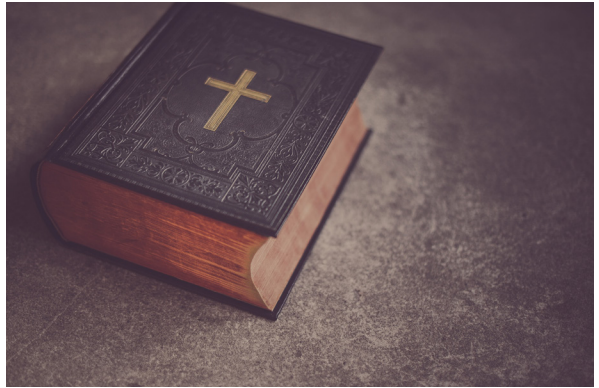


CHAPTER 3

GOD'S REVELATION (JESUS AND THE BIBLE)



Last chapter, we left off with a fairly bleak picture of the human predicament. Indeed, if God were, as many people are fond of claiming, just a far off, unconcerned deity, then we are lost forever, without hope. However, this is not the picture of God we find in the Bible. From the very first chapters of the Bible, God comes to a fearful Adam and Eve and asks, “Where are you?”

Yet, God’s presence is not so blatant as to be tangible and unambiguous. So how has God acted in history to make himself known? This chapter will explore how God has revealed himself through the Bible, and ultimately, through Jesus. But first, let’s consider some of the reasons God might have chosen to not disclose himself more directly.

WHY DOESN'T GOD JUST APPEAR?

If God really exists, why in Heaven’s name does God not prove that he exists instead of leaving us here in our terrible uncertainty? Why does he not show his face so that at last a despairing world can have hope? At one time or another, everyone asks such a question.

In some objectively verifiable and convincing way, we want God himself to demonstrate his own existence. Deep down in our hearts, I suspect that this is what all of us want, unbelievers no less than believers.¹

– Frederick Buechner,
The Magnificent Defeat

If an all-powerful God wanted to reveal himself to man, it would be a simple task. He could simply open the skies and shout for all to hear. Or, he could give a dramatic display of his splendor in the night sky in such an undeniable and magnificent way that everyone on earth would have to acknowledge that he is there. An argument can be made that since such a display would be easy

for God, and given that such revelations do not occur regularly, God does not exist. The argument seems compelling at first; in fact, the statement, "If God appeared to me right now in such and such a way, I would believe..." has been uttered repeatedly throughout history. Why, then, does God remain so hidden? If man has lost the knowledge of God through centuries of sin, and God is a caring God who has the power to enter into history with a clear display of his presence, why hasn't he?

Think for a moment: What would happen if God did what you asked him to do? Author Frederick Buechner imagines that such a spectacular display would cause an immediate response of terror, panic and awe. He imagines that churches would overflow into football stadiums and open fields, wars would stop, and a kind of uncanny hush would fall over the world. Then Buechner continues the imagined revelation:

Several years would go by and God's proof of himself would still be blazing away every night for all to read. In order to convince people that the message was not just some million-to-one freak of nature, I would be tempted to have God keep on rewriting it in different languages, sometimes accompanying it with bursts of pure color or with music celestial that finally the last hardened skeptic would be convinced that God must indeed exist after all.²

– Frederick Buechner,
The Magnificent Defeat

Surely that would convince everyone of the existence of God. However, Buechner contends that the fundamental question is: So what if God exists? What difference does that make? Although it's a profound revelation that would shake the intellectual foundations for the first generation that experienced it, what would that accomplish besides a certainty of knowledge that a powerful being exists? We need to know what God created us for. If God created human beings so that we would just be impressed by him, then such a celestial revelation would probably do the job. But if God desires a loving, trusting relationship with us, does a celestial sign accomplish that? Does speaking from the clouds do that? At best, these demonstrations can inspire awe and obedience, but that would be a far cry from (and even counterproductive to) a person relating to God as a beloved child to his heavenly Father.

Dr. Gregory Boyd in *Letters From A Skeptic* writes:

Think for a moment...what would happen if God did what you asked Him to do...if God individually wrote a message in the clouds for every person alive. What if He wrote, "Jesus is My Son. Believe in Him or perish"? Would all people now put their love and trust in Jesus Christ? I suspect not. When Jesus was here on earth and did all His miracles, those who didn't want to follow Him still doubted. When the Father spoke from heaven, "This is My beloved Son," those who didn't have a heart to believe said, "It thundered." [...]

God desires a loving, trusting relationship with us. We were created to this end. Does speaking from the clouds do that? [...] At best they can wow or scare people into submission (and that only temporarily). They can coerce obedience. [...] But they do not produce love.³

– Dr. Gregory Boyd,
Letters From A Skeptic

Perhaps God is interested in something more than a mere display of his power. If God is interested in a personal relationship, he would need to reveal more than his power.

Suppose you are a famous person eager for someone to get to know you. How would you get the other person to understand who you are as a person?

VEILED OUT OF MERCY

Another possible reason for God's hiddenness is that God is veiled out of mercy for us. He is veiled so that man can have some "elbow room" away from his overwhelming presence. Wise parents will sometimes deliberately reduce their presence when dealing with their children, knowing that to notice every infraction, every misdeed would stifle them. Occasionally, the parent will even look the other way to remain "hidden." This, of course, is the loving thing to do. Love often expresses itself in shrinking oneself down so others will not be overpowered. The unveiled presence of God, in all his holiness, would probably be traumatic for sinful man to experience.

Moses had once asked God if he could get a glimpse of his glory. God's reply to Moses is sobering:



Exodus 33:20

"But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live."

POWER GETS IN THE WAY

Read 1 John 4:8, 16.



1 John 4:8

Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.



1 John 4:16

So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

“God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16) is the shortest statement of God’s nature in the Bible. Demands for a display of God’s presence, which tend to focus on dramatic manifestations of power, miss this essential point. God is much more than mere power. He is love. In order for God to reveal this aspect of who he is, other aspects of his character—namely, his power and glory—must be veiled. If God is to relate to sinful and finite man, God must regulate his self-disclosure so that we are not overwhelmed by the more glaring aspects of his character.

Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard tells a parable, “The King and the Maiden”:

Suppose there was a king who loved a humble maiden...The king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power. No one dared breathe a word against him, for he had the strength to crush all opponents. And yet this mighty king was melted by love for a humble maiden. How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his kingliness tied his hands. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels and clothed her body in royal robes, she would surely not resist—no one dared resist him.

But would she love him? She would say she loved him, of course, but would she truly? If he rode to her forest cottage in his royal carriage... that too would overwhelm her. He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted a lover, an equal...For it is only in love that the unequal can be made equal.⁴

– Soren Kierkegaard,
Parables of Kierkegaard

If you were the king, what would you need to do to win the maiden’s love?

In order to convey the kind of personal knowledge required for a relationship, it is certainly understandable why God does not flex his cosmic muscles and reveal himself in a dramatic display of power. Further, because our understanding of power is often colored by themes of domination, conquest, fear and control, we are prone to misunderstand God’s power. Human beings have a stubborn tendency to view power in terms of something we can utilize and harness. Given our limited understanding and fallen tendencies, perhaps an awareness of God’s power would give us only one narrow, if not warped, perspective of who God is.

God chose, rather, to portray himself through the narratives of the Bible and most vividly in the person of Jesus Christ.

NARRATIVES THAT REVEAL

Friends who know each other very well often say something like: “We go way back...we’ve been through thick and thin together...” To know someone means to know something about their character, values, habits and inner qualities. These are learned only by seeing how people conduct their relationships, how they react to events, how they stand up under pressure, how they remain loyal through difficulties, how kind or generous they are, etc. These, in turn, can only be observed across time through actual events.

In fact, the Bible is full of just such narratives. The Bible is not so much a book full of commandments and legal codes as it is an account of God’s relationship with people. Much of the Bible is comprised of historical narratives of God’s relationship with certain individuals—Abraham, Jacob, Moses and King David, to name a few. These stories give a sense of who God is and what he is like.

Christians claim that the Bible is the Word of God—that is, the message by which God chose to reveal himself to humanity. But a fundamental difference exists between the Bible and the rest of the world’s sacred writings. William Lane Craig points out:

Christianity is not a code for living or a philosophy of religion; rather it is rooted in real events in history. To some this is scandalous, because it means that the truth of Christianity is bound up with the truth of certain historical facts, such that if those facts should be disproved, so would Christianity.

But at the same time, this makes Christianity unique because, unlike most other world religions, we now have a means of verifying its truth by historical evidence.⁵

– William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*

There is a false notion that still gets passed around among the uninformed, which is that the Bible is a myth that has no connection to secular historical sources. However, archaeological discoveries, along with non-biblical historical documents, have proven again and again the historicity of the Bible. From non-biblical historical sources alone, we can reconstruct the following facts regarding the events surrounding the New Testament:

- A young travelling rabbi named Jesus, born around 4 BC, started to teach in Israel around AD 26–27 and gathered a following of disciples.
- When public opinion turned against him a few years later, he was tried by a governor named Pontius Pilate under Roman rule (whose record survives to this day), and he was executed by crucifixion.

- Shortly thereafter, his disciples caused quite a disturbance with their proclamation that Jesus had risen from the dead.
- Despite severe persecution by the government, Christianity, with this strange message of the resurrection, spread to the point where it dominated the Roman Empire.
- By AD 313, Christianity had become so widespread that it was the only thing that Emperor Constantine could use as the unifying factor for the entire Roman Empire, issuing the Edict of Milan declaring the legality of Christianity.
- The eyewitnesses and contemporaries of Jesus left behind a historical record of Jesus' life, which together form the core writings of what we now call the Gospels.

EVIDENCE FOR THE RELIABILITY OF THE BIBLE

One might find it surprising that there is an overwhelming amount of supporting evidence for the historicity of the Bible. Although there is much to be said about the entire Bible, given our limitations in this reader and given that Christianity is primarily based on the historicity of Jesus and the events surrounding him, we will just touch upon Old Testament historicity and focus most of our attention on the reliability of the New Testament. As summarized by Dr. Gregory Boyd in *Letters from a Skeptic*, the approach should be the following:

I'm not asking you to accept on "blind faith" that [the Gospels] are God's Word. Forget about that altogether for right now. I'm simply saying, look at them as you would any ancient document. Apply to them the same criteria historians apply to other documents when they research history. And my contention is that, when the Gospels are treated in this critical-historical way, they fare very well and can be trusted to tell us a good deal about the person of Jesus Christ, enough, in fact, to know that God was present with him and working through him in a most significant way.⁶

– Dr. Gregory Boyd,
Letters from a Skeptic

ARCHAEOLOGY

Archaeology has confirmed countless passages in the Bible that were initially rejected by critics as unhistorical or contradictory to known facts.

Many critics in the last two hundred years have looked for holes in the Bible. They asserted, for example, that there was no evidence that the psalms from the Old Testament were written at the time of David (more than a thousand years before Christ) because they contain information not known in those days. They also postulated that Isaiah chapter 53 (from the Old Testament)

must have been written after Jesus by the Church to insert prophecies back into history because it contains specific details of Jesus' life and death. Since the earliest copies of Isaiah known to scholars were from the Middle Ages, the skeptical theory of these critics held sway.

Then in 1947 came the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, known as the greatest archeological discovery of the 20th century. Today no reputable scholar would maintain the same argument that he had before the discovery. The entire scroll of the book of Isaiah was also found, including the famous chapter 53, dated to be from around 300 BC.



Scroll of Isaiah, found among the Dead Sea Scrolls



A sanctuary in Hattusa, the capital city of the Hittite Empire, today in Turkey.

It was also fashionable among critics to claim that the Old Testament made up stories about a nonexistent Hittite Empire of which there was no other historical record. They had theorized all sorts of reasons why the writers would be theologically motivated to fabricate an entire empire. Yet within the last few decades, archaeologists have discovered that there was indeed a Hittite Empire, just as described by the Bible, with a highly defined language.

Another such example involves King David of the Old Testament:

Before the discovery of the "House of David" inscription at Dan in 1993, it had become fashionable in some academic circles to dismiss the David stories as an invention of priestly propagandists who were trying to dignify Israel's past after the Babylonian exile. But as Tel Aviv University archaeologist Israel Finkelstein observes, "Biblical nihilism collapsed overnight with the discovery of the David inscription."⁷

– Jeffery L. Sheler, *Is the Bible True?*

By the way, "fashionable in academic circles" means that many university professors and scholars believed this and wrote their Ph.D. dissertations on the various theories about the purpose for which these David stories were invented; their literary style and who or what group would have benefited from the fabrication. It means that scholars who wrote these things were considered cutting-edge. Such papers were easily published and such scholars would have been invited to speak at academic conferences. It means that an entire generation of college students would have been taught that most of the Old Testament was a fabrication. And it turns out that much of such so-called scholarship amounted to speculation on top of speculation piled upon the thin ground of, "We have not yet found any evidence of such a Hebrew dynasty as the Davidic line of kings, so



"House of David" inscription

it must not have existed..."

There are numerous archeological discoveries that verify the biblical accounts, such as the discovery of the Pilate Stone, the discovery of Caiaphas' tomb, along with countless numbers of uncovered cities, tablets and inscriptions that fill today's museums.

Such examples abound, but the archeological evidence for the places and people described in the Bible does not, by itself, show that the Bible is necessarily accurate history. To establish historical accuracy, many more criteria need to be satisfied. We will go over these. But at minimum, the archeological evidence shows that

the Bible presents itself not as meditative, mythical writing, but as a historical record to be taken seriously. Unlike the ancient myths of pagan religions (which were written to be read symbolically), the Bible's narratives have a solid foundation in human history.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS

Archaeology is not the only resource a historian has to verify the historicity of a document. One can determine the authenticity and accuracy of documents by looking at what is called the bibliographical evidence.

Accurate Copies of the Original?

Given any historical document, one must ask: How do I know if the document that I hold in my hand has the same content as the original? After all, there were no copy machines or electronic files on computers to ensure that the content remained the same. All historical documents, not just the Bible, had to be hand-copied because the papyrus and scrolls on which the originals were written simply decayed.

In order to determine whether or not accurate copying was done, historiographers look for the number of ancient copies (manuscripts) we possess. If there are only a handful of manuscripts, it means that any error introduced during the copying process would propagate more easily, and it would be exponentially harder to detect the mistakes because of the lack of alternative manuscripts to compare it with. For example, if we only had one copy in existence, we would have no idea if there were any corruption or errors introduced during the copying process, since the original and any subsequent copies are no longer in existence.

If there were three copies total, we would have a slightly higher level of confidence; however, if there were any differences between the copies, we would not have much confidence about which is the more "accurate" copy of the original. If there were thirty copies in existence, you can imagine that even if there were differences, one could potentially look at the other copies (especially if some of them are earlier) and arrive at a more accurate approximation of the original.

Please refer to Table 1, the last column (**# of Manuscripts**). The other works listed are similar documents from antiquity with the 2nd, 3rd and 4th strongest manuscript base after the New Testament. As the numbers demonstrate, when it comes to the manuscript authority of the New Testament, the abundance of material is almost embarrassing in contrast, with over 20,000 manuscripts in existence today.

Table 1

Book	Author	Written	Earliest Copy	Time Gap	# of Manuscripts
Poetics	Aristotle	343 BC	AD 1100	1400 years	5
Gallic Wars	Caesar	50 BC	AD 900	1000 years	9-10
Iliad	Homer	900 BC	400 BC	500 years	643
New Testament	Various	AD 40-100	AD 125	<80 years	20,000+

Because of the sheer number of manuscripts available for comparison and analysis, the New Testament documents enjoy an extremely high level of reliability in terms of their fidelity to the original.

Corruption of Copies Over Time?

Although the number of manuscripts helps historians to reconstruct the original, how would we know that the records didn't get corrupted during the time period before our earliest copy in possession? For example, if a historical event happened in AD 500 but the earliest copy of the manuscript we have is from AD 1,500, we would have a time gap of 1,000 years during which corruption could have happened. But let's say we were to discover copies dated at AD 600, reducing the time gap to 100 years. In that case:

1. We can compare the more recent copies with the older and eliminate errors.
2. If there is very little difference observed, we can gain a level of confidence about the copying process utilized.

And this is exactly the situation that we have with the New Testament manuscripts. Refer back to Table 1, the "Time Gap" column. Again, when it comes to the New Testament, the time gap

between the date of writing and the date of the earliest copies that we have is extremely short.

Sir Frederic Kenyon, director of the British Museum (the most revered of such institutions) and foremost authority on manuscript verification, concludes:

In no other case is the interval of time between composition of the book and the date of the earliest extant manuscripts so short as the New Testament... The interval then between the dates of the original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.⁸

– Sir Frederic Kenyon

The New Testament cannot be a result of legend accumulation.

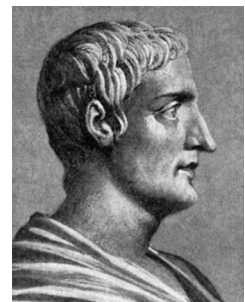
When compared to other works, which enjoy the presumption of transmission accuracy, the New Testament passes with flying colors. Given the combination of the short time gap plus the overwhelming number of manuscripts, there is universal agreement (even by historians critical of the Bible) at least on this: the New Testament we have today is an accurate representation of the documents written by the original writers.

One might consider such a conclusion to be rather weak in establishing the actual historicity of the content of the Bible. So what if the New Testament today is what the authors wrote back then? Let's think for a moment about what we can minimally conclude at this point. If the Bible we have today is an accurate copy of the original written by Jesus' contemporaries, then that means we can safely dismiss the rather popular "legendary accumulation" theory, which claims that legendary tales accumulated through hundreds of years of rewriting and copying. Moreover, as we will see in this and later chapters, the Bible's fidelity to the original turns out to be essential in establishing the historical validity of the content of the New Testament.

OUTSIDE SOURCES

Given that the copies are faithful to the original, how do we know that the original itself was telling the truth about an actual event? One of the criteria is to see if there are some cross-references from outside sources that corroborate the same event or situation.

- There are numerous other extra-biblical sources and historians that recorded the events surrounding Jesus and the early church: Suetonius (AD 120), Plinius Secundus (AD 112), Tertullian (AD 197), Thallus (AD 52), along with numerous Jewish Talmuds that speak of Yeshu of Nazareth (the Jewish name for Jesus) who was hanged on the eve of Passover for



Cornelius Tacitus

leading Israel astray. It's interesting to note that even the Jewish Talmuds, which were written by the enemies of Jesus, do not deny that Jesus performed signs and miracles, although they try to explain them away as demonic. In fact, as mentioned previously, much of Jesus' life, ministry and the early church events can be reconstructed through extra-biblical sources.

... Hence to suppress the rumor, he falsely charged with the guilt, and punished with the most exquisite tortures, the persons commonly called Christians, who were hated for their enormities. Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius: but the pernicious superstition, repressed for a time broke out again, not only through Judea, where the mischief originated, but through the city of Rome also.

– Cornelius Tacitus, born AD 52-54
Annals XV. 44

At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. And his conduct was good, and (he) was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that He was alive; accordingly, he was perhaps the Messiah concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.

– Flavius Josephus, Jewish-Roman historian (38-97 A.D.) *Antiquities XVIII. 33*

- The New Testament was also quoted extensively by the early Church Fathers. It has been observed that even if all of the biblical manuscripts were lost overnight, it would still be possible to reconstruct the entire New Testament from quotations by extra-biblical writers, with the exception of 15-20 verses. These extensive quotations serve as yet another layer of cross-references, allowing historians to verify the fidelity of the text.

These independent accounts prove that in ancient times even the opponents of Christianity never doubted the historicity of Jesus, which was disputed for the first time and on inadequate grounds by several authors at the end of the 18th, during the 19th, and at the beginning of the 20th centuries.

– *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 15th edition.

INTERNAL ANALYSIS

Another test for historicity comes from directly analyzing the content of the text itself.

- The authors themselves were in the position to give authoritative accounts of the events. If an Englishman in the 21st century wrote an original historical account of what happened in 3rd

century China, you would be right to doubt its authenticity. However, the Gospels were written as eyewitness historical accounts by the contemporaries of Jesus who had access to the information most directly.

- The writings present themselves as documents reporting on historical occurrences. For example, the gospel of Luke begins, "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses..." (Luke 1:1-2). Repeatedly, the Gospel writers state that they are attempting to give an account of facts, things that they were eyewitnesses to (see 2 Peter 1:16, 1 John 1:3, John 19:35 below) or that were collected from eyewitnesses. C.S. Lewis, a formerly atheistic professor at Oxford and Cambridge and an expert on ancient mythology, said, "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 things."⁹



2 Peter 1:16

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.



1 John 1:3

We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us.



John 19:35

The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe.

- In advocating their case for the gospel, the apostles had appealed to common knowledge concerning Jesus, even when confronting their most severe opponents. They not only said, "Look, we saw this" or "We heard that..." but they turned the tables around on adverse critics and said, "You also know about these things... You saw them; you yourselves know about it" (Acts 26:26). One had better be careful when he says to his opposition, "You know this also," because if he isn't right in the details, it will be shoved right down his throat.



Acts 26:26

For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner.

- The presence of self-damaging or embarrassing material is actually yet another sign of its authenticity. Tim Keller, author of *The Reason for God*, explains:

Why would the leaders of the early Christian movement have made up the story of the crucifixion if it didn't happen? Any listener of the gospel in either Greek or Jewish culture would have automatically suspected that anyone who had been crucified was a criminal, whatever the speaker said to the contrary. Why would any Christian make up the account of Jesus asking God in the garden of Gethsemane if he could get out of his mission? Or why ever make up the part on the cross when Jesus cries out that God had abandoned him? These things would have only offended or deeply confused first-century prospective converts. They would have concluded that Jesus was weak and failing his God. Why invent women as the first witnesses of the resurrection in a society where women were assigned such low status that their testimony was not admissible evidence in court? It would have made far more sense (if you were inventing the tale) to have male pillars of the community present as witnesses when Jesus came out of the tomb. The only plausible reason that all of these incidents would be included in these accounts is that they actually happened.

Also, why constantly depict the apostles—the eventual leaders of the early Church—as petty and jealous, almost impossibly slow-witted, and in the end as cowards who either actively or passively failed their master? Richard Bauckham makes similar arguments about the depiction of Peter's denial of Jesus, even to the point of his calling down a curse on his master (Mark 14:71). Why would anyone in the early church want to play up the terrible failures of their most prominent leader?¹⁰

– Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*

EVIDENCE FROM THE HEART

If the Bible is indeed some kind of revelation from our Creator, then one can expect that it would contain intimate knowledge of mankind.

As an analogy, imagine a situation where all of mankind had been wiped out, leaving a few cars who had somehow become conscious. All the sentient cars got together and started to discuss the issue of their identity, struggling with the question: “What are we?” Some cars discussed how they thought they were gigantic paperweights; others advanced the theory that they were really just living quarters. Finding it difficult to come to a satisfactory answer, they all started to drift toward the answer: “We are whatever we make ourselves to be.” Just then, one of the cars came out with a book called *The Owner's Manual* and proceeded to show the rest of the cars how it explained so many mysteries. It explained their need for gasoline; it explained the doors and the seats. Not only that, the manual explained and described components under the hood that the cars themselves were not aware of until they, following the guidelines of the manual, opened their hoods and looked inside. They realized that this manual must have been written by someone who intimately knew what they were and how they were put together.



In this example, note how the evidence for the validity of the manual came as they subjected themselves to introspection. Likewise, when we approach the Bible with an open and introspective heart, we find, to our own surprise, that it shows a deep, intimate knowledge of us—a knowledge that could only come from our Creator. Many of us, as we study the Bible, encounter this unnerving experience of being addressed ever so personally by the Bible. We find that the Bible describes our true condition and gives

voice to deep longings that we didn't know how to express. It seems that the author knows us, in many cases, better than we know ourselves, suggesting that the Bible might indeed be the word from our Creator.

JESUS OF NAZARETH

Earlier in this chapter we dealt with the question, "Why doesn't God just appear?" Ironically, the answer to that question is that he did appear – but not in the way that we might have expected.

Throughout the Old Testament, God spoke through the prophets and expressed his character through his acts in history. But then God finally uttered his most eloquent, full and complete expression, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). In a grand miracle that Christians call the "Incarnation," God took on flesh and came to be with humanity. If a picture paints a thousand words, how much more eloquent is a life? If God created us to relate with us in love, then what better way than to come to us in a manner that we understand best? And that's indeed what we have – God revealed himself ultimately by coming to us as a person: Jesus of Nazareth.

God revealed himself through Jesus.

To start off, it needs to be noted that Jesus' coming into the world is no ordinary historical event, but something that had been foretold throughout the Bible.

In about 740 BC the prophet Micah predicted that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. Mary, Jesus' mother, lived in Nazareth. Because of an order from the Roman government, she had to travel to Bethlehem and was there when Jesus was born. At the time that Mary conceived, even she could not have guessed that this would happen. Isn't it interesting that Isaiah 53 was written hundreds of years before Christ was born! In those days the use of a cross as an instrument of execution was totally unknown. Yet, the words "pierced through" in Isaiah 53:5a fit both the use of nails in crucifixion and the sword wound in Jesus' side. Furthermore, note Isaiah 53:9. How could anyone have guessed that Jesus would be assigned for execution "with wicked men" (the two robbers on the crosses at either side), and yet end up "with a rich man in His death" (Joseph of Arimathea, who buried him)?¹¹

– Ralph Neighbour, Jr., *Survival Kit*

The advent of Jesus was the fulfillment of over 300 Old Testament prophecies regarding the coming of a Messiah (meaning "anointed one"). This Messiah would be a Savior who would deliver them from their sins, and a King who would reign over the people of God forever. Romans 1:2-4 reads "which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son...Jesus Christ our Lord and was declared to be the Son of God in power

according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord." The fact that Jesus matches the description prophesied hundreds of years before His birth is not some coincidence. ... using the modern science of probability in reference to eight prophecies, "we find that the chance that any man might have lived down to the present time and fulfilled all eight prophecies is 1 in 10^{17} ..."¹²

– Josh McDowell,
Evidence that Demands a Verdict

To understand what the probability of 1 in 10^{17} (1 in 100,000,000,000,000,000) is like, suppose we had 10^{17} dollars in silver dollar coins. If we were to place each of those coins side by side, it would be enough to cover the whole surface area of the state of Texas two feet deep in coins. Now, imagine that one of those coins was marked with an "x". What is the chance of someone with a blindfold finding that coin on the first try? When we consider 48 of the prophecies, the likelihood of one person fulfilling them becomes an incomprehensible 1 in 10^{157} . That number is approximately the total number of electrons in the entire known universe. Imagine the probability of someone finding the right electron with the "x" on it on the first try. That's the probability of one person fulfilling just 48 of the prophecies, let alone over 300.

However, the fulfillment of prophecies surrounding Jesus is just one part of the story.

JESUS: A PORTRAIT

When we turn our attention to Jesus, what we find is the amazing portrait of someone who embodies the qualities of God Himself. In Jesus, "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily." (Colossians 2:9)

The portrait of Jesus is richly painted in the section of the New Testament called the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Each is a written record of how Jesus lived, what he did, how he treated people, how he viewed power, fame and wealth, and what he thought and valued.

Jesus lived a perfect life by almost anyone's standards. He did not do anything a normal person would consider sinful. There is no vice that shows up in His character. There is no virtue that He did not have. The life of Jesus shines out as the ideal for all humanity.¹³

– Michael Green, *Who is This Jesus?*

Many misconceptions about Jesus depict a detached, mystical guru-type figure. Some imagine a young, naïve teacher who did not realize how much trouble he was creating by attacking the establishment. The Gospels portray someone completely different: compassionate and merciful, yet authoritative and intolerant toward hypocrisy and oppression. The insecurities and fears that plague most did not bind him. His elevated teaching was matched by his courageous actions. His heart was for the downtrodden and poor – the sick, the prostitutes, the thieves, and children, even daring to touch those who were considered loathsome and impure. He confronted powerful rulers,

inspiring reformers such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gandhi. And he seemed to have an intimate knowledge of each person he encountered, eliciting responses showing that he somehow touched their deepest longings and desires.

The Gospels show that Jesus quickly established intimacy with the people he met. Whether talking with a woman at a well, a religious leader in a garden, or a fisherman by a lake, he cut instantly to the heart of the matter, and after a few brief lines of conversation these people revealed to Jesus their innermost secrets. People of his day tended to keep rabbis and "holy men" at a respectable distance, but Jesus drew out something else, a hunger so deep that people crowded around him just to touch his clothes.¹⁴

– Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*

THE IMPACT OF JESUS

Speaking on a strictly historical level, the impact that Jesus' life had on the history of mankind is unfathomable.

I know men and I tell you that Jesus Christ is no mere man. Between Him and every other person in the world there is no possible term of comparison. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have founded empires. But on what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded His empire upon love; and at this hour, millions of men would die for Him.

– Napoleon Bonaparte

If ever the Divine appeared on earth, it was in the Person of Christ...the human mind no matter how far it may advance in every other department, will never transcend the height and moral culture of Christianity as it shines and glows in the Gospels.

– Goethe

Christ is the most unique person in history. No man can write a history of the human race without giving first and foremost place to the penniless teacher of Nazareth.

– H. G. Wells

– Calvin Miller, *The Book of Jesus*¹⁵

ONE SOLITARY LIFE

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in still another village, where He worked in a carpenter's shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family or owned a house. He did not go to college. He never visited a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where He was born. He did none of the things one usually associates with greatness.

He had no credentials but Himself. He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against Him. His friends ran away. He was turned over to His enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While He was dying, His executioners gambled for His clothing, the only property He had on earth. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen centuries have come and gone, and today He remains the central figure of the human race, and the leader of mankind's progress. All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man on this planet so much as that one solitary life.

– James Allen Francis

Although his positive impact on history was unparalleled, Jesus remains one of the most controversial figures of history. Why?

A PECULIAR CLAIM

There is little controversy over the majority of facts surrounding Jesus' life. Moreover, there is widespread agreement that Jesus' teachings were sublime and that his life was exemplary. But wherever he went, Jesus kept making a peculiar claim about himself. He repeatedly stated that he was God in the flesh. One of the most startling things in the New Testament is Jesus' unmistakable claim to be the incarnate Son of God.

The most striking feature of the teaching of Jesus is that He was constantly talking about Himself...This self-centeredness of the teaching of Jesus immediately sets Him apart from the other great religious teachers of the world. They were self-effacing. He was self-advancing. They pointed men away from themselves, saying, "That is the truth, so far as I perceive it; follow that." Jesus said, "I am the truth; follow me." The founder of none of the ethnic religions ever dared to say such a thing.¹⁶

– John Stott, *Basic Christianity*

It didn't take long for the people who knew Jesus to realize that He was making astounding claims about Himself. It became clear that His own claims were identifying Him as more than just a prophet or teacher. He was obviously making claims to deity. He was presenting Himself as the only avenue to a relationship with God, the only source of forgiveness for sins, and the only way of salvation...¹⁷

– Josh McDowell, *More Than a Carpenter*

If you think of these two words, Son and Father, they are a brilliant choice. Jesus was a human being, not God in disguise. But He was not only a human being: He shared God's nature. What better imagery than Father and Son? A son shares his father's nature, and yet has his own distinctness. And the intimacy between father and son can be the greatest in the world. Jesus claimed that shared nature, that shared intimacy with almighty God.¹⁸

– Michael Green, *Who is this Jesus?*

He kept pressing the question: "Who do you say I am?" He said that anyone who had seen him had seen God. He said that he came to find and redeem men and women who are lost. To the Jews, all these claims were blasphemous, and to the religious leaders, Jesus' blatant declaration of his divinity was reason enough for his execution.

Jesus' claim to be the Son of God was a claim to deity. This claim, accompanied by his insistent demand that people repent and follow him personally in order to be forgiven and receive eternal life, was what caused such a disturbance among the people of his day.

In addition, Jesus' assertion to divinity emerges when he boldly claims for himself what can otherwise be attributed only to God. Jesus not only accepted worship from people, but he even commended those who worshipped him. No good man would have done that.

Jesus' response would be mindboggling in any culture. But in Judaism it has the added significance that they were all passionate monotheists. They would not offer any kind of worship to any man or statue: only to God alone. The implications of Jesus' accepting worship are obvious. He knew it was His due. Humble though He was, full of love and service to all, He nevertheless knew who He was and where He had come from. "He had come from God and was going to God," as the apostle John put it [John 13:3].¹⁹

– Michael Green, *Who is this Jesus?*

I AM...

Significantly, Jesus made explicit claims to deity through his use of the words "I am."

In the words of Michael Green:

The force of these little words is often blunted in English translations because you can't just say, "I am": you need to say "I am he" or something of the sort. But "I am" is the most holy name of God Himself in the Old Testament. He is the source of life, the everliving One. When Moses saw the bush burning without being destroyed in the deserts of Sinai, sensed God's presence, and dared to ask His name, the answer was "I am." That name for God was much revered in Israel.

That is exactly the claim we find Jesus making—the divine "I am." We find it in Jesus' conversation with the woman of Samaria [see John 4]. She wonders if Jesus could be the Messiah. He seems to correct her and says, "I am, I the one who is speaking to you..." (John 4:26)

There is a freak storm on the Sea of Galilee. The disciples, hardened fishermen, are terrified. They are even more terrified when they see Jesus walking on the waves. He says to them, "Take heart, I am. Have no fear." [see Matt. 14:22-33]. The divine name accompanies the divine action of stilling the storm.

Then, in debate with the Jews about Abraham, Jesus claimed that Abraham rejoiced to see His day. The indignant reply of His assailants was, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am" [John 8:57-58]. We are told that they picked up rocks to hurl at Him. They knew quite well what He was claiming.

Again, at the height of His trial, when the chief priests charged Him with being the Messiah, Jesus replied with these two same little words, I am...He was using those words with all the depth of the Old Testament name of God behind them. Not just the Messiah but God in person. No wonder the chief priests tore their clothes and cried blasphemy.

And finally, on that precious last evening He spent with His disciples, He foretold the way Judas would betray Him and said, "I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he" (John 13:19). He wants, above all, for His followers to be sure of His identity.²⁰

– Michael Green, *Who is this Jesus?*

THE TRILEMMA

Jesus made extraordinary claims about himself. Yet people try to blunt the intensity of his words by saying that Jesus was just a respectable moral teacher. However, the problem is this: the distinct claims of Jesus to be God eliminate the possibility of him being merely a good moral teacher.

C.S. Lewis states the choices as follows:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of

things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse...You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.²¹

– C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Confronted with the staggering claims Jesus made about himself, what are the possible options available to a genuine inquirer into his identity?

Was He a Liar?

If, when Jesus made His claims, He knew that He was not God, then He was lying and deliberately deceiving His followers. But if He was a liar, then He was also a hypocrite because He told others to be honest, whatever the cost, while He Himself taught and lived a colossal lie. More than that, He was a demon, because He told others to trust Him for their eternal destiny. If He couldn't back up His claims and knew it, then He was unspeakably evil. Last, He would also be a fool because it was His claims to being God that led to His crucifixion.²²

– Josh McDowell, *More Than A Carpenter*

Was He a Lunatic?

This view of Jesus, however, doesn't coincide with what we know either of Him or the results of His life and teachings. Wherever Jesus has been proclaimed, lives have been changed for the good, nations have changed for the better, thieves are made honest, alcoholics are cured, hateful individuals become channels of love, unjust persons become just.

After all, it's possible to be both sincere and wrong. But we must remember that for someone to think himself God, especially in a fiercely monotheistic culture, and then to tell others that their eternal destiny depended on believing in him, is no slight flight of fantasy but the thoughts of a lunatic in the fullest sense. Was Jesus Christ such a person? Someone who believes He is God sounds like someone today believing himself Napoleon. Yet in Jesus we don't observe the abnormalities and imbalance that usually go along with being deranged. His poise and composure would certainly be amazing if He were insane.²³

– Josh McDowell, *More Than A Carpenter*

Was He Lord?

The only other alternative is that Jesus spoke the truth.

From one point of view, however, claims don't mean much. Talk is cheap. Anyone can make claims. There have been others who have claimed to be God. I could claim to be God, and you could claim to be God, but the question all of us must answer is, "What credentials do we bring to substantiate our claim?" In my case it wouldn't take you five minutes to disprove my claim. It probably wouldn't take too much more to dispose of yours. But when it comes to Jesus of Nazareth, it's not so simple. He had the credentials to back up His claim. He said, "Even though you do not believe Me, believe the evidence of the miracles, that you may learn and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father."²⁴

– Paul E. Little, *Know Why You Believe*

The New Testament clearly presents Christ as God...The Scriptures attribute characteristics to Him that can be true only of God. Jesus is presented as being self-existent, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, and possessing eternal life.²⁵

– Josh McDowell, *More Than A Carpenter*

Please read the following accounts from the people who were closest to Jesus, some of whom were constantly in close proximity to him and able to observe him closely.



Matthew 16:16

Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."



John 11:27

She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."



John 20:26-29

²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."

²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

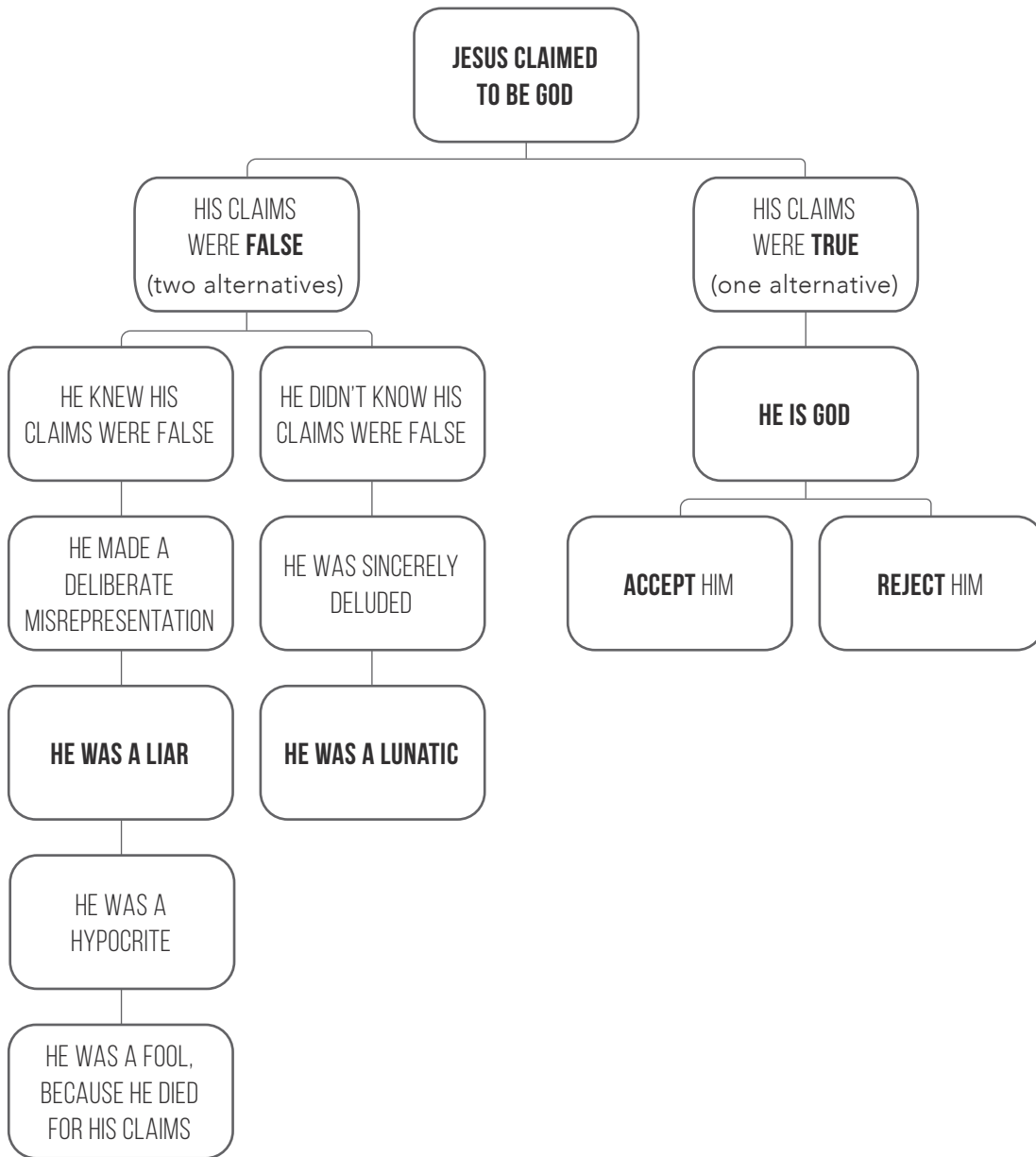
How would you sum up all of the above testimony of who Jesus is?

Jesus' claims to divinity make it impossible for us to stay neutral – he is the wedge in humanity that goes through history, dividing mankind into two groups. Throughout history, many have been offended by Jesus' claims to be more than a man; yet many others have considered his claims and found them to be true. There are many men and women we find throughout history that either inspire or appall us. However, no other person demands a response from us like Jesus, not because of his exemplary character or impact, but because he makes this startling claim that he is God incarnate.

Why is it impossible to remain neutral with regard to Jesus?

What is your response to Jesus' claim?

Where do you find yourself on this chart regarding the identity of Jesus?



If this penniless preacher from Nazareth really is who he claimed to be, everything changes. Life cannot go back to business as usual: life's purpose, direction, and very meaning are utterly transformed. Not only that, Jesus came with a purpose that very much has to do with each of us. Did he come to eliminate world poverty, redistribute wealth, quell our racism and bigotry, or cure cancer? Jesus said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Of all the great problems in society, Jesus pointed to our sins as the issue he has come to address. And the solution that he offers has impacted human history like none other.

What is your personal response to this week's material?

ENDNOTES

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