

Session 3



EVIDENCE OUTSIDE THE BIBLE

What if there were other biographies of Jesus that have been censored because the early church didn't like the image of Jesus they portrayed? How could I have confidence that church politics haven't squelched biographies of Jesus that were every bit as accurate as the four that were finally included in the New Testament, and that would shed important new light on the words and deeds of this controversial carpenter from Nazareth?... If the Jesus of faith is not also the Jesus of history, he's powerless and he's meaningless. Unless he's rooted in reality, unless he established his divinity by rising from the dead, he's just a feel-good symbol who's as irrelevant as Santa Claus.

Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*

READ THIS!

If possible, read the following content in preparation for your group meeting. Otherwise, read it as follow-up.

The Case for Christ, chapter 4: The Corroborating Evidence

The Case for Christ, chapter 6: The Rebuttal Evidence

WATCH THIS!

DVD Teaching Segment #1

For every DVD clip, space is provided to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

DISCUSS THIS!

1. Was Jesus a real person in history? Give a brief historical description of the general events surrounding his life and death.

“We also have volumes of writings by the ‘apostolic fathers,’ who were the earliest Christian writers after the New Testament. They authored the Epistle of Clement of Rome, the Epistles of Ignatius, the Epistle of Polycarp, the Epistle of Barnabas, and others. In many places these writings attest to the basic facts about Jesus, particularly his teachings, his crucifixion, his resurrection, and his divine nature.”

Lee Strobel



Fast Fact

Corroborative Evidence

Webster's dictionary defines corroborate this way: "To make more certain; confirm: He corroborated my account of the accident."

Corroborative evidence supports other testimony; it affirms or backs up the essential elements of an eyewitness account. It can be a public record, a photograph, or additional testimony from a second or third person. It can verify a person's entire testimony or just key parts of it. In effect, corroborative evidence acts like the support wires that keep a tall antenna straight and unwavering. The more corroborative evidence, the stronger and more secure the case.

2. Describe an incident in which you doubted someone's story until he or she offered some corroborating evidence. What criteria helped you determine the level of relevancy of this supporting evidence?

"If the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt."

Historian F. F. Bruce



Think About This!

“Let’s pretend we didn’t have any of the New Testament or other Christian writings. Even without them, what would we be able to conclude about Jesus from ancient non-Christian sources, such as Josephus, the Talmud, Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, and others?”

Lee Strobel

“Often the same people, places, and events referenced inside Scripture are cited also in non-biblical materials. These range from a myriad of geographical place names to the hard evidence by archaeology to a host of documents that have come down to us from the ancient world that correlate completely with the biblical evidence.”

Historian Paul Maier, Western Michigan University

“We would still have a considerable amount of important historical evidence [about Jesus without the New Testament]; in fact, it would provide a kind of outline for the life of Jesus. We would know that first, Jesus was a Jewish teacher; second, many people believed that he performed healings and exorcisms; third, some people believed he was the Messiah; fourth, he was rejected by the Jewish leaders; fifth, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius; sixth, despite this shameful death, his followers, who believed that he was still alive, spread beyond Palestine so that there were multitudes of them in Rome by AD 64; and seventh, all kinds of people from the cities and countryside – men and women, slave and free – worshiped him as God.”

Historian Edwin M. Yamauchi, Miami (Ohio) University

“This was indeed an impressive amount of independent corroboration. And not only can the contours of Jesus’ life be reconstructed apart from the Bible, but there’s even more that can be gleaned about him from material so old that it actually predates the Gospels themselves.”

Lee Strobel



Think About This!

Josephus

“Josephus was a very important Jewish historian of the first century. He was born in AD 37, and he wrote most of his four works toward the end of the first century. He was a priest, a Pharisee, and he was somewhat egotistical. His most ambitious

work was called The Antiquities, which was a history of the Jewish people from Creation until his time. He probably completed it in about AD 93."

Edwin M. Yamauchi

"He [Ananias] convened a meeting of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man named James, the brother of Jesus, who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned."

Josephus, *The Antiquities*

"Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as received the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. When Pilate, at the suggestion of the principle men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him first did not forsake him. And the tribe of Christians so named for him are not extinct to this day."

Josephus, *Testimonium Flavianum*

"Josephus corroborates important information about Jesus: that he was the martyred leader of the church in Jerusalem and that he was a wise teacher who had established a wide and lasting following, despite the fact that he had been crucified under Pilate at the instigation of some of the Jewish leaders. [Josephus'] accounts of the Jewish War have proved to be very accurate; for example, they've been corroborated through archaeological excavations at Masada as well as by historians like Tacitus. He's considered to be a pretty reliable historian, and his mentioning of Jesus is considered extremely important."

Edwin M. Yamauchi

3. How does the fact that the Jewish historian, Josephus, gives accurate accounts of other historical details support his accounts of Jesus and the early Christians?



Think About This!

Tacitus

“Tacitus recorded what is probably the most important reference to Jesus outside the New Testament. In AD 115 he explicitly states that Nero persecuted the Christians as scapegoats to divert suspicion away from himself for the great fire that had devastated Rome in AD 64.”

Edwin M. Yamauchi

“Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome.... Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty: then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind.”

Tacitus, *Annals*

4. How does the fact that Tacitus does not align himself with Christians affect your confidence in the reliability of his “outside” evidence for Jesus? Do you think he was trying to promote Christianity in any way? Do you think he believed that Jesus was a real historical figure?

“The Bible is a book that has been read more and examined less than any book that ever existed.”

*The Theological Works
of Thomas Paine*



Think About This!

Pliny the Younger

"[Pliny the Younger] was the nephew of Pliny the Elder, the famous encyclopedist who died in the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79. Pliny the Younger became governor of Bithynia in northwestern Turkey. Much of his correspondence with his friend, Emperor Trajan, has been preserved to the present time."

Edwin Yamauchi

"I have asked them if they are Christians, and if they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them. If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution; for, whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished.... They also declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery, and adultery.... This made me decide it was all the more necessary to extract the truth by torture from two slave-women, whom they called deaconesses. I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths."

Pliny the Younger, *Letters*

Tertullian and Phlegon

"To me, one of the most problematic references in the New Testament is where the Gospel writers claim that the earth went dark during part of the time that Jesus hung on the cross. Wasn't this merely a literary device to stress the significance of the crucifixion, and not a reference to an actual historical occurrence? After all, if darkness had fallen over the earth, wouldn't there be at least some mention of this extraordinary event outside the Bible?"

Lee Strobel

"This phenomenon, evidently, was visible in Rome, Athens, and other Mediterranean cities. According to Tertullian ... it was a 'cosmic' or 'world event.' Phlegon, a Greek author from Caria writing a chronology soon after 137 AD, reported that in the fourth year of the 202nd Olympiad (i.e., 33 AD) there was 'the greatest eclipse of the sun' and that 'it became night in the sixth hour of the day [i.e., noon] so that stars even appeared in the heavens. There was a great earthquake in Bithynia, and many things were overturned in Nicaea.'"

Historian Paul Maier

What are some factors that help you discern the credibility of each biography?

- What do the corroborative writings offered in this session confirm for you? What do they fail to confirm? In your opinion, which parts of Jesus' life and ministry have been corroborated?
- Some skeptics will accept material about Jesus only if it's from sources *outside* the Bible. Does that make sense to you if the biblical Gospels are rooted in eyewitness testimony? What do you think of this comment from Christian apologist Mark Mittelberg: "Why should the New Testament be ignored as a source for Jesus when it passes the tests of historicity? Just because certain documents are included in the Bible shouldn't automatically exclude them from consideration as if they are somehow tainted."

WATCH THIS!

DVD Teaching Segment #2

"When people begin religious movements, it's often not until many generations later that people record things about them, but the fact is that we have better historical documentation for Jesus than for the founder of any other ancient religion."

Historian Edwin M. Yamauchi

DISCUSS THIS!

7. Examine the following chart that compares some of the teachings in the most popular Gnostic text, the Gospel of Thomas, to the teachings of the New Testament. Do you see any way the teachings of Thomas can be reconciled with the biblical teachings? Why or why not?

Subject	Gospel of Thomas (written between 100 - 500 AD)	New Testament (written between 50 - 90 AD)
Who is Jesus?	Someone who imparts secret teachings to the disciples who are mature enough to receive it.	The redeemer who saves anyone who believes from sin (John 3:16).
Salvation	Salvation comes through a special, secret knowledge. You have to be worthy to receive that knowledge.	Salvation comes through faith in Jesus. "And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God" (Ephesians 2:8 NLT).
Fasting, prayer, and giving	"If you fast, you will bring sin upon yourselves, and if you pray, you will be condemned, and if you give to charity, you will harm your spirits." (Saying 14)	"When you fast, comb your hair and wash your face" (Matthew 6:17 NLT).
		"And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests" (Ephesians 6:18 NIV).
		If [your gift] is contributing to the needs of others . . . , give generously (Romans 12:8 NIV).

"Everyone who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven."

The Gospel of Thomas



Think About This!

“The various Gnostic gospels were late arrivals, which is one reason why church leaders rejected them.... They lacked authority since their authors were neither (a) apostles of Jesus nor (b) persons associated with apostles of Jesus.... No one really knows who wrote the texts.”

Christian apologist Richard Abanes

8. The various Gnostic gospels were written sometime between the late second century and the sixth century AD, while even the most skeptical scholars concede the biblical Gospels were written in the first century, which is when Jesus lived. [Jesus was executed in either AD 30 or 33. Many experts date the gospel of Mark to the late 50s or early 60s; the gospels of Matthew and Luke to the early 60s; and John to the 90s (though some argue it was written earlier).] What does the dating of a gospel tell you regarding its credibility? How important is it to you that an ancient document was written close to the events it describes? How significant is it that the biblical Gospels were authored by actual apostles of Jesus or persons associated with his apostles, while the Gnostic gospels were not?

“The Bible is a product of man, my dear. Not of God.... Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book.”

Line from the novel *The Da Vinci Code*



Think About This!

“More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusion – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John among them.... Teabing located a huge book and pulled it toward him across the table. The leather-bound edition was poster-sized, like a huge atlas. The cover read: The Gnostic Gospels. Teabing heaved it open.... ‘These are photocopies of... the earliest Christian records. Troublingly, they do not match up with the gospels in the Bible....’ Flipping toward the middle of the book, Teabing pointed to a passage, ‘The Gospel of Philip is always a good place to start.’”

Fictional character Sir Leigh Teabing, from *The Da Vinci Code*

“There is a view among some that there were all of these different competing views of Jesus Christ and the one that won out became the orthodox perspective of Christ reflected in the Gospels. All the evidence runs contrary to that.”

New Testament scholar Mark Strauss

9. Why do you think alternative stories of Jesus, contrary to the New Testament, are so intriguing or attractive to some people? Which “alternative version” of Jesus do you most often hear among your friends and colleagues?

“There are no new discoveries that tell us anything new about Jesus. The Gospel of Thomas was discovered long ago, but it’s only now being used to create an alternative Jesus. Some theories about the Gospel of Thomas may be new, but the gospel itself is not.”

Gregory Boyd, PhD



Think About This!

“Jesus is not a symbol of anything unless he’s rooted in history. The Nicene Creed doesn’t say, ‘We wish these things were true.’ It says, ‘Jesus Christ was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and the third day he rose again from the dead,’ and it goes on from there. The theological truth is based on historical truth. That’s the way the New Testament reads. Look at the sermon of Peter in the second chapter of Acts. He stands up and says, ‘You guys are a witness of these things; they weren’t done in secret.’”

Gregory Boyd, PhD

10. In *The Case for Christ*, Dr. Gregory Boyd states, “I don’t want to base my life on a symbol. I want reality.” What do you think he means by this statement? Do you agree or disagree with his conviction? Is it enough that Jesus is a symbol of hope, or is it important for you to be confident that his life, teachings, and resurrection are rooted in history? Why?



Think About This!

“What do these scholars have? Well, there’s a brief allusion to a lost ‘secret’ gospel in a late-second-century letter that has unfortunately only been seen by one person and has now itself been lost. There’s a third-century account of the crucifixion and resurrection that stars a talking cross and that less than a handful of scholars think predates the Gospels. There’s a second-century Gnostic document, parts of which some scholars now want to date early to back up their own preconceptions. And there is a hypothetical document built on shaky assumptions that is being sliced thinner and thinner by using circular reasoning. No, I’m sorry. I don’t buy it. It’s far more reasonable to put my trust in the [four biblical] Gospels – which pass the tests of historical scrutiny with flying colors.”

Gregory Boyd, PhD

Optional Discussion Questions

- In the DVD clip, Craig Evans makes the observation that people are free to “pick and choose” between two versions of Jesus. Someone may prefer the second-century Gnostic Jesus better, while others might like the early first-century Palestinian Jesus. Do you think “preferences” or “feelings” are a good way to decide what to believe? Why or why not?
- Often, scholars are accused of finding the Jesus they wanted to find. Said Charlotte Allen in *The Human Christ*: “The liberal searchers found a liberal Jesus, the deists found a deist, the Romantics a Romantic, the existentialists an existentialist, and the liberationists a Jesus of class struggle.” Is it possible to find the *real* Jesus? What are some ways we can safeguard against our natural tendency to make Jesus fit into our preconceptions or personal tastes?

WATCH THIS!

DVD Wrap-up/Lee's Perspective

“Just read these other documents for yourself. They’re written later than the four Gospels, in the second, third, fourth, fifth, even sixth century, long after Jesus, and they’re generally quite banal. They carry names – like the Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of Mary – that are unrelated to their real authorship. On the other hand, the four Gospels in the New Testament were readily accepted with remarkable unanimity as being authentic in the story they told.”

Bruce Metzger, Princeton Theological Seminary

BETWEEN SESSIONS

Personal Reflection

LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy mountain? Those whose walk is blameless, who do what is righteous, who speak the truth from their hearts.

Psalm 15:1–2

Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.

Psalm 25:5

Do not withhold your mercy from me, O LORD; may your love and your truth always protect me.

Psalm 40:11 NIV

Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

Psalm 51:6 NIV

The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

Psalm 145:18

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

John 8:32

- What determines for you what you believe to be true? Are you a “facts and data” person or do you rely more on gut feelings? Can you think of an example of a time when a gut feeling you had proved to be true? How about a time when something you were absolutely sure of proved not to be true? How willing were you to change your mental paradigm once the facts were presented?
- What about evidence? To what extent do you genuinely examine the evidence for any given story? Are you the type that goes to *snopes.com* when a questionable email arrives? Or are you someone who considers the source of the email and lets your opinion of the sender affect your opinion of the content? Have you ever been embarrassed by forwarding information you thought was true and later found out wasn’t accurate? When you discovered the correct information, how did it make you feel? Like the rest of us, you probably felt humiliated! But here is the key question: Were you glad to find out the truth or would you have preferred to continue to believe the wrong information and save yourself the humiliation? Which is

most important to you: to learn the truth even when it contradicts your current belief system, or to believe in something that may be false, but is comfortable?

- How important is truth to you? According to the verses on page 51, what value do the authors of the Bible place on truth? In the last verse, Jesus is quoted as saying, "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free." What do you think Jesus meant when he said those words? What value do you think Jesus placed on the Bible? On truth? How hard are you willing to search for the truth about Jesus?
- Some would say that the story of Jesus Christ is a feel-good story that is too good to be true. Others would say there are no facts to support it and that Jesus was a mythological figure who never even existed. Many think the Bible is unreliable and the events it contains are spurious and uncorroborated by history. Is this what you have believed in the past? Is this an accurate reflection of what you believe now? Is this what the evidence supports? What have you learned in this discussion or in your reading that has challenged your current belief system? How open are you to assimilating this new information? Psalm 145:18 reads: "The LORD is near all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth." How willing are you to call on the Lord right now and disclose your beliefs, doubts, and concerns? When you do, he promises to be near you and to hear you. He is listening.