

# Jesus Christ: Superstar or superstition?

By Rex Morgan

**I**t would be hard to find anyone who hasn't heard of Jesus Christ. His is probably the most famous name in history—the most influential person ever to have walked the earth.

But did he walk the earth? Was Jesus really an historical person, or is he just a legendary figure?

The 1970s rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* asked the question 'Do you think you're what they say you are?' Millions worship him as their 'Saviour', claiming that he was resurrected from the dead. Others say he was no more than a wise and respected teacher. Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, posits that he was a mere mortal who married Mary Magdalene and fathered a child.

Who was, or is, Jesus? Is he a Superstar, the Son of God and Saviour of mankind, or is this all just superstition?

## What does history say?

Jesus' life is recorded in some detail in the Bible, but that is no surprise as the writers were his followers. If such a significant person existed, surely other writers would have referred to him.

Actually, he wasn't all that important at the time. He was an itinerant preacher who enjoyed limited popularity for a very short time within a small community in a remote province on the eastern edge of the vast Roman Empire.

Very little literature of that time has survived to the modern day.

*Is Jesus the superstar that the 1970s rock opera named him, or is his existence just superstition?*

**Issue 30**

However, there are some notable references to Jesus in some of the oldest literature we possess.

Tacitus, a Roman historian writing around AD 115, reported on the Emperor Nero's decision to blame the Christians for the fire that destroyed Rome in AD 64 in the following words: 'Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted tortures on the Christians. Christus (the Latin spelling of Christ), from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus...'<sup>1</sup>

Suetonius, another Roman historian contemporary of Tacitus, tells us that in AD 49 'Since the Jews were constantly causing disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus (a

common misspelling of the name of Christ), he (the Emperor Claudius) expelled them from Rome'.<sup>2</sup>

Another Roman writer, Pliny the Younger, who was governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, referred to the Christians in a letter to the Emperor Trajan in around AD 112: 'They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath...never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery...'<sup>3</sup>

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, writing around AD 93, referred a couple of times to Jesus in his work, *Antiquities of the Jews*. In one section he referred to James, 'the brother of Jesus who was called





This statue of Flavius Josephus stands at the museum of the Masada fortress, Israel. The Jewish historian, writing around AD 93, referred to Jesus in his work, *Antiquities of the Jews*.

Christ'.<sup>4</sup> Another passage states: 'About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man...When Pilate condemned him to be crucified, those who had come to love him did not give up their affection for him...And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day'.<sup>5</sup>

There are also references to Jesus in the Talmud, a collection of Jewish rabbinical writings compiled from AD 200–500. Many of these references are derogatory, as the rabbis were antagonistic to his teachings, but they do help establish his historicity.

Lucian of Samosata, a second century Greek satirist, wrote: 'The Christians... worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account'.<sup>6</sup>

So there is indeed some historical evidence that Jesus actually did live, in addition to the many pages recorded in the New Testament gospels. These biblical references constitute valid evidence of Christ's historicity, too. The New Testament has been shown to be a genuine, accurately transmitted historical record, with thousands of manuscripts extant today, dating as far back as AD 100.

Now, let's return to the question posed in *Jesus Christ Superstar*: 'Do you think you're what they say you are?'

What, or who, did Jesus say he was? A quick overview of the New Testament reveals that Jesus made some startling claims about himself.

### Amazing claims

What would you say if you heard someone on the street, or maybe one of our politicians in the Beehive, declare loudly: 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to God but by me'.<sup>7</sup>

What an outrageous claim! You would probably have

questions about the speaker's sanity.

But that was only one of the claims of Jesus. He also claimed to have shared the glory of God before the world began!<sup>8</sup> He claimed to have been alive before Abraham, who lived around 2000 years earlier.<sup>9</sup> He claimed to be a heavenly king.<sup>10</sup> He claimed that he was going to die and come back to life,<sup>11</sup> and after that, he was going to return to earth again to judge the world.<sup>12</sup> He claimed to be able to forgive sins, something that only God can do.<sup>13</sup> He even claimed that he could give people everlasting life.<sup>14</sup>

The list of staggering claims goes on and on! He claimed that he was 'the Christ, the son of God'.<sup>15</sup> He claimed to be one with God.<sup>16</sup> And he even claimed he was worthy of worship.<sup>17</sup>

A line from *Jesus Christ Superstar* says: 'He's a man, he's just a man'. If Jesus was just a man, all of the claims listed above are lies, because clearly he represented himself as more than just a man, he made himself out to be God.

Many people feel that Jesus was a good man, a wise and peace-loving teacher who taught helpful moral principles. But if he claimed to be God when he was only a man, he was telling a blatant lie, deceiving his followers, and therefore could not be an honest and good man.

## The God Delusion?

Oxford University Professor, David Dawkins, published a bestseller entitled *The God Delusion* in 2006. The book contends that belief in a supernatural creator is a delusion.

To Dawkins, Jesus Christ is a superstition rather than a superstar. He says: 'Faith is the great copout, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence'.

Christians hotly debate Dawkins' stance, and rather than evading evidence, they claim to provide abundant evidence for their beliefs. The accompanying article considers some of the evidence for Christian belief in the historicity of Jesus.

Noted author C.S. Lewis brought out this point tellingly in his book *Mere Christianity*: '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 the level with a man who says he is a poached egg—or he would be the devil of hell. You must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us'.<sup>18</sup>

### True or false?

Let's consider the possibilities logically. When Jesus said: 'I and the Father are one', he was claiming to be God. This statement was either true or false. There isn't any alternative. If it is true, then he is the Lord. If it is false, either he knew it was false, in which case he was a liar, or he didn't know, in which case he was a lunatic. There just isn't any alternative.

So we are left with three possibilities: because of what he said, Jesus was either the Lord, a liar, or a lunatic.

Let's look at the options. Firstly, was Jesus a liar? If he was, then he was

a particularly evil and villainous liar, deliberately misleading millions of people to trust their lives to him, and even to die for him. Of course, he died for his teachings himself, an incongruous thing to do if he was a liar, because he could have easily changed his story and lived. There was no motive for him to lie—his claims brought him hatred, rejection, misunderstanding, persecution, torture, and death.

Few people claim Jesus was a liar. Even sceptics agree that he had a pure and noble character. He taught high principles of honesty, love, and virtue, and by all accounts lived a morally faultless life. It doesn't make sense that such heartless hypocrisy and deceitfulness would come from someone who was as unselfish, loving, caring, compassionate, and careful about the truth as Jesus was. It just doesn't fit his psychological profile.

Was Jesus a lunatic? Once again, his character demonstrated the opposite. He was a man of wisdom, logic, mental health, and creativity. How could a madman possibly have come up with the consistently pure and noble teachings of Jesus? Those teachings, such as

the Sermon on the Mount, are still today regarded as a paragon of moral principles.

Jesus was continually challenged by the highly educated scholars and lawyers of his day, but he always responded with quick and intelligent answers that amazed and outwitted them. In the face of tremendous pressure he remained calm and composed. He didn't display any of the characteristics of imbalance or abnormality that point to insanity.

There isn't even a shred of evidence that Jesus was either a liar or a lunatic. This leaves just one alternative, that he is who he said he is, the Lord.

But let's examine this a little further. Is there any other evidence to demonstrate Jesus was more than just a normal human being? Yes, there are at least a couple of things that indicate he is divine. Firstly, he fulfilled hundreds of prophecies written about him prior to his birth. Secondly, after he died he came to life again.

### Predicted centuries in advance

Books proved to have been written hundreds of years before Christ's birth state that a Messiah was



*An artist's conception of the scene of Jesus' crucifixion, the tomb where he was laid, and where he was resurrected from the dead. The argument that the disciples made up the resurrection story doesn't add up because they themselves didn't believe it, until Jesus himself convinced them it had happened.*



## Christ the Redeemer?

The statue of Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, was chosen on 7 July 2007 in an online poll of 100 million voters as one of the New Seven Wonders of the World. The statue weighs 700 tons and stands 38 metres tall.

The title 'Christ the Redeemer' refers to the Christian belief that Jesus came to earth as the Redeemer of mankind, saving humanity from the penalty of its sin.

The statue is truly a magnificent monument. But is Jesus Christ really the Redeemer of mankind? The accompanying article explores the historicity of Jesus, and the validity of his claims.

to come who would be a Jew,<sup>19</sup> a descendant of King David,<sup>20</sup> and would be born to a virgin,<sup>21</sup> in Bethlehem.<sup>22</sup> Other predictions stated he would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey,<sup>23</sup> would speak in parables,<sup>24</sup> and would be betrayed by a friend<sup>25</sup> for 30 pieces of silver.<sup>26</sup> Yet other prophecies recorded that he would die with criminals, pierced in the hands and feet, with

his executioners gambling for his clothing,<sup>27</sup> that none of his bones would be broken,<sup>28</sup> and that he would be buried in a rich man's tomb.<sup>29</sup>

There are literally hundreds of such predictions in the Old Testament, and Jesus fulfilled every one of them. Professor Emeritus of Science at Westmont College,

Peter Stoner, used the aid of 600 students to carefully calculate the probability of anyone conspiring to fulfil these prophecies. He conservatively estimated that the chance of one man fulfilling just 48 of the recorded predictions was one in 10 to the power of 157, an almost inconceivably large number.

One of the prophecies written by King David about 1000 years before Jesus was born stated that he would be resurrected from the dead.<sup>30</sup> This is probably the most difficult prophecy for someone to engineer of his own accord. If it is true, it is really worth sitting up and taking notice of. Think of it: do you know anyone who has come back to life after being dead several days? It is a stupendous proof that there is something very special about this man, that he is a superstar rather than a superstition, if it is true.

So is there any evidence for this astonishing claim, that Jesus was resurrected?

### The tomb was empty

Jesus himself predicted his resurrection so clearly that the Romans made sure they carefully guarded the tomb in order to prevent the disciples stealing the body or claiming he had risen. When the disciples did start proclaiming that the tomb was empty, all the Romans needed to do was to reveal the body and the Christians would have been silenced. But realising the body was gone, the authorities tried to explain it away by concocting a lie that the disciples had stolen it.<sup>31</sup>

The argument that the disciples made up the resurrection story doesn't add up because they themselves didn't believe it, until Jesus himself convinced them it had happened. If they had invented the story, certainly they wouldn't have made women the first witnesses of the empty tomb and the risen Christ, as women's testimony wasn't accepted in that culture. And if they had made it up, would they really have died for such a lie? Each of the disciples was viciously persecuted and most were brutally murdered for their belief in Jesus.

Prior to Jesus' death, they had all deserted him in fear of their lives, with Peter even swearing in cowardly fashion that he didn't know him. Amazingly, all of them were suddenly transformed after the death of Jesus, from men who were terrified and desperately discouraged<sup>32</sup> into men who confidently and boldly stood up, defying prison and death, for their master. How can that transformation be explained? The only way that makes sense is that they had seen that Jesus was indeed resurrected.

In a letter written to one of the churches in Greece soon after the resurrection, Paul claimed that 500 people had seen the risen Christ.<sup>33</sup> Many of those witnesses were still alive when Paul made this claim. If it was untrue, the sceptical Greeks could have easily disproved it.

Paul himself was a violent opponent of the Christians, vehemently terrorising and killing them. But overnight he suddenly changed and began risking his life for the message he had hated so much. The reason he gave for this was that he had seen the risen Christ, and indeed there is no other way to make sense of it.

Interestingly, millions of other people since that time have claimed they also have a relationship with Jesus and that he has transformed their lives.

It still happens regularly today. Former criminals, gangsters, liars, and thieves have suddenly changed their lifestyles and started trying to be kind-hearted, generous, and loving. This is only possible on such a wide scale because Jesus was resurrected, and is still alive today, and in a position where he can influence people's lives. If you'd like more information on how Jesus works today, why not visit your local church this weekend? Or if you prefer, feel free to write to *Inside Life*, P.O. Box 304055, Hauraki Corner, Auckland 0750, for more information.

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Jesus Christ is not a superstition. There is ample proof that he lived, died and was resurrected. He is indeed the Son of God, a Superstar, and the Saviour of mankind.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, 15.44.
- <sup>2</sup> Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars*, book 5.25.
- <sup>3</sup> Pliny, *Letters*, 10.96.
- <sup>4</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 20.9.1.
- <sup>5</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.3.3.
- <sup>6</sup> Lucian, *The Death of Peregrine*, 11.13.
- <sup>7</sup> John 14:6.
- <sup>8</sup> John 17:5.
- <sup>9</sup> John 8:58.
- <sup>10</sup> John 18:36–37.
- <sup>11</sup> John 12:32–22.
- <sup>12</sup> Mark 14:61–62.
- <sup>13</sup> Luke 5:20–21.
- <sup>14</sup> John 11:25.
- <sup>15</sup> Matthew 16:16–17.
- <sup>16</sup> John 10:30.
- <sup>17</sup> John 20:28–29.

<sup>18</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow, Collins Fount Paperbacks, May 1978), p. 52.

<sup>19</sup> Genesis 49:10.

<sup>20</sup> 2 Samuel 7:12.

<sup>21</sup> Isaiah 7:14.

<sup>22</sup> Micah 5:2.

<sup>23</sup> Isaiah 62:11.

<sup>24</sup> Psalm 78:2.

<sup>25</sup> Psalm 41:9.

<sup>26</sup> Zechariah 11:12–13.

<sup>27</sup> Psalm 22:16–18.

<sup>28</sup> Psalm 34:20.

<sup>29</sup> Isaiah 53:9.

<sup>30</sup> Psalm 16:10.

<sup>31</sup> Matthew 28:13.

<sup>32</sup> John 20:19.

<sup>33</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:6.



Rex Morgan, the editor of *Inside Life*, and his wife Marilyn live on Auckland's North Shore. Rex has worked in Christian ministry and office administration for over 40 years and has contributed articles to a number of international publications. Rex can be contacted at [rex@gci.org.nz](mailto:rex@gci.org.nz)