

NETFLIX THEOLOGY CLASS

Taught by Alan Garcia, Red Mountain Community Church Elder

SESSION 1: WHAT ABOUT HORUS?

A response to *The Zeitgeist Movie* concerning the claim that Jesus is a made-up copy of pagan gods.

Assertion: Jesus is a mythological copy of pagan deities that preceded him by thousands of years. Thus, Jesus did not actually exist in history but is an invention of the founders of Christianity based on the patterns of other religions.

Dialogue/Response: Pagan religions do not account for Christianity for several reasons. First, most parallels are not present in primary sources and are greatly exaggerated. Second, there is no causal link between pagan religions and early Christianity. Finally, there is no reason to doubt the historical existence of Jesus.

I. Parallelomania

- A. As a starting note, some parallels are to be expected among divine figures—this should not surprise anybody. Religion deals with the supernatural and issues of the human condition so naturally there will be similarities. Furthermore, religious rites can only be done in a certain number of ways (e.g., eating food, washing, etc.), so similarities in the superficial aspects of religious ceremony should not be surprising. However, the core issues of a religion are what truly matter (e.g., nature of God, reality, salvation, etc.). At these issues, no pagan religion compares with Christianity.
- B. The parallels drawn are often not backed up in the primary sources (ancient texts/art) and even if they are, they do not bear the same significance as the events in Jesus' life. Let us use Horus as an example.
 - 1. Birth story: In all accounts, Horus' mother Isis is always already married to Osiris at the time of Horus' conception (which assumes sexual relations). Though the conception accounts vary, in one common version Osiris is murdered and chopped up into several pieces that Isis must put back together to have intercourse (there are more details, but I'll leave those out to keep this G-rated).^[1] The conception may indeed be miraculous, but it appears to not be virginal.

1. Anthony S. Mercatante, *Whose Who in Egyptian Mythology* (New York, NY: Barnes and Noble, 1998), 73. See also: Geraldine Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology* (New York, NY: Oxford University, 2002), 76, 150.

2. Nativity: There is no primary source to support the claims that Horus was born on December 25, that he had three kings adore him or that a star appeared in the east at his birth. Furthermore, the Christian traditions of December 25 and the three kings (an unknown number of magi) are not included in the Biblical account, so these details are irrelevant.
 3. Teacher at 12: There is no primary source support for this claim.
 4. Baptized: There is no primary source support for this claim unless baptism is defined as any contact with water. Anup the Baptizer is also not found in primary source material. There is a god named Anubis who was known as a god of the dead associated with embalming- he was certainly not known as "the baptizer."^[2]
 5. Divine Titles: There is no primary source support for these claims.
 6. Crucifixion/Resurrection: In some myths, Horus is killed by a scorpion sting as a child and is brought back to life by Isis through a magic cure.^[3] However, this death/revival does not accomplish salvation or anything of note. There is no primary source to support that Horus was crucified and dead for three days.
- C. The parallels seem to be found (or invented) by reading Christianity back into ancient religions anachronistically. For instance, in the so-called Horus parallels, any depiction of Horus with his arms stretched out is interpreted as him being crucified even though this far pre-dates our knowledge of the practice of crucifixion (5th century BCE) and in no way relates to the actual myth of Horus.^[4] Egyptian mythology is thus re-written from a Christian lens, rather than letting the primary source material speak from its own perspective and story. In fact, ancient mythology is so fractured in this perspective that it is difficult to believe that anybody would be able to reconstruct it (or even understand it!) and make a new religion out of it.
- D. Judeo-Christian terms (e.g., messiah, baptism, disciple, crucifixion, resurrection, etc.) are used loosely (and often incorrectly) to create a false sense of similarity between other religions.

2. Arthur Cotterell, Anubis. In *A Dictionary of World Mythology* (Oxford University, 1997). Retrieved 1 Jun. 2016, from <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780192177476.001.0001/acref-9780192177476-e-9>.

3. Mercatante, 74.

4. Zeitgeist Movie Companion Guide, 27. Retrieved 6/1/2016 from <http://www.zeitgeistmovie.com/Zeitgeist,%20The%20Movie-%20Companion%20Guide%20PDF.pdf>

- E. The secondary sources cited are largely outdated, non-scholarly, selective and from people who hold the same view (Murdock, Massey, Budge etc.). Any real historical research should use current scholarly sources, as well as a diversity of perspectives. Concerning the book, *The Christ Conspiracy* by D.M. Murdock (upon which most ideas regarding the mythical Jesus in *Zeitgeist* are based), Bart Ehrman (a distinguished New Testament scholar and avid non-believer) comments,

- 1. *"Mythicists of this ilk should not be surprised that their views are not taken seriously by real scholars, that their books are not reviewed in scholarly journals, mentioned by experts in the field, or even read by them. The book is filled with so many factual errors and outlandish assertions that it is hard to believe that the author is serious."*^[5]

- F. Modern academic scholars in related disciplines (Religion, Archeology, New Testament, etc.) have almost universally dismissed this type of comparative religious study in relation to Christianity.^[6]

II. The Problem of Causation

- A. This documentary demonstrates a fallacy of "post hoc ergo propter hoc" (Latin: after this, therefore because of this) by assuming that if a similar religion pre-dates Christianity, then Christianity was caused by that religion (Example: A rooster crows before the sun rises. Therefore, the sun rises because the rooster crows.). Simply put, it must be sufficiently proven that the founders of Christianity were influenced by pagan mythology to prove causation.
- B. The founders of Christianity were Jews who abhorred pagan religion (Exodus 20:3; 23:13; Deuteronomy 6:14; 11:28; Matthew 6:7; Acts 15:19-20; Romans 1:22-25; 1 Corinthians 8:4-6; 1 Corinthians 12:2; 2 Corinthians 6:14-16; 1 Peter 4:3). It is unthinkable that first century Jews would borrow pagan material for a new religion.
- C. There is no archeological evidence that pagan mystery religions asserted any influence upon Aramaic speaking Jews in rural Palestine in the early first century.^[7] When we look at Jewish writings from the first century, there is simply no mention of Horus, Attis, Mithras or any pagan mystery religion.^[8]

5. Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2012), 21.

6. Ehrman, 226-230. One article that has been highly influential on this topic is "Dying and Rising Gods," by Jonathan Z. Smith, which strongly demonstrates the need to dismiss the category of dying/rising gods from comparative religious studies.

7. Ehrman, 256.

8. *ibid.*

- D. Jesus is never spoken of in astrological terms in our earliest traditions of him. Rather, Jesus is described as the Jewish Messiah who was dead, buried and resurrected. Jesus' story has nothing to do with agriculture, crop cycles or sun-worship. It has everything to do with the fulfillment of the Jewish belief in a new kingdom, era, and covenant (Mathew 4:23; 26:28; Mark 1:15; 14:24; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8).
- E. Ironically, many of our sources on pagan religions (e.g., Plutarch, 46-120CE) come significantly after the rise of Christianity.^[9]

III. Historical evidence supports Jesus' existence.

A. Extra-biblical Non-Christian References

1. Pliny the Younger (112CE, Letter Number 10); Pliny comments on the illegal gathering of Christians, as well as their worship of Christ as God.
2. Suetonius (115CE, Lives of the Caesar); Suetonius mentions the deportation of the Jews in Rome due to social disturbances caused on account of "Chrestus" (most likely a spelling error) during the reign of Claudius from 41 to 54CE (interestingly see Acts 18:2).
3. Tacitus (115 CE, Annals of Imperial Rome); Tacitus describes emperor Nero's horrific persecution of Christians after he made them a scapegoat for a fire he had instigated. The author continues to describe Christ as one who was put to death by Pilate during the reign of Tiberius.
4. Josephus (The Antiquities of the Jews, 93CE); Josephus mentions the death of James who he acknowledges as Jesus' brother, and that some believe that Jesus is the Messiah (Antiquities 20.9.1)." In another section, he talks about Jesus as a teacher who performed miracles, gained a diverse following, was crucified under Pilate and was seen as resurrected (Antiquities 18.3.3). Scholars do acknowledge that this text appears somewhat altered by Christian scribes; however, even critical scholars would affirm the passage was written by Josephus, just in a less explicitly Christian form than is currently seen.^[10]

9. Mark S. Smith, "The Death of 'Dying and Rising Gods' in the Biblical World: An Update, with Special Reference to Baal in the Baal Cycle," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 12 (1998), 288.

10. Ehrman, 60.

B. Biblical

1. The writings of the New Testament represent multiple first century attestations to the historical existence of Jesus. The New Testament writings are almost always attached to an apostle who was an eyewitness of Christ (See Luke 1:1-4; 2 Peter 1:16; 1 John 1:1-3). Throughout all the New Testament, there is never any indication by an apostle or enemy that Jesus did not exist.
2. There are early oral traditions which pre-date our written scripture and are likely within the first 10 years after Jesus' death. One of these is a tradition that Paul quotes in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. If this is a source that Paul received shortly after his conversion (early 30's) during his trip to Jerusalem (Galatians 1:18), its likely dates within five years of Jesus' death and resurrection. Another important tradition is thought to be contained in Mark's passion narrative (Mark 14-16). The gospel structure dramatically shifts at this point from being focused on various short stories to a long continuous narrative. The explanation scholars give for this shift is that Mark is quoting a fixed tradition according to eyewitness testimony that had been memorized in a particular framework. These are both extremely early traditions that were most likely circulating in the early years after Jesus' death, burial and resurrection.^[11]
3. Paul on his journey to Jerusalem encountered both a significant disciple (Peter) and brother (James) of Jesus (Galatians 1:18-19). This autobiographical detail from Galatians demonstrates that Paul encountered people who directly knew Jesus as a historical, living person.
4. The early church proclamation of a "crucified Messiah" (Acts 2:22-36; 1 Corinthians 1:23) would never be invented by a first century Jew. Paul details why in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. It seems far more likely that the church was basing its theology upon the cold facts of history—Jesus indeed was a Jewish man who was crucified, and something happened (i.e., the resurrection) that made his followers convinced that he was the promised messiah.

11. William Lane Craig, "Independent Sources for Jesus' Burial and Empty Tomb," accessed 6/1/2016 from: <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/independent-sources-for-jesus-burial-and-empty-tomb>.

SESSION 2: WHAT ABOUT THE GOSPEL OF MARY MAGDALENE?

A response to the claim that other non-canonical gospels are just as authoritative as the books of the New Testament.

Assertion: The early church was marked by a few “Christianities” who had diverse and equal opinions regarding theology and canon (scripture). By implication, there is no true form of Christianity, and writings from other early “Christian” groups should have an equal standing with the canonical New Testament documents.

Dialogue/Response: While there were groups with varying opinions about Jesus, only one of these groups was credibly linked to the teaching of the historical Jesus mediated through the apostles. It was this apostolic teaching (i.e., the New Testament) that was preserved through the early centuries of Christianity.

- I. While there were a few “Christianities” in the early years of the church, many of them are demonstrably far from the apostolic faith and teaching of the historical Jesus.
 - A. Here’s a brief survey of some of the more prominent non-orthodox “Christian” groups:
 1. Ebionites^[1] (2nd Century CE)
 - a. Ebionites were Jewish Christians who believed that Jesus was the Messiah but denied his pre-existence and virgin birth.
 - b. They insisted that one had to become fully Jewish to become part of the people of God (e.g., circumcision, keeping food laws, etc.).
 - c. They were vegetarian believing that all animal sacrifice was complete in Jesus’ death.
 - d. Texts: Old Testament, Matthew (presumably without the virgin birth), Gospel of Ebionites (based on Matthew, Mark and Luke); The writings of Paul were not accepted.

1 Barth Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 99-103. See also Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 615-616.

2. Christian Gnostics^[2] (2nd Century CE)

- a. The goal of the gnostic was to escape the material world (which was viewed as evil) by having special knowledge (Greek: gnosis) to enter a spiritual existence.
- b. Gnostics viewed the Old Testament God (Yahweh) as evil and inferior to the “true god” since He had created the material world.
- c. Gnostics portrayed Jesus as one who was sent from the “true god” (not Yahweh) and had the secret knowledge needed to escape reality into the spiritual world. Thus, the Gnostic Gospels consist mostly of supposed sayings of Jesus.
- d. Texts: Gospels of Philip, James, Mary Magdalene and Thomas (well known to be late forgeries not authored by the book’s namesake).

3. Marcionites^[3] (2nd Century CE)

- a. Led by a second century figure named Marcion who rejected the Old Testament God (Yahweh) for being wrathful and viewed Jesus as a separate God of love.
- b. Marcion viewed Jesus as immaterial/spiritual—it only seemed like he had a human body.
- c. Texts: Antithesis (Marcion’s own writing), The writings of Paul (except 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), The Gospel of Luke; He rejected the Old Testament.

B. A clear problem with all these other “Christianities” is that they are difficult to legitimately connect to the teaching of the historical Jesus.

- 1. In his cultural milieu, Jesus would not have taught anything remotely close to what Marcion or the Gnostics proclaimed.^[4] As a first century Jew in Palestine, Jesus would have understood himself as a continuation and fulfillment of the Old Testament narrative rather than a complete separation from it. Our most ancient documents (i.e., The New Testament) portray Jesus in this exact way (Matthew 4:17; 26:54; Luke 4:16-21; 22:20; 24:27; Mark 1:15; 14:49; John 5:39, etc.).

2. Ehrman, 113-134.

3. Ehrman 103-112. See Also Ferguson, 612-613.

4. Alan Hultberg, “Revising the Roots of Orthodoxy,” Sundoulos: Spring 2007, Retrieved 6/11/2016 from <http://www.talbot.edu/sundoulos/spring-2007/second-feature/>

2. Likewise, the teachings of the Ebionites also miss the historical Jesus reducing the radical nature of his message to nothing more than a reformation of Judaism.^[5] Clearly, the historical Jesus must have challenged the status quo of Judaism more than this to account for the animosity he faced among Jewish leaders and his crucifixion (Matthew 9:11,34; 12:2,24; 15:12; 22:15; 23:13,15; Mark 3:6; 14:1, Luke 19:43; 22:2; 23:10, John 5:18; 7:1, etc.).
3. Most of these groups are demonstrably late with the earliest references to them being from the second century or later.^[6] This again undercuts the idea that these groups and their distinctive texts are related to the historical Jesus in any pertinent way.

II. The writings of the New Testament are credibly linked to apostles.

- A. Nearly every book of the New Testament is strongly tied to an apostle or authoritative source.^[7]
 1. Matthew, John, Paul, Peter and James (the brother of Jesus) were apostles whose writings made it into the canon (Gospel of Matthew, Gospel of John, Johannine Epistles, Revelation, Pauline Epistles, Petrine Epistles, James).
 2. Other writers of the New Testament had known affiliations with apostles. Luke was Paul's traveling companion (Luke and Acts), Mark was Peter's secretary (Mark), and Jude was the brother of James (Jude).^[8]
 3. The authorship of Hebrews is unknown, but the quality of the epistle set it apart as an authoritative text for the church.
- B. Many liberal scholars contest the traditional view that the apostles were involved in the writing of the New Testament. However, there is good reason to believe that the traditional view is correct.
 1. All the New Testament books were written well within the lifetime of the apostles in the first century—most of which can be dated within 50 years of Jesus' ministry.^[9] This means that the apostles were available for fact-checking and verification.

5. Mark Saucy, "Between Da Vinci and Rome," *Trinity Journal* 27NS No.2 Fall (2006), 214.

6. Michael Wilkins, "Gnostic Gospels," *Sundoulos*: Fall 2006, Retrieved 6/11/2016 from <http://www.talbot.edu/sundoulos/fall-2006/second-feature/>

7. Wilkins, "Gnostic Gospels." For more information for authorship though I'd recommend checking out *An Introduction to the New Testament*, by D.A. Carson and Douglas Moo.

8. Wilkins, "Gnostic Gospels."

9. Hultberg, "Revising the Roots of Orthodoxy."

2. All the New Testament books were viewed as authoritative and used regularly in the Christian church from as early as the first century (Interestingly see Luke 10:7; 1 Timothy 5:18; 2 Peter 3:16).^[10] That the documents were well received lends support that they were written by the apostles.
3. The early church fathers affirm the legitimacy of the Biblical authors (e.g., Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, etc.).^[11]
4. Known forgeries were always rejected by the early church (e.g., 3 Corinthians, Gospel of Peter).^[12] Furthermore, many of the names attached to New Testament books would be odd choices for a forgery. Matthew was formerly a despised tax-collector. Mark and Luke were most likely not firsthand witnesses.
5. Many issues that are brought up can be easily resolved. For instance, liberal scholars often doubt that the apostles could write Greek as well as the New Testament conveys. However, this does not consider other solutions: 1) It was acceptable to use secretaries to write/translate (1 Peter 5:12, etc.); 2) The apostles could have learned Greek.

III. The New Testament is firmly planted and unified around the teachings of the historical Jesus.

- A. The writers of the New Testament describe themselves as people who are faithfully passing forward the teachings and events of Jesus' life (Matthew 28:20; Luke 1:1-4; John 14:25; 17:8,20; Acts 1:1-3; 1 Corinthians 11:23; 14:37; 15:3; Hebrews 1:2; 1 John 1:1; 5:20; 2 Peter 1:16; 3:2).
- B. Writers of the New Testament were clearly unified on their teaching because they address false teachings as distortions of the truth (1 Corinthians 15:12-19; Galatians 1:6-9; Colossians 2:8; 1 John 2:4-6). This demonstrates that the fledgling years of Christianity were not marked by lack of clarity on the message of Jesus. Rather, there was a clear body of teaching that was used as the limiting guide for faith and theology.

10 D.A. Carson, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 733. In this section, a study by John Barton is cited which shows that the early church fathers quoted extensively from New Testament documents when compared to others that weren't included in the NT canon.

11. Carson, 172-173, 230-231. These sections deal respectively with early references to the Gospel of Mark and John.

12. Carson and Moo, 342-343.

- C. Finally, unlike the other “Christianities,” the New Testament teaching is consistent with the teachings of a first century Jewish teacher who was convinced that the kingdom of God was breaking forth into the world through His sacrificial death. Jesus understood himself to be the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 who would usher in the new covenant promises of Jeremiah 31 and reign as the Davidic King of 2 Samuel 7.

IV. Where the rubber meets the road...

- A. Why were some books left out? There were three main criteria that determined whether a book was considered canonical.

1. The first was whether the writing conformed to accepted Christian traditions (i.e., the rule of faith).
2. The second was whether the book had a known association with an apostle.
3. The third was the document’s pervasive acceptance and use by the church at large. Simply put, many of the extra gospels (e.g., Gospel of Thomas, etc.) were rejected by the early church because they did not meet these criteria. There was a clear difference between these writings and those of the apostles in terms of authenticity, truth and usefulness.

- B. Was the New Testament only made official in the fourth century?

1. The first mention of all twenty-seven books of the New Testament together was in 367CE by Athanasius (39th Festal Letter). However, this does not mean that there was some sort of debate going on for the first centuries of the church over which books were authoritative and true. Bruce Metzger boldly states, “When the pronouncement was made about the canon, it merely ratified what the general sensitivity of the church had already determined.”^[13] The church clearly knew which books were considered authoritative because these are the books that were quoted most extensively by the early church fathers and used in Christian worship. Placing the twenty-seven books together in one binding didn’t confer authority upon the books— the books themselves carried that authority from the very outset of their penning.

13. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 90.

SESSION 3: WHAT ABOUT THE HISTORY CHANNEL JESUS?

A response to the claim that the Jesus of history was different than the divine Jesus that the Christian church has worshiped for centuries.

Assertion: The New Testament and church have long distorted people's understanding of Jesus as a true historical figure. While the opinions vary, it is largely believed that Jesus did not die for the sins of his people, perform miracles or claim divinity for himself. Rather, Jesus was a peasant man who taught the masses about a new ethic and social order in the shadow of Roman oppression and Jewish corruption. Jesus is thus more of a political/social revolutionary than a religious figure.

Dialog/Response: There is no reason to doubt the traditional view of Jesus. First, many depictions of the historical Jesus are deficient in describing one or more aspects of Jesus' life (e.g., his crucifixion, his teaching, his Jewishness, etc.). Second, the New Testament documents are demonstrably reliable and can be dated well within one generation of Jesus' death. This means that it is unlikely that the stories of Jesus' life (including his miracles) are the product of myth or later church theology. Finally, the traditional picture of Jesus makes much more sense of his life, teaching and self-understanding.

- I. Many views of the historical Jesus are deficient in describing one or more aspects of Jesus' life.
 - A. There have been various quests for the historical Jesus that started with the writings of the German skeptic H.S. Reimarus (1694-1768).^[1] The fundamental premise of the quest is that there is a sharp divide between the Jesus of history (the man who lived in Palestine) and the Christ of faith (the Lord whom Christians worship every day). Part of the reason for this divide is the rejection of anything miraculous or supernatural in the story of Jesus. Many depictions of Jesus have risen out of these quests, many of which still are presented in popular media today. Here is a quick survey of some of the more prominent depictions of Jesus:
 1. Jesus as a Sage (e.g., Jesus Seminar, etc.). Jesus is viewed as a wise teacher who taught a new kind of ethic which challenged social norms through parables and witty sayings. Jesus' teachings are radically countercultural and include things like loving one's enemies and counting the poor as blessed.

1 N.T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 2.

2. Michael J Wilkins and J.P. Moreland, ed., *Jesus Under Fire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 60-61.

2. Jesus as a Social Revolutionary (e.g., Crossan, etc.). Jesus is viewed as a social radical who sought to tear down the systems of oppression which he experienced from both Roman and Jewish authorities. Jesus both promotes social equality and deconstructs social distinctions by promoting open table fellowship with all people, the provision of free healing for the masses and the invitation for all people to experience God outside of normal religious systems (e.g., the Temple).^[2]
3. Jesus as a Failed Apocalyptic Prophet (e.g., Schweitzer, etc.). Jesus is viewed as a prophet who expected the world to imminently end. Jesus believed through his ministry and death that human history would come to a halt, and God's kingdom would arrive. Unfortunately, Jesus fails. The wheels of history kept turning, and Jesus died a failure.
4. Jesus as a Gnostic (*not a historical Jesus position, but often presented as one*). The Jesus of the gnostic gospels is portrayed as a likely image for the historical Jesus. In this, Jesus taught people how to escape the material world through his secret teachings. Jesus is often portrayed in this strand of thinking as sexually involved with Mary Magdalene.

II. The New Testament Documents are Demonstrably Early and Reliable

- A. Early Dating: All the New Testament books were written well within the lifetime of the apostles in the first century—most of which can be dated within 50 years of Jesus' ministry.^[3] Furthermore, the early traditions found in Paul's writings (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:3-8) can be dated within five years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Even Mark's passion account (Mark 14-16) is most likely a fixed tradition that dates within ten years of the crucifixion.^[4] With these dates, eyewitnesses of Jesus would still be alive for both confirmation and dispute of the historical facts. Furthermore, according to A.N. Sherwin-White (classical historian) it takes at least two generations before myths begin to creep into and distort a historical event.^[5] This means that it is highly unlikely that myths about Jesus crept into the New Testament record.
- B. Genre: The New Testament gospels conform closely with first century biographies which means that they were written to be read as historical accounts of the life of Jesus.^[6] While they do offer theological reflection on the events of Jesus' life, this should not be viewed as detrimental to their task of preserving accurate history (Luke 1:1-4). That the gospels were written from a point of view is not surprising- all history is written from a point of view and out of a conviction of its alleged importance.

3. Alan Hultberg, "Revising the Roots of Orthodoxy," Sundoulos: Spring 2007, Retrieved 6/11/2016 from <http://www.talbot.edu/sundoulos/spring-2007/second-feature/>

4. William Lane Craig, "Independent Sources for Jesus' Burial and Empty Tomb," accessed 6/1/2016 from: <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/independent-sources-for-jesus-burial-and-empty-tomb>

5. J.P. Moreland, Does God Exist? (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1993), 40.

6. Wright, 95-96.

- C. Archaeology: Archaeology has repeatedly confirmed the historical details of the New Testament documents.^[7] An example of this is seen in the story of the healing at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-15) in which John mentions that the pool had five porticoes. Archaeologists long doubted the accuracy of this story because the place could not be found. This is, of course, until it was found complete with five porticoes.^[8] The gospel writers' concern for the accurate recording of minute details bolsters their credibility in their historicity concerning the life of Jesus.
- D. Embarrassing Details: Several embarrassing or inconvenient details are present throughout the gospel accounts which helps confirm that the gospel narratives were told honestly and without favorable distortion (e.g., the women at the tomb (Matthew 28:5-10), the mistakes of the apostles (Matthew 16:23), Jesus' lack of knowledge (Matthew 24:36), etc.).

III. The New Testament picture of Jesus fits nicely in Jesus' historical situation.

- A. Jesus' Jewishness: Jesus was clearly a believing first century Jew in first century Palestine. This means that his hopes and expectations were wrapped up with those of the Old Testament (e.g., Matthew 11:4-6). Jesus wasn't trying to bring about simple social reform, but Yahweh's complete rulership in the world. It is because of Yahweh's gracious ruling that society is restored to order and peace (Isaiah 61:1-2; Luke 4:21). Jesus was not making his own program based on some sort of intellectual or abstract philosophy but trying in some way to usher God's promises to Israel into the world through his life and ministry. N.T. Wright points out, "It was these whispers that he heard in the lanes and backyards of his native Galilee. It was these aspirations that he found himself called to fulfill."^[9]
- B. The Kingdom of God: The core of Jesus' message was his teaching and proclamation of the kingdom of God (e.g., Mark 1:15). This teaching was not simply about a new social ethic or internal spirituality (e.g., Crossan's brokerless kingdom) but the historical event of Yahweh's establishment of his rule over creation (e.g., Zechariah 14:9). God would become King in a very real way, and the old order of things would be dramatically altered forever. This kingdom would be marked by unprecedented peace (even in the natural order), prosperity, a new covenant, and the presence of the Holy Spirit. The amazing thing is that for Jesus this was both a present and future reality. It was present in the sense that Kingdom realities were already being made manifest through Jesus' ministry (e.g., Matthew 12:28; Luke 4:21; 22:20, etc.). However, the fullness of the promise had not yet been realized because Jesus claims that he will return to bring judgment to his enemies and restore the Davidic throne in Israel (Matthew 12:28; 25:31, etc.).

7. See Strobel, 129-134 for further examples of archaeological confirmations of the gospel accounts.

8. Strobel, 132-133.

9. Wright, 95.

- C. The Messiah: Jesus understood himself to be the Hebrew Messiah (e.g., Matthew 16:16; John 4:25-26, etc.). This means that Jesus viewed himself as being God's anointed servant to rescue and rule over his people. The amazing thing is that Jesus viewed the primary part of this vocation as becoming the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 (Matthew 16:21; Mark 10:45, etc.). Jesus clearly understood that he was going to give his life in order that accomplish the forgiveness of sins for God's people (Matthew 26:28).
- D. Divinity: Jesus viewed himself as divine (John 8:58; 14:9; 20:28) and demonstrates this identity throughout his ministry. In Jesus' healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:1-12), Jesus declares the forgiveness of the paralytic's sins. Jesus' audience would naturally derive from this that he was claiming to be a replacement of the temple and in the place of the Shekinah (Yahweh's presence).^[10] Jesus also teaches with divine authority (Matthew 7:28-29). Jesus performs unparalleled miracles which were ascribed to Yahweh in the OT (Mark 4:35-41, Psalm 89:9, etc.). Jesus viewed belief in himself as the determinant of a person's eternal destiny (John 3:16). Finally, the writings of the apostles in the NT demonstrate their understanding of Jesus' divinity (e.g., John 1:1; Philippians 2:6-11; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3; Revelation 22:13). Either they all experienced a sort of collective amnesia about the historical Jesus, or they all understood from Jesus' life and ministry that Jesus had truly revealed God to them in a real and living way. Personally, I think the second option is far more plausible.

10. Wright, 50.

SESSION 4: WHAT ABOUT DOCUMENTARIES ON JESUS?

A summary of the problems with secular documentaries in their depictions of Christianity and Jesus.

Assertion: Christianity is largely unreliable because several documentaries display legitimate scholars who disagree with the traditional beliefs of Christians.

Dialogue/Response: Secular documentaries often focus more on entertainment value than truth which makes their claims largely slanted for the sake of sensationalism. Many secular documentaries are clearly biased and present an unbalanced liberal view of the issues. Furthermore, there is always a good and sufficient response to any claim against traditional Christianity.

- I. What have I learned from going through various documentaries?
 - A. There is always a good response for any question that a documentary raises. I have found that issues are often presented as being “what all legitimate scholars believe about something” when this is far from the case. Many of the issues (e.g., biblical authorship, etc.) are very much up for debate even in scholarly circles. It should be comforting to know that there are believing Christians among the scholarly ranks of all disciplines, including biblical studies, philosophy and science (e.g., D.A. Carson, Thomas Schreiner, William Lane Craig, Alvin Plantinga, Hugh Ross, etc.). We can always find answers—we must look for them.
 - B. There is little-to-no accountability for accuracy in the popular media outlets. A lot of information is simply wrong (e.g., the parallels between Jesus and Horus, etc.). Sometimes a simple fact check is more than sufficient to expose the falsity of many claims made in documentaries. We must remember that documentaries are not peer-reviewed scholarly productions.
 - C. Secular documentaries mostly gravitate towards outlandish claims (sensationalism). The point of the documentaries is to entertain not to present a fair and balanced view.
 - D. Many issues brought up don’t have anything to do with biblical Christianity (James the “secret” brother of Jesus, etc.). Christians can simply acknowledge these as “non-issues.”
 - E. Secular documentaries are heavily slanted toward liberal scholarship and even have an agenda to debunk historic Christianity (Jesus Seminar).
- II. What are the most important questions for Christians to answer considering recent documentaries?

- A. Gnostic Texts. It is often claimed that there has been some new discovery of secret texts that shed a new light on Jesus (e.g., Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Jesus' Wife, etc.). Remember, none of these texts are first century documents like the canonical books of the NT. They are all dated to at least the mid-second century and were widely known as forgeries from a fringe cult group known as the Gnostics.
- B. Canon. The documentaries frequently claim that the books of the Bible were not established until the fourth century. The reality is that the church accepted the books that became part of the canon from the very beginning. They were clearly viewed as apostolic, authoritative, and accurate because they were the most quoted and used documents in the church. The placing of them in a single collection did not confer a special status upon them that they had not already carried.
- C. Biblical Authors. Liberal scholars largely want to dismiss the accuracy of the authors assigned to the biblical books. As we have seen, there are many reasons to believe that the biblical authors are who the church has believed them to be. The New Testament documents all date from the first century with most within 50 years after Jesus' death. The church always rejected known forgeries. The authors are almost unanimously affirmed by early church leaders (with most books being completely uncontested in terms of authorship). People like Matthew, Mark and Luke were not ideal candidates for forgeries (a tax collector and two non-eyewitnesses). Finally, it is completely plausible that the apostles could write in Greek through secretaries or by learning Greek.
- D. Dating of Books. Documentaries will often present a "worse than the worst-case scenario" for the dating of the New Testament books sometimes claiming that they were written 100 years after Jesus' death. This is simply false. Most New Testament books are dated by Christian and secular theologians alike within the first century. Furthermore, there are many good arguments for the early dating of all the New Testament books (e.g., The ending of Acts seems to indicate a dating prior to Paul's death, etc.). Also, we learned that there are various pre-Christian traditions that are scattered throughout the NT which probably date within the first 10 years after Jesus' death (e.g., Mark 14-16; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, etc.). This was not nearly enough time for the message to be distorted or mythicized because the eyewitnesses were still around the corroborate the facts.

- E. Jesus. There are many attempts to re-imagine Jesus which fall short from a historical perspective. The most important thing to keep in mind is that the historical Jesus was firmly grounded in first century Judaism. This means that Jesus wasn't simply attempting to be a social or political philosopher- he was proclaiming and inaugurating Yahweh's kingdom. Also, this means that Jesus is not some copy of pagan religion. The connections between Jesus and other religions are largely spurious. It is decidedly out of the Jewish mindset that Jesus' message comes to the fore. Finally, Jesus would not have rejected the Old Testament as the Gnostic texts propose. This picture of Jesus has more to do with second century Greek philosophy than historic Christianity.
- F. BONUS: Textual Reliability. We haven't covered this, but it gets mentioned every now and then in documentaries. It is often claimed that the Biblical manuscript is so filled with errors and alterations made by Christian scribes that it is impossible to know what the original text said. This clearly overstates the case. While we don't have the originals of the NT documents, we have thousands of hand-written copies that range from the second century up to the invention of the printing press. There are over 5,000 Greek manuscripts and many more thousand ancient translations (e.g., Latin, etc.) for a total of around 20,000 manuscripts!^[1] This is an unbelievable wealth of witnesses according to historical standards. Unsurprisingly, since these are all hand-written and there are so many of them, there are several minor mistakes present among the witnesses (e.g., lines repeated, letters dropped, etc.). There are also few instances where scribes seem to have added to the original text (e.g., Mark 16:9-20; John 7:53-8:11; 1 John 5:7, etc.), but these instances are well known to textual critics (modern Bibles often notate these additions). This may sound alarming, but it really is not given the number of manuscripts we have that attest to the original. To put it in perspective, less than 1% of the New Testament text is disputed, and these issues are decidedly trivial—no doctrine depends on them.^[2] Even secular scholars like Bart Ehrman will readily admit that the NT text we have today is probably not significantly different from the original; scholars are confident that they have accurately reconstructed the text.^[3]

1. Important Points for Textual Criticism.

- a. There are many errors in the manuscript tradition (300,000-400,000), but this is because there are many copies (20,000 copies) with every difference counting - even if there is only one variant out of the 20,000.^[4]

1. Daniel Wallace, *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2011), 28.

2. Strobel, *Case for Christ*, 84-85. See also William Lane Craig, *Establishing the Gospels' Reliability* <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/establishing-the-gospels-reliability>

3. Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3rd ed (New York, NY: Oxford, 2003), 481.

4. Wallace, 26.

- b. The manuscript tradition includes copies that are incredibly close to the originals by historical standards: 12 from the 2nd Century, 64 from the 3rd Century and 48 from the 4th Century.^[5] Furthermore, there is a wealth of quotations and commentaries from the early church fathers that provide additional insight.
 - c. There were multiple lines of transmission that can each be consulted as witnesses to the original text and some of these lines (i.e., Alexandrian) are known to be very well preserved.
 - d. Most errors affect nothing at all and less than 1% of them affect the meaning of the sentence to some degree.^[6] None of these errors at all affect any major doctrine.
- G. BONUS - Divinity of Jesus. It is becoming increasingly popular to deny the divinity of Christ and deny that the Bible teaches this doctrine. It is presented as something that the church imposed upon Jesus later due to pagan influence and to somehow consolidate church authority.
- 1. Response: The reality of the Divinity of Jesus is firmly rooted in the Bible. It was the language of how to describe it that became nuanced over the first several centuries of the church as various controversies arose.
 - 2. Jesus is proclaimed as God throughout all of scripture.
 - a. Isaiah 9:6; 40:3 (Parallel Matthew 3:3).
 - b. The use of Kurios (i.e., Lord) in the New Testament finds its precedent in the Septuagint (the Greek Translation of the Old Testament which predated Jesus) which uses this word for both Adonai and Yahweh.
 - c. John 1:1 (parallel Psalm 33:6), John 5:58 (I am), John 10:30; 14:9.
 - d. Philippians 2:6 (Who being in the very nature God...), Colossians 1:15-17 (Image of the invisible God, the firstborn/preeminent....)
 - e. Hebrews 1:3 - The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being....
 - f. Revelation 22:13-16 - I am the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End....

5. Wallace, 28-29.

6. Wallace, 42.

3. Jesus performs the acts of God.
 - a. Mark 2:5-7: Jesus forgives sins.
 - b. Mark 4:35-41 - Jesus calms the seas (Psalm 89:9; 107:29; 65:7).
 - c. Matthew 7:28-29 - Jesus teaches as one with authority.
 - d. Matthew 28:20 - Jesus is with us always to the end of the age.
 - e. John 21:17 - Jesus knows all things.
4. Jesus receives praise and worship.
 - a. John 20:28 - Thomas' declaration.
 - b. Philippians 2:9-11 - Every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.
 - c. Revelation 5:12- Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.

H. Jesus is true man.

- a. Hebrews 5:8 - Jesus learned obedience.
- b. John 11:35- Jesus experienced human emotions such as grief.
- c. Matt 13:55- Jesus had a job and a normal life as a carpenter's son.
- d. Luke 23 - Jesus truly died.
- e. Luke 24:39 and Acts 1:11 - Jesus resurrected and ascended in a human Body.

I. How the church clarified Christology in the early centuries.

- a. Council of Nicaea (325)- dealing with Arius - Affirmed Jesus was fully God not a created being....

- b. Council of Constantinople (381) - dealing with Apollinaris - Affirmed Jesus had a human mind and full human nature.
- c. Council of Ephesus (431) - dealing with Nestorius - Affirmed that the natures of Jesus are indivisible and that he is one person.
- d. Council of Chalcedon (451) - dealing with Euthyches - Affirmed that the two natures are distinct.
- e. What we end up with in terms of Christology is Chalcedonian Orthodoxy - Christ is true God, true man, has two distinct natures and is one person.

J. Why does Christology matter?

- a. We understand the fullness of God's grace in creation and redemption.
- b. We understand who God truly is in Jesus.
- c. We understand what faith looks like because Jesus is the author and perfecter of faith.
- d. We understand that we have hope beyond death because of the resurrection.
- e. We understand we have a faithful mediator between God and humanity - one who can sympathize with our weaknesses, our sorrows, and our suffering.
- f. We understand that Jesus alone can atone for sin, bearing the guilt that belongs to the children of Adam while satisfying the infinite sin debt man contracted with God after the fall.
- g. We understand that Jesus is worthy of praise, adoration, and worship.

III. How can we dialogue with coworkers and family members? 1 Peter 3:15-16

A. Be prepared

- 1. Get a grasp on the normal questions that people ask. The content we covered in this class is a good start, but there are many more questions that are common which we should be equipped in giving sound answers.

2. Know how to find good answers. We don't always have to have an immediate response. We should always be able to do good research and get back to people who bring up questions about our faith. I have provided a list of resources at the end of this lesson that will help you find many answers to various questions.

B. Be respectful

1. Don't be a know-it-all. Make sure to attentively listen to people, even when they say things that are disagreeable. Validate genuinely good questions. Admit when you don't have an immediate response.
2. Speak graciously (Colossians 4:5-6) - Even when you disagree, speak in such a way that demonstrates patience and acceptance. Treating people like idiots is usually counter-productive to the gospel mission!
3. Be credible. 1 Peter 3:8-22 is about suffering as a Christian. Peter's message is to continue to do good because it will put to shame those who revile and persecute believers. The message for us is to be credible believers who strive for righteousness and Christlikeness. When we do this, it greatly enhances our testimony and witness.

Recommended References

1. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*. This book is really a great read and completely accessible. Strobel asks the right questions to the right people and lands on the right answers. Pretty much everything we have covered in this class is dealt with (and much better) in this book.
2. Reasonablefaith.org. This is William Lane Craig's website, and it is full of helpful content (articles, blog posts, etc.) to answer a multitude of questions brought up about the Christian faith.
3. Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*. This is a great resource for questions regarding various introductory questions for the NT, especially issues of authorship and dating.
4. Simon Gathercole, *The Pre-existent Son*. This is a great book addressing the divinity of Christ in the synoptic gospels.
5. N.T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* This is a great book about the historical Jesus. Wright goes through and analyzes many false approaches in historical Jesus study and gives his own perspective on the matter. This is also very accessible and short.

6. Recommended Commentaries. Commentaries will help answer questions about specific NT books regarding things like authorship, dating and textual issues. Here are a couple good commentary series that are accessible and not overly liberal:
 - a. NIV Application Commentary Series.
 - b. The Baker Exegetical Commentary Series.
 - c. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries.
7. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire*. This book answers a lot of questions that we dealt with in this class. The writing in this book can be a tad dry, but the information is helpful. William Lane Craig's chapter on the resurrection is a great read.
8. Daniel Wallace, *Revising the Corruption of the New Testament*. Chapter one (Lost in Transmission) gives a balanced perspective regarding textual criticism and the existence of errors in the transmission of the NT. Wallace essentially points out that the errors in the NT manuscript tradition are nothing to be alarmed about and have more to do with the number of manuscripts we have.