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Historical sources seem to indicate that Jesus was born into a Jewish peasant family from a small middle eastern village. As a baby he was a refugee, as his parents fled persecution. On their return, he grew up in another small village, where he worked as a carpenter until he was about 30. Then, for three years, he became an itinerant preacher.

At first, people hung on his every word, but he was extremely critical of the Jewish religious leaders, who then managed to turn public opinion against him, and got the Romans on their side. Jesus was arrested, tried and sentenced to death. He was publicly flogged and hung on a Roman cross to die.

His close friends hid behind locked doors, for fear they would be next. However, just a few weeks later, they went public again, preaching to the people about 'the good news', but this time making the claim that Jesus had 'come back from the dead'. They insisted that they had seen him alive and that they were telling the truth, even when they themselves began to be persecuted, arrested, flogged and some even killed.

They continued to say, as Jesus had said, that they had 'good news' about a new 'kingdom' and about Jesus being their special 'king'. Despite the persecution, this 'good news' spread, and their story soon came to be believed even by non-Jews. It spread from country to country, and in a matter of a few decades there were people calling themselves followers of Jesus all around the known world.

Currently, there are around 2.5 billion people who say they follow Jesus and believe this 'good news'. The best-selling book in the whole world centres on the life story of this one obscure Jewish peasant preacher, and it has been translated into more different languages than any other book, ever.

The texts of the Bible, plus contemporary historical documents, have been scrutinised by countless scholars and academics for centuries – helped, more recently, by archaeologists – and translations of the story have been read, studied and appreciated by billions of people for almost 2000 years.

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*If the above summary is even moderately accurate then the story of Jesus has had an unparalleled effect on the history of the whole human race – for good or ill.*

*But then again, maybe the whole story of Jesus is just made-up wishful thinking.*

*Maybe.*

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## ***Jesus – Fact or Friction***

### ***An irritating historical conundrum***

So what qualifications do I have to write about the historical Jesus? None – unless you count a grade 9 at O level history in 1965 – but I have read quite a few related books in the past few years.

To explain, I have been highly motivated in my studies of the historical Jesus because, 10 years ago, after 40 years of calling myself a Christian, I lost my faith totally and began to wonder if maybe God didn't even exist and the whole of Christianity was just made-up wishful thinking.

I then slowly began to rebuild my faith, but it was on the same lines as the previous 40 years, and I still wasn't happy – it somehow didn't ring true to me.

Five years ago, having moved house, my wife and I went to a new church, and we were amazed by the sense of welcome and inclusiveness. At the same time, I started reading some more radical Christian books and, as I went back to looking at the historical Jesus, I was thrilled by what I found.

As I said at the start, clearly something quite remarkable happened in Palestine in the first century CE: the teaching of this one peasant preacher spread like wildfire, and people were willing to die for what they believed. How? Why? Whatever was it that so inspired them?

And the other thing that I find difficult understand is how, in later centuries, Christians could justify things like burning people to death, on the basis of their ‘heresy’, or repeatedly persecuting Jewish people; and why, in more recent centuries, churches split into more and smaller factions because of minor theological differences. How could all this be based on Jesus’ teaching about love – including ‘love thy enemy’?

Yes, many Christians have been sacrificially involved in projects such as bringing education and healthcare, the abolition of slavery and care for the poor, but that doesn’t excuse the Christian ‘bad stuff’ that we’ve seen down the centuries. So what keeps going wrong?!

All I hope to do here is first to look at how good the documentary evidence is for what Jesus said and did, and for what actually happened in the first century. Then I’ll try to offer a pointer towards how it could have gone so horribly wrong. I certainly don’t have ‘all the answers’.

But clearly **something** in Jesus’ life and teaching has inspired vast numbers of people, for two millennia, to lead good and positive lives. He did talk a lot about love, and so I’d like to suggest that maybe it’s worth going back and looking at the source of some of this good stuff.

## ***Did Jesus even exist?***

How reliable are the historical documents on which the Bible is based? We don’t have the originals, of course, just copies of copies of copies – and 2000 years is a very long time. And hasn’t the church changed the wording over the centuries?

Well, the church has changed the *translations* over the centuries – indeed, translations *have* to change because language changes over time, and the meaning of words changes, sometimes totally: “Wow, that’s wicked!”

But how accurately do we know what the original authors actually wrote? What’s the principle with ancient documents? I don’t want to bore you with too much detail, but if we’re to give any credence to Jesus’ teaching, I think it’s important to know how much of what we’ve got we can trust.

First of all, the New Testament isn’t just a single book; it’s a series of different documents, written by different people at different times over a period of about 60 years after the events they describe. The earliest of these were written as letters, so let’s concentrate on one of those, just to illustrate the principle.

So Paul sat down and wrote a letter, in Greek, and sent it to a church in a region called Galatia (in modern day Turkey). As there were several congregations in the area, they would probably have written out one or more copies of that original letter, and people probably took it to other churches further afield, and then you end up with copies of copies and so on. The problem is that in the copying, some bits may have been changed, and maybe some bits were added and some left out.

Fast forward to today. As a basis for our (English) translations, we have what purport to be the words, in New Testament Greek, that Paul wrote to his friends, but how close are they to the original words? Well, scholars study all the different manuscript copies and, where there are differences, they give greater weight to the oldest existing actual manuscript copies. Also, this study has been helped more recently by other manuscripts and cultural information that archaeology has revealed (see Appendix 1). However, for any parts of that letter that still remain uncertain, there will be a footnote in the text to warn us.

But as readers of books such as *The Da Vinci Code* will be aware, the documents we have in our Bibles are not the only ones written around that time. We know that there were lots of account written because of what Luke says at the beginning of his gospel, written 35–50 years after the events they describe.

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*

This echoes the even earlier writings of Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, written within 25 years of Jesus' death.

*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures [i.e. the Old Testament], that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep [died].*

This could be set alongside the supposed claims of books such as *The Da Vinci Code*.

And one tiny detail that, for me, has the ring of truth: John, in his account (chapter 19), says that one of the soldiers pierced the side of Jesus' body on the cross and that 'blood and water' flowed out. The person who recorded that would presumably not have known, but modern medical knowledge suggests that this shows Jesus really was dead; he did not revive in the cool of the tomb and lead a religious movement based on claims of his own resurrection.

### ***How could it all go so wrong?***

Given that all Christians say they base their lives on the teachings of this peasant preacher, how could there be such a contrast between the best and the worst of the lives of Christians throughout history?

I'm no historian, but isn't it basically that people tend to see what we want to see, to believe what they want to believe? The Bible certainly provides a happy hunting ground for those who want to pick out bits they like and ignore those that we find unpalatable. Sadly, I can see how I've done this in my own life.

But if we do want a more objective view of Jesus' teachings, part of the difficulty is that, if we don't understand New Testament Greek, we have to rely on a **translation**. Plus, we also need some understanding of the 2000-year-old culture; otherwise, even if we know what Jesus and his contemporaries actually *said*, we'll still have difficulty knowing what they actually *meant*.

The meaning of much of the text is reasonably obvious, but where there are bits that seem contradictory, we have to interpret it on the basis of the teaching of the Bible as a whole. Not wanting to overstate this, but isn't there a degree of circularity here? Our interpretation (and therefore our translation) is based on our overall beliefs, but our beliefs are based on our own interpretation of the Bible. OK, in extreme cases, the perpetrators have also had to actually *ignore* some bits of Jesus' teaching, but there is certainly plenty of scope here for getting it wrong.

What's the answer? How do we find a Bible translation that gives us a chance to examine the 'good stuff' of Jesus' teaching? One practical suggestion is to seek out (through books or in person) Christians whose quality of life we admire, and find out what Bible translations they use.

### ***Now what?***

In summary, here's what I've tried to suggest:

1. Based on the life and teaching of this one single Jewish preacher, something good and positive, attractive and contagious happened in the first century CE, and it changed human history.
2. We do know, with ninety-something percent accuracy, what was actually written down at the time by the authors of the New Testament, i.e. the claims they made about Jesus.
3. Trying to understand what Jesus' teaching actually meant at the time, and then how we might apply it today, has its pitfalls. Sadly, it has on occasion gone horribly wrong.

The shortest contemporaneous summary of the life and teachings of Jesus is: *The Good News According to Mark* (a.k.a. Mark's Gospel). In a modern English translation it's only about 14,000 words, which could probably be read in an evening (this booklet is about 2000 words). Luke, quoted above, set out his "orderly account", but his version is quite long (24,000 words).

Thanks for listening, and if you do read one of the gospels, I'd love to hear what you think.

Paul Beverley, 2nd Jan 2022  
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## ***Appendix 1***

How many old manuscripts have we got, and how close are they, time-wise, to the date when the originals were written?

Scholars think that the various New Testament books were written between AD 40 and AD 100. We have manuscript copies of some parts of those books dated (some by *radiocarbon analysis*) to around AD 130, and full manuscripts from AD 350. So those manuscripts are from 30–310 years after the books were written, and there are over five thousand (part or whole) Greek manuscripts.

How does that compare with other contemporary historical documents?

	<b><i>Written</i></b>	<b><i>Earliest mss</i></b>	<b><i>Time gap (yr)</i></b>	<b><i>Copies</i></b>
Livy's <i>Roman History</i>	59 BC – AD 17	AD 900	<b>900</b>	<b>20</b>
Tacitus	AD 100	AD 1100	<b>1000</b>	<b>20</b>
Herodotus	488–428 BC	AD 900	<b>1300</b>	<b>8</b>
Caesar's <i>Gallic Wars</i>	58–50 BC	AD 900	<b>950</b>	<b>10</b>
New Testament	AD 40–100	AD 130 (part) AD 350 (full)	<b>&lt; 310</b>	<b>&gt; 5000</b>