



David Robertson's letters are engaging and insightful. In these chapters a portrait of Jesus emerges that is attractive and compelling. This book is useful no matter what your experience and where you stand on matters of faith.

Tim Keller

Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City

David Robertson is a thoughtful and provocative debating partner. In a society where cultural relativism prevails, David is an unashamed Christian evangelist. David and I disagree on a great many things, but we are unified in understanding the importance of this ongoing debate.

Gary McLelland

Atheist, blogger and secular campaigner, Edinburgh, Scotland

David Robertson's *Magnificent Obsession* is a Christ-exalting and Christ-centred apologetic. Beautifully written, laced with tasteful humour, here is a book you can give to your non-Christian friends.

R. T. Kendall

Minister of Westminster Chapel (1977-2002), London

David Robertson's speaking ministry and books are informed, insightful, full of wit and yet surprising depth. Robertson helps us to answer the common questions of skeptics with sensitivity, astuteness and a careful listening ear.

Rebecca Manley Pippert

Prominent speaker and author, Founder of *Salt Shaker Ministries*

My dad wrote a book. It's pretty great.

Becky Milburn

New South Wales, Australia





It's outstanding. You will want to read this book and give it away to people. The subject is Jesus – a unique person in history and the ultimate defeater apologetic! You cannot argue about the character, life and message of the authentic Jesus of Nazareth.

The book has the feel of being written by a man who almost died and has discovered what or who is really important. Dragons have been slain, elephants in the room exposed and becoming a disciple of Jesus becomes totally logical and liberating.

Robertson knows Jesus and he knows our culture but just as important, he is an expert bridge-builder between the two!

David Meredith

Chairman of *Affinity* and Minister of Smithton Free Church
Inverness, Scotland

David Robertson has done it again. Building on his incisive response to Richard Dawkins atheism in *The Dawkins Letters* David has written another series of letters explaining how to respond to friends who say there is no proof for God. In his usual vigorous and engagingly personal manner David explains precisely why the Christian teaching about Jesus is intellectually, morally and emotionally credible. This is a book for you to read and give away. I therefore recommend that you buy as many copies as you can.

John Lennox

Professor of Mathematics, University of Oxford, Fellow in Mathematics
and Philosophy of Science, Green Templeton College, Oxford

This book will put fire in your heart or a pebble in your shoe; but then Jesus always does. Written by a historian, for sceptics or believers, these letters are accessible, honest, powerful and life changing. In them you'll meet the Jesus of historical fact, and the author's obsession may become your own. I just wish Christopher Hitchens could have read it.

John Ellis

Consultant Ophthalmologist, Dundee, Scotland





I love this book! It's an excellent, conversational introduction to Christianity for non-Christians and new Christians who are wrestling with questions about Jesus, the Bible and the Christian church. Robertson brilliantly interacts with atheist objections and explains why Jesus is the magnificent obsession for hundreds of millions.

Jon Bloom

President, Desiring God, Minneapolis, Minnesota

David Robertson is so honest, acute and convincing, that I fear books like *Magnificent Obsession* will soon be banned by the new atheist censors, lest enquiring young sceptics presume to examine them.

Dick Lucas

Formerly Rector of St Helens Bishopsgate, London







MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION

WHY JESUS *IS* GREAT

DAVID ROBERTSON

CHRISTIAN
FOCUS





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In Memory of

David Jack







INTRODUCTION

‘Now let me at the truth that will refresh my broken mind’
Mumford & Sons, *The Cave*



‘I would believe if I had the evidence’ is the oft-repeated and not unreasonable claim that many make when it comes to God. What is unreasonable, though, is when the statement is made with the assumption that there is either no or insufficient evidence. Bertrand Russell was once asked; ‘Lord Russell, what will you say when you die and are brought face to face with your Maker?’ He replied without hesitation: ‘God,’ I shall say, ‘God, why did you make the evidence

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for your existence so insufficient?’ This book is written to challenge that assumption.

I once had the privilege of debating with the English comedian Marcus Brigstocke on Premier Christian Radio’s ‘Unbelievable’ show. He was perceptive, receptive, open and searching. ‘Though I seek to express myself through comedy a lot of the time, there are some things I’m deadly serious about, and the desire for a workable and available deity in my life is one of them.’¹ This book is written for Marcus and those like him. I too am deadly serious about showing who God is.

In 2007 I wrote a response to Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion* entitled *The Dawkins Letters*, little suspecting how much interest this would generate. Having spoken widely in Scotland, the U.K. and many parts of Europe and the U.S.A., I am intrigued and greatly encouraged that there is such interest in religion in general and Christianity in particular. The New Atheists thought that they were going to offer the *coup de grâce* to a religion that was dying. Instead they seem to have woken up not only the church, but many outside it, who are now beginning to think about questions they would not have contemplated a generation ago. If you are one of them, welcome to a new world. Welcome to a world of hope and the possibility that you are more

¹ Marcus Brigstocke, *God Collar* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2011), p. 52.



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than just a blob of carbon floating from one meaningless existence to another. Welcome to a world of truth, meaning and love. Welcome to a world where you will find who you really are and why you are really here. These are grand claims but I hope and pray that as you read this, your mind will be blown at the staggering wonder of the truth. I pray that you will not only gain an understanding of why so many people continue to believe in God, but also that you will come to have your own faith challenged. I realize, of course, that if you are an agnostic or atheist, you will claim that you do not have a faith, but allow me to point out that in fact all of us have a faith position – including you. There are many things you believe and act upon that you cannot absolutely prove. More of which later.

This book began life as a response to the late Christopher Hitchens's *God is Not Great*, but has morphed into something much more. It really is my answer to the question I was asked by the leader of an atheist society at a Scottish university: 'Okay, I admit you have destroyed my atheism, but what do you believe?' I was there to address a mixed group of atheists, pagans and Christians, as well as not quite sure and wannabe Christians. It was a sincere question and one that I have heard many times over the past few years. I can give many reasons as to why I am a theist (I list ten of them for example in *The Dawkins Letters*) but only one as to why I am a Christian. The clue is in the name: I am a Christian



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because of Jesus Christ. And therein lies the problem. What does that mean? Is it anything more than a mere Christian soundbite?

It is to answer that question that these letters have been written. They are addressed to a person whom I call 'J'. Unlike Jesus, 'J' is not real, but is rather a conflation of many of the people whom I have had coffee with, corresponded with or just generally chatted with about these things. Every question in these letters is a real one from a real person. And I suspect that many of them are questions that you have had. At the very least, I hope that you are a person who asks questions, rather than just presupposing that you know the answers. The story is told of a Christian student in the University of Edinburgh who thought he would be what Christians call 'a good witness' by going into his philosophy lecture early and writing on the blackboard 'Jesus is the Answer', before heading out of the lecture theatre. (This was some time ago – if you are under forty ask an older person what a blackboard is!) When he returned with his fellow students he was somewhat pleased to see that his chalk-written words were still there for all to see. But underneath someone had written 'What's the question?' I do believe that Jesus is the answer, in a way that goes far deeper than you can possibly hope or imagine, but we first have to ask the questions. As we look at who Jesus is, we will find ourselves being provoked to ask the questions that really matter, and



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hopefully will see how incredible and wonderful the answer of Christ is.

You will note that what I am *not* doing is saying, 'Just believe in Jesus'. You can't believe, you can't have faith, without knowing something about the one you are to believe in. Blind faith is a rather successful lie put about by the Father of Lies (the devil, not Dawkins!). Faith by definition is not blind. Or at least Christian faith by definition is not blind. We believe because we see Jesus. It is not so much this intangible thing called 'faith' that matters, but rather whom the object of our faith and trust is in. What I want to do is present you with the evidence for Jesus Christ in the hope that you will come to see. As John Newton, the converted former slave trader, wrote in his most famous hymn, *Amazing Grace*, 'I was blind but now I see.'

The other difficulty that so many people have is the question of truth. Indeed they often give up in despair. Like Pilate, we ask 'what is truth?' and like Pilate we too think that it is impossible to be sure of truth. So we shrug our shoulders and walk away certain only of one thing – that what we cannot know is not worth knowing. This is another lie that has caused so much of our culture to be mired in cynicism and bogged down in the quagmire of relativism. But what if there is truth and that truth is found in a person – the One who said, 'I am the Truth'? Like Albert Camus, I have a passion for an absolute and beautiful truth. I do so



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because, like Mumford & Sons, I believe that there is a truth that will refresh not only our broken minds but also our broken bodies, hearts and societies.

Let me add a qualification. When we say that we can know Christ we are not claiming to know *everything*. Christopher Hitchens asserts: ‘And yet the believers still claim to know! Not just to know, but to know everything.’² Either Mr Hitchens has met some very odd Christians (not impossible I know) or he was not quite telling the truth. I have never come across any believer who believed that they *could* know everything, never mind that they did. However, we do claim that we can know, and are known by, the One who knows everything.

When we claim to know God, or that God is knowable, we are not setting ourselves up as the ultimate judge. We use ‘know’ in the sense of relationship with, rather than knowledge about, a subject. Herein lies the arrogance and faith of those who think they have the ability to sit in judgment upon God – our finite minds daring to think we can critique His infinite one. ‘The arrogance that would make God an object and impose our laboratory conditions upon him is incapable of finding him. For it already implies that we deny God as God by placing ourselves above him, by discarding the whole dimension of love, of interior listening; by no longer acknowledging as real anything but what we can experimentally test and grasp. To think like that is to

² Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), p. 10.



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make oneself God. And to do so is to abuse not only God, but the world and oneself too.³

This notion, that we have not only the ability but the right to judge the character as well as the very existence of God, is deeply ingrained in our culture. I think of the eleven-year-old boy from Huddersfield who asked: ‘What do I tell my friends who say there is no proof for God?’ I suspect that his friends have not engaged in deep philosophical study nor been regular attenders at church. They are just repeating the ‘meme’ of our atheistic culture, which both assumes that there is no proof and that we are capable of making the judgment that there is no proof.

The wonderful Roman Catholic writer G. K. Chesterton wrote: ‘My own case for Christianity is rational; but it is not simple. It is an accumulation of varied facts, like the attitude of the ordinary agnostic. But the ordinary agnostic has got his facts all wrong. He is a non-believer for a multitude of reasons; but they are untrue reasons.’⁴ My own case for Jesus Christ is rational. It is not simple, but an accumulation of varied facts. It is climbing Mount Improbable in order to prove to you the existence and worth of Jesus. I have often met some of the more emotive and arrogant atheists who demand, ‘Show us the evidence!’ The trouble is that they are not asking

3 Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008), p. 37.

4 G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1999), p. 222.



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a question but making an accusation. They are declaring there is no evidence and, therefore, that everything you say will automatically be dismissed. It's a bit like arguing with a conspiracy theorist – you can never win because everything you say is part of the conspiracy! There are those who read this who will automatically dismiss every piece of evidence presented here, just because it does not fit their world view and faith. Their starting point is that there can be no evidence. They trawl the Internet filtering out 'inconvenient truths' just to reaffirm themselves in their faith. However, I have hope. Firstly, you are reading this precisely because you want to find out and you are a little bit more open-minded. Secondly, if you have that kind of closed mind – watch out. Christians believe in the Holy Spirit who is able to melt the hardest heart and open the eyes of the blind! He may even use what you read in these letters to draw you to Him.

Speaking of the heart, truth is apprehended and comprehended by more than just the mind. The French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal's reflections on this subject are interesting: 'We know the truth, not only through our reason, but also through our heart.'⁵ It is possible to feel the truth. 'The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing.'⁶ And that truth is felt and known through

5 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, (London: Penguin, 2003), no. 110.

6 *Ibid*, no. 423.



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Jesus Christ: 'Jesus Christ is the object of all things, the centre to which all things tend. Whoever knows him knows the reason for everything.'⁷ Please note that this last quote from Pascal is not saying that Christians have stumbled across the theory of everything, but that we have come across the reason for everything. So real knowledge is found when we know Christ. We know in our experience and in our spirit. We know also in our mind. Which is why Calvin says that we need to stretch our minds to Christ. In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. What is being said here is that our search for truth is holistic, involving every aspect of our being. To know the truth you need an open mind, open ears and an open heart. It is helpful, also, to belong to an open community. I say all this because my aim is that you would be convinced of, and come to know, the truth, in your heart, mind and spirit; that you would think, feel and breathe, the Truth. It is beautiful beyond belief.

How did we get the title of this book? The BBC used to have an excellent programme series called *Everyman*. One of the documentaries, *How to get to Heaven in Montana*, was a fascinating insight into the life of a Hutterite community in that wonderful State. The pastor of the group had died and his children had, in Hutterite terms, 'gone wild'. They dared to go into town, visit the cinema and even drink alcohol! Then they

⁷ Ibid, no. 449.



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had become ‘born again’, as a result of which a split developed in the community. The *Everyman* team spent a year with the community and recorded how the two sides lived together. It was a beautiful documentary superbly filmed, with some fascinating insights. One of these came out when the pastor’s son (one of the ‘Born Agains’, who had become the leader of the new group) was asked by the interviewer, ‘What does Jesus Christ mean to you?’ I will never forget his answer. His eyes filled with tears as he quietly declared, ‘Jesus? He is beautiful ... He is my everything ... He is my magnificent obsession.’ Pascal would have agreed: ‘Jesus is the centre of all, the object of all: whoever knows not him, knows nothing aright, either of the world or of himself ... In him is all our happiness, our virtue, our life, our light, our hope.’⁸

But that still leaves us with the question of where we find Jesus. This was forcefully brought home to me by a reality TV episode which, unusually for such a programme, had a great deal of reality in it. It was a kind of parent swap, in which two teenagers from England – drunken, sexually promiscuous, rude and ignorant – went to live with an African-American Baptist pastor and his wife in Atlanta, U.S.A. It was a moving and fascinating programme as they struggled to understand one another and come to terms with their common humanity in a culture clash that was brutal. No more so than when

⁸ Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts on Religion and Philosophy*, translated by Isaac Taylor (London, 1894), p. 142.



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the voice behind the camera asked the young man, as he headed back to the airport, what he had made of the whole event. ‘These people are all right,’ he opined. ‘They’re really into this Jesus bloke, aren’t they? Jesus – he seems all right. Where can I find Jesus in England? Is he in the yellow pages?’ That question haunted and continues to haunt me. Here was a young man shown respect and love, because of Jesus, and he wanted to know where he would find Jesus in his home country. It is the key question. How can we find the real Jesus? The answer is that He has to find us. We are so ignorant of who He is that He Himself has to come and reveal Himself to us. It is as though you have arranged to meet someone at the airport but you don’t know who they are or what they are like. You stand there with a piece of paper with their name on it. Then there is that wonderful moment when they approach you and identify themselves. You have been looking for them, but they are also looking to reveal themselves to you. That is what Jesus does. He is the One we are looking for; and He is the One who is looking for us. He brings enlightenment – He is after all, the light of the world.

One other thing before you read the letters. They are highly personal. Even more so because they were written after I experienced a serious illness during which I almost died. I could tell you that I walked down a dark tunnel, saw a light and met Christ, who told me to return to earth to tell people about Him. Then this book would be number one in the



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New York Times best-seller list – because, yes, people are that gullible, and do prefer the sensationalism of lurid, tabloid-style super-spirituality. I could claim that, but I would be lying. Nothing so sensational happened. I was close to death, while thousands of Christians all over the world were given a strong desire to pray for me. And their prayers were answered. I was healed, thanks to the skills and care of the doctors, nurses and physios at Ninewells Hospital, Dundee, and the X-factor of prayer and the Holy Spirit. I do believe there is a purpose in my being left on this earth – both for my family, and to be able to tell people about Jesus Christ. I do not ask you to believe because of my kind of near-death experience or dream. My aim is simply to muster all the evidence I can and to point you to the beauty of the Truth, that you might come to see and experience Him for yourself. Enjoy!

... What in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support;
That to the highth of this great argument
I may assert eternal providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I:22–26

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find;
knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone
who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who
knocks, the door will be opened. (Matt. 7:7-8)



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You endeavour to prove an incredible and well nigh impossible thing; that God endured to be born and become Man.

Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*¹

The Church has had as much difficulty in proving that Jesus was man, against those who denied it, as in proving that he was God, and both were equally evident

Pascal, *Pensées*,² no. 307

Dear J,

Thanks for getting in touch. It was a real privilege meeting you and hearing what you have to say. Sorry that I wound you

1 Alexander Roberts, et al (Eds), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325, Volume I: The Apostolic Fathers With Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2007), p. 232.

2 (London: Penguin Books, 2003).



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up a wee bit, but I am thankful that you have some passion for these very important subjects. I have just read Matthew Parris, in a wonderful article in *The Spectator*, declaring that the truth is the only thing that matters. I agree. I meant what I said about Christopher Hitchens. He was a brilliant writer and makes for superb, entertaining reading. However, his book *God is Not Great* is not really his finest work. The first major mistake is in the title (an obvious cheap shot at the Islamic chant). Normally a title should tell you what a book is about. This one doesn't. Hitchens's book is all about religion, humanity's foibles and sins. There is almost nothing about God in the book at all. After reading it, I wanted to sue under the Trade Descriptions Act! Crucially, there was almost nothing in it about Jesus. Of course, Hitchens is not alone in this. Many people, including those who profess to be religious, make this major-category error. They talk about the church, culture and ceremonies but rarely mention God. So people have responded to Hitchens's book by talking about the wonders of Christianity, or Islam or whatever particular version of religion they espouse. For example, Dinesh D'Souza's book, *What's so Great about Christianity* is a magnificent exposé of the weakness of Hitchens's arguments and demonstrates clearly the benefits that the U.S.A. in particular, and the West in general, has had from the Christian faith. But it still leaves one with the impression that we are talking about a philosophy, a way of



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life, a religion. As I pointed out to you, this misses the point. You asked me why I believed. I gave you lots of answers (the Creation, the Bible, the church, etc.) but all of them only lead to the one ultimate answer. I believe *in* and *because of* Jesus Christ.

However, to you that just begs the question. Doesn't everyone just invent their 'own personal Jesus' (in the words of the Depeche Mode song covered by many from Johnny Cash to Marilyn Manson)? Who is Jesus? To some, He is a religious icon; to others, the first communist; to yet others, the *Godspell* image conjures up visions of a 1960s hippy chanting 'peace and love'. In our postmodern, touchy-feely world, Jesus is whoever we want Him to be. There is no objective reality at all. Hitchens, of course, recognizes this: 'Thus the mildest criticism of religion is also the most radical and the most devastating one. Religion is man-made.'³ Indeed. Religion *is* largely man-made – humankind's vain attempt to buy a Stairway to Heaven (with apologies to Led Zeppelin). In that sense, it matters not whether the religion involves god or gods, or is just the materialistic-humanist philosophy of Hitchens, et al – it is in effect Godless. But what if there is something different? What if there is a religion that was not based on human rules and philosophy; one which is centred on a person – for real. Unless you are going

³ Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), p. 10.



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to make the claim that you know everything, you do at least have to consider the possibility and look at the evidence. That is why I am writing you. Jesus is real.

There is (note the use of the present tense) a personal, historical, living Jesus. Most people have some awareness of the name: perhaps an idea associated with religion, some vague memory of a long-haired hippy icon, or a barefooted, white, saintly figure in a children's Bible. But the notion of Jesus being a real person, having lived in time and space and being alive today, is quite frankly one that is to many, including some professing Christians, way out of their reality zone. Sometimes I have suggested that I know that Jesus is alive and real as much as I know that my wife is alive and real – remember how shocked you were when I first said that to you? You were ready to send for the men with the white coats! I accept that this claim is usually greeted with incredulity because, quite clearly, my physical senses prove my wife (or do they? ... but we will not divert down that particular *Matrix*-like rabbit warren just now) in a way that they do not demonstrate physically the person of Jesus Christ. So in what sense can I possibly state with such confidence that I know Him and that it is possible to have a relationship with Him? Let me begin by simply asking the question: what if, instead of our reaching out to Him, Jesus reached out to us? I am not talking about you having a personal visitation in the middle of the night (how would



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you know that was real?). I am talking about whether Jesus really did come to this earth, and what that means.

Please allow me to cite a past Pope again: ‘For it is of the very essence of biblical faith to be about real historical events. It does not tell stories symbolizing suprahistorical truths, but is based on history, history that took place here on this earth’⁴. That is why I have invited you to the *Life of Jesus* course. The author John Dickson and his friends do a superb job of setting Jesus in the historical context of first-century Israel. The reason this works, even for those who say they are not interested in history, is that it helps dispel the notion of Jesus as being some kind of mythical made-up figure. And it is very personal.

It is precisely because there is a personal, real Jesus, that we are able to have a personal, real relationship with Him. You don’t begin with an imaginary relationship. You begin with the facts and the reality of Jesus. But you don’t stop there. You then go on to how He relates to you and you relate to Him. The fisherman John said about his recording of the miracles of Jesus: ‘These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name’ (John 20:31). That is why I am writing—so that you may believe that Jesus *is*, and that by believing you may have life in His name.

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008), p. xv.



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Let's begin at the beginning (although as we will see, the birth of Jesus was not the beginning of Jesus). When did Jesus exist? Did He really exist? Hitchens assures us that 'there was little or no evidence for the life of Jesus'⁵ This is typical of the kind of rhetoric of the New Atheists. Anyone who was seriously trained in history would recognize it for what it is: ahistorical waffle, seeking to set up a meme, which at first the faithful buy into, and then transmit over the Internet as truth. Bart Ehrman, no friend of biblical Christianity, has challenged this new approach. Have a look at his YouTube trailer⁶ for his book, *Did Jesus Exist?* He declares that Jesus 'was a real person and we can know some things about him' and that the evidence for Jesus is 'overwhelming'. Dickson makes the point clearly: 'Profs Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz of the University of Heidelberg in Germany – leading critical scholars and by no means advocates of Christian apologetic – write, "the mentions of Jesus in ancient histories allay doubt about their historicity".'⁷ Suffice it to say for now, that the only reason that people will not accept the overwhelming evidence for the existence of Jesus is that they just really do not want Him to exist.

After speaking about Jesus in the now sadly defunct Borders store in Cambridge, I was challenged by an

5 Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p. 127.

6 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SB6EZzJ7m1c>.

7 John Dickson, *The Life of Jesus: Who He is and Why He Matters* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2010), p. 39.



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articulate and intelligent man, in some detail, on the writings of Tacitus and Josephus as evidence for Jesus. He certainly knew what he was talking about and his comments were astute, knowledgeable and politely put. Indeed I learnt something from him, not least about the dispute on one of the quotes. I asked him about how he knew so much, and he replied: 'I am professor of biblical archaeology at the University of Jerusalem!' He was not a Christian but he said something particularly wise after that. 'I would not expect to find lots of writings about Jesus in the first century. Why? Because he was a Palestinian peasant who was executed on a cross.' His point was valid. It is the rulers and the victors who generally write history. Why would they include Jesus in that? Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. The trouble is that our fundamentalist atheists so often fail to understand context, and as a result, it is almost as if they are demanding newsreels, DVDs, newspaper articles and e-mails from the first century to prove Christ. One man has just tweeted me demanding written news reports from A.D. 33-35 to prove Jesus existed! He clearly does not understand how history works. By any accepted historical standards, there is little doubt that Jesus existed.

At that same meeting in Cambridge, I was informed by a Swedish teacher that he agreed that Jesus existed but that He had come from another planet and that English Lords were descended from Him – hence the reason they were

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called Lord! I sincerely hope he was not a lecturer at the University! If the denial of the historicity of Jesus Christ borders on the fantastical, the belief that Erik Von Däneken espoused of Jesus being an alien has long crossed the border of rationality and evidence, and I will not insult your intelligence in discussing that, any more than I would spend time trying to explain to you why Jesus was not a boiled egg.

Sources

Where do we get our sources of information about Jesus Christ?

There are extrabiblical sources. Mara Bar-Serapion (A.D. 75), the Roman historian Tacitus (A.D. 115), and the Jewish historian Josephus (A.D. 90) all mention Jesus Christ. Let me give you the two most famous quotes. They are a bit lengthy but they are extraordinary. Firstly Josephus:

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 surprising 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 Greeks. He was the Messiah. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning



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him. And the tribe of Christians, so named for him are not extinct to this day.

This was written around A.D. 95. Some dispute parts of this quote but the basic message is the same. Secondly, Tacitus writing in A.D. 115:

The founder of this sect, Christus, was given the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate; suppressed for the moment, the detestable superstition broke out again, not only in Judea where the evil originated, but also in the city of Rome to which everything horrible and shameful flows and where it grows.

And then there is the Bible, in particular the four Gospels. I love what Erasmus, the sixteenth-century scholar and Reformer, wrote: ‘The Bible will give Christ to you, in an intimacy so close that he would be less visible to you if he stood before your eyes’⁸. This is an extraordinary claim, but in my experience I can testify to its truth. It means that there is a whole lot more to the Bible than just being history, but it is history. So let’s examine what that means.

Some of your friends have told you that you cannot accept the Gospels as historical documents. Why not? They were written as historical documents (take for example the prologue to Luke’s Gospel, which talks about investigating and sources).

⁸ Erasmus, cited in John Stott, *The Incomparable Christ* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 15.



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You could argue that they are bad or inaccurate history, but you cannot automatically dismiss them as unhistorical mythological, fictional documents, just because the church uses them. In order to prove that they were inaccurate, false or just mythology, you have to get through a number of hoops first. You could, for example, identify events, places or people that they describe which we now know from history did not exist. You could date the Gospels, which purport to be eyewitness – or based on eyewitness – accounts, as being centuries after the events the authors supposedly witnessed. Many have tried. And you could claim that there were many other ‘gospels’ and that the church in or around the fourth century just did a pick ‘n’ mix of the ones that suited them. So let’s look at all three of these hoops.

First, let’s take one example of how people have tried to prove the Gospels wrong – the question of Nazareth. All four Gospels point out that Jesus’ hometown was a small place called Nazareth. For many years, ‘scholars’ and sceptics argued that this was a fiction because the Jewish historian Josephus did not mention Nazareth in his writings. Then, lo and behold, in the 1950s an ancient village on the traditional site was discovered. That particular argument has been blown to pieces. As indeed have many similar attempts to disprove the Bible.

Secondly, the question of dating. Hitchens argues that Jesus’ ‘illiterate living disciples left us no record’⁹. This set

⁹ Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p.114.



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me wondering how illiterate disciples could write. Hitchens, of course, pronounces that they didn't. This is just prejudice and chronological snobbery. How does he know that Jesus' disciples were illiterate? Matthew, a tax collector, would certainly not have been, neither would Luke the doctor. Mark and John could clearly read and write. The fact is that we have no substantive reason to doubt that the Gospels were written by those who were eyewitnesses of Jesus. As John puts it: 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of Life' (1 John 1:1).

Thirdly, the question of the other gospels. This particular myth has been perpetuated by the truly dreadful, *The Da Vinci Code*. When we set up a debate on the film and the book, we scoured high and low throughout Britain to find any academic who would be prepared to defend the claims made by Dan Brown that the church just selected the gospels in the fourth century and rejected a whole lot of equally valid 'gospels'. No one was prepared to. It is a fanciful myth and is taken seriously only by those who think that *The Sun* or *The National Enquirer* are reliable sources of news. I have spent the past year reading all these so called 'gospels' – at least those which have been translated into English. If you are serious about this question, then all I would suggest is that you read them and compare them with the four Gospels

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we have in the Bible. You will soon see the difference. ‘Chalk and cheese’ would not be an adequate phrase to describe how vastly different they are.

The virgin birth

But let's go on to look at some of the actual history. Probably the most important thing about the birth of Christ is what is known as the virgin birth. The television and radio host Larry King was once asked whom he would like to interview if he had his pick from all history. His answer? Jesus Christ. ‘What is the one question you would like to ask him?’ ‘I would ask him if he was indeed virgin-born, because the answer to that would define history for me.’

Christopher Hitchens, of course, has no doubt. And you seemed to have been impressed by this. But, in reality, Hitchens's pronouncements are largely bluster. ‘Matthew and Luke cannot concur on the virgin birth.’¹⁰ His comments on Isaiah 7:14 are particularly interesting: ‘The word translated as “virgin”, namely *almah*, means only “a young woman”.’¹¹ In one meeting in Belfast, there was almost a riot between some Young Earth creationists and the militant ‘you-are-all-going-to-atheist-hell’ secularists. When things calmed down, a young man dressed in his black goth outfit complete with chains and nose studs,

¹⁰ Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p. 111.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.



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shouted out from the back, ‘There are hundreds of Greek, Egyptian and Roman myths about babies being born on the 25th of December, why should we believe yours?’ I broke the cardinal rule of polite debating by mocking him – ‘You, sir, are a prime example of the dangers of Wikipedia’ – before going on to point out the fallacies within his statement. At the end of the evening he was standing at the back of a long queue, looking really angry. I took my time signing books but he was very patient and waited, and waited. When it was his turn, I shook his hand and apologized for putting him down. But he just laughed. ‘No,’ he replied, ‘I thought you were going to give me some of that Christian XXXX, and I was going to walk out. But you called me on it. Cheers.’ And off he went.

Sadly, Hitchens argues at that level. I am sorry to say that, but it is not unreasonable to treat as bluster the statements of a man who can declare that Augustine, the writer of at least two of the greatest books in human history, was ‘an ignoramus’.¹² Unlike Hitchens, E. J. Young and R. D. Wilson did serious research on the meaning of the nine occurrences of *almah* in the Old Testament. Both conclude that the word is never employed to describe a married woman, and that the Septuagint (cited by Matthew’s Gospel) was right to translate it in Greek as *parthenos* (virgin).

¹² Ibid, p. 64.



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Hitchens, though, is in good and bad company. There are many more ‘sophisticated’ clergymen who are stuck in a nineteenth-century paradigm of ‘miracles don’t happen’ and so do their best to dismiss the virgin birth as untrue or unimportant. Tony Jordan, a scriptwriter for the BBC series *EastEnders*, did an excellent mini-series on the Nativity. He describes his experience in researching this: ‘I sat with these men of the cloth, these were organized religion. They were all explaining to me about the Nativity and about how it never happened. And they were saying, “Well of course, Mesopotamia...mumble, mumble – there was always the legend of the virgin birth.” And I’m thinking, “What? Hang on a minute! You’re on the wrong side, that doesn’t work.” So I despair of them.’¹³ Indeed. The ‘evangelical’ liberal, Rob Bell, likened the virgin birth to one brick in a wall of theology. ‘What do you lose if you lose that one brick?’ – to which the best reply was that of Mark Driscoll: ‘Nothing, except Jesus.’ The virgin birth of Christ is one of the key doctrines of Christianity and without it you do not have Christ. It’s a bit like the man who goes into the local fish and chip shop and announces, ‘I’ll have a fish supper, without the fish!’ Christianity without the virgin birth of Christ is Christianity without Christ.

I have to confess that I have never understood why the virgin birth was seen as such a stumbling block. If human

¹³ Tony Jordan, interview in *Christianity* magazine, March 2012.



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beings can manufacture a situation whereby a woman can become pregnant without the necessity of sexual intercourse, why should we consider it impossible for an almighty God to do so? He does not need IVF or a turkey baster! The trouble is that people start off with the presupposition that such a God does not exist, and therefore a non-existent being cannot perform such a miracle. This is the ultimate in circular reasoning. To claim that a virgin birth cannot happen because the Being who could make such a thing happen does not exist, really says nothing, other than about the prejudices of the person making the claim. Likewise, I am NOT stating that merely claiming it did happen makes it true. However, I AM stating that by definition it is not self-evidently impossible that an almighty God could do this miracle!

It does all make sense. So much so that there is an increasing trend amongst those who once thought sceptical atheism was the only way to fly, to turn or return to the fold. You are too young to remember this, but A. N. Wilson was one of the most famous atheists in the United Kingdom. In 1992 he wrote a popular book entitled *Jesus: A Life*, in which he argued the conformist position of the time that the Gospels were just legends. Seventeen years later, one Saturday afternoon, I was doing my usual, lying in the bath, drinking a coffee and reading *The Spectator* (in my view the magazine with the best writing of English in the

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world), when I had one of those ‘Eureka’ moments. I almost shouted for joy to read an article by the aforementioned Mr Wilson, renouncing his atheism and announcing his return to Christianity.

Tim Keller tells the story of the novelist Anne Rice, who had lost her childhood faith. When, however, she began to read the work of sceptical scholars, it had the opposite effect of restoring the clarity and simple truth of the historical, biblical Jesus. ‘The whole case for the non-divine Jesus who stumbled into Jerusalem and somehow got crucified by nobody and had nothing to do with the founding of Christianity and would be horrified if he knew it – that whole picture which had floated in the liberal circles I frequented as an atheist for thirty years – that case was not made.’¹⁴

I leave you with that thought. Please feel free to get back to me. I am sorry that I have skimmed over these deep topics in such a quick fashion, but if you want to investigate this further then I would be happy to recommend several books for you,

Yours etc.,

David

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. (Gal. 4:4-5)

¹⁴ Timothy Keller, *King's Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011), p. xxi.



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