



1 / MAN

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).



Magnificent Obsession

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



Man

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.



Magnificent Obsession

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



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.



Magnificent Obsession

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=SB6EZz\]7m1c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SB6EZz]7m1c).

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



Man

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





Magnificent Obsession

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



Man

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.



Magnificent Obsession

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.



Man

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





Magnificent Obsession

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.



Man

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.



Magnificent Obsession

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.



Man

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



Magnificent Obsession

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.