

MidWeek - Problems with Christianity

Week 4 - The Problem of Jesus

Who Is Jesus?

- Common responses
- Why does this question matter?
 - It's **everything**..¹
 - “No person in history has provoked as much study, criticism, prejudice, or devotion as Jesus of Nazareth.”²

Worldview Answers

- Atheism - We can never know the **true historical** Jesus, assuming he existed.
- Selfish - Jesus is who I **understand** him to be.
- Theism - Jesus is the **Messiah, God** the Son.

Three Common Objections and Responses

- Objection 1: Jesus didn't **exist**.
 - Response: **History** says he did.
- Objection 2: The Jesus in the gospels was **created** by the church, we can't know the true historical Jesus.
 - Response: [Ask them to acknowledge] “We all have **presuppositions** that affect what we will **accept** as historical truth.”
 - “Is there any amount of evidence that could convince you that Christianity is true?”
 - Remember, we can't prove Jesus beyond all **doubt**.

¹ See also - William Lane Craig, Reasonable Faith, 287ff

² R.C. Sproul, Crucial Questions

- “The goal of historical knowledge is to obtain probability, not mathematical certainty.”³
- Response: “We **can** know the true Jesus from Scripture - why aren’t the gospels **historically** reliable?”
 - [Summary from last week] The gospels were:
 - **Eyewitness** accounts (or scribes for the eyewitness accounts in the case of Mark for Peter and Luke for Paul)
 - First started by **controlled** oral tradition (see 1 Cor 11:2 and 15:1; 2 Thess 2:15)
 - Then written down **thousands** of times and circulated for the early church
 - There is internal and external **evidence** that the church knew it was the inspired, authoritative Word of God
 - Internal (Biblical) Evidence - the church recognized it as Scripture
 - 1 Timothy 5:18 / Luke 10:7
 - 2 Peter 3:16
 - 1 Thess 2:13
 - External Evidence - Early Church Fathers
 - “You have searched the Scriptures, which are true and given by the Holy Spirit.” - Clement of Rome, first century.
 - “All Scripture which has been given to us by God is perfectly consistent.” - Irenaeus of Lyons, second century.
 - “The churches believe these writings to be divine.” - Origen, third century.
- Response: “If the Bible isn’t historically reliable - can you give me an example of a **mistake** in the Bible?”
 - Example: The tearing of the temple curtain [Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45] at the death of Jesus could not have happened because the gospel accounts differ, there are no other records of it occurring, and also it’s impossible.
 - How would you respond?
 - Also, we need to read the other side to be equipped to respond. (See for example Bart Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels: How the Earliest Christians Remembered, Changed, and Invented Their Stories of the Savior*, 2016)

³ Craig, Reasonable Faith, 234.

- Response: “If the gospels were a creation of the church and are historically unreliable, then what was Jesus’ **self-understanding** of who he was?”
 - “Liar, lunatic, Lord” or **legend?**
 - In the (mythological) gospels, Jesus **understood** himself to be **God**.
 - He was aware he was the **Messiah** (Jesus the **Christ**)
 - Mark 8:27-30
 - Jesus was **executed** for claiming to be **God**.
 - He invoked the name of **Yahweh** of the Old Testament.
 - John 8:56-59
 - Matthew 14:27 (“I AM” in the Greek)
 - He said the **Kingdom** of God was “at hand/among you.”
 - Matthew 4:17
 - He referred to himself as the **Son** of **Man**.⁴
 - Connects the NT to the OT - fulfillment of Daniel 7
 - Matthew 9:6; 12:8; 17:12, etc.
 - He demonstrated control over **creation**.
 - Matthew 8:23-27
 - He did many **miracles**.⁵
 - “Jesus never prays for a miracle to be done; he may first express thanks to the Father, but then he effects it himself.”⁶
 - He taught with sole **authority**.
 - Matthew 5 “...you have heard it said, but I say to you...”
 - “Truly I say to you...”
 - He demonstrated control over **evil**.
 - Matthew 8:28-34

⁴ See Brant Pitre, “The Case for Jesus: Biblical and Historical Evidence for Christ,” 113ff

⁵ See Lee Strobel, “The Case for Christ: A Journalist’s Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus,” 135ff

⁶ Craig, Reasonable Faith, 324.

- Response: The early church unanimously thought of Jesus as the **Messiah**, **God** the Son.
 - “Within 20 years of the crucifixion a full-blown Christology proclaiming Jesus as God incarnate existed.”⁷
 - It was the consistent testimony of the church from the Scriptures thru the centuries that Jesus was God.
- Response: If he were merely a **legend**...then why did people react like he was **Lord**?
- Response: If the gospels are myths, they are not **written** that way.
 - “Now, as a literary historian, I am perfectly convinced that whatever else the Gospels are they are not legends. I have read a great deal of legend and I am quite clear that they are not the same sort of thing. They are not artistic enough to be legends. From an imaginative point of view they are clumsy, they don’t work up to things properly. Most of the life of Jesus is totally unknown to us, as is the life of anyone else who lived at that time, and no people building up a legend would allow that to be so. Apart from bits of the Platonic dialogues, there is no conversation that I know of in ancient literature like the Fourth Gospel. There is nothing, even in modern literature, until about a hundred years ago when the realistic novel came into existence.”⁸
- Objection 3: Jesus **loves** and **accepts** everyone, that is who he was.
 - Response: He was very harsh with the **religious** leaders
 - Matthew 23 rant
 - Why?
 - They lead people astray from God’s **law**. (So there was a standard!)
 - They failed to see Jesus as the **Messiah**. (So there is exclusivity!)
 - Response: He holds us to a higher standard of **holiness**.
 - Matthew 5:17-48

Big Idea: Jesus is who he says he is.

Next Week: Problem of Evil and Suffering

⁷ Craig, Reasonable Faith, 300.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, “What Are We to Make of Jesus?” 1950.