

A STUDY OF JESUS CHRIST OF NAZARETH:
LEGEND, LIAR, LUNATIC, OR LORD?

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Introduction

"But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence." 1 Peter 3:15¹ (NASB)

These words authored by the Apostle Peter provide the Christian with a clear definition of being prepared to share the truth of the Gospel in a fashion that exemplifies the love of Christ. These cohorts, truth and love, are the Biblically prescribed method for bringing the message to the world. Each of these ingredients is necessary to affect mankind because one is tailored to influence the intellect while the other is employed to affect the will. Dr. Terry Peer states, "Truth without love is cold, harsh, and unconvincing while love without truth is soft, subjective, and unconvincing."² According to Vine's Expository Dictionary, the Greek word that is translated 'to make a defense' or 'to give an answer' is:

4. apologia NT:627, a "verbal defense, a speech in defense," is sometimes translated "answer," in the KJV, Acts 25:16; 1 Cor 9:3; 2 Tim 4:16, all which the RV corrects to "defense." See Acts 22:1; Phil 1:7,16;

¹ Spiros Zodhiates, Th.D., *The Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible: New American Standard Bible*, (United States of America: AMG International, Inc., 1984 and 1990).

² Terry L. Peer, "The Doctrine of Conversion – God's Call, Man's Response" (Lecture delivered at Louisville Bible College, February 19, 2007).

2 Cor 7:11, "clearing." Once it signifies an "answer,"
1 Peter 3:15. Cf. B, No. 4. See CLEARING, DEFENSE.³

The understanding of the original Greek provides the Christian with a clear understanding of the importance of knowing the truth and being able to communicate it with the love of Christ. Peter also supplies the means by which the Christian is proficient in doing this; first and foremost, one must sanctify or set apart Christ in their hearts.

These ideals are key principles for the Christian who is preparing to live out the great commission given by Jesus which is recorded in the 28th Chapter of Matthew. As there are many who have believed the truth, there are many more that do not. For those who do not believe, each is faced with the person of Jesus where each must make some determinations. First and foremost one must determine who was He? Was he a person of history or just a legend? Was He crazy, a lunatic? Was He a liar? Or were His claims to be God incarnate true? It is therefore the aspiration of this study to explicitly demonstrate that Jesus Christ of Nazareth was exactly who He said He was, namely, the Son of God, while giving due diligence to the proclamations set forth by the Apostle Peter in the aforementioned scripture, witnessing to the truth in love.

³ W.E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), Defense. PC Study Bible Version 4.2 [CD-ROM] (Biblesoft, Inc. Copyright © 1988-2010)

Jesus Christ, A Man of History

For many centuries the historicity of Jesus, while oft contended, has withstood the test of time. Not until recent years has the attack grown to such a degree. Josh McDowell relates a fact from *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "For almost 1800 years following the life of Christ, apologists for the Christian religion were able to focus on other defenses of the faith due to the fact that the historicity was never actually challenged."⁴ Logic would dictate that those who lived in closer proximity to the events would be better equipped to determine who "existed" and who didn't. Despite this gap in the logical framework of history, the historicity of Christ now provides the apologist with another battleground on which to engage. Therefore, before one may tackle the question of Christ's claim to be God, one must first determine if he was a man of history or just a legend.

Even though many men, such as Thomas Paine, purported utter contempt of the person of Jesus Christ, they did not deny his existence.⁵ Only recently have men like philosopher Bertrand Russell begun to make such assertions; "Historically it is quite doubtful whether Christ ever

⁴ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 135.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 120.

existed at all.”⁶ Otto Betz affirms the opposite position, “No serious scholar has ventured to postulate the non-historicity of Jesus.”⁷ As the debate rages, the historical evidence falls on the side of Betz. Various and sundry sources, internal and external to the Christian religion, establish the un-deniability of the historical Jesus Christ of Nazareth. One scholar details some of the resources that give credibility to this understanding are secular authorities, Jewish references, Christian sources, and additional assorted historical sources.⁸

The secular authorities that give weight to the historicity of Jesus are numerous. According to McDowell, some of these would include Cornelius Tacitus (Roman Historian), Lucian of Samosata (A Greek satirist), Suetonius (Roman Historian), Pliny the Younger (Governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor), Thallus (A secular writer), Phlegon (Historian and Author), and Mara Bar-Serapion (A Syrian Stoic Philosopher).⁹ Each source includes factual information concerning the person of Jesus. One of these accounts is recorded by Mara Bar-Serapion in a letter where

⁶ Ibid., 119.

⁷ Otto Betz, *What Do We Know About Jesus?* (Canterbury: SCM Press, 1968), 9.

⁸ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 120-136.

⁹ Ibid., 120-123.

he compares Jesus to Socrates and Pythagoras documented by noted theologian F.F. Bruce:

What advantage did the Athenians gain from putting Socrates to death? Famine and plague came upon them as a judgment for their crime. What advantage did the men of Samos gain from burning Pythagoras? In a moment their land was covered with sand. What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their King? It was just after that that their kingdom was abolished. God justly avenged these three wise men: the Athenians died of hunger; the Samians were overwhelmed by the sea; the Jews, ruined and driven from their land, live in complete dispersion. But Socrates did not die for good; he lived on in the teaching of Plato. Pythagoras did not die for good; he lived on in the statue of Hera. Nor did the wise King die for good; He lived on in the teaching He had given.¹⁰

Sources such as these with no apparent agenda to advance give much authority to the hypothesis of Christ the man. Much more could be cited concerning the historicity of Christ. No one would conclude the historicity of anyone based on one fact. Therefore, the unbiased evidence put forth by the secular philosophers, historians, authors, and politicians detailed in the previous passage provide many more corroborating facts that allow any open minded objective person to easily conclude that Jesus Christ of Nazareth did in fact exist.

¹⁰ F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1964), 114.

Jesus Christ of Nazareth: Liar, Lunatic, or Lord?

Having examined the historicity of Jesus, it is necessary to determine, since He in fact did exist, if His claims were founded in truth, the deceit of a liar, or the ramblings of a lunatic.¹¹ These three are the only viable options available to this proposition. Jesus claimed on many occasions to be the Son of God, deity, the Messiah.

Therefore, it is of utmost importance to evaluate these claims in light of the three possible conclusions. Some world religions recognize the person of Jesus and claim that he was a good man, a prophet, a solid moral teacher. How can this be? How can any man teach making the claims that Jesus did and still be good and moral if they are indeed found to be not true? The New Testament is replete with statements made by Jesus each beginning with; "I am." Some of these bold statements would include:

John 10:9

I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.

John 8:23-25

23 And He was saying to them, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. 24 "I said therefore to you, that you shall die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you shall die in your sins." NASB

¹¹ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 155.

John 14:5-8

6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me. 7 "If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him."¹² NASB

Based upon the clear claims detailed and recorded in the Scriptures, one is left with these three options; Liar, Lunatic, or Lord.¹³

Jesus was not a Fraud

One of the three positions that one may adhere to is that of Jesus being a bold faced liar. If when he made the claims such as the 'I am' statements listed above that He in fact knew that He was not God incarnate, then He clearly is a deceiver and a liar. McDowell states that there are other implications if this was the case:

But if He was a liar, then He was also a hypocrite, because He told others to be honest, whatever the cost, while He, at the same time, was teaching and living a colossal lie.

More than that, He was a demon, because, He deliberately told others to trust Him for their eternal destiny. If He could not back up His claims then He was unspeakably evil.

Lastly, He would be a fool, because it was His claims to deity that led to His crucifixion.¹⁴

Therefore, one may conclude that He was a liar but must do so in the face of ample evidences to the contrary;

¹² Spiros Zodhiates, Th.D. *The Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible: New American Standard Bible*, (United States of America: AMG International, Inc., 1984 and 1990)

¹³ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 155.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

such as His teachings and life are regarded as the most profound moral instruction and powerful moral examples respectively that anyone has ever left.

Jesus was of Sound Mind

If the conclusion that He was a liar is left on shaky footings, then one may lean to the idea that Jesus was like many others who claim to be God, crazy. The teachings of Christ such as those spoken on the Sermon on the Mount are some of the most profound teachings concerning the desires of men to be at peace of mind and heart. For centuries since Christ walked the earth, man has searched for the answers to mental hygiene. The ideals taught by Jesus in this profound sermon sum up all that man has ever needed in order to be at peace, one to another, and before God. These ideas, even to the average person, can be evaluated as the words of a sane man. No lunatic could possibly be the source of so many lasting, influential, and powerful morsels of wisdom. The noted theologian C.S. Lewis expounds:

No other explanation but the Christian one will do: "The historical difficulty of giving for the life, sayings and influence of Jesus any explanation that is not harder than the Christian explanation is very great. The discrepancy between the depth and sanity of His moral teaching, and the rampant megalomania which lie behind His theological teaching unless He is indeed God, has never been satisfactorily got over.

Hence the non-Christian hypotheses succeed one another with the restless fertility of bewilderment.¹⁵

Lewis sums up with great efficacy that to believe Christ did exist and that He was not a liar or a lunatic is the simplest and most plausible possibility for one to espouse. Again, at the risk of redundancy, there could be many more stances and facts provided that give full weight and measure to the apologist in order to combat the 'lunatic' position of the skeptic. For the purpose of this terse study the above citations will provide the necessary basis for further examination, but even on their own merit they provide ample fodder for the mind in relegating this contrary belief (lunacy) to the trash heap. Therefore, it may be concluded that Jesus was in fact a man of history, truthful, and of sound mind.

He is Lord
Summaries and Conclusions

If the beholder of the Jesus Trilemma has effectively ruled out the liar and lunatic positions, then all that is left is that of Jesus being Lord. Biblical accounts where Thomas, Peter, Mark, and the author of Hebrews all advocate this position have been corroborated for the last 2000 years by millions upon million of believers. They, indeed, having been faced with the person of Jesus, were left with

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Miracles, A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1947), 113.

the unwavering resolve that He was the Messiah, the Son of God.

All men at some point or the other will be faced with the question; just who is Jesus? No one will escape the inevitability of this trilemma. As all these particulars have been investigated, it becomes abundantly clear where the evidence falls. For man, it has become a matter of the will ignoring the intellect which is bombarded with proofs deeply rooted in the facts of history. Lee Strobel quotes C.S. Lewis on the very essence of this entire discussion bringing it to a concise end:

I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I am ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." This 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... 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 with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open for us. He did not intend to."¹⁶

The logic laid forth by this man and many others when carried out to an honest conclusion leaves mankind with

¹⁶ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 271.

only one plausible option, and that option is the Lordship of Christ.

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