

3. How can we be expected to believe what happened so long ago?

Previously, we said the choice about Jesus was between considering him to be Lord or else a lunatic or liar. But I want now to clear up another possibility: could He have been a legend? Well, certainly not in the same sense as Robin Hood, because there's precious little evidence that *he* ever existed. It's not like that with Jesus. In His case, historians who were around in the first century - both Jewish and Roman - people like Josephus and Tacitus - give clear support from outside the Bible that Jesus did exist as an historical character.

So Jesus existed, but was He all that was claimed? We're familiar today with what are known as 'spin-doctors': people who project a certain image. Was Jesus simply a larger-than-life personality whose PR got out of control? Were modest and explainable exploits simply exaggerated out of all proportion? Is it really credible that first century spin-doctors took the working-class son of Mary and Joseph and spun him into the awesome Son of God? Could the Jesus of Christian belief have been very different from the Jesus of history?

How do you check out things that happened in the past? Suppose I say I had a meal out in a restaurant last week, and you said to me: prove it. How do I prove it, at least to your reasonable satisfaction? It's like what happens in a courtroom. I need to give you legal and historical -type evidence in support of my claim, then you have to judge whether it's reasonable or not. So I could show you my receipt; I could ask you to contact the friend I had dinner with; I could possibly take you to a shirt in the laundry basket and say 'go and analyze these soup stains, and compare recipes!' Notice the kind of evidence - eyewitness evidence - the friend; written evidence - the receipt; and circumstantial evidence - the stained shirt. Now let's try to do exactly the same with the claim of Christianity...

Well for a start this whole Christianity thing wasn't something dreamed up in a backroom somewhere without witnesses 2000 years ago. Jesus received a tremendous amount of attention. The things which He did weren't done in a corner. We're talking about a national phenomenon.

And - what's more - very shortly people were putting pen to papyrus and getting it all down in writing. People who earn their living by studying these things argue that the gospels - that's the 4 biographies of Jesus' life - were written during the lifetime of people who knew Jesus personally, and certainly within 60 years of the events themselves. Sixty years - at first that might seem like quite a long time, but don't forget that writers like Matthew and John were themselves eyewitnesses and others like Mark and Luke got their information from interviewing eyewitnesses.

And for these eyewitnesses, the dramatic events they were reporting would have been etched on their memory, for we're not talking of everyday events but about very exceptional happenings. I remember doing an experiment with a group of 50 young people. Very few of them could tell me what they'd eaten for dinner a few days before, but nearly all of them could still remember in vivid detail exactly what they were doing when they first heard the news of Princess Diana's death. In the same way that it's true for us today, those dramatic events which Jesus' eyewitnesses had personally experienced would have been etched in their memories - precisely because they were dramatic. In fact much more so for them than with us, because the medium of storytelling was then the television of their day.

Having thought about the testimony of the witnesses: eyewitnesses of unforgettable events who wrote it down quickly, we can now turn to look at the quality of the written evidence - the Bible itself. We can notice one thing about those who did the writing, they didn't always cast themselves in a good light in what they wrote. There's the ring of truth about it as we read of them writing

about their own misunderstanding of Jesus' teachings, their display of ugly pride among themselves, their running away, denying and deserting their Leader, then cowering away in fear. They admit to initial, total disbelief after the crucifixion of Jesus. The place they gave to women in the resurrection account was extraordinary. Did you know that there, in the 1st century, the testimony of women wasn't acceptable in a court of law? So why use them as witnesses, if it wasn't simply because that's exactly how it was? What's more, I can't imagine anyone being prepared to die for something they'd just made up - but yet many of these writers became martyrs.

And soon hundreds of copies of what they'd written went into circulation. Nowadays none of the original writings of the New Testament books and letters still exist. The same, of course, holds true for all ancient literature - the originals have long since gone. So it's worth asking: 'How do the people who study these things decide that ancient copies are trustworthy - things like Julius Caesar's reports of his Gallic Wars, for example?'

Two of the main things they do are work out how many copies there are in existence and then work out how big the gap in time is between the oldest copy and when the original would've been written. The more copies that exist, and the smaller the gap in time between the oldest copy and the original, then the more trustworthy the writings are reckoned to be. Take the case we've mentioned about Caesar's reports of his Gallic Wars. Today we have about ten copies and these date to about 1,000 years after his death. However, historians still believe them trustworthy. Now compare the evidence for the Bible record of Jesus. Thankfully lots of really old copies of what was written still survive - there are literally thousands of copies made from the original and dating back to only about 100 years after Christ's death. If any ancient record can be judged by these standards to be authentic and an accurate record of events, then it has just got to be the Bible in all that it has to tell us about the life of Jesus.

But for millions of people in the world today, the best evidence for believing the story of Jesus, and all that goes with it, is something else. For millions, the best evidence for the Bible is simply the fact that it works. A friend of mine has just passed her driving test. To do that, of course, as well as being able to control the car, she had to make sure she knew pretty well everything that's contained in the Highway Code, the instruction book for users of the roads. Just imagine for a moment what would happen if that particular book came with lots of mistakes in it. Road-signs could be misunderstood and various rules we agree to follow when driving could be disrupted. We'd be facing chaos on the roads. If the instruction manual was faulty, it simply wouldn't work, it wouldn't be much use in keeping us safe on the roads. Now compare that with the Bible. Today, and for centuries, all kinds of people all over the world have put the message of Jesus to the test and found that it works. They've discovered a richer experience of living, and are enjoying a peace, joy and contentment they never knew before. Life on the basis of Jesus' message has proved to be more fulfilling and rewarding than it had ever been before for so many people.

And archaeologists have done their bit too in checking out the Bible's record. Sir William Ramsay, one of history's greatest archaeologists, devoted 25 years of his life to using archaeology to disprove, or at least discredit, the Bible book of the Acts of the Apostles which describes early Christianity. In the end his conclusion was that its writer, the doctor Luke, was among the first rank of historians and there was every reason to trust his record of events, events which formed the sequel to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Now if the Bible passes all the tests which we can reasonably apply, and if we're satisfied, on a purely factual and historical basis, that it's authentic and trustworthy, then surely now it's worth considering its claim to be God's communication to us. Near the end of the fourth Gospel we read: 'And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name' (John 20:30-31).