

WHO IS JESUS? By Rev (Dr) Kenny Fam

Introduction

A missionary working among children in the Middle East was driving her jeep down a road when she ran out of petrol and the nearest petrol station was about a mile down the road. What should she do?

She found a potty in her jeep and with the potty in hand she walked a mile down the road to the nearest petrol station and filled the potty with petrol and walked all the way back to her jeep.

As she was pouring the petrol into the gas tank of her jeep, a very large Cadillac, occupied by wealthy oil sheiks, drove by.

They were absolutely fascinated at seeing her pouring the contents of the potty into the jeep.

One of the men in the Cadillac wind down the window and said to her, "Excuse me, lady! My friend and I, although we do not share your religion, we greatly admire your faith!"

Some people see becoming a Christian as a blind leap of faith - the type of faith that would be needed to expect a car to run on the usual contents of a potty.

There is indeed a step of faith required to become a Christian. However, it is not a blind leap of faith, but a step of faith based on firm historical evidence.

This evening, we are going to examine some of that historical evidence.

I read that in a communist Russian dictionary Jesus is described as "a mythical figure who never existed".

No serious historian could maintain that position today. There is a great deal of evidence for Jesus' existence. This evidence comes not only from the Gospels and other Christian writings, but also from non-Christian sources.

For example, the Roman historian Tacitus wrote directly about Jesus, and another Roman historian Suetonius wrote indirectly about Him.

The Jewish historian Josephus, born in AD 37, describes Jesus and His followers thus: *Now there was about this time, Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works - a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was the Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again on the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians so named after him, are not extinct at this day.*

So there is evidence outside the NT for the existence of Jesus. But more importantly, there is very strong evidence in the NT that attest that Jesus really existed.

Some people say, "The New Testament was written a long time ago. How do we know that what they wrote down has not changed over the years?"

The answer is that we do know, very accurately through the science of textual criticism, what the NT writers wrote. Essentially the more texts we have, the less doubt there is about the original.

Professor F. F. Bruce (who was Rylands professor of biblical criticism and exegesis at the University of Manchester) shows in his book *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable? How wealthy the NT is in manuscript attestation by comparing its texts with other historical works.*

The table you have in your notes summarizes the facts and shows the extent of the NT evidence:

Work	When Written	Earliest Copy	Time Lapse	No. of Copies
Herodotus	488-428 BC	AD 900	1,300 years	8
Thucydides	c. 460-100 BC	c. AD 900	1,300 years	8
Tacitus	AD 100	AD 1100	1,000 years	20
Caesar's Gallic War	58-50 BC	AD 900	950 years	9-10
Livy's Roman History	59 BC - AD 17	AD 900	900 years	20
NT	AD 40-100	AD 130 (full mss AD 350)	30-310 years	5,000 + Greek 10,000 Latin 9,300 others

F. F. Bruce points out that for *Caesar's Gallic War* we have 9 or 10 copies and the oldest was written some 900 years later than Caesar's day.

For Livy's *Roman History* we have not more than 20 copies, the earliest of which comes from around AD 900.

Of the 14 books of the histories of Tacitus only 20 copies survive; the earliest being 1,000 years later.

The history of Thucydides is known almost entirely from eight manuscripts belonging to about AD 900, some 1,300 years later.

The same is true of the history of Herodotus.

Yet no classical scholar doubts the authenticity of these works, in spite of the large time gap and the relatively small number of manuscripts.

When we come to the NT, we have a great wealth of material.

The NT was written between AD 40 and AD 100. We have excellent full manuscripts of the whole NT dating from as early as AD 350 (a time lapse of only 300 years).

There are also papyri containing most of the NT writings dating from the third century (making the time lapse only about 200 years), and they have even found a fragment of John's Gospel dating from about AD 130 (so virtually making the time lapse a mere 100 years).

There are over 5,000 Greek manuscripts, over 10,000 Latin manuscripts and 9,300 other manuscripts, as well as over 36,000 citations in the writings of the early church fathers.

F. F. Bruce summarizes the evidence by quoting Sir Frederic Kenyon, a leading scholar in this area: "The interval then between the dates of 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 NT may be regarded as finally established."

All the evidences, from both outside and inside the NT, show that Jesus really existed as a person in history, in time-space dimension.

But Jesus was more than just a man; He was more than just a great religious teacher.

In fact, the evidences suggest that Jesus is the unique Son of God. Indeed, He is God the Son.

A. WHAT DID JESUS SAY ABOUT HIMSELF?

Some people say that Jesus never claimed to be God.

While it is true that Jesus did not go around saying the words, "I am God", yet when we look at all He taught and claimed, there is no doubt that He was claiming to be God.

1. His Teaching on Himself

He is saying to people, in effect, "If you want to have a relationship with God, you need to come to Me" (John 14:6). It is through an encounter with Jesus that we can have a relationship with God.

There is a hunger deep within the human heart. The leading psychologists of the 20th century have all recognized this: Sigmund Freud said, "People are hungry for love." Jung said, "People are hungry for security." Adler said, "People are hungry for significance."

Jesus says, "I am the Bread of Life" (John 6:35). In other words, "If you want your hunger satisfied, come to Me."

Many people are living in darkness, depression, disillusion and despair. They are looking for direction.

Jesus says, "I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows Me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Someone once said after he had become a Christian, "It was as if the light had suddenly been turned on and I could see things for the first time."

Many people are fearful of death. No one can avoid the inevitability of death. We may be sitting in one of the planes that crashed recently and that could be the last time we fly in a plane.

In Singapore, sudden death has hogged the headlines with the latest reported case being a 31-year-old policeman collapsing during a taekwondo class in July (2007).

Every year, about 30 young people and young adults suddenly collapse and die for no apparent reason. And many of these people have no known medical conditions.

Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in Me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die" (John 11:25-26).

So many people are burdened by worries, anxieties, fears and guilt. September 11 has changed the world so much that there is no longer any safe place in the world.

Jesus says, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

People are not sure how to run their lives or who they should follow.

Jesus says, "Follow Me" (Mark 1:17).

Jesus says to receive Him is to receive God (Matthew 10:40), to welcome Him is to welcome God (Mark 9:37), and to have seen Him is to have seen God (John 14:9).

A child once drew a picture and her mother asked what she was drawing.

The child replied, "I am drawing a picture of God."

The mother said, "Don't be silly. You can't draw a picture of God. No one knows what God looks like."

To which the child replied, "Well, they will know what God looks like by the time I finish drawing."

Jesus says in effect, "If you want to know what God looks like, look at Me."

2. His Indirect Claims

Jesus said a number of things which, although not direct claims to be God, show that He regarded Himself as being in the same position as God.

For example, Jesus claims to be able to forgive sins. On one occasion He said to a paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5).

The reaction of religious leaders was quick, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

Jesus went on to prove that He did have the authority to forgive sins by healing the paralyzed man.

C.S. Lewis said this of Jesus in his book *Mere Christianity*: "He told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was the party chiefly concerned, the person chiefly offended in all offences, this makes sense only if He really was God whose laws are broken and whose love is wounded in every sin. In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words would imply what I can only regard as silliness and conceit unrivalled by any other character in history."

Another extraordinary claim that Jesus made was that one day He would judge the world (Matthew 25:31-32). He said He would return and "sit on His throne in heavenly glory" (v. 31).

All the other nations would be gathered before Him. He would pass judgment on them. Some would receive an inheritance prepared for them and eternal life, but others would suffer the punishment of being separated from Him forever.

Jesus says He will decide what happens to all of us at the end of time. Not only will He be the judge, He will also be the criterion of judgment.

What happens to us on the Day of Judgment depends on how we respond to Jesus in this life (Matthew 25:40, 45).

If I were to say to you, "On the Day of Judgment, you will all appear before me and I will decide your eternal destiny. What happens to you will depend on how you've treated me", you would say that I am mad.

You see, for a mere human being to make such a claim would be preposterous. But it is not so for Jesus because He is God Himself.

3. His Direct Claims

On one occasion, Jesus claimed to be the Christ (the Messiah) and the Son of God.

When the question was put to Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?," Jesus answered, "I am ; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Upon hearing Jesus' answer, the high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked. "You have heard the blasphemy . . ."

In this account, Jesus was condemned to be deserving of death for the assertion He made about Himself. A claim tantamount to a claim to be God was blasphemy in Jewish eyes, worthy of death.

On another occasion, when the Jews started to stone Jesus, He asked, "Why are you stoning Me?" they replied that they were stoning Him for blasphemy "because You, a mere man, claim to be God" (John 10:33). His opponents clearly understood the bold claim Jesus was making.

When Thomas, one of His disciples, knelt before Jesus and said, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28), Jesus didn't turn to him and say, "No, no, don't say that; I am not God."

Instead He said, "Because you have seen Me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

Of course today we have all sorts of people making all kinds of claims. The mere fact that someone has made a claim to be somebody does not mean that they can be trusted.

They are people in Woodbridge Hospital claiming to be God also, but of course, we don't believe them.

Anyone who claims to be God or somebody else must be tested. So how do we test Jesus' claim to be God?

There are three logical possibilities:

First, if Jesus' claims were untrue, either He knew they were untrue - in which case He was a liar, and an evil one at that. That is the first possibility.

Or secondly, Jesus did not know that His claims were untrue - in which case He was deluded. That means He was an insane man or a lunatic. That is the second possibility.

And the third possibility is that His claims were true. Now if His claims were true that He is indeed God Himself, then we cannot simply just ignore His claims. You see, if His claims are true, then He must be Lord of our lives.

C. S. Lewis made a very interesting point when he wrote: "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher, he'd either be a lunatic . . . or else He'd 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 . . . but don't let us come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He hasn't left that open to us. He didn't intend to."

B. WHAT EVIDENCE IS THERE TO SUPPORT WHAT JESUS SAID?

In order to assess which of these three possibilities is right (whether Jesus is liar, lunatic, or Lord) we need to examine the evidence we have about His life.

1. His Teaching

The teaching of Jesus, generally and His Sermon on the Mount particularly, is widely acknowledged to be the greatest teaching the world has known.

Bernard Ramm, an American professor of theology, said this about the teachings of Jesus: "They are read more, quoted more, loved more, believed more, and translated more because they are the greatest words ever spoken. . . their greatness lies in the pure lucid spirituality in dealing clearly, definitively, and authoritatively with the greatest problems that throb in the human breast. . . no other man's words have the appeal of Jesus' words because no other man can answer these fundamental human questions as Jesus answered them. They are the kind of words and the kind of answers we would expect God to give."

Jesus' moral teaching forms the very basis of the judicial system of many countries in the world today, including ours.

The question you and I must answer is this: "Could that moral teaching have come from someone evil or insane?"

2. His Works

Jesus said that the miracles He performed were in themselves evidence that "the Father is in Me, and I in the Father" (John 10:38).

Jesus must have been the most extraordinary person to have around. Sometimes people say that Christianity is boring. Well, it was never boring being with Jesus.

For example, when He went to a wedding party, He turned water into wine (John 2:1-11).

On one occasion, He multiplied a boy's picnic lunch to feed thousands of people (Mark 6:30-44)

Once He had control over the elements, commanding the wind and the waves to stop, thus calming a storm (Mark 4:35-41).

Jesus carried out the most remarkable healings: opening blind eyes, causing the deaf and the dumb to hear and speak, and enabling a paralyzed man to walk again.

Once He healed a man who had been invalid for 38 years so that the man was able to pick up his bed and walk (John 5:1-9).

He also set people free from evil from evil forces which had dominated their lives.

On another occasion He even raised a man from the dead (John 11:38-44).

Yet it was not just His miracles that made His work so impressive. It was His love, especially for despised people of society (such as the lepers and the prostitutes).

The supreme demonstration of His love was shown when He died on the cross (which is our topic for next week).

When they nailed Jesus to the cross He said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 22:34). Surely these are not the works of an evil or deluded man?

3. His Character

The character of Jesus had impressed millions of people who would not even call themselves Christian.

Recently I was sitting in the MRT reading over what I am going to say to you this evening. A man looked over my shoulder and he pointed his finger to that part of my text which says: Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic, or He is Lord. And the man said Jesus could not be a liar or a lunatic.

I thought he was a Christian and so I asked him, "Are you a Christian?" and he said "No." But he commented that looking at the life of Jesus, he has to conclude that Jesus could not be a liar or a lunatic.

So I invited him to join our Alpha Course, but he declined to come, saying that he wanted to search by himself.

Jesus was Someone who exemplified supreme unselfishness but never self-pity; humility but not weakness; joy but never at another person's expense; kindness but not indulgence.

He was a person in whom even His enemies could find no fault and where His friends who knew Him well said He was without sin.

Surely no one could suggest that a man with such character was a liar or a lunatic?

4. His Fulfillment of OT Prophecy

Jesus fulfilled over 300 prophecies (spoken by different prophets over 500 years), including 29 major prophecies fulfilled in a single day - the day He died.

I suppose it could be suggested that Jesus was a clever con man who deliberately set out to fulfill these prophecies in order to show that He was the Messiah foretold in the OT.

The problem with that suggestion is first, the sheer number of them would have made it extremely difficult.

Secondly, humanly speaking, He had no control over many of the events.

For example the exact manner of His death was foretold in the OT (Isaiah 53), the place of His burial and even the place of His birth (Micah 5:2).

Suppose Jesus had been a con man wanting to fulfill all these prophecies. It would have been a bit late by the time He discovered the place He was supposed to have been born.

5. His Conquest of Death

The physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the cornerstone of Christianity.

Example of people who were out to do mankind a favor by proving that the resurrection never took place. Morrison.

The evidence that Jesus rose from the dead is very extensive. A former Chief Justice of England, Lord Darling, said, "In its favour as living truth there exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in a verdict that the resurrection story is true.'

Your Response

If I may just summarize what I am saying to you this evening: What Jesus said about Himself, there are only three realistic possibilities - either He is a liar, or He is a lunatic, or He is really who He claims to be, which means we must declare Him as Lord.

When we look at the evidence it does not make sense to say that He was insane or a deceiver.

The whole weight of His teaching, His works, His character, His fulfillment of OT prophecy and His resurrection make those suggestions absurd, illogical and unbelievable.

On the other hand, they lend the strongest possible support to Jesus' own claim that He is actually God Himself, He is God the Son.

As C. S. Lewis pointed out: "We are faced then with a frightening alternative. The man we are talking about was (and is) just what He said or else a lunatic or something worse. Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend; and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that he was and is God. God has landed on this enemy occupied world in human form."