’t have but a very superficial understanding of who He is, no different than, for example, Buddha or Confucious. It only takes a couple probing questions to reach ignorance, or simply not knowing, even with staunch agnostics and atheists. Afterall, where would the average American even learn about Jesus? Not in public schools. And most don’t go to church. So, unfortunately, there’s only a hodgepodge of Internet folklore, and the educated know how illogically-based most of that is. Education we (at www.CrossFireUSA.org) are trying to help people distinguish.

Modern culture therefore supplies nearly the same variety of answers that surrounded Jesus in the first century. To some He is God incarnate and the risen Son of God. To others He is a prophet, rabbi, healer, ethical teacher, social reformer, revolutionary, apocalyptic preacher, or exceptionally good man. Still others regard the Gospel portrait as legendary, argue that His followers gradually elevated Him into deity, or go further and claim Christianity constructed Him from earlier pagan religions.

Not all of those proposals deserve the same response. Some are serious historical reconstructions, while others belong largely to popular culture and the internet. Liberal scholar, **Bart D. Ehrman (born 1955)**, James A. Gray Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Princeton Theological Seminary Ph.D., and one of America’s best-known agnostic New Testament scholars, argues that Jesus should be understood substantially as a Jewish **apocalyptic prophet**—a preacher who expected God dramatically to intervene in history, judge evil, and establish His kingdom. ([Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*.](#))

That is a serious historical thesis even though I will prove in this treatise why it ultimately explains only part of the evidence. Other claims are much weaker. Some still insist Jesus never existed. Others say His deity was invented at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, while internet videos recycle claims that Jesus was copied from Horus, Mithras, or other pagan gods.

The proper response is not to shout louder than the skeptic. It is to ask whether each explanation can account for the evidence better than the Christian claim it seeks to replace. A theory that Jesus was merely an apocalyptic prophet must explain why His earliest Jewish followers treated Him in ways astonishing for monotheists. A theory that His deity arose centuries later must explain Paul’s extraordinarily high view of Jesus within roughly two decades of the Crucifixion. A pagan-copy theory must produce the ancient pagan texts containing the alleged parallels, while mythicism must explain why historians who reject Christianity nevertheless overwhelmingly agree Jesus existed.

And this is precisely where the polling becomes so revealing: **the question Jesus asked at Caesarea Philippi has never disappeared. We are still answering it—only now Gallup and Barna can count the answers.**



Evidence Trail 2: Bertrand Russell—A Brilliant Philosopher Who Misread Jesus

Few modern attacks on Christianity have enjoyed the longevity of *Why I Am Not a Christian*, the famous 1927 lecture and later book by **Bertrand Russell (1872–1970)**, British philosopher, logician, mathematician, Nobel laureate in literature, and one of the founders of modern analytic philosophy.

Russell was unquestionably brilliant, but brilliance in mathematical logic does not automatically make someone an expert in first-century Judaism or historical-Jesus research. Russell acknowledged that Jesus possessed a high degree of moral goodness while nevertheless concluding that He did not rank as highly as Buddha or Socrates in wisdom and virtue. More startlingly, Russell wrote that historically it was **“quite doubtful whether Christ ever existed at all.”** ([Bertrand Russell, Why I Am Not a Christian, lecture delivered March 6, 1927.](#))

That particular judgment has aged remarkably poorly. Russell also objected to Jesus on several moral and interpretive grounds. He thought Jesus expected the end of the age within His disciples’ lifetimes, regarded the cursing of the fig tree as evidence against Christ’s wisdom, and found His warnings of judgment and hell morally objectionable. Those claims deserve answers rather than slogans.

In my undergraduate years, when discussing with my atheist father the evidence for Jesus, I asked, “If you don’t believe Jesus was who He claimed to be, then who do you say that He was?” His answer somewhat surprised me: “I suppose He never existed.” And with a wave of a historical wand, Jesus vanishes?? We shall discuss the real evidence there next.



Evidence Trail 3: Did Jesus Actually Exist? The Historians Answer

If Jesus never existed, virtually everything else in this investigation becomes unnecessary. So how secure is His existence historically? By the standards historians use for the ancient world, it is very secure. In fact, more secure than anyone else in antiquity.

Dr. Helen K. Bond, Professor of Christian Origins at the University of Edinburgh and a major historian of Jesus, Caiaphas, and Pontius Pilate, treats Jesus' execution as ordinary ancient history. Her treatment of **Pontius Pilate** identifies him as Rome's prefect of Judea from approximately AD 26–37 and notes that he is remembered especially for sending Jesus of Nazareth to the cross, an event also attested by Tacitus. ([Helen K. Bond, "Pontius Pilatus," *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.](#))

Dr. John P. Meier (1942–2022), longtime William K. Warren Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame and author of the monumental multi-volume *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, devoted decades to reconstructing Jesus using critical historical methods rather than simply assuming the conclusions of Christian faith. The central scholarly debate concerns **what Jesus said, did, intended, and understood Himself to be**, not whether a Galilean Jew named Jesus existed at all. ([John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*.](#))

Even **Bart D. Ehrman**, who rejects biblical inerrancy and does not affirm the bodily Resurrection as orthodox Christianity does, wrote an entire book arguing against Jesus mythicism. His conclusion is that Jesus existed, whatever one subsequently concludes about His identity or the supernatural claims surrounding Him. ([Bart D. Ehrman, Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth.](#))

That judgment is hardly limited to modern agnostic scholarship. **Dr. F. F. Bruce (1910–1990)**, longtime Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester and one of the twentieth century’s most respected New Testament scholars, wrote that although some writers may “toy with the fancy of a ‘Christ-myth,’” they do not do so on historical grounds. Bruce concluded that “the historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar” and added pointedly: “It is not historians who propagate the ‘Christ-myth’ theories.” ([F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*](#))

The historical existence of Jesus is therefore not a “Christians say yes, atheists say no” controversy. Across the mainstream of ancient history and New Testament scholarship, including among scholars who reject Christian theology, Jesus’ existence is treated as historical bedrock.

Josephus: A Jewish Historian Outside Christianity

We also possess evidence outside the New Testament. **Flavius Josephus (AD 37–c. 100)** was a Jewish priest, military commander, aristocrat, and historian who eventually wrote under Roman patronage. His *Jewish Antiquities*, completed around AD 93–94, contains two passages relevant to Jesus.

The longer passage, commonly called the **Testimonium Flavianum**, has generated centuries of discussion because the surviving Greek form contains phrases some scholars suspect were inflated a bit by Christian copyists. That does not mean Josephus wrote nothing about Jesus—he did. But a major 2025 Oxford University Press monograph by **T. C. Schmidt**, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Fairfield University, argues that Josephus supplied an authentic underlying notice of Jesus and investigates the manuscript history in considerable depth. ([T. C. Schmidt, *Josephus and Jesus: New Evidence for the One Called Christ.*](#))

Even more significant to many is Josephus’ later reference to **James, “the brother of Jesus who was called Christ,”** in *Antiquities* 20.200. Schmidt’s Oxford analysis notes that the **vast majority of scholars** regard this James passage as authentic. ([Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.200; T. C. Schmidt, *Josephus and Jesus.*](#))

That matters because Josephus was not writing Christian Scripture. He was identifying James for his readers by reference to a known Jesus who was called Christ.

Tacitus: Rome Remembers the Execution

Cornelius Tacitus (c. AD 56–c. 120), Roman senator and one of antiquity’s most important historians, wrote in *Annals* 15.44 that *Christus*, from whom Christians took their name, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius under Pontius Pilate. ([Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.](#))

Tacitus disliked Christianity, which makes his notice especially useful. He is not offering Christian devotional testimony; he regards the movement as a troublesome superstition while casually confirming its founder and execution.

The historical situation is therefore far stronger than Bertrand Russell imagined. We have Paul’s letters within the first Christian generation, multiple Gospel traditions, Josephus from the Jewish world, Tacitus from Rome, and an expanding Christian movement that itself requires explanation.

These references also illustrate a larger point I examined in [The RECENT TOP 10 Archaeology PROOFS of the BIBLE](#). Archaeology and ancient inscriptions cannot prove theological doctrines such as inspiration, forgiveness, or deity, but they can repeatedly test whether biblical writers placed their narratives in a recognizable historical world. Pontius Pilate, Caiaphas, first-century Jerusalem, Roman administration, Jewish burial practices, and many other features of the Gospel setting belong to actual history rather than an invented mythological landscape.

That distinction matters throughout this investigation. **Archaeology cannot prove that Jesus is God, but it can test whether the story about Jesus is anchored in the world in which the New Testament says it occurred.**

One may deny that Jesus was divine, reject His Resurrection, or argue over specific sayings attributed to Him. But denying that Jesus existed now places the critic far outside the mainstream of both Christian and skeptical historical scholarship.



Evidence Trail 4: What Kind of Documents Are the Gospels?

One of the questions preserved in my earlier study was deceptively simple: **What are the Gospels, and why were they written?**

They are not modern biographies in the twenty-first-century sense, but neither are they timeless mythological poems. Many scholars classify them broadly within the ancient literary world of biography, sometimes using the Greek term *bios*, meaning a written account of a life.

That does not mean the Gospel writers were religiously neutral. They were not. They believed Jesus mattered enormously, and they wrote with theological purposes. Yet theological conviction and historical intention are not mutually exclusive.

The Gospel writer Luke tells the reader explicitly that others had compiled accounts, that traditions had come from eyewitnesses and servants of the message, and that he himself had investigated matters carefully so that his reader could know the reliability of what had been taught. ([Luke 1:1–4.](#))

N. T. Wright has long emphasized that the Gospels must be read simultaneously as theological texts and as writings rooted deeply in the actual Jewish world of first-century Palestine. Their theological reflection is emphatically Jewish, and they can be investigated historically as well as theologically. ([N. T. Wright, Who Was Jesus?](#))

James D. G. Dunn (1939–2020), longtime Lightfoot Professor of Divinity at Durham University and one of the most influential New Testament scholars of his generation, devoted major scholarship to how Jesus' words and deeds were remembered and transmitted orally before and alongside written Gospel composition. ([James D. G. Dunn, Jesus Remembered.](#))

Richard Bauckham (born 1946), Cambridge-trained historian, former Professor of New Testament Studies at the University of St Andrews, Fellow of the British Academy and Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, has argued in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* that Gospel tradition remained considerably more connected with identifiable eyewitness testimony than models of long, anonymous communal development often suppose. ([Richard Bauckham, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses.](#))

Peter J. Williams, Cambridge-trained scholar of ancient biblical languages, Principal of Tyndale House in Cambridge, and former Senior Lecturer in New Testament at the University of Aberdeen, has examined names, geography, language, textual transmission, and incidental historical details in the Gospels. His work argues that these documents display a degree of local knowledge that deserves serious historical attention. ([Peter J. Williams, Can We Trust the Gospels?](#))

One further point strengthens the historical case: the Gospels repeatedly anchor Jesus in identifiable places, rulers, customs, controversies, family relationships, political authorities, and Jewish religious practices rather than in a vague mythic past. Their authors name towns, regions, officials, festivals, synagogues, the Temple, Roman governors, priestly figures, and ordinary social details that can be compared with archaeology and other ancient sources. That does not by itself prove every theological claim, but it does show that the Gospel writers intended to place Jesus within the real historical world of first-century Judea and Galilee, not within the timeless landscape characteristic of legend.

None of this means historians must accept every Gospel claim simply because it appears in a Gospel. Ancient sources still have to be interpreted critically, but neither can the Gospels be dismissed merely because their authors believed what they were writing. The more interesting historical question is harder: **What kind of Jesus best explains the documents we actually possess?**



Evidence Trail 5: Jesus Inside the Jewish World That Produced Him

A second question in my early study remains indispensable: **What was Jesus' relationship to Judaism?**

Jesus was Jewish. His mother was Jewish, His disciples were Jewish, and His others earliest followers emerged from Judaism. He quoted Israel's Scriptures, attended synagogue, went to the Temple, celebrated Jewish feasts, discussed Torah, invoked Abraham and Moses, and proclaimed the God of Israel.

Christianity therefore did not begin with an anti-Jewish spiritual teacher floating outside Israel's story. Jesus stands firmly inside that story.

First-century Jews lived under Roman rule and carried profound hopes concerning Israel's restoration, God's kingdom, covenant faithfulness, Davidic kingship, judgment, forgiveness, and the promises of the prophets. Different Jewish groups interpreted those expectations differently, but the longing for God's decisive intervention formed part of the atmosphere Jesus inhabited.

My earlier study preserved a particularly useful insight from N.T. Wright: Jesus did not attract crowds merely because He told people to be nicer. First-century Jews already possessed moral instruction, Scripture, Temple worship, sacrifice, and expectations regarding God's future. Jesus attracted attention because His proclamation suggested that **Israel's great story was reaching a decisive moment**, and astonishingly, He acted as though His own mission stood at the center of that moment. ([N. T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God.](#))

That matters enormously. Christianity's claim that Jesus is God's Son does not emerge from a religious vacuum. It grows inside Israel's fiercely monotheistic (belief in one God) world, where the distinction between the Creator and everything He created was taken with extreme seriousness. That is precisely why Jesus' conduct becomes so provocative.



Evidence Trail 6: Jesus' Focus Falls Again and Again Upon Himself

One of the most striking observations in my forty-year-old paper came from a Jewish scholar rather than a Christian theologian.

Jacob Neusner (1932–2016) was one of the twentieth century's most prolific Jewish scholars, authors and a major historian of rabbinic Judaism. In *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, Neusner imaginatively places himself inside the Sermon on the Mount and asks whether he, as a Torah-observant Jew, could follow Jesus.

His answer is no, but the reason is extraordinarily revealing. Neusner recognizes that Jesus' teaching has an intensely personal center. With a rabbi, the disciple ordinarily follows the Torah that the teacher explains. With Jesus, the demand repeatedly becomes **"Follow Me."** ([Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*.](#))

Later Neusner presses the matter still further. Confronted with what Jesus demands regarding Sabbath and allegiance, Neusner asks one of His Apostles, **"And is your master God?"** because, as he explains, **"only God can demand of me what Jesus is asking."** ([Jacob Neusner, **A Rabbi Talks with Jesus**.](#))

That testimony is particularly valuable because Neusner did **not** accept the Christian conclusion. He did not become a follower of Jesus. Yet precisely as a Jewish scholar, he perceived what many modern reductions miss: Jesus does not merely deliver a message and then disappear behind it. His own Person repeatedly becomes central.

He Forgives Sins

In **Mark 2:1–12**, friends lower a paralyzed man through a roof. Jesus' first words are not, "Stand up." He tells the man that his sins are forgiven.

The scribes react immediately: **Who can forgive sins but God alone?** The issue is not whether human beings may forgive wrongs committed against themselves; we can. The extraordinary feature is Jesus authoritatively pronouncing forgiveness of sins in God's place and then performing a healing intended by the narrative to demonstrate His authority. ([Mark 2:1–12.](#))

He Claims Authority Over the Sabbath

In **Mark 2:27–28**, Jesus declares the Son of Man **Lord even of the Sabbath**. The Sabbath is not merely a social custom. Within Judaism it belongs to God's creational and covenantal order, which makes the claim startling. ([Mark 2:27–28.](#))

He Speaks With Personal Authority Inside Torah

Moses receives the Law, and Israel's prophets characteristically proclaim, **"Thus says the LORD."** Jesus, by contrast, repeatedly says in **Matthew 5:21–44**, **"You have heard that it was said...But I say to you."**

He does not abolish Moses. Earlier in the Sermon He explicitly says He has come not to abolish the Law and Prophets but to **fulfill** them. Yet His mode of authority is extraordinary. ([Matthew 5:17, 21–44.](#))

This is where **Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (1948–2020)**, philosopher, theologian, author, and former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, helps sharpen the contrast. Sacks described Moses with the biblical title *eved Hashem*—the servant of God. Moses is great precisely because he faithfully serves the divine Lawgiver. ([Jonathan Sacks, "The Leader as Servant."](#))

The pattern becomes even more striking when these sayings are considered together rather than in isolation. Jesus does not merely claim to interpret Scripture correctly; He repeatedly makes a person's response to **Himself** decisive. People are summoned to leave everything and follow Him, loyalty to Him can take precedence even over family obligations, and He speaks as though final judgment turns on how individuals respond to His Person and mission.

In the world of first-century Judaism, that is an extraordinary concentration of authority in a single teacher. Jesus takes it one step further. In the Gospel of John (5:46), **Jesus tells the religious leaders that "Moses wrote about Me." Wow!**

Jesus stands inside the world Moses helped shape and speaks in His own name. That does not by itself prove deity, but it raises the historical question with increasing intensity.



Evidence Trail 7: The Son of Man and the Trial of Jesus

Another important technical phrase needs explanation: **“Son of Man.”** At first glance, the title can sound like a humble way of saying, “I am human.” Sometimes it does carry ordinary human associations, but Jesus’ use of the expression repeatedly draws readers toward **Daniel 7**, where “one like a son of man” comes with the clouds of heaven, approaches the Ancient of Days, and receives authority, glory, kingdom, and the service of the nations. ([Daniel 7:13–14.](#))

That becomes especially important at Jesus’ trial. In **Mark 14:61–64**, the high priest asks Jesus whether He is the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One. Jesus’ answer brings together Daniel 7 and Psalm 110: the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of Power and come with the clouds of heaven. ([Mark 14:61–64; Daniel 7:13–14; Psalm 110:1.](#))

The high priest responds by tearing his garments and charging blasphemy. Whatever one makes of the precise legal dynamics of that scene, Mark plainly wants the reader to understand that Jesus’ claim is enormous. He does not merely say, “Yes, I am another prophet.” He associates Himself with Israel’s enthroned, heavenly Son of Man.

The Gospel of John makes the claims still more explicit. Jesus says, **“Before Abraham was born, I am,” “I and the Father are one,” “I am the Resurrection and the Life,”** and **“I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.”** Then Thomas addresses Him as **“My Lord and my God!”**, and Jesus receives rather than corrects the confession. ([John 8:58; 10:30–33; 11:25; 14:6; 20:28–29.](#))

The cumulative picture matters more than any one isolated sentence. Jesus forgives sins, claims lordship over Sabbath, places Himself at the center of judgment, speaks with personal authority inside Torah, says He is the God about whom Moses wrote, identifies Himself with Daniel’s heavenly Son of Man, claims a unique relationship with the Father, and makes response to His Person decisive.

The historical question becomes increasingly difficult to avoid: **What ordinary category is large enough for this Jesus?**



Evidence Trail 8: Christopher Hitchens—Was the Cross Immoral?

Another generation of atheists inherited Bertrand Russell’s challenge, and among the eloquent was **Christopher Hitchens (1949–2011)**, British-American journalist, Oxford graduate, essayist, polemicist, and author of *God Is Not Great*.

Hitchens did not merely deny Christianity; he regarded some of its central teachings as morally offensive. During a 2007 debate with **Alister E. McGrath (born 1953)**, Oxford-trained molecular biophysicist, theologian, Anglican priest, and former Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University, Hitchens attacked **vicarious redemption**, meaning the Christian claim that Christ bears the consequence of human sin. Hitchens called redemption through the punishment of another “**utterly immoral.**” ([Christopher Hitchens and Alister McGrath, public debate, 2007.](#))

If Christian atonement meant that an angry God grabbed an uninvolved innocent person, tortured him instead of the guilty, and then pretended justice had been satisfied, Hitchens would have identified that as a serious moral problem.

But that is not what the Bible teaches or historic Christian theology. The word **atonement** means God’s action in dealing with sin and reconciling sinners to Himself. Christianity does not say the Father seized an unrelated human victim and punished him against his will. God “emptied Himself” and became a human to die on the Cross ([Philippians 2:5-11](#))

In **2 Corinthians 5:19**, Paul writes that **God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself**. In **John 10:17–18**, Jesus says His life is not merely taken from Him; He lays it down willingly. ([2 Corinthians 5:19](#); [John 10:17–18](#).)

Christian theology understands Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the one God. The Son's self-offering is therefore not God abusing an unrelated third party. It is divine love-based self-giving.

Think of forgiveness even at an ordinary human level. If someone destroys something you own and you forgive him without demanding repayment, the cost does not evaporate; somebody absorbs it. Christianity claims the Cross is infinitely greater: God does not ignore evil, yet neither does He abandon sinful humanity. In Christ, God bears the cost of reconciliation Himself.

Hitchens was correct about one thing: Christianity without atonement is no longer recognizably historic Christianity. Christianity is not merely “be kind like Jesus.” Its center is **who Jesus is and what He accomplished**.



Evidence Trail 9: Richard Dawkins—Admiring Jesus While Rejecting His Identity

If Hitchens wielded rhetoric like a sword, **Richard Dawkins (born 1941)** brought the prestige of modern science into the New Atheist movement. Dawkins is an Oxford-trained evolutionary biologist, former Charles Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, and author of *The Selfish Gene*, *The Blind Watchmaker*, and *The God Delusion*. His 2006 bestseller ***The God Delusion*** became one of the most popular atheist books of the twenty-first century.

Dawkins' scientific career deserves respect, but evolutionary biology is not the academic discipline that determines what first-century Jewish texts meant. No one puts on a lab coat and becomes an expert at everything.

In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins' attitude toward Jesus is surprisingly mixed. He can admire portions of Jesus' ethics while—like Hitchens--attacking Christianity's doctrines of original sin and atonement, and he doubts that Jesus understood Himself in the divine terms later Christianity attributes to Him.

That is where the boundaries of expertise matter. Questions about what a first-century Jewish teacher meant by forgiving sins, claiming authority over Sabbath, invoking Daniel's Son of Man, speaking with authority within Torah, interpreting His death as ransom, and being worshiped inside early Jewish Christianity belong to **New Testament history, ancient languages, and Second Temple Judaism**, not evolutionary biology.

The historical problem for Dawkins is therefore not simply whether one likes Christian theology. It is why this astonishingly elevated treatment of Jesus appears so early. Dawkins is out of his league to address such issues.

That is why followers of Dawkins who are looking for truths about Jesus would do far better to turn to scholars like **Dr. Richard Bauckham (born 1946)**. Bauckham studied history at Cambridge, earned his Ph.D. there, became Professor of New Testament Studies at the University of St Andrews, and is a Fellow of both the British Academy and Royal Society of Edinburgh. His work focuses heavily on Christology, the Gospels, Jewish monotheism, and eyewitness tradition. ([Richard Bauckham, Jesus and the God of Israel; Jesus and the Eyewitnesses.](#))

Likewise, see also the work of **Dr. Larry W. Hurtado (1943–2019)**, Professor of New Testament Language, Literature and Theology at the University of Edinburgh and founder of its Centre for the Study of Christian Origins, spent decades studying exactly how early devotion to Jesus arose. His monumental *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* examines how Christians treated Jesus in prayer, hymns, confession, invocation, worship, and sacred practice very close to the movement's beginnings. ([Larry W. Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ.](#))

Did Jesus Teach Hatred of Family?

Dawkins also criticizes Jesus' "family values," especially **Luke 14:26**, where Jesus says anyone who does not "hate" father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, and even his own life cannot be His disciple.

To modern ears, that can sound alarming, but the language functions as Semitic hyperbole—deliberately shocking comparative language emphasizing that loyalty to God outranks even the strongest natural relationships. Jesus does not teach people to abuse or abandon their parents.

In **Mark 7:9–13**, Jesus condemns those who use religious excuses to avoid caring for father and mother. He reaffirms the commandment to honor parents, and while dying on the Cross He arranges for His mother's care through the beloved disciple in **John 19:26–27**. ([Luke 14:26; Mark 7:9–13; John 19:26–27.](#))

The point in Luke is radical allegiance, not contempt for family.

Dawkins and the Atonement

Dawkins' moral criticism of atonement resembles Hitchens'. Again, however, it often treats Jesus as though Christianity describes an unwilling third-party victim. Historic Christian theology claims something much more profound: the eternal Son willingly enters humanity's condition and gives Himself.

Original sin also needs careful explanation. It does not mean a newborn personally committed Adam's historical act. It means humanity inherits a fallen condition—alienation, corruption, disordered desire, mortality, and a universal tendency toward sin. The Cross therefore becomes not divine sadism, but divine rescue.

Dawkins Meets John Lennox

Dawkins publicly debated these larger issues with **Dr. John C. Lennox (born 1943)**, Northern Irish mathematician, Oxford Professor of Mathematics Emeritus, philosopher of science, and Christian author. Their 2007 *God Delusion Debate* placed Dawkins' naturalism—the view that physical nature is ultimately all that exists—against Lennox's Christian theism. ([Richard Dawkins and John Lennox, *The God Delusion Debate*, 2007.](#))

Lennox's key observation remains useful for the average reader: science can brilliantly describe mechanisms operating inside nature without thereby deciding every historical or metaphysical question. A telescope is the wrong instrument for determining whether Caesar crossed the Rubicon, just as a genetics laboratory is the wrong instrument for deciding whether Pontius Pilate crucified Jesus. Historical claims require historical evidence.



Evidence Trail 10: Horus, Mithras, and the Pagan-Copycat Myth

The internet age produced one of the most confident accusations against Christianity: Jesus was supposedly copied from older pagan gods. Memes and videos announce that the Egyptian god **Horus** was born of a virgin on December 25, had twelve disciples, was crucified, buried, and rose three days later. Others make nearly identical claims about **Mithras**.

It sounds devastating until we ask for the ancient texts.

In the Egyptian Osiris-Isis-Horus cycle, Isis is the wife and sister of Osiris. After Osiris is murdered and dismembered, Isis reassembles him and conceives Horus in relation to the restored Osiris. That is not Matthew or Luke's virginal conception. The surviving Egyptian material presents Isis as wife of Osiris and mother of Horus, not as a virgin mother corresponding to Mary. ([Metropolitan Museum of Art, materials on Isis, Osiris, and Horus.](#))

Egyptian religious material also prominently features the **Four Sons of Horus**, not a group of twelve apostles paralleling Jesus' disciples. Nor is there an ancient Egyptian Passion narrative in which Horus is condemned under Roman authority, nailed to a cross, buried like Jesus, and bodily raised on the third day before named followers. ([British Museum, materials on Egyptian deities and the Four Sons of Horus.](#))

The alleged parallel is created by taking later Christian vocabulary and attaching it loosely to very different Egyptian stories.

Mithras fares no better. Roman Mithraic iconography famously portrays him emerging from a rock rather than being born through a virgin Jewish mother. He is not presented in the ancient Mithraic evidence as a Galilean teacher with twelve apostles, condemned by Pontius Pilate, crucified outside Jerusalem, and bodily raised before historical followers.

Broad religious motifs do not establish literary copying. Many religions use water, light, meals, sacrifice, or cosmic imagery. The real question is whether earlier texts contain the distinctive narrative later supposedly copied by Christians.

Dr. Edwin M. Yamauchi (born 1937), Brandeis Ph.D., Professor Emeritus of History at Miami University, and specialist in ancient history, biblical archaeology, Persia, and early Christianity, has spent much of his career working directly with the religions commonly invoked in these comparisons. His comparative work repeatedly warns against collapsing genuinely different ancient traditions into superficial modern parallels. ([Edwin M. Yamauchi, studies in ancient religion and early Christianity.](#))

The more fundamental problem for pagan-copy theories is chronological and cultural. Paul's letters are already circulating in the AD 50s, and traditions embedded within them are earlier. Jesus' crucifixion takes place under Pontius Pilate within first-century Judea. Christian proclamation grows from Jewish Scripture, Jewish Messiah expectation, Jewish Passover, Jewish resurrection hope, Jewish monotheism, and the Temple world.

The evidence points overwhelmingly toward **Judaism**, not Egyptian or Persian mythology, as Christianity's immediate theological soil.



Evidence Trail 11: Was Jesus Turned Into God Centuries Later?

This objection is far more sophisticated than internet Horus memes and therefore deserves much closer attention. Some modern scholars argue that Christian ideas about Jesus developed over time, and in one sense that is true. The Church spent centuries finding increasingly precise language to describe the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The word **Christology** simply means the study of who Christ is—His identity, nature, mission, and relationship to God. Scholars legitimately debate how different New Testament authors express Christology and how Christian language developed.

But the popular claim that Jesus remained merely human until Constantine or the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 is historically untenable because the chronology is far too early.

Paul Is Already There in the AD 50s

Paul's undisputed letters are our earliest surviving Christian documents. In **1 Corinthians 8:6**, Paul writes that for Christians there is **one God, the Father**, from whom are all things, and **one Lord, Jesus Christ**, through whom are all things.

This matters because Paul is a Jewish monotheist. **Monotheism** means belief in one God. Paul has not abandoned Jewish belief in one God, yet he places Jesus inside an extraordinary confession concerning creation and divine lordship. ([1 Corinthians 8:6.](#))

In **Philippians 2:5–11**, Paul uses material many scholars regard as an early Christian hymn or confession. Christ is described as existing in the **form of God**, taking the form of a servant, dying on the Cross, and receiving universal homage. ([Philippians 2:5–11; Larry W. Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ.](#))

The significance is not merely what Paul says; it is **when** he says it. We are approximately twenty years after Jesus' death, not three centuries, and many scholars think Paul is drawing upon material older than the letter itself.

Romans 10 and the Name of the LORD

In **Romans 10:9–13**, Paul tells believers to confess Jesus as Lord and then draws upon the Old Testament prophet Joel's language about calling upon the name of the LORD. For a first-century Jewish thinker, that is not casual vocabulary. Paul is integrating Jesus into the religious language of Israel's one God in a way that demands explanation. ([Romans 10:9–13; Joel 2:32.](#))

Why Worship Matters

This is where **Dr. Richard Bauckham** becomes especially important. Bauckham argues that ancient Jewish monotheism drew a decisive practical boundary between Creator and creature through **worship**. Angels could be astonishing, patriarchs revered, and prophets honored, but worship belonged uniquely to God.

Bauckham's scholarship examines why placing Jesus within worship inside a Jewish-monotheistic framework is historically remarkable. His argument is not simply that Christians eventually developed lofty language about Jesus, but that the earliest Christian sources place Jesus astonishingly close to the divine identity within the fiercely monotheistic world of Judaism. ([Richard Bauckham, Jesus and the God of Israel; "The Worship of Jesus in Apocalyptic Christianity."](#))

Larry Hurtado and the Earliest Devotion to Jesus

Turning back to **Dr. Larry W. Hurtado**, Professor of New Testament Language, Literature and Theology at the University of Edinburgh, he approached the same question from another direction. Instead of beginning with later creeds, he asked what the earliest Christians actually **did** with Jesus: whether they invoked Him, sang about Him, confessed Him, baptized in relation to Him, prayed in His name, and treated His name as sacred.

His answer was yes—and very early. His major studies argue that intense devotion to Jesus arose astonishingly close to the origins of the Christian movement rather than after centuries of theological evolution. ([Larry W. Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ; How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?](#))

That creates a formidable historical problem for the theory that Jesus' deity was invented at Nicaea.

Ignatius Is Already Calling Jesus God

Ignatius of Antioch (c. AD 35–c. 110), bishop of Antioch, wrote while being transported to Rome for execution in the early second century. His letters use strikingly elevated language about Jesus, including formulations that openly identify Him as God. ([Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Ephesians; Letter to the Romans.](#))

Ignatius is writing roughly two centuries before Nicaea. The Council of Nicaea in AD 325 therefore did not vote on whether Jesus should suddenly become divine. It wrestled with **how the divine Son relates to the Father**, especially in response to Arius, who denied that the Son was eternal in the same way as the Father.

You cannot plausibly explain fourth-century debates about the nature of Christ by claiming fourth-century Christians had only just invented His divine status. Nicaea refined the theological vocabulary surrounding a conviction already deeply embedded in Christianity's earliest centuries; it did not create the phenomenon.



Evidence Trail 12: Jesus' Mission—What Was He Actually Trying to Accomplish?

Another question from my early study deserves restoration: **What were Jesus' objectives?**

Jesus did not simply wander Palestine dispensing disconnected moral aphorisms. His preaching, symbolic actions, confrontation with religious authorities, gathering of twelve disciples, announcement of God's kingdom, warnings of judgment, and movement toward Jerusalem form a coherent mission.

N.T. Wright has emphasized that Jesus took Israel's long expectation of divine restoration and applied it to His own vocation. The selection of **twelve disciples** itself almost certainly carried symbolic meaning, evoking Israel's twelve tribes and signaling restoration. ([N. T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God.](#))

Jesus announced God's kingdom, but remarkably, He made His own actions the signs that the kingdom was arriving. He healed, forgave, welcomed outsiders, confronted corruption, claimed authority over

Sabbath, entered Jerusalem in deliberately royal symbolism, acted dramatically in the Temple, predicted judgment, and interpreted His own approaching death as part of the divine plan.

This is where simplistic descriptions such as “nice moral teacher” become inadequate. Jesus’ mission is **eschatological**, meaning it concerns God’s decisive action in history and the ultimate destiny of His people. He believed something decisive was happening through Him, and the remaining question is what.



Evidence Trail 13: Why Was Jesus Crucified?

People sometimes say Jesus was killed merely because He taught love. Rome did not normally crucify people for teaching kindness.

Crucifixion was a brutal public execution associated especially with slaves, rebels, insurgents, and those considered threats to Roman order. The Gospels portray two overlapping dimensions to Jesus’ death. In the Jewish religious setting, His claims and actions created profound conflict concerning His authority, Temple symbolism, Messiahship, and relationship to God. In the Roman setting, the charge that reached Pilate was political: **King of the Jews**.

The sign placed over Jesus’ cross announced precisely that royal charge. **Helen K. Bond**, whose scholarship specializes in Jesus’ political and historical setting under Roman rule, places the Crucifixion squarely within Pilate’s administration, while Tacitus independently remembers *Christus* as having been executed under Pilate. ([Helen K. Bond, “Pontius Pilatus”; Tacitus, Annals 15.44.](#))

This means the Cross is not an embarrassing detail Christian writers invented to make Jesus look impressive. Crucifixion was shameful. For first-century Jews, a crucified Messiah was profoundly counterintuitive; for Romans, crucifixion advertised defeat.

Yet Christianity placed the Cross at its center because Jesus and His followers believed the execution meant far more than Rome intended.



Evidence Trail 14: Jesus Interpreted His Own Death as Redemption

Jesus' extraordinary self-understanding would not by itself establish its truth. History contains people who believed astonishing things about themselves, so the next question is crucial: **Did Jesus interpret His mission in a way consistent with Christianity's later proclamation?**

The Gospel evidence says yes. In **Mark 10:45**, Jesus says the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and **“to give His life as a ransom for many.”** A **ransom** is a price associated with liberation. Jesus therefore does not present His death merely as an unfortunate political execution; He gives it redemptive meaning. ([Mark 10:45.](#))

At the Last Supper, Jesus takes the Passover cup and says in **Mark 14:22–24** that it represents His **blood of the covenant**, poured out for many. The word **covenant** means a binding relationship established by God with His people. Jews hearing Jesus at Passover inhabited a world shaped by Exodus, covenant blood, deliverance, sacrifice, and forgiveness. ([Mark 14:22–24; Exodus 24:8.](#))

Jesus places His approaching death inside that story. Paul later states the early Christian summary in **1 Corinthians 15:3**: **“Christ died for our sins.”** ([1 Corinthians 15:3.](#))

The interpretation of Jesus' death as redemptive is therefore not a medieval invention. It belongs near Christianity's beginning and grows directly out of the Jewish world in which Jesus understood His mission.



Evidence Trail 15: What Does “The Lamb of God” Actually Mean?

One reason modern readers can miss the force of Jesus’ mission is that expressions such as “**Lamb of God**,” “**Passover**,” “**atonement**,” and “**covenant blood**” sound religious but foreign. My old study recognized this problem, asking what an average modern reader is supposed to understand when John the Baptist calls Jesus the Lamb of God.

To a first-century Jewish audience, these images belonged to a story already centuries old. The **Passover** reached back to Israel’s deliverance from Egypt. In Exodus 12, judgment was coming upon Egypt, and Israelite households were instructed to sacrifice a lamb and mark their doors with its blood. The Passover lamb was not simply a generic “sin offering”; it became the sign of God’s rescue from judgment and liberation from slavery. (Exodus 12.)

Alongside Passover stood Israel’s larger sacrificial system. Leviticus describes sacrifices associated with purification, guilt, thanksgiving, fellowship, and atonement. **Atonement** means dealing with the barrier created by sin so that reconciliation with a holy God becomes possible. (Leviticus 1–7; 16.)

Against that background, John the Baptist’s announcement becomes far more striking. In **John 1:29**, he sees Jesus and declares, “**Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.**” ([John 1:29.](#))

The New Testament book of Hebrews later argues that animal sacrifices were never God’s final answer to human sin. They belonged to a system pointing beyond itself toward Christ’s once-for-all self-offering. (Hebrews 9–10.)

Christianity therefore does not portray Jesus as another unfortunate religious martyr. It presents Him as the fulfillment of the sacrificial pattern itself—the One who announces rescue and then becomes the Rescuer who bears the cost.



Evidence Trail 16: The God Who Came Down

At this point, the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation can be understood more clearly. Decades ago, I came across an illustration that has remained with me ever since. I used it in a former treatise, but it bears repeating here.

Imagine a farmer preparing to plow a field and noticing an anthill directly in the tractor’s path. The ants are busily carrying food, digging tunnels, and preserving their tiny colony, completely unaware that destruction is approaching. The farmer desperately wants to warn them, but shouting, waving, and attempting to redirect them only creates confusion because the gulf between their world and his is too great.

Finally he imagines what it would take truly to communicate with them. If somehow he could enter their world, move among them, communicate at their level, and say, “Follow me—I know what is coming, and I know the way out,” the barrier between rescuer and rescued could finally be crossed.

The illustration is obviously limited. The distance between a human being and an ant is infinitesimal compared with the distance between the eternal Creator and creation. Historic Christianity certainly

does not teach that God simply changed from one kind of creature into another. Rather, it teaches that the eternal Son **assumed a genuine human nature without ceasing to possess His divine nature.**

Yet the illustration still captures something of the astonishing movement Christianity proclaims. God did not merely shout directions from an unreachable distance. He had already revealed Himself through creation, conscience, covenant, Law, prophets, and Scripture, and Christianity claims that in the fullness of time **He entered the human story Himself.**

The infinite Creator entered human history. He was born, experienced hunger, exhaustion, friendship, grief, rejection, pain, and death. He walked human roads, ate at human tables, wept at a grave, touched lepers, welcomed children, confronted hypocrisy, forgave sinners, and looked human beings in the eye.

The early Church understood this claim with remarkable clarity. **Athanasius of Alexandria (c. AD 296–373)**, bishop, theologian, and one of Christianity’s most influential defenders of the full deity of Christ, summarized the Incarnation with the famous words: **“He became man that we might become divine.”** By this Athanasius did not mean that human beings literally become God by nature, but that the eternal Son entered our humanity so that fallen human beings might be restored, transformed, and brought into fellowship with God. Elsewhere in *On the Incarnation*, he argues that the Word came personally because humanity could not rescue itself from corruption and death. For Athanasius, then, the Incarnation was not a decorative doctrine added to Christianity; it was the very heart of God’s rescue mission—**the Creator entering His creation in order to reclaim it from within.**

The Incarnation also answers a deeper philosophical problem: **How can finite human beings truly know an infinite God?** Christianity’s answer is not that humanity climbed upward far enough to discover Him, but that God stooped downward to make Himself known in a form we could encounter. That is why the New Testament repeatedly presents Jesus not merely as one who speaks about God, but as the One in whom God is uniquely revealed—“the image of the invisible God,” the One in whom, as **Colossians 2:9** declares, **“all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,”** and the One who can say, “Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father.” The claim is staggering because it means Christianity is not ultimately centered on humanity’s search for God, but on **God’s decision to make Himself personally knowable within history.** If that claim is true, then Jesus is not simply another rung on the religious ladder; He is the point at which the One above the ladder descended to us.

John says it with breathtaking economy: **“The Word became flesh.”** Christianity therefore does not claim merely that another messenger arrived with information about God; it claims that the eternal Word entered human history. ([John 1:1–14.](#)) To conclude anything less is not orthodox Christianity.



Evidence Trail 17: If God Really Became Man, What Might We Expect?

Decades ago, while first working through these questions, I wrote down a simple thought experiment: **If God really became human, what kind of life might we reasonably expect?** That question is not itself proof, but it is worth considering.

If God entered human history, I would expect something unusual surrounding His entrance into the world. I would expect words of extraordinary moral and spiritual depth, an unusual moral character, and acts interpreted by those closest to Him as signs of authority over nature, sickness, sin, and death. I would also expect His life to exert an influence wildly disproportionate to His (or others') political power, wealth, formal education, military strength, or social position.

This brings us naturally to Jesus' reputation as a healer and exorcist. Even critical historical-Jesus scholarship commonly recognizes that Jesus was remembered very early as someone whose ministry included extraordinary healings and exorcisms, although historians disagree over how those events should ultimately be explained. **Craig S. Keener (born 1960)**, Duke University Ph.D. and Professor of Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary, has devoted extensive research to miracle claims both in the New Testament world and comparatively across cultures. The historian may investigate testimony, setting, reputation, and explanatory possibilities; the historian cannot simply assume in advance either that miracles must have occurred or that they cannot occur. ([Craig S. Keener, Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts.](#))

If God truly entered human history, I would also expect a life that somehow gathers together categories that normally remain separate. I would expect extraordinary compassion without moral softness, authority without political office, humility without uncertainty about identity, holiness without

withdrawal from sinners, and a message universal in scope yet rooted in a particular historical people and place. That is precisely what makes Jesus so difficult to reduce to an ordinary religious founder. He teaches with remarkable moral clarity while claiming authority that belongs to God; He welcomes social outsiders while confronting hypocrisy with severity; He identifies Himself with Israel's Scriptures while speaking as though those Scriptures ultimately point toward His own mission; He predicts suffering rather than avoiding it; and He inspires followers not merely to preserve His teachings but to center their worship, loyalty, hope, and understanding of salvation upon Him personally. Even the scale of His subsequent influence is historically extraordinary. A first-century Jew from a small Roman province, without military force, wealth, state patronage, or institutional machinery during His lifetime, becomes the central figure of a movement that reshapes civilizations, languages, ethics, art, law, education, charity, and the religious imagination of billions. Influence by itself cannot prove deity, but the combination of Jesus' claims, character, deeds, historical impact, and the earliest conviction that death itself had failed to contain Him creates exactly the kind of cumulative historical footprint one might reasonably investigate if the Christian claim of Incarnation were true.

The sheer historical impact of Jesus has also impressed scholars who have approached Him as a subject of cultural history rather than merely Christian devotion. **Jaroslav Pelikan (1923–2006)**, longtime Sterling Professor of History at Yale University and one of the twentieth century's most distinguished historians of Christianity, opened his landmark study *Jesus Through the Centuries* with the observation that, regardless of what anyone personally believes about Him, **“Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries.”** Pelikan's point was historical, not merely theological: the influence of this first-century Jewish teacher became so immense that entire civilizations have wrestled with His identity, interpreted His teachings, dated history in relation to His birth, produced vast traditions of art and literature around Him, and repeatedly reorganized their moral and religious thought in response to Him. None of that proves the Incarnation by itself, but it does sharpen the question raised by this Evidence Trail: **What sort of life produces a historical aftershock so wildly disproportionate to the earthly power its subject ever possessed?**

Above all, if Jesus explicitly claimed that death would not have the final word over Him, I would expect the truth or falsity of that claim to become decisive. This thought experiment does not prove Christianity; it simply asks what sort of historical footprint would be surprising if left by an ordinary provincial teacher and considerably less surprising if Christianity's claim were true.

Jesus possessed no army, throne, fortune, printing press, university, bureaucracy, or political machinery. Yet His words, identity, death, and alleged Resurrection became the center of a movement that rapidly crossed ethnic, geographic, linguistic, and cultural boundaries.

That extraordinary disproportion prepares us for the claim Christianity itself says decides everything.



Evidence Trail 18: The Prophetic Fingerprint

Christianity has historically argued that Jesus did not arrive unannounced. Israel's Scriptures created expectations concerning a coming king, covenant restoration, divine rescue, suffering, judgment, forgiveness, and God's kingdom.

The prophetic case is much stronger when presented as a **cumulative biblical pattern**. **Genesis 12:1–3** begins the promise that blessing through Abraham will reach the nations. **Genesis 49:10** associates Judah with kingship, while **2 Samuel 7:12–16** establishes expectations surrounding David's royal line.

Micah 5:2 associates Bethlehem with a future ruler, and **Zechariah 9:9** portrays Israel's king arriving humbly. **Isaiah 52:13–53:12** presents the mysterious servant suffering, bearing the iniquities of others, being cut off, and ultimately vindicated.

Christians have historically seen Isaiah 53 as one of the strongest Old Testament windows into Jesus' suffering and atoning death. Jewish interpreters have frequently understood the servant corporately as Israel, and scholars debate aspects of the passage. Responsible Christian scholarship should acknowledge that discussion rather than pretend every verse has only one uncontested interpretation.

At the same time, the Christian reading did not arise centuries after Christianity broke from Judaism. The New Testament itself is already reading Jesus through Isaiah's suffering servant, and scholarship has shown that Jewish interpretation before and around the early Christian era could contemplate suffering and redemptive or eschatological readings of such texts.

Daniel 7:13–14 portrays "one like a son of man" receiving dominion over the nations, while **Psalms 110:1** speaks of David's Lord seated at God's right hand. Jesus and the earliest Christians repeatedly return to these passages.

A stronger scholarly way to understand the significance of this convergence is to look not for artificial mathematical odds, but for the way messianic expectation develops across the Hebrew Scriptures themselves. **Walter C. Kaiser Jr. (1933–2020)**, longtime Old Testament scholar and former president of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, argued in *The Messiah in the Old Testament* that messianic hope unfolds progressively from the Pentateuch through the Psalms and Prophets rather than being imposed retrospectively upon a few scattered verses.

Similarly, **Michael Rydelnik (born 1955)**, professor of Jewish Studies and Bible at Moody Bible Institute and editor of *The Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy*, has likewise emphasized the central place of messianic prophecy in the earliest Christian case for Jesus. The significance, then, is not that anyone can assign a defensible numerical probability to Jesus' fulfillment of prophecy, but that **multiple independent strands of Israel's hope—Davidic kingship, Abrahamic blessing, covenant, suffering, sacrifice, kingdom, divine authority, restoration, and worldwide blessing—converge with unusual concentration in one historical figure.** The real question is therefore not, "What are the mathematical odds?" but rather, **"How does one first-century Jewish man come to embody so many distinct and centuries-old strands of Israel's expectation at once?"**

That cumulative pattern also helps answer the objection that Christians simply searched backward through the Old Testament after Jesus' death and selected convenient verses. Certainly the earliest Christians reread Israel's Scriptures in light of what they believed had happened in Jesus, but the categories they used were already there: Davidic kingship, suffering, covenant, sacrifice, kingdom, restoration, and the hope of God's decisive intervention. The Christian claim is therefore not that Jesus resembles a handful of isolated predictions, but that **His life, mission, death, and exaltation repeatedly intersect with major themes that had already shaped Israel's expectations for centuries.**

The strength of prophecy therefore does not lie in selecting eight isolated verses, assigning numerical probabilities, and multiplying them together. It lies in the extraordinary convergence of **Abrahamic blessing, Davidic kingship, Passover, sacrifice, covenant, Temple, suffering servant, Son of Man, kingdom, forgiveness, resurrection hope, and restoration** around one Person.

What makes this convergence especially significant is that these themes arise from **different books, genres, authors, and centuries of Israel's history.** No single passage contains the entire Christian portrait of the Messiah, and that is precisely the point. The case is cumulative: royal expectation, suffering, covenant, sacrifice, kingdom, worldwide blessing, divine authority, and vindication gradually accumulate across the Hebrew Scriptures and are then brought together in the New Testament's presentation of Jesus. The argument is therefore not that one cleverly selected verse "proves" Christianity, but that Jesus fits an extensive and deeply rooted pattern that long predates His birth.

The New Testament claim is not merely that Jesus checked enough prediction boxes; it is that **Israel's story converged upon Him.**



Evidence Trail 19: The Resurrection—Where Christianity Risks Everything

At this point we reach the claim Christianity refuses to let us avoid: the bodily Resurrection. Paul says in **1 Corinthians 15:14–17** that if Christ has not been raised, Christian preaching is empty, faith is futile, and believers remain in their sins. Christianity therefore does not say merely that Jesus’ ideas live forever or that His influence remains with us; Paul says that if Jesus remained dead, **Christianity collapses**. ([1 Corinthians 15:14–17.](#))

Because the Resurrection deserves an investigation of its own, I am deliberately giving only the essential historical framework here. **Next week’s Tactical Tuesday will put the Resurrection itself under concentrated examination**, bringing together the strongest established evidence, current historical scholarship, the major skeptical alternatives, and some important newer evidence that deserves far more attention than it has received. For this investigation, however, we need enough of the Resurrection evidence to understand why it became inseparable from the earliest Christian answer to the question, “**Who is Jesus?**”

What Historians Broadly Agree On

Care is important here. Not every historian accepts every Resurrection argument. We should not claim that every scholar agrees the tomb was empty, that all five hundred mentioned by Paul physically touched Jesus, or that every apostle died specifically because he refused to deny the Resurrection.

We do not need those overstatements. The strongest historical ground is already formidable: Jesus died by Roman crucifixion; very shortly afterward His followers became convinced He had appeared to them alive; Resurrection proclamation did not arise centuries later; Paul himself moved from persecuting Christians to becoming Christianity's greatest missionary after an experience he interpreted as an encounter with the risen Christ; and James, Jesus' brother, became a major leader of the Jerusalem church.

The Early Tradition in 1 Corinthians 15

Paul writes around AD 53–55 in **1 Corinthians 15:3–8** that he is passing along material he had previously **received**: Christ died for sins, was buried, was raised, and appeared. The wording has the character of transmitted tradition, which means the Resurrection proclamation predates the letter itself and reaches back toward Christianity's beginning. ([1 Corinthians 15:3–8.](#))

The crucial historical issue is therefore not whether Christians eventually came to believe in the Resurrection, but how astonishingly early that conviction appears.

N. T. Wright and What “Resurrection” Meant

N. T. Wright (born 1948) has spent an enormous portion of his scholarly career examining resurrection belief inside ancient Judaism. His central point for the average reader is straightforward: ancient Jews did not ordinarily use **resurrection** to mean “his teaching lives on,” “his spirit is with God,” or “we feel his presence.” Resurrection referred to renewed embodied life after death. ([N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.](#))

That makes the earliest Christian proclamation highly specific. The disciples did not merely say Jesus' cause survived; they claimed God had done to Jesus, ahead of the general resurrection expected at the end of history, something unprecedented.

Gary Habermas and the Historical Core

Gary R. Habermas (born 1950), Michigan State University Ph.D. and Distinguished Research Professor at Liberty University, has spent decades cataloging scholarship concerning Jesus' death and Resurrection. His approach often emphasizes a smaller group of claims granted across a broad spectrum of scholars, sometimes called the **minimal facts approach**. ([Gary R. Habermas, studies of the Resurrection and minimal facts.](#))

That method is useful, but we should not pretend scholarly consensus is mathematically uniform. Methodological critiques have challenged attempts to attach overly precise percentages to scholarly agreement, which is another reason to make the strongest case from the best-attested historical evidence rather than inflated statistics.

The central point remains that the people closest to Jesus' death became convinced **extremely early** that He was alive again.

Naturalistic Alternatives

Could grief visions explain some experiences? Possibly. Could cognitive dissonance—the psychological tendency to reinterpret failure rather than abandon a cherished belief—help explain why

some followers remained committed? Perhaps. Those possibilities deserve examination rather than ridicule.

Yet neither explanation easily accounts for the entire phenomenon. Legend ordinarily requires time, while the Resurrection tradition appears very early. Merely saying that Jesus “lived on in their hearts” also sits awkwardly beside the Jewish meaning of resurrection and the explicitly embodied language of the Gospel traditions.

None of these considerations forces a supernatural conclusion upon someone who has already decided that supernatural action is impossible. But they make the historical problem considerably harder. The Resurrection proclamation is **early, central, specific, and historically consequential**, and the Christian explanation remains the one the earliest witnesses themselves gave: God raised Jesus from the dead.

For now, that establishes why the Resurrection belongs in an investigation of Jesus’ identity. **Next week we will ask the harder question directly: what happens when the Resurrection itself is placed on trial?**



Evidence Trail 20: The Liar and Lunatic Alternatives— Do They Really Explain Jesus?

My old study explored the classic alternatives that Jesus might have been a deliberate deceiver or a profoundly self-deluded man. Those categories are worth retaining, but they should be handled more carefully than older apologetic slogans sometimes did.

Historical sources cannot provide a modern psychiatric examination of Jesus, and we should not pretend they can. Yet neither do the earliest traditions naturally portray a disorganized fanatic or cynical religious confidence man. Jesus argues coherently, handles Scripture with sophistication, anticipates objections, debates hostile interpreters, maintains a consistent proclamation of God's kingdom, confronts His own followers when necessary, and knowingly walks toward consequences He repeatedly predicts.

A critic may still conclude that Jesus was mistaken about Himself, but simply labeling Him “crazy” does not explain the portrait. Likewise, the fraud hypothesis raises serious questions. If Jesus knowingly fabricated claims about divine authority, Messiahship, judgment, and His own mission, then the deception would have to coexist with a body of moral teaching praised even by many of His critics, a repeated denunciation of hypocrisy, and a willingness to undergo death rather than retreat from His vocation.

None of that mathematically proves honesty, but it makes “conscious fraud” historically costly as an explanation. This is the context in which C. S. Lewis's famous argument retains force.



Evidence Trail 21: C. S. Lewis and the Failure of the “Just a Good Teacher” Escape Route

Many Americans want a comfortable middle position. They reject atheism's hostility toward Jesus, admire His kindness, quote the Golden Rule, and appreciate the Sermon on the Mount, but do not want Him to be Lord.

C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), former atheist, Oxford literary scholar, longtime Fellow and Tutor at Magdalen College, and later Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English at Cambridge University,

understood that impulse. Lewis was not a professional New Testament historian, and I do not cite him as one. He was a literary scholar asking whether the Gospel portrait can coherently be reduced to “good moral teacher.”

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis argues that if Jesus really spoke the way the Gospels portray Him speaking, the merely-great-teacher category becomes extremely difficult to maintain. His famous description of the delusional alternative includes the memorable comparison to a man claiming to be “a poached egg.” ([C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*](#).)

The broader argument is often summarized as **Lord, liar, or lunatic**. That summary can be too simplistic because a fourth historical possibility exists: perhaps Gospel writers attributed claims to Jesus that He never made. That is precisely why the earlier Evidence Trails matter.

Lewis’s argument does not stand by itself. But once there are good reasons to take the Gospel portrait seriously, his challenge becomes powerful. A sane moral teacher does not casually claim authority to forgive sins, lordship over Sabbath, universal judgment, preexistence before Abraham, resurrection in His own Person, and exclusive access to the Father.

If those claims are substantially authentic, merely calling Jesus a “nice moral teacher” is not moderation. It is refusing to confront what He actually claimed.



Evidence Trail 22: Jordan Peterson—When the Modern Search for Meaning Runs Into Jesus

One of the most interesting contemporary encounters with Jesus comes from someone who has drawn millions of people back toward the Bible without beginning as a conventional orthodox Christian teacher.

Jordan B. Peterson (born 1962) is a Canadian clinical psychologist, former Harvard University professor, former University of Toronto professor, bestselling author of *Maps of Meaning*, *12 Rules for Life*, and *We Who Wrestle with God*, and one of the most influential public intellectuals of recent years.

Peterson matters because many people who stopped listening to pastors have nevertheless listened to him talk about Genesis, Exodus, sacrifice, Logos, suffering, meaning, responsibility, and Christ for hours at a time. He has helped reopen the Bible for people who had assumed it was intellectually childish or culturally exhausted.

Yet Peterson also illustrates the difference between finding Jesus **meaningful** and confessing Jesus **Lord**. For years, Peterson approached Christ primarily through the language of **archetype**. An archetype is a recurring psychological or narrative pattern—a model that appears across human stories and behavior. Christ, in Peterson’s framework, can represent the ultimate embodiment of truth, voluntary sacrifice, courage, responsibility, suffering, and Logos.

A Christian can appreciate much of that, but Christianity claims more. It says Jesus is not merely the most profound symbol humanity ever generated; it says the Word actually **became flesh**, which means something happened in history.

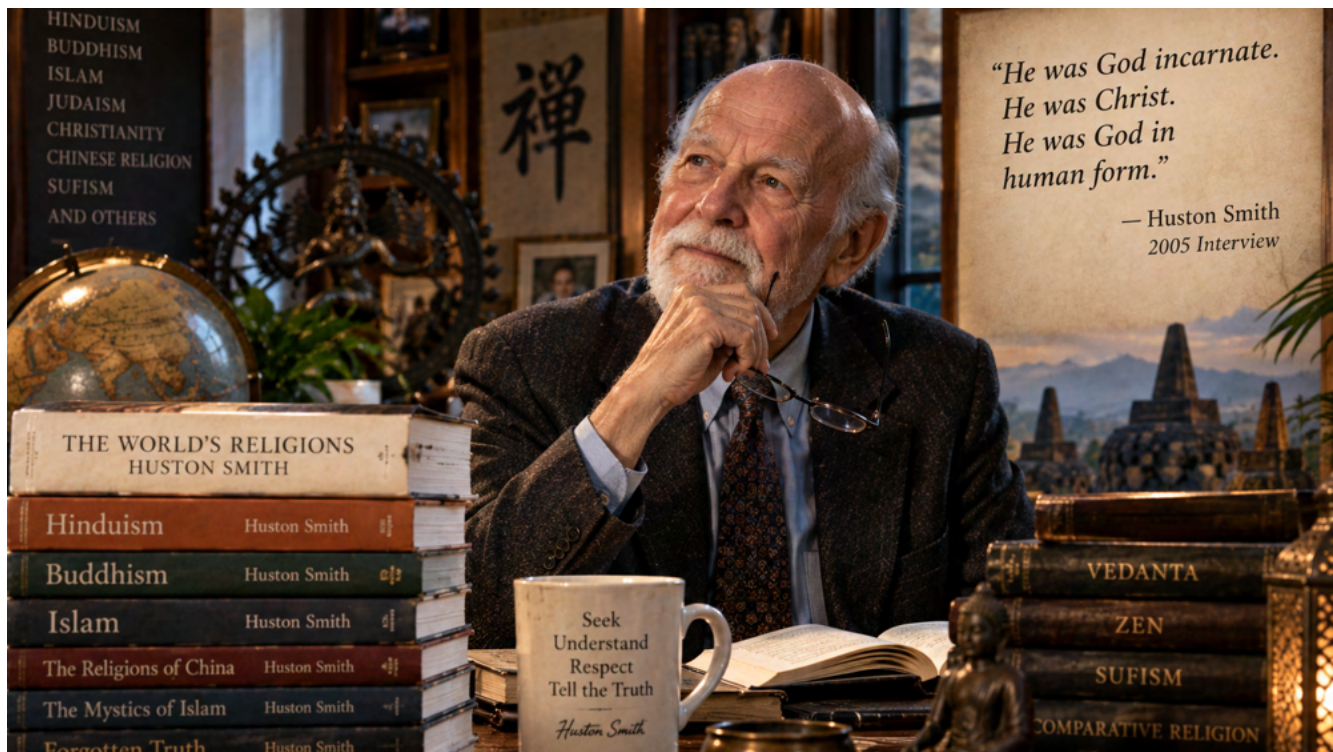
Alex O’Connor Presses the Question

This distinction became particularly clear when young atheist philosopher and interviewer **Alex O’Connor (born 1999)** pressed Peterson directly about the Resurrection. O’Connor understood that if Christianity says Jesus physically died and bodily rose, symbolic language cannot finally replace the historical question.

Peterson has described denial of Jesus’ historical existence as a fool’s errand. When O’Connor asked him to imagine a camera outside the tomb and whether it would have recorded Jesus emerging, Peterson indicated that he **suspected yes**, while also acknowledging that he continued to wrestle with what precisely the Resurrection means. ([Jordan B. Peterson, conversation with Alex O’Connor, Episode 451, 2024.](#))

That is significant movement from speaking only in archetypal categories, yet it also reveals the remaining tension. From an orthodox Christian perspective, the Cross can symbolize voluntary sacrifice **because a real crucifixion occurred**. The Resurrection can symbolize triumph over death because Christianity claims **a dead Jesus actually rose**. The psychological and archetypal meaning does not replace the historical event; it rests upon it.

Peterson has helped many modern skeptics realize that Scripture is intellectually deeper than they imagined. But Christianity finally asks Peterson, and every one of us, something more personal than whether the story is psychologically profound: **Is it true?**



Evidence Trail 23: Huston Smith—After a Lifetime Studying the Alternatives

Another voice from our previous investigation deserves to return because few modern scholars spent more of their lives inhabiting the world’s religious traditions.

Huston Smith (1919–2016), born in China to Methodist missionary parents, earned his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1945, taught at Washington University, MIT, Syracuse University, and Berkeley, and wrote *The World’s Religions*, one of the most influential comparative-religion books of the twentieth century.

Smith did not study other religions only from a desk. He immersed himself in Vedanta Hinduism, practiced Zen, studied Islam, explored Sufism, and engaged deeply with Asian religious traditions. That does not make his opinion proof, but it makes his answer to a direct question about Jesus particularly interesting.

In a 2005 interview, Smith was asked who Jesus was. His answer was remarkably direct: **“He was God incarnate. He was Christ. He was God in human form.”** ([Huston Smith, BeliefNet interview, “God Speaks to Each Person in Their Own Language,” 2005.](#))

Smith knew Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Chinese religion, and mystical traditions intimately. Yet when asked to place Jesus into a category, he did not describe Him merely as another prophet, Buddha, sage, or moral genius. His answer was **God incarnate**.

Smith’s personal conclusion cannot substitute for historical evidence. Its significance is that a man who spent a lifetime studying the alternatives still recognized that Jesus does not fit comfortably into the categories adequate for the other great religious teachers.



Evidence Trail 24: So What Is the Positive Case That Jesus Is the Son of God?

After answering the major objections, the case cannot remain purely defensive. The question is not merely why Russell, Hitchens, Dawkins, mythicists, pagan-copy theorists, or late-divinity theories are inadequate. We must also ask whether there is a cumulative positive case pointing toward the Christian conclusion.

The first strand is straightforward: **Jesus is historically real**. His existence is accepted across the mainstream of historical scholarship, including by scholars who reject Christian supernatural claims. Josephus supplies Jewish evidence, Tacitus supplies Roman evidence, and the Christian sources arise extremely early by ancient historical standards. The argument has therefore moved far beyond the question of whether there was a Jesus and toward the far more consequential question of who He was.

A second strand is **Jesus' extraordinary self-understanding**. The Gospel traditions portray Him forgiving sins, claiming authority over Sabbath, speaking with personal authority inside Torah, identifying Himself with Daniel's heavenly Son of Man, making response to Himself decisive, and—especially in John—speaking in strikingly elevated terms about His relationship to the Father. No single episode must carry the entire argument; the cumulative pattern is what demands explanation.

A third strand is **the meaning Jesus gives His own death**. He speaks of His life as a ransom for many and of His covenant blood poured out for others. The earliest Christians then proclaim that Christ died for sins. The Cross is therefore not an accident that later believers desperately tried to theologize away; redemptive meaning stands very near the center of the earliest tradition.

A fourth strand is **the extraordinarily early devotion directed toward Jesus**. Paul already places Christ inside elevated monotheistic language. Philippians 2 presents preexistent divine status, humiliation, Cross, exaltation, and universal confession, while Romans 10 places Jesus inside language drawn from Israel's Scriptures concerning the LORD. Hurtado documents devotional practices surrounding Jesus at the movement's beginnings, while Bauckham shows why such devotion is especially remarkable inside Jewish monotheism.

A fifth strand is **the extraordinary immediacy of Resurrection proclamation**. Paul receives Resurrection tradition before writing 1 Corinthians, while Peter, James, Paul, and the earliest Jerusalem community are already organized around the conviction that Jesus was raised. Whatever explanation one finally accepts, the belief itself cannot plausibly be pushed centuries away from the events. As noted above, the entire historical case for that event will become the subject of next week's *Tactical Tuesday*.

A sixth strand is the way **Jesus fits Israel's unfolding biblical story**. Christianity's central categories arise from Abraham, Moses, Passover, David, Psalms, Isaiah, Daniel, Temple, sacrifice, covenant, Messiah, kingdom, and resurrection rather than from a late pagan collage. Christians did not simply grab unrelated religious motifs from around the Roman Empire and manufacture a Savior; they interpreted Jesus through the Scriptures and expectations of Israel.

A seventh strand is the **remarkable coherence of the entire picture**. Jesus' Jewish setting, His claims about Himself, His authority over sin and Sabbath, His interpretation of His death, the prophetic patterns of Israel's Scriptures, the earliest worship directed toward Him, and the immediate proclamation of His Resurrection do not sit as unrelated curiosities. They reinforce one another. The more these strands are examined together, the harder it becomes to explain Jesus adequately as merely a teacher, prophet, political martyr, later legend, or religious symbol. None of the individual pieces, taken alone, compels the conclusion that Jesus is the Son of God. But the cumulative force matters: **the Christian explanation uniquely draws the historical, theological, prophetic, and devotional evidence into one coherent account of who Jesus believed Himself to be, why He died, why His followers worshiped Him, and why they became convinced that God had vindicated Him by raising Him from the dead.**

Finally, Christianity makes an unusually risky historical claim. It could have remained safely philosophical by saying only that God is love, people should forgive each other, and life has meaning. Instead it says a particular man lived under particular rulers, was executed by a particular Roman method, and that His followers proclaimed Him physically alive afterward.

Paul then says that if this central claim is false, the religion is false. That is not the language of a faith trying to insulate itself from history. It is a faith putting its central proclamation in history and inviting investigation.



Evidence Trail 25: What History Can—and Cannot—Prove

Before reaching the final verdict, we need to understand what historians can reasonably be expected to establish. A historian cannot place Jesus' divine nature under a microscope, repeat the Crucifixion in a laboratory, travel back to Jerusalem with a video camera, or conduct DNA tests on the people standing outside the empty tomb. "Jesus is the eternal Son of God" is ultimately a theological and **metaphysical** conclusion. *Metaphysical* simply means that it concerns ultimate reality—questions such as God, existence, mind, meaning, and realities that cannot be reduced merely to physical measurement.

But that limitation is not unique to Christianity. **History cannot experimentally prove any past event in the same way chemistry can repeatedly demonstrate a reaction under controlled laboratory conditions.** The past is gone. It cannot be rerun.

No historian can recreate **Julius Caesar's (100–44 BC)** crossing of the Rubicon in 49 BC and watch the original event occur. We infer it from ancient testimony and the events that followed. No historian can return to Athens in 399 BC and record **Socrates (469–399 BC)** drinking the hemlock; indeed, Socrates himself wrote nothing, and we reconstruct his life and final years chiefly through ancient witnesses such as Plato and Xenophon.

Likewise, no historian can transport himself to 331 BC to watch **Alexander the Great (356–323 BC)** defeat **Darius III (c. 380–330 BC)** at Gaugamela, nor can we follow **Hannibal (247–c. 183 BC)** across the Alps with a modern camera during his invasion of Italy in 218 BC. We cannot stand beside **Julius Caesar** when he is assassinated in 44 BC, listen to every exchange inside the Roman Senate, and then replay the scene under laboratory conditions.

Yet historians do not therefore shrug and declare Caesar, Socrates, Alexander, and Hannibal matters of blind faith. They compare sources, chronology, geography, archaeology, independent testimony, hostile or unsympathetic testimony, manuscript transmission, explanatory power, and the later developments that would be difficult to explain if the reported event never occurred.

Historical knowledge operates primarily through **inference to the best explanation**, not laboratory repetition.

Even when historians are highly confident that an event occurred, there are details history may never recover. History may establish that Caesar crossed the Rubicon without telling us precisely what every soldier said that evening. It may establish that Socrates was executed without giving us a verbatim audio recording of every sentence spoken during his final hours. It may establish that Alexander won at Gaugamela without allowing us to know every private thought in Alexander's mind as the battle began.

The same principle applies much nearer our own time. Historians know that **George Washington (1732–1799)** crossed the Delaware River on Christmas night in 1776 and attacked the Hessian garrison at Trenton. Yet no historian possesses a film of the crossing, a complete transcript of every conversation in every boat, or direct access to Washington's mind at every moment. We know the event through documents, military records, eyewitness testimony, geography, material evidence, and the enormous chain of consequences that followed.

Historians know that **Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865)** was shot at Ford's Theatre on April 14, 1865, and died the following morning. No modern scholar can reproduce the assassination experimentally. We do not need to. The documentary, physical, eyewitness, medical, and contextual evidence is overwhelming.

This distinction is enormously important because skeptics sometimes demand a level of "proof" from Christianity that they would never demand from the rest of history. If "prove" means **mathematical certainty or direct laboratory reproduction**, then the historian cannot prove Caesar crossed the Rubicon, Socrates drank the hemlock, Washington crossed the Delaware, or Lincoln was assassinated either. If "prove" means demonstrating that an event is overwhelmingly or reasonably the best explanation of surviving historical evidence, then historians routinely reach strong conclusions about events that nobody living today directly observed.

The same principle applies to archaeology, a subject I examined more fully in ***The RECENT TOP 10 Archaeology PROOFS of the BIBLE***. Archaeology can discover an inscription naming Pontius Pilate, excavate first-century Jerusalem, examine tombs, identify coins, reconstruct Roman administration, and test whether places and people mentioned in Scripture belong to the appropriate historical setting. It cannot excavate a layer stamped "**Jesus is the eternal Son of God.**" Archaeology tests historical context; it does not directly adjudicate theology. [The RECENT TOP 10 Archaeology PROOFS of the BIBLE](#)

Science has a similar boundary. In ***The Scientific Evidence for God*** and ***The ERRORS in Evolution—Scientists Speak Up***, I explored what scientific investigation can tell us about the origin, order, intelligibility, fine-tuning, biological complexity, and history of the natural world. Science is enormously powerful at investigating physical processes, but no laboratory instrument can directly measure purpose, moral obligation, the ultimate worth of a human being, or God Himself as though the

Creator were one more physical object inside His universe. [The Scientific Evidence for God The ERRORS in Evolution—Scientists Speak Up](#)

History therefore cannot chemically test deity, but it **can** investigate the historical claims surrounding deity. It can ask whether Jesus existed, whether He lived within the Jewish world described by our sources, whether He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, whether His followers quickly proclaimed Him risen, whether extraordinarily high beliefs about Him appeared only centuries later, whether early Jewish Christians included Him within their worship and devotional practices, and whether our earliest traditions portray Him claiming extraordinary personal authority.

On those questions, the evidence is substantial. Jesus existed; His crucifixion under Pilate is among the most secure facts of His life; His movement arose rapidly; remarkably high beliefs about Him appear within Christianity's first generation rather than centuries later; and His earliest followers undeniably became convinced that God had raised Him from the dead.

What history cannot do is force the historian to accept a supernatural explanation. A person may examine all of that evidence and begin with the rule, **“Whatever happened, God did not do it, because miracles cannot happen.”** But notice what has occurred. The exclusion of the miracle did not arise from historical investigation; it was imposed upon the investigation beforehand as a philosophical assumption.

That distinction became increasingly important in my own journey from atheism. I had assumed Christianity was impossible before determining whether Christianity was historically credible. I eventually realized those were two entirely different questions.

If there is no God, then of course God did not raise Jesus. But if there is good reason to believe a transcendent Creator exists—a question I addressed at length in *The Scientific Evidence for God*—then a Resurrection is no longer logically impossible. It would remain extraordinary, unprecedented, and something requiring extraordinary historical evidence, but it could no longer be dismissed merely because dead people ordinarily stay dead.

That is precisely why the Resurrection matters so profoundly. Christianity is not claiming that ordinary biology inexplicably stopped working. It is claiming that **the Creator of biology acted deliberately within history to vindicate Jesus of Nazareth.**

And that claim brings history to the edge of a question history alone cannot answer for us: after weighing what can be established about Jesus, **what explanation best accounts for the whole evidence?**



Evidence Trail 26: Why Does the Question Become So Personal?

There is another reason the Jesus question feels unlike most historical questions. Whether Alexander the Great crossed a particular river may fascinate the historian without demanding anything from the reader on Monday morning, and whether Caesar said a particular sentence may alter a footnote without altering a life.

But if Jesus truly is who He claimed to be, the conclusion cannot remain safely inside an academic notebook. It reaches into authority, morality, worship, forgiveness, mortality, and the ownership of one's life. The question is no longer merely whether an interesting event occurred in antiquity, but whether the One at the center of that event possesses a rightful claim upon us now.

My forty-year-old study ended by wrestling with precisely that issue. Why, if the evidence becomes compelling, does the conclusion remain so difficult? Wright has observed that accepting Jesus' claim is costly because the claim concerns not merely an interesting religious figure, but rightful allegiance. ([N. T. Wright, Who Was Jesus?](#))

That helps explain why the Jesus question can become existential rather than merely academic. If the historical conclusion were simply, "Jesus was a fascinating Galilean rabbi," we could admire Him and move on. If Peter was right, we cannot.

The Verdict: Was Jesus Really the Son of God?

We began with the answers Americans give to Jesus' question, and the polling already revealed something important: Jesus remains deeply admired, yet Americans remain divided over what that

admiration means. Some confess Him as God incarnate, others regard Him as a uniquely inspired teacher or prophet, and still others are uncertain. The polls can count the answers, but they cannot determine which answer is true.

That required following the evidence.

Bertrand Russell regarded Jesus as morally inferior to Buddha and Socrates and even entertained doubt about whether He existed, yet the historical existence of Jesus is so well established that prominent agnostic scholars such as Bart Ehrman themselves reject mythicism.

Christopher Hitchens condemned the Cross as immoral, but his objection lands most forcefully against a picture of substitution detached from the Incarnation and the Son's voluntary self-offering. Historic Christianity does not present an unwilling stranger being punished by an unrelated deity; it presents God acting in Christ to reconcile fallen humanity to Himself.

Richard Dawkins admires aspects of Jesus' moral teaching while rejecting His divine identity and atonement, but evolutionary biology does not settle historical Christology. The earliest Christian evidence places Jesus in an extraordinarily elevated position long before the fourth century, and the Jewish context makes that early devotion far more historically remarkable than a simple "legend grew over time" explanation suggests.

Horus and Mithras have been invoked as pagan originals, yet the ancient evidence refuses to cooperate with the popular comparison charts. The supposed parallels depend largely upon broad similarities, later reinterpretations, or claims for which the required ancient texts simply do not exist. Christianity's immediate theological matrix is plainly Israel's Scriptures and first-century Judaism.

The Council of Nicaea has likewise been accused of inventing Jesus' deity, but Paul, Philippians, Romans, early Christian worship, Hurtado, Bauckham, and Ignatius all arrive centuries too early for that theory. Nicaea argued over how the Father and Son should be understood in relation to one another; it did not suddenly decide that a previously ordinary Jesus should become God.

Jesus Himself has been reduced to a moral teacher, yet the Gospel traditions give us a man who forgives sins, claims lordship over Sabbath, speaks with extraordinary personal authority inside Torah, identifies Himself with Daniel's heavenly Son of Man, makes human destiny turn upon response to Him, gives His life as ransom, and interprets His blood as covenantal.

Then comes the Resurrection—not a legend first appearing in medieval Christianity and not a fourth-century imperial doctrine, but an announcement already embedded within Christianity's earliest surviving generation. The earliest Christians did not merely announce that Jesus' principles survived His death; they proclaimed that God had raised Him.

Taken together, the alternative explanations begin to carry less and less historical weight. The earliest evidence stands too close to Jesus' lifetime to comfortably support a centuries-late invention; the claims associated with Him are too extraordinary to reduce Him easily to an ordinary moral instructor; devotion to Him appears too early within Jewish Christianity to blame Nicaea; the Cross is too central to His interpreted mission to dismiss as a later theological attachment; and the Resurrection proclamation appears too near Christianity's beginning to explain simply as a legend slowly accumulating over generations.

None of this allows us to put the Son of God under a laboratory instrument and produce a chemical reading marked “divine,” any more than a laboratory can replay Caesar crossing the Rubicon, Socrates drinking the hemlock, Washington crossing the Delaware, or Lincoln’s assassination. History does something different: it asks what explanation best accounts for the surviving evidence. After following that evidence from skepticism through decades of study—across science, archaeology, comparative religion, Scripture, and the historical Jesus—I came to believe that the Christian explanation does.

That brings me back to the question that first caught the attention of an atheist young man staring at a television screen decades ago. The question that began with Tracy telling me about someone I barely understood, and then suddenly seeing that same Jesus presented as a real figure of history, has followed me ever since: **Who was this man?**

One Solitary Life

There may be no more fitting way to step back from the manuscripts, scholars, debates, ancient texts, atheist objections, Jewish context, Roman history, and theological arguments than the famous meditation commonly called *One Solitary Life*.

Its author was **James Allan Francis (1864–1928)**, Canadian-born Baptist pastor who eventually served First Baptist Church of Los Angeles. The meditation grew from his 1926 sermon “**Arise, Sir Knight!**”, later published in *The Real Jesus and Other Sermons*, and subsequent adaptations carried its central imagery around the world. ([James Allan Francis, *The Real Jesus and Other Sermons*, 1926.](#))

Francis asks us to contemplate the extraordinary contrast between the apparent smallness of Jesus’ earthly life and the immensity of His historical influence. He was born far from the centers of imperial power, raised in an ordinary village, and spent much of His early life working with His hands. He held no political office, commanded no army, accumulated no great fortune, wrote no surviving book of His own, established no university, and controlled no earthly empire.

For only a brief public ministry He taught, healed, confronted, forgave, challenged, and gathered disciples. Then public opinion turned against Him. One follower betrayed Him, another denied Him, and others fled. His enemies arrested Him, a Roman governor sentenced Him, soldiers mocked Him, and He was nailed to a cross.

By every ordinary measurement of ancient political power, the story should have ended there. Rome had crucified thousands, Judea had produced other Messianic movements, and Galilee had known other teachers. Empires do not normally reorganize themselves around executed provincial Jews.

Yet the name of Jesus did not disappear with His execution. His followers carried His message across the Mediterranean, preaching in synagogues, homes, marketplaces, and eventually before political authorities. His words were copied, translated, argued over, defended, rejected, rediscovered, sung, painted, preached, and carried across cultures Rome itself had never imagined controlling.

Men and women suffered rather than renounce Him, and communities bearing His name eventually established churches, schools, hospitals, charities, missions, universities, orphanages, and institutions across continents. His teaching became one of the formative moral and intellectual influences upon Western civilization while simultaneously spreading far beyond the West into Africa, Asia, Latin America, and virtually every inhabited part of the globe.

Francis' famous conclusion reflects that the armies that marched, navies that sailed, parliaments that sat, and kings that reigned have not together affected human life as profoundly as **one solitary life**.

After following the evidence in this investigation, perhaps we can understand why that life was never truly ordinary. The carpenter from Nazareth who wrote no book became the subject of libraries. The prisoner condemned by Pilate outlasted Pilate. The man Rome crucified became Lord to people living beyond Rome's wildest geographical imagination, while the Teacher without earthly office became the One before whom kings eventually knelt.

The man I first encountered decades ago as an atheist staring at a television screen still refuses to remain merely an interesting figure in history. Jesus does not finally ask whether Bertrand Russell approved of His doctrine of judgment, whether Christopher Hitchens found atonement morally acceptable, whether Richard Dawkins admires His ethics, whether Jordan Peterson finds Him psychologically profound, whether a historian finds Him fascinating, what Gallup or Barna says Americans believe about Him, or whether I can assemble an impressive file of evidence about Him.

He asks the same question He asked His disciples in **Matthew 16:13–17**. First He asks about public opinion: **“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”** The disciples tell Him that people are placing Him among Israel's great prophets. Then Jesus strips away every secondhand verdict, every public-opinion poll, every historian's reconstruction, and every safe category and turns the investigation toward the individual.

“But who do YOU say that I am?”

Peter answered, **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”** Jesus responded that this recognition had not ultimately been revealed merely by human reasoning but by His Father in heaven. ([Matthew 16:13–17.](#))

After following the Evidence Trail—from my first encounter with Jesus as a skeptical young man, through the historians, Jewish witnesses, Roman sources, Gospel traditions, atheist objections, early Christology, the Cross, the Incarnation, prophecy, and the earliest Resurrection proclamation—I came to believe Peter was right.

The investigation therefore ends exactly where Jesus intended the question to end. Not merely with what Bertrand Russell said about Him, what Richard Dawkins thinks about Him, what a historian reconstructs about Him, what a pastor preaches about Him, what a church creed declares about Him, or even what I have concluded about Him.

It ends with the question Jesus places before every reader:

“BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”

Your verdict on that question may be the most consequential verdict you will ever render.

COMING NEXT WEEK in Tactical Tuesday...

Did Jesus REALLY Rise From the Dead?

This investigation has repeatedly brought us to the Resurrection because it is impossible to ask seriously **who Jesus was** without eventually confronting what His followers said happened after Rome killed Him. But we have intentionally stopped short of placing the entire Resurrection case before the reader, because that evidence deserves an investigation all its own.

Next week we will take the most consequential event-claim in Christianity and put it under concentrated historical examination. We will look at the earliest Resurrection material, how close it stands to the events themselves, what happened to the disciples after the Crucifixion, what transformed Paul from persecutor to apostle, why James became a leader of the Jerusalem church, what can and cannot responsibly be said about the empty tomb, why women appear at the center of the Gospel discovery narratives, and what the major skeptical alternatives actually explain—or fail to explain.

We will examine legend, grief experiences, hallucination proposals, cognitive dissonance, deliberate fabrication, mistaken-tomb theories, stolen-body theories, and other naturalistic explanations. Rather than merely repeating familiar apologetic arguments, we will distinguish carefully between what historians regard as bedrock, what is strongly supported but debated, what Christian tradition has sometimes overstated, and what the newest scholarship may allow us to say with greater confidence.

We are also going to bring the investigation **up to date**. That means revisiting some familiar evidence with stronger historical methodology, discarding arguments that do not carry the weight Christians sometimes place upon them, and examining **newer evidence and developments that many Christians—and many skeptics—have probably never encountered**.

The objective will not simply be to retell the Easter story. It will be to ask the same question we have asked throughout this series: **What actually happened, what can history reasonably establish, and which explanation best accounts for the evidence?**

Paul understood exactly what hangs upon the answer. If Jesus remained in the grave, Christianity is not merely weakened; its central historical claim has failed. But if Jesus really walked out of that tomb, then the question of His identity changes forever.

Next week, we put the Resurrection on trial.

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