

“Christmas: Cross Examined”

This is how Jesus Christ was born.....Matthew chapter 1

By all accounts Jesus is famous. Whether as the identity who split the timeline in two, your favourite swearword, or your claimed Lord and Saviour, Jesus is rarely more in the spot light than at Christmas time. But who is Jesus?

The answer to this question hinges on Jesus’ birth and his life. Yet, like all good stories, if the beginning is wrong, it casts doubt over the entire account. What can we know about Jesus 2,000 years on? Are the accounts we have of his life trustworthy? Can we believe that many details of his life were really prophesied hundreds of years before his birth?

Are miracles possible?

With the Biblical accounts claiming Jesus was born of virgin, did miracles such as walking on water and returning to life from death, it’s reasonable to want to know why the impossible is said to be possible. The issue in a nut shell comes down to whether God exists. If a supernatural being, God, exists, then he can do supernatural things. Philosopher Peter Kreeft gives 20 Arguments for God’s existence, available at http://www.peterkreeft.com/topics-more/20_arguments-gods-existence.htm

What can we know about Jesus?

The birth and life of Jesus of Nazareth is a well accepted fact of history and no longer seriously debated by historians regardless of their background or personal belief. What causes debate though is what we can know about him and what he did during his life. The evidence for Jesus’ birth and life come from a number of sources including, but not limited to, the accounts within the Bible.

1. Eye witness accounts:

The most cogent and compelling evidence for the details of Jesus’ birth and life come from the four biographies of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The gospels strictly speaking are anonymous however the uniform testimony of the early church was that Matthew was a tax collector and one of the 12 disciples of Jesus was the author of Matthew which you see first in your bible; John Mark was a companion of the disciple Peter; and the author of the book of Mark and that Luke was known as Paul’s beloved physician and also wrote the book of Acts. For these three gospels there are no known competitors as apparently their authorship was just not in dispute. John is very well regarded as having been written by John the son of Zebedee one of Jesus disciples and close friends.

Most likely Mark and Luke at least were actually written 30 years after Jesus death but at most even very critical scholars would say within 50 years of his death. And in addition to these four gospels we have even earlier accounts of Jesus’ life contained in church creeds

like 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul within only 5 years of Jesus' death passes on a creed he's received that affirms Jesus' death, his resurrection, and gives a detailed list of who Jesus appeared to, alive.

By comparison, the biographies of Alexander the Great—written by Arrian and Plutarch—were recorded more than 400 years after Alexander's death in 323BC, yet historians consider those biographies generally trust worthy.

So what you have in the Gospels is early accounts of Jesus' life, written right on top of the events, at a time when people who knew Jesus were still alive and they were based on eye witness accounts either written by or based on testimony from his contemporaries.

2. Accounts outside the Bible

In addition there are sources outside of the Bible that talk about Jesus' life. We have the work of the early church fathers—the disciples of the disciples. But we also sources hostile to Christians. The most important Roman historian of the first century period was Tacitus and he makes reference to Jesus as an historical figure, as well as Josephus the most important Jewish historian writing toward the end of the 1st century AD and other sources like the Roman historian Suetonius, or the Roman official Pliny the Younger. All these sources confirm key details of Jesus' life found in the Bible.

3. Physical evidence:

Archaeology strongly supports the accuracy of the Gospels and can corroborate particular details. Only last year in May the Israel Antiquities Authority announced the discovery of an ancient small clay seal, approximately from 2,000 years ago, that mentions Bethlehem, which is where Jesus was born. That is the first piece of physical evidence that mentions the existence of Bethlehem.

4. DNA evidence:

DNA evidence is typically used in trial to confirm a person's identity. The correlation with Jesus is that God has stamped the Bible with the DNA of Jesus the Messiah in the form of prophecies. The eye witness accounts of his life tell us what happened—what he did. It is the fulfilled prophecy that confirms he was divine. It is uncontroversial that these prophecies existed before Jesus' birth.

What would a World without Jesus Look Like?

"Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about Him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of western culture for almost 20 centuries. If it were possible, with some sort of super-magnet, to pull up out of that history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of His name, how much would be left?" - Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan

Perhaps it's easier to answer what a Jesus-less world would look like if we got a clear picture of Jesus' legacy in this world—in his life, in history, and even today. And this influence is far reaching, for Jesus' life "has been not only the highest pattern of virtue, but the strongest incentive to its practice" (noted historian and skeptic, William Lecky).

There's a lot of truth to the idea that people believe Christmas should be less about the birth of Jesus and more about snuggles and snow flakes. It won't be long before we see modern nativity scenes with little baby Santa in the manger, and frosty and the three wise Snowmen who brought him gifts. Slowly our culture is diluting the 'Christ' in 'Christmas' by making Jesus just one of many symbols of the 'true meaning of Christmas'. So what real difference does Jesus' birth make thousands of years later? There are too many ways Jesus has changed human history to mention here. But let's look at just a few.

Many historians acknowledge the role that Christianity played in founding hospitals as places where the sick and dying could come and find mercy and treatment. Even today many hospitals right here in Brisbane still reflect their Christian origin. And it's not surprising that Christians would be linked to health care when you read how compassionately Jesus dealt with those inflicted by physical disease. Just one story, for example in Matthew 8, shows Jesus' compassionate response to leprosy.

It was this kind of example of the loving kindness of Jesus that inspired a new attitude toward helping the sick. After Constantine's adoption of Christianity in the 4th Century, Christians built numerous hospitals. And then in 325 A.D. the council of Nicaea made a ruling that decreed hospitals were to be established wherever the church was established. Jesus has also had a profound impact in shaping the culture of modern day nursing care. Florence Nightingale, considered to be the founder of modern nursing, received much of her inspiration for her work from Jesus. Following Jesus' example, she chose to care for the wounded. Her written work profoundly shaped modern medicine and nursing care.

But health care isn't the only way Jesus' birth has changed human history. Without the birth of Christ there would be no William Wilberforce, whose life work was to abolish slavery; no mother Teresa, whose charities care for millions of dying, disadvantaged men and women. It was Christ who empowered these kinds of men and women to show impossible, unthinkable, incredible, world changing love—and these qualities formed the inspiration for Christian charities still working today. The leader of the Salvation Army said "If you ask how many families were helped by Salvation Army it is more than 10 million families a year. *And there wouldn't be Salvation Army without a saviour.*"

Relevance to us

But what about us? What relevance does this have to you and me, to the problems we face every day? The birth of Jesus demonstrates several incredibly relevant and personal lessons. Firstly, it shows us is that **God cares about us**. Jesus' choosing to be born a baby is under-cover boss on steroids. The founder and CEO of life, God, cares about humanity and its problems enough to become one of us... but amazingly he doesn't consider us

employees, he wants us to be his children. The fact that God is willing to become a man shows an incredible love for us and an unimaginably deep desire to have the most intimate relationship possible. The fact that Jesus was born as one of us means that he understands us. It means he understands what you have been through because he's experienced life as a human.

Secondly, even more incredible is that Jesus' birth doesn't just mean God cares—it means *there's hope for us*. God didn't just become a man so that he could experience our suffering; he became a man so that he could end our suffering, physical, emotional and spiritual suffering. Jesus' birth demonstrates that God has gone to the most incredible lengths to intervene to fix this broken world. We have hope that God has stepped in to take on the problems of this world, but more than that he's taken on our problems, my problems ... your problems.

Jesus' greatest work was to make a difference to our eternal hope. Jesus modelled incredible compassion and love which changed human history. But even more significant is the fact that, if the child in that manger 2000 years ago really was born, and he really was God's son and he died for us, then it means we can be forgiven of the wrong we've done, and if we chose to, we can have an eternal relationship with our loving father God, and that is the greatest difference of all.

Conclusion: If you're a Christian then follow the example of Jesus, not just at Christmas but always. Show people just how much Jesus' birth has made a difference for good in this world by modelling his example to those in need. And if you're not sure really what significance Jesus' birth has for you, just know that Jesus is real, he is alive and the difference he's already made is that he loved you enough that he died for you so that you might be forgiven—and if you choose, you can 'find' God this Christmas.¹

Discussion Questions

- (1) What impacted you most in this talk? Download the manuscript and small group discussion guide from <http://logos.kbc.org.au/blog/resources/logos-talks/christmas-cross-examined/> to jog your memory.
- (2) What is your view of Jesus? If someone asked you what you based your view on—what evidence you had considered—what would you say?
- (3) Have you left Jesus as a baby, merely human? Read the gospel of Mark (it's the shortest) and form a fresh view of Jesus this Christmas.
- (4) Do you think Jesus' life has changed the world? What changes can you see?
- (5) Have you ever met someone who said Jesus changed their life? Share your stories.
- (6) Have you responded to Jesus' legacy? Spend some time considering how you might, in God's strength, live this legacy, making the world better & sharing Jesus life with others.

¹ Like to know more about how Jesus has changed human history? See "What if Jesus Has Never Been Born", a book by James Kennedy, or the video series by James Kennedy available from <http://www.godtube.com/watch/?v=P6YGNNX>