

# The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ

AMONG THE MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS



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## **The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ among the Major World Religions**

**by Gary R. Habermas**

Overviews of world religious studies often reveal a forgotten aspect of the landscape. Rare enough are authors who actually compare the exclusive teachings of particular religions. However, listing really unique aspects of different belief systems is even more neglected, especially if these items could possibly have an evidential basis. For example, how long after the founder of a major world religion dies are his or her major teachings actually written down and recorded, especially such that they can be accurately retrieved? When is the earliest extant copy of the written texts? Often, it is very difficult to even locate these sorts of data. Why is this the case?

### **The Place of Comparison, Truth, and Evidence in Religion**

It is probably the case that many different reasons contribute to the phenomena just mentioned. Oftentimes, religion and truth, or religion and history, are simply considered by many to occupy entirely different categories. They are often treated as strange bedfellows. Perhaps it is even thought that there are airtight partitions between these categories, too. Religion is just not something which is supposed to be evidenced or compared. Our beliefs are often said to be just that--meant to be held by faith or not at all. Moreover, it is believed to be private--faith is not well-suited for discussion, voting, and certainly not meant to be debated. Many who call themselves conservatives, liberals, and in-between think this way.

Others, of course, take contrary views, and may actually enjoy hearing good religious give-and-take with plenty of clash. But what if the participants are simply speaking “off the tops of their heads” rather than actually being authorities? Who wants to hear someone assert what they do not know? Thus, proper background and research into these areas are some of the prerequisite for the best conversations.

Certainly a huge reason for avoiding logical, evidential, or other sorts of religious comparisons is what many refer to as “political correctness.” It is simply considered to be in very bad taste to teach or even to imply that one religion is in any way superior to another. Among other problems, such an attitude is held to smack too often of intolerance, and virtually nothing is more despised these days, especially among young people. Someone having an attitude that their religious beliefs are correct, especially if they think that their position is the *only* truthful view, may be termed prejudicial, narrow-minded, or even considered just plain bigots.

For a number of major and minor reasons, then, it often flies in the face of our modern ethos to attempt to compare, evaluate, or especially to judge one religion by virtue of another. If only one analogy could be used to express these positions, it might be this one: For many people today, religion is only a subjective preference—like choosing one’s favorite foods. On this view, haughty religious views are taken as being exactly akin to someone getting all huffy or even angry because someone dares to prefer apple pie over steak. It is widely held that religious views are completely up to the individual! No one has the right to tell someone that steak is the best, for it is merely a matter of personal preference! The same goes for religion.

## David Hume and the Cancellation of Religious Dogma

But treating faith more subjectively is not the only way to come at this issue, even from a skeptical standpoint. Some persons think they have rational reasons for rejecting judgments between the world religions. One who thought so was influential Eighteenth Century Scottish philosopher David Hume, who concluded that “miracles” in one religion were capable of ruling out the “miracles” in other faiths. But when the miracles clash, the rival beliefs in both of the religious systems are destroyed, as well. Therefore, the bottom line is that “miracles” in the various religions thereby nullified each other. When that occurred, the rest of their teachings were also eliminated.<sup>1</sup>

But this is an odd critique for many reasons and it is usually rejected or at least ignored even by Hume’s skeptical supporters. To clarify, Hume clearly did not believe in the occurrence of miracles. But even if most miracle-claims in the world’s religions were bogus, perhaps just lies, how could false reports conceivably annul the possibility of true miracle claims? Or if *all* miracles were rejected as false, on what grounds would any of them cancel each other? Then again, miracles in different religions might actually occur because of being quite compatible with each other!

In varying circumstances regarding our alternative examples of miracle-claims, it is difficult to charge that *any* of these claims or actual events would cancel each other. For example, if all miracle-claims are simply false anyway, as Hume believed, then that clearly

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<sup>1</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section X: “Of Miracles,” Part II, point four.



would be the bottom line—but *not* due to the force of Hume’s charge here, for they are not eliminating each other. They simply do not obtain. On the contrary, if there are a combination of true and false miracle-claims in the various religions, and/or particular supernatural events that are even compatible with each other, Hume’s point is just totally misplaced. In such cases, how could a non-event challenge a true occurrence? If both events are historical, what is the basis for asserting that they eliminate each other? Again, what if it turns out like that they could be compatible with each other?

As a result, the bottom line here is that claimed miraculous events need to be researched in order to ascertain whether or not they actually occurred. Otherwise, we are arguing in a vacuum. True miracles may either fail to evidence a corresponding belief system, or they may actually be quite able to bear such a burden. But mere assertions do not solve the problem; neither do they even help.

### **The Double Standards in Researching Miracles-Claims**

One of the most frustrating aspects of this entire issue is watching how some “liberals” interact with Christian miracle-claims versus their attitudes towards miracle-claims within the world religious traditions. Many examples could be supplied concerning how the very strictest guidelines possible are usually exacted upon Christianity, whereas much lesser criteria, or even none at all, may be applied to non-Christian claims. When the latter are complimented or even accepted without critical interaction, the biased ruse is apparent. Observing these inequities can be a truly amazing exercise.

For example, influential critical theologian John A.T. Robinson uncritically repeated a Buddhist story and claim of apotheosis, where a holy man in Tibet died in 1953. The man's body was later missing from a blanket in which it was wrapped and kept inside a house. Sometime afterwards, a rainbow over the house was interpreted by the local Tibetan villagers to mean that the holy man had been taken up to "heaven"!<sup>2</sup>

In another of his volumes, while being fairly positive towards Jesus' empty tomb (but not in the same context towards his virgin birth), Robinson still raised questions concerning the Christian accounts.<sup>3</sup> Yet, no criticisms were raised regarding the details concerning the Tibetan holy man, such as the assurance of the man's death in the first place, or the possibility of a naturally removed body that was only kept inside a private home, or the extent to which the story may have changed over the years before Robinson heard about it. Perhaps most of all, how in the world does a rainbow indicate that the man was spiritually "absorbed into the Light"<sup>4</sup> especially when the Tibetan climate is often quite rainy and rainbows would seem to be both common as well as extraordinarily difficult to trace to a single house anyway? The levels of skepticism and critical interaction are simply not the same in these cases.

In another instance, leading critical philosopher Charles Hartshorne implied in his comments regarding a public debate on Jesus' resurrection that he felt bound not to accept Jesus' resurrection because it might also confront him with the miraculous events that Buddha was supposed to have performed!<sup>5</sup> Yet, while once again raising some standard questions concerning

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<sup>2</sup> John A.T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 139.

<sup>3</sup> John A.T. Robinson, *Exploration into God* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1967), 112-114.

<sup>4</sup> Robinson, *The Human Face of God*, 139, note 157.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Hartshorne, "Response to the Debate," in Gary R. Habermas and Antony G.N. Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*, ed. by Terry L. Miethe (New York, N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1987), 137, 141-

the resurrection in this same context, no mention whatsoever was made that the events reportedly from Buddha's life were not recorded until many hundreds of years afterwards, as if this little fact were hardly even relevant! In such a case, how could the latter reports from hundreds of years after Buddha's life possibly eliminate the former, very early ones?<sup>6</sup>

A last instance is provided by David Levenson, who asserts rather negatively that, in the case of Jesus, "we are forced to rely on secondhand accounts" in the Gospels, as if Levenson were announcing that these four texts were regrettably too late or otherwise sub-par!<sup>7</sup> But the four Gospels were written as early as three to less than seven decades after Jesus' teachings! We will take a look later at how many of the world religious founders have books written this soon after their deaths?

However, when Levinson discusses the recording of Buddha's teachings, *centuries-long gaps* between his teachings and their initially being recorded are glossed over quickly, without specifications!<sup>8</sup> So one sometimes has to work out the math in order to realize this distance! But why the somewhat derogatory comment about the secondhand Gospels while not even being specific about the distance to the writings regarding Buddha?

It is precisely such an overly-critical and very specific attitude toward Christian beliefs while hardly posing any similarly tough questions at all to the frequently unevidenced, non-Christian situations that reveal the scholarly double standard. Regarding the empty tomb or the resurrection, critics typically throw the proverbial kitchen sink of major naturalistic hypotheses (and then some!) at the Christian positions. But too seldom they are not at all critical of non-

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142. Perhaps the issue is partly solved when Hartshorne confesses in the last sentence of his essay, "My metaphysical bias is against resurrections." (!) (142)

<sup>6</sup> We return to the question of the evidence for Buddha's life later in this E-Book.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. David Levinson, *Religion: A Cross-Cultural Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 38.

<sup>8</sup> Levinson, *Religion*, 28-30.

Christian teachings. Granted, it could be a case of the political correctness mentioned above. Or it could be that the factual data regarding the non-Christian religions is just unknown to the commentator. But whatever the reasons, it certainly seems to occur too often to simply be a matter of coincidence.

A last matter should be remembered briefly here before we dig into the meat of this subject. One remark is perhaps heard above all others, often made in a variety of ways in this age of supreme tolerance. The popular platitude is that all major religions basically proclaim the same core message or truths, though they may be packaged a little differently. The most common rendition could well be that all religions are paths up various sides of the same mountain, of course implying that they will all reach the pinnacle together. Throughout the remainder of this short book, this idea will remain in the background in our comparison of religious ideas. Our chief conclusions will bear on the truth of these notions.

### **Six Areas Indicating Jesus' Uniqueness**

Moving beyond these preliminary matters, we will now examine a half-dozen areas that indicate that several of Jesus' major teachings and actions were unparalleled in religious terms. Comparisons will be made to what we know regarding several non-Christian founders of other major world religions, too. But our purpose in this volume is to contrast the Christian message at each of these points with other philosophical and religious declarations or actions, to test if the nature of Jesus' teachings and actions indeed were unmatched. The contention and overall

theme from this point onwards is that the world religions do not really even come close to rivaling the singularity of Jesus' claims.

However, note that it is *not* our purpose in this volume to actually *establish or demonstrate* the historical or other truth of these areas, especially since that would be a much longer treatise by itself. Not having ignored this subject, however, many of my other books have argued these historical theses in great detail.<sup>9</sup> Our chief intention, then, is to inquire whether the major non-Christian religious founders even made the most unique statements that Jesus did in the first place. Along the way, we will even pursue several occasions when those who actually hold to the truth of these different world religions and philosophies nonetheless still even *agree* with *our* general theme!

## **1. Jesus Claimed to be Deity**

This is by far the most-detailed of our half-dozen categories. It may surprise many readers that we have no reliable historical data that any of the founders of the world's major religions ever claimed to be God, deity, or a comparative concept. In other words, at least no early, reliable writings attest such a claim by these founders on their own behalf. In fact, for several of them, their views are quite opposed to such a claim.

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<sup>9</sup> For just one example, see especially Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), especially chapters 1-5, 10.

## Non-Christian Religious Founders

The religious founders that differ most from Christianity often exhibited an early form of philosophical naturalism. Almost incredibly for some, Buddha most likely rejected belief in God, at least in the sense of a personal or creator God. At least Buddha's more philosophically-inclined followers tended to follow the same course.<sup>10</sup> As S.A. Nigosian attests in a section entitled, "Denial of the Existence of a Creator God," it is "(f)undamental to Buddhism" that reality is impersonal. While there is a life-principle in nature, especially the Mahayana Buddhist version of China and Japan "philosophically denies the existence of a creator god that controls both nature and human destiny."<sup>11</sup>

Nigosian notes a difference with popular Buddhism, however, which remains "incurably polytheistic" even though "these heavenly beings are not 'gods' in any absolute sense." For instance, these beings are still subject "to the law of rebirth." So for Buddhism as a whole, it is incorrect to discuss these matters by utilizing the term "God" in any absolute or theistic sense, including for Buddha.<sup>12</sup>

Allie Frazier largely agrees with this assessment regarding Chinese Buddhism, likewise noting that, "Superstition, magic, and mythological beings were entirely absent from early Buddhism." However, later Buddhism, especially in "its most extensive period of growth in China" from 220-589 AD, many other popular teachings crept in, including that of "divine

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<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, *Comparative Religion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1962, 1975), 85. Hexham agrees (*Concise Dictionary of Religion* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993], 39-40).

<sup>11</sup> S.A. Nigosian, *World Religions: A Historical Approach*, Third ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2000), 80-81.

<sup>12</sup> Nigosian, *World Religions*, 81.

figures and heroic saints.”<sup>13</sup> But it should be noted that this time of Buddhist growth in China, including the move away from the earlier time to superstition and mythology, began about 700 years after Buddha’s death, and extending to over 1100 years afterwards by the end of this period.

Another example is that of highly influential Chinese teachers Confucius and Lao Tzu (Taoism), who definitely exerted tremendous ethical, social, political, and cultural influences on their students and societies. This was especially true of Confucianism. However, these teachers were not theologians.<sup>14</sup> To place some of their teachings in a somewhat similar cross-cultural context, many of their aphorisms can be a bit reminiscent of the Jewish Book of Proverbs.

In least for earlier forms of both Confucianism and Taoism, Bahm points out that, “there is nothing prior to, other than, or outside of, Nature to influence it.” Thus, “Nature acts naturally, or in accordance with its own nature.” So, “Tao or Nature is naturalistic.” Further, “Tao is impersonal. . . . there is nothing supernatural in Tao and nothing superior to Tao.” For instance, nature cannot be acted upon or changed, such as by prayer (*Tao Teh King* 56). Both Confucius and Lao Tze were naturalistic, humanistic, and, “Neither appealed to a God or any other principle outside the process.”<sup>15</sup>

Similarly to what occurred in Buddhism, however, Frazier adds more details. In their early texts, “Confucius is treated as a normal human being and no extravagant claims are made concerning his origin or his success in life.” But similarly to what happened in Buddhism, “In later Confucian texts, Confucius is represented as a superhuman teacher” and dignified above the

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<sup>13</sup> *Readings in Eastern Religious Thought*, Vol. 3: *Chinese and Japanese Religions*, ed. by Allie M. Frazier (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), “The Religions of China,” 25-27.

<sup>14</sup> Lao Tzu, *Tao Teh King, Interpreted as Nature and Intelligence*, ed. by Archie Bahm, Second ed. (Albuquerque, N.M.: World Books, 1986), 77.

<sup>15</sup> These quotations are taken, respectively, from Bahm’s commentary in *Tao Teh King*, 77, 85, 78, 80, 114-115; cf. also the further comments on 78, 80, 102, 107; 131.

ordinary Chinese.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, earlier Taoist texts exhibited teachings on “moral action and conduct” along with “individual spirituality” and thoughts concerning the glories of nature. In contrast, later Taoist writings included “treatises on magic and longevity, ramblings by saints in states of trance.”<sup>17</sup>

So the earlier, more reserved teachings of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism each evolved into more phenomenal, mystical, and occultic versions. There is a fair amount of agreement that among the chief reasons for these changes was that these religions became rivals of each other and competed for adherents. The result was the inclination to incorporate widely and syncretistically from both the surrounding religious and non-religious folk beliefs. As Frazier states rather succinctly, all three religions “responded to every pressure from the laity to provide whatever succor or spiritual comfort was required by the people.”<sup>18</sup>

At least from what we can tell authoritatively concerning Buddha, Confucius, and Lao Tzu, then, there are no rivals to Jesus whatsoever in that these three teachers definitely did not refer to themselves as deity, especially not in the theistic sense that we are speaking here. In fact, each of these systems might be referred to as some variety of qualified naturalism, which is diametrically opposed to Jesus’ outlook. While we have seen that later versions of these religions migrated away from the earlier forms, this was more prominent hundreds of years later and did not reflect the views of the founders, but was decidedly more syncretistic.

Beyond these ancient and more naturalistic ethical, social, and political thinkers, another prominent category for the foremost religious founders would be that of a prophet.

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<sup>16</sup> Frazier, *Chinese and Japanese Religions*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Frazier, *Chinese and Japanese Religions*, 22-23.

<sup>18</sup> Details are provided especially in Frazier, *Chinese and Japanese Religions*, 23-25; the quotation is from page 23; also Nigosian, 76-79, 88, 119, 124-125, 128; Bahm, 86.



Geographically, they would congregate westward from where Buddha emerged, over to the shores of the Mediterranean area, in Israel. Several of the best-known individuals who established or updated major belief systems claimed to be no more than special teachers, even if noble, honorable, and illustrious ones. In such cases, it would be offensive and even blasphemous to call or refer to these prophets as God or deity in any sense.

The chief prophet of the Persian religion named after him, Zoroaster is usually dated to the Sixth Century BC. But he never claimed to be deity. A key concern is that the reports indicate a span of potential dates for Zoroaster's birth that varies as widely as about 1000 years, from 1500 to 500 BC!<sup>19</sup> But the major problem is that, of all the Zoroastrian writings, none date between 250 BC and 225 AD. So this automatically removes the most important material to *at least* 700 years after Zoroaster lived and perhaps as much as 1700 years later, given his range of possible birth dates.<sup>20</sup>

The only items that could have been written by Zoroaster himself are a small portion of a set of non-theological prayers and hymns, contained within the Avesta, composed over about a thousand years. Worst of all, the earliest manuscript copies of the Avestas are "highly dubious" and date to the Thirteenth Century AD, or some 1800 years after the earliest of Zoroaster's birth dates.<sup>21</sup> Much of the religion's theology (especially its important eschatology) comes from the

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<sup>19</sup> Nigosian, *World Religions*, 216; Irving Hexham, *Understanding World Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 235. However, Hexham himself chooses the traditional Sixth-Century BC date, in his volume *Concise Dictionary of Religion*, 239.

<sup>20</sup> This is according to a Persian ancient historian of religion, Edwin Yamauchi. See his *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 458-466 and Yamauchi's lengthy essay, "Life, Death, and the Afterlife in the Ancient Near East," in Richard N. Longenecker, *Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 21-50, especially 47-49.

<sup>21</sup> Winfried Corduan, *A Tapestry of Faiths: The Common Threads Between Christianity and World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), especially 63-64; cf. Nigosian, *World Religions*, 222.

Bundahishn, which is a Ninth Century AD writing.<sup>22</sup> So the end result is that we know very little concerning Zoroaster's theology except through very late sources not written by him.<sup>23</sup> There is certainly no rival here to Jesus' teaching on his deity.

The Qur'an definitely does not elevate Muhammad to the place of Allah (Surahs 14:11; 40:78) or worship Muhammad (Surahs 21:25-26; 23:32; 41:14). So while Muhammad is Allah's chief prophet and messenger (Surahs 4:13-14; 16:43-44; 33:6, 33), there is no attempt to make him deity. To the contrary, Allah has no partners (Surahs 4:48, 171; 5:72, 117). Thus, Muhammad does not make claims such as those made by Jesus in the Gospels. As Muslim scholar Anderson notes, for Islam, "the one unforgivable sin is that of *shirk*, or associating anyone or anything with the Almighty. The very idea of an incarnation of the deity is therefore anathema, or simple blasphemy."<sup>24</sup>

Neither does the Old Testament place any prophet or leader on God's level. Arguably the most sacred text in the Old Testament, the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4) left no room for prophets or other human beings to co-occupy God's place or throne. Rather, we are told that God will not share his glory with anyone else (Isa. 48:11). So neither are Abraham, David, Isaiah, Daniel, or anyone else candidates for godhood, and again, no claims are made for them such as Jesus makes in the Gospels.

In sum, none of these chief founders of the major world religions viewed so far claimed to be deity. Whenever their later followers may have drifted in such a direction, it was not because they were following their founder's original teachings or directions. Further, such later

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<sup>22</sup> Yamauchi, "Life, Death, and the Afterlife in the Ancient Near East," 48; Negosian, *World Religions*, 221-222.

<sup>23</sup> As in the example from Yamauchi, "Life, Death, and the Afterlife in the Ancient Near East," 49; cf. Corduan, *A Tapestry of Faiths*, 63.

<sup>24</sup> J.N.D. Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1970), 47 (Anderson's emphasis).

notions exhibit two additionally significant problems. These later world religious concepts carry largely different meanings than the Christian sense, meaning that they were not in fact saying the same thing anyway. Further, the books in which these teachings are reported are far too late to track these different teachings to the original founders, both their original time of writing as well as their earliest extant copies.

### **The Case of Krishna**

Representing Hinduism, perhaps Krishna comes the closest to being understood as God, according to their own texts. The most important manifestation of Vishnu, Krishna is referred to in the lofty terms of deity in the Bhagavad-Gita and even worshipped (for example, 4:13, 15; 9:18-20, 23; 18:65). The Bhagavad-Gita is a part of the larger text, the Mahābhārata.

Yet, there are several serious problems here. Initially, in what sense does Hindu teaching consider this notion of deity? Is it a reference to deity in the full theistic sense, or is it conceived some other way? To be God in the normal Hindu sense would be quite distinct from the views of the Jewish, Christian, or Muslim traditions.<sup>25</sup> In the monotheistic religions, God is by nature totally separate from his creation. Further, human beings do not become God. In Christianity, there is only one such Incarnation of God, Jesus Christ. In the Bhagavad-Gita, however, the

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<sup>25</sup> An exceptional example of this difference in outlooks between Christian and Hindu believers is an older volume by Swami Akhilananda. He argues clearly that Jesus was actually an incarnation of God (37-39, 50, 55) and additionally agrees “in regarding Christ as unique” (56). Incredibly, he even quotes Swami Vivekananda as saying, “If I, as an Oriental, have to worship Jesus of Nazareth, there is only one way left to me, that is, to worship Him as God and nothing else.” (55)! But as to the *meaning* of these comments, Akhilananda is also exceptionally clear that there are major differences with the Christian view, for Hindus hold that there are *many* such incarnations of God (38-56, especially 44, 49, 51, 55-56). Swami Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949). The page numbers in this footnote are taken from an essay drawn from this book, Akhilananda’s “Hindu View of Christ” in *Christianity: Some Non-Christian Appraisals*, ed. by David W. McKain (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 34-56.

process of enlightenment can be attained by those who return to the Godhead and achieve their own divinity (especially 18:46-68).<sup>26</sup> In a certain additional sense, in the Hindu tradition, all persons already have or may become divine.

An additional difference concerns historical matters. Scholars are not sure if Krishna ever lived or not. For example, in the introductory “Setting the Scene” in the volume above, it is said that Krishna was believed to have spoken the text of the Bhagavad-Gita to his student Arjuna some 5,000 years ago. Then we are told that, “The general pattern translators have followed” is to count the larger work of which the Bhagavad-Gita is a part (the Mahābhārata) as “quaint mythology” and Krishna himself as “a poetic device for presenting ideas.” “At best, He becomes a minor historical personage.”<sup>27</sup>

But shortly afterwards, editor A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda in the Preface reports the simply startling comment that Krishna “first spoke *Bhagavad-gītā* to the sun-god some hundreds of millions of years ago. We have to accept this fact” as part of the tradition. As if this is not tough enough, we are also told that Krishna “descends to this planet once . . . every 8,600,000,000 years”!<sup>28</sup>

But many questions rush upon us at once, especially issues concerning literalness and historicity. For instance, what is the relation between the 5,000 years ago conversation with his disciple Arjuna, the hundreds of millions of years ago discussion with the sun-god, and Krishna’s

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<sup>26</sup> In the popular version *Bhagavad-Gita as it Is*, Compete Ed., Rev. and Enlarged (including the original Sanskrit text), ed. with commentary by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1983), the editor (from the International Society for Krishna Consciousness) makes several comments on the text of 18:46-68. For examples, Krishna’s followers “will achieve the highest perfection” (comment on 18:46, page 830), as the actual text of 18:49 is translated. They “can attain to the supreme perfectional [sic] stage, Brahman, the state of highest knowledge” as in the translation of 18:50. The accompanying commentary states that followers can attain “the supreme stage of Brahman” (835).

<sup>27</sup> *Bhagavad-Gita as it Is*, xiii.

<sup>28</sup> Swami Prabhupāda, “Preface,” xix.

return every 8,600,000 years? We are apparently being asked to take all of these quite literally. Moreover, who is this “sun-god” and how does this fit into the picture of what is taught regarding Krishna’s deity? Are there many deities, then? That would be pretty typical of Hinduism, but the main point for our present purposes is that this would again have a potentially serious bearing on the previous question of the concept of deity that is being employed of Krishna.

For many readers, the years and personages involved in the previous two paragraphs by themselves would seem to indicate that, indeed, what was said above concerning the typical view being that Krishna was “a poetic device” or some other mythical construct seems to make some good sense! From the angle of typical Hinduism, this would not rule out the words of the book being truthful themselves in some non-historical sense, but it would rule out the deity of Krishna himself as any sort of historical rival to Jesus and his claims.

Also contributing to this notion is an even more crucial issue. None of the actual Hindu texts themselves, including the Bhagavad-Gita, can be accurately dated prior to the Twelfth Century AD!<sup>29</sup> So even if one accepted the earlier date of Krishna actually living and talking with his first disciple Arjuna some 5,000 years ago, his words were not recorded for approximately 4200 years later! How many changes occurred to the text regarding Krishna’s teaching concerning himself (or anything else, for that matter) in *over four millennia*?

Irving Hexham presents a brief survey of several widespread dates for the actual writing of the Bhagavad-Gita, that still indicate at least two insurmountable problems. Any of the dates still necessitates a gap of at least 3300 to 3500 years, which is absolutely huge!<sup>30</sup> Further, the

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<sup>29</sup> Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Hinduism: A Religion to Live By* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 30-31.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Hexham, *Understanding World Religions*, 145-147.

date of composition is not as crucial here as the earliest extant copies that we have, since if the latter do not date before the 4200 year mark, then it is still just as fruitless of a process. But even the earlier date of composition is still *far* too late to have any reliable historical accounts of what may have been spoken or claimed in those earlier discussions. So it makes very little difference as to which dates are employed: tracking any possibility of Krishna's original claims and teachings is absolutely fruitless.

Hence Krishna fails to provide any sort of historical challenge to Jesus' claims.<sup>31</sup> As we have seen further, none of the other founders of the world's major religions were even in the vicinity of being a historical rival, either. We have found no discernable challenges to Jesus' claim of deity here.

### **Jesus Christ's Claims to Deity in Early Sources**

Confucius and Lao Tzu are best considered as ethical, political, and social teachers, while Buddha apparently taught many spiritual values. But all three of these were probably some sort of proto-naturalists in their overall philosophy, although this is admittedly somewhat of a loaded, anachronistic term. On the other hand, prophets like Zoroaster, Muhammad, or major Jewish figures such as Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, or Daniel played major roles in teaching their people, though none of these ever attempted to employ personal deified characteristics. In fact, we have every reason to think that they would consider such moves to be highly blasphemous. Krishna is

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<sup>31</sup> It should be noted carefully here, in keeping with our initially-stated task of not providing evidence for these claims but only comparing them for uniqueness, the point above with Krishna is *not* whether or not he lived or if his stated teachings in the Bhagavad-Gita are historical. Rather than the *evidential* angle, our chief point above was *epistemic* in nature: that the earliest texts of this book are too far away from any even possible original teachings, in which case we could never *ascertain anything* he taught, thus not knowing whether or not he rivaled Jesus' teachings in any way. Therefore, in the end, we did not try to solve the problem of Krishna's existence.

somewhat different, but severe historical and extremely late textual considerations indicate that, even if he actually lived, we have no reliable way whatsoever to ascertain his actual teachings about himself.

In total contrast as well as on a different level, the case for Jesus' own teachings concerning his deity consists not only of clear messages, but the data are numerous enough that they can be sub-divided into various categories. We will demarcate five such taxonomies: Jesus claimed particular titles of deity for himself, such as (1) Son of God and (2) Son of Man. (Actions such as Jesus' miracles may point somewhat further to these conclusions, but we will address this area below.)

Attracting much attention from critical scholars in recent years is that, immediately after Jesus' crucifixion, the earliest believers gave recognition to Jesus' teachings by (3) worshipping him, as well as by (4) taking the loftiest Old Testament teaching and titles reserved only for God and applying them directly to Jesus. (5) Very early, easily-memorized creedal teachings were formulated in the apostolic message and clearly included these lofty teachings, too. We will simply outline very briefly each of these areas.

One other point should be noted very carefully. It will *definitely not* be asserted or assumed that the truths taught in these texts are true simply because the Gospel or other New Testament references state these things. Rather, we will for the most part be citing only those well-acknowledged texts that are generally accepted as historical even by critical scholars. But note, too, that this content is not even historical just because the critical scholars say so, either. Many of these researchers are often predisposed *not* to employ these views themselves unless there are good reasons that back each one. So it is precisely these *good reasons* that indicate that the assertions in the text are Jesus' genuine teachings, as well as showing at the same time why

they are so highly-regarded by scholars. Footnoted sources will highlight many of these reasons for acceptance.

### Son of God

First, Jesus claimed to be the Son of God in a number of places. One example is from the enigmatic, so-called early “Q” passage in Matthew 11:27 regarding his unique relationship with his Father. There is also the highly embarrassing<sup>32</sup> statement in Mark 13:32, where Jesus asserted his lack of knowledge regarding his own return, included in the very same context where he affirmed that he was the heavenly Father’s son. Jesus also spoke of his Father in very familiar though exceptionally uncommon ways such as calling him the familiar Aramaic term *Abba*, thereby hinting at his personal knowledge of God (Mk. 13:36), as well as utilizing a parable to infer that he was the son of God who would later be killed (Mk. 12:1-12).<sup>33</sup>

### Son of Man

Second, Jesus’ favorite self-designation was the Son of Man, which especially given his own descriptions, introduced images of the heavenly, pre-existent figure in Daniel 7:13-14. As

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<sup>32</sup> For those who are not familiar with the critical principle of embarrassment, it is definitely used in a *positive* rather than a negative way, in spite of its sound. The central idea is that a really embarrassing comment about Jesus would either never have been made, or at least that it would have been quite unlikely, *unless* Jesus had actually made the comment. In this case the point is that Jesus affirmed that he did not know the time of his own return. Hence it is known that he actually called himself the Son of the Father in this context.

<sup>33</sup> On the Son of God, see the relevant critical sources such as Martin Hengel, *The Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion*, trans. by John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), particularly 8-15, 58-63, 67, 90-93; Ben Witherington III, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 213-233; Joachim Jeremias, “Abba” in *The Central Message of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 9-30; C.F.D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 22-31; Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (Mahweh, NJ: Paulist, 1994), 80-89, 101; Howard Clark Kee, *What Can We Know about Jesus?* Understanding Jesus Today Series ed. by Howard Clark Kee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 62-63, 111; I. Howard Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 111-125; F.F. Bruce, *Jesus: Lord and Savior*, The Jesus Library, ed. by Michael Green (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 156-163.



the Son of Man, Jesus forgave sins even though the religious leaders who were present asserted properly that only God could do that (Mk. 2:1-12). Other recognized texts include rather shocking claims for a mere man to make (like Mk. 2:28), along with other so-called early Q texts (like Matt. 8:20; 11:19). Moreover, it is highly significant that the title Son of Man is used by Jesus in every one of the independent Gospel strata and did not originate in Judaism or in the early church, two highly impressive critical indications of its authenticity. Amazingly for instance, Jesus is not called the Son of Man in even a single New Testament epistle, indicating that it was his own self-designation!<sup>34</sup>

One of our earliest and very clearest indications of Jesus' self-claims that *combined* the two titles Son of God and Son of Man occurred when the High Priest asked Jesus if he were actually the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus declared firmly and positively. Then going further beyond the question, Jesus even asserted that he was likewise the Son of Man who would co-reign on God's throne and come on the clouds in judgment! By his answer as well as by ripping his clothing, the High Priest pronounced his verdict that Jesus' claims constituted blasphemy (Mk. 14:61-64).

Of the five claims that Jesus either affirmed or made in this setting (that he was the Messiah, the Son of God, the Son of Man, would be sitting on God's right hand, and coming with the clouds of heaven in judgment), scholars often agree that probably Jesus' strongest claim

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<sup>34</sup> For the Son of Man, see Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus*, 233-256; Moule, *The Origin of Christology*, 11-23; Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, 92-102; Kee, *What Can We Know about Jesus?*, 62-64, 111; Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology*, 63-82; Bruce, *Jesus: Lord and Savior*, 58-66; Royce G. Gruenler, "Son of Man," and Robert Stein, "Jesus Christ," both articles in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 1127-1129 and 584, respectively.

on this occasion was that he would sit on the right side of God on his throne. The high priest's charge of blasphemy followed Jesus' answer.<sup>35</sup>

These sayings of Jesus were recorded in documents that were written only several decades after the events, which is a small time gap in the ancient world. These texts are much, much closer to Jesus than are ancient writings to Buddha, Krishna, or Alexander the Great, for example. Additionally, there are strong reasons to hold that each volume was composed by authors who researched the material and were close to the occurrences. Moreover, many of the individual passages exhibit critical earmarks that argue specifically for their historicity.

### Jesus Worshipped

Third, very soon after the crucifixion, Jesus was worshipped by monotheistic, Law-abiding Jews, providing a pointer to Jesus' own teachings. The leading scholar concentrating on this subject is the University of Edinburgh's Larry Hurtado, who has specialized in this theme for more than 25 years. He finds six practices of the early believers that indicate this direction, of which two examples are singing hymns and directing prayers to Jesus. These indications "appeared very early, at or near the outset of the early Christian movement." They occurred "so early that practically any evolutionary approach is rendered invalid as historical explanation." In

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<sup>35</sup> For perhaps the most thorough treatment of this passage, see Darrell L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism and the Final Examination of Jesus*, Vol. 106 in *Wissenschaftliche zum Neuen Testament*, Second Series (Tübingen, Germany: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1998). It was later reprinted as *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism: The Charge against Jesus in Mark 14:53-65* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000). On the nature of the blasphemy in this case and signs of authenticity, see especially pages 196-237 in the latter edition. For other assessments, see Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), especially 167-168; Craig A. Evans' essential article, "In What Sense 'Blasphemy'? Jesus before Caiphas in Mark 14:61-64," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers*, Vol. 30 (1991), 215-222, 231-234; Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus*, 256-261; Moule, *The Origin of Christology*, 23-31.

fact, this phenomenon was “more like a volcanic eruption.”<sup>36</sup> The radical change must be explained sufficiently.

Hurtado suggests that “we have to posit powerful revelatory experiences of followers of Jesus early in the days after his execution that conveyed the assurance that God had given Jesus unparalleled heavenly honor and glory.” For Hurtado, the experiences that gave rise to this worship of Jesus were his resurrection appearances.<sup>37</sup>

### Jesus Given the Name of God

Fourth, Richard Bauckham of Cambridge University has argued another extremely powerful theme, championing the idea that, “The earliest Christology is *already the highest Christology*. I call it a Christology of divine identity.”<sup>38</sup> Here is Bauckham’s chief idea regarding the biblical texts that place Jesus Christ on God’s throne: “My argument is that the exaltation of Jesus to the heavenly throne of God *could only mean*, for the early Christians who were Jewish monotheists, *his inclusion in the unique identity of God*.”<sup>39</sup> Bauckham indicates that such divine identity is “not just a matter of what Jesus does, but of *who Jesus is* in relation to God.” This concept intrinsically “includes Jesus in the identity of the one God.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Hurtado’s magisterial work on this subject is the 700 page work, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003). Also providing many insightful details, including many gems, is Hurtado’s earlier text, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), especially Chap. 5. The quotations here are taken from Hurtado’s volume, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?* 23, 25.

<sup>37</sup> Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 68, 94-95, 114-124; Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?* 30, 47-48, 192-196.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), x (emphasis added); cf. 30-31.

<sup>39</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 23 (emphasis added); cf. 25, 44, 249-251, and especially 172-181.

<sup>40</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 31 (Bauckham’s emphasis). For others of Bauckham’s important comments on the notion of divine identity and Jesus, cf. ix, 6 note 5, 207, 216-217, 233, 235, 253, 264-265.

Beside the “throne texts,” other similarly powerful ideas of Jesus’ divine identity are revealed when the most exalted Old Testament teachings and titles that were reserved for God alone were then applied directly to Jesus Christ. This would include the application of the exclusive and absolutely sacred name of God, YHWH, to Jesus, the pre-existence of Jesus, as well as Jesus being added to the Old Testament Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4, where “A higher Christology . . . is scarcely possible.”<sup>41</sup> Further and like Hurtado’s conclusions, these concepts date to the earliest strands of the church.<sup>42</sup> Bauckham ends where he begins: “it becomes clear that, from the earliest post-Easter beginnings of Christology onwards, early Christians included Jesus, precisely and unambiguously, within the unique identity of the one God of Israel.”<sup>43</sup>

#### Early Creedal Texts

Fifth, there is a last but lengthy subject that can only be mentioned very briefly in this context. While it overlaps somewhat with the last two subjects, it nevertheless stands quite well on its own. The New Testament contains dozens of very early texts that actually pre-date the epistles in which they were recorded. They may basically be thought of as the answer to the exciting question, “Of what did the very earliest apostolic and other preaching look like before even a single New Testament book was ever written?” The earliest forms of these texts were oral, where they usually served the purpose of briefly summarizing the essentials of Christianity

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<sup>41</sup> For a few examples of each, see Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*. For the name YHWH being applied to Jesus, see pages 11-13, 24-25, 106, 194-195, 219-221. For the the pre-existence of Jesus, see pages x, 26-30, 32-33, 41-43, 207-208. For Jesus being added to the Shema, see pages 28, 101, and particularly pages 210-218. The quotation in the sentence above comes from page 30.

<sup>42</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, ix, 25, 128, 259 for just a few of these many references.

<sup>43</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, ix.

(usually the factual essence of the Gospel data) including the deity of Jesus Christ, and could easily be memorized, even by those who were illiterate.

Amazingly, scholars generally agree on the location of these traditions or creeds. These texts are recognized in many ways, but one of the clearest is when the New Testament writer *explicitly tells us* that he is repeating an early teaching, passing on a tradition, and so on.<sup>44</sup>

Others are identified by linguistic, syntactical, cadence, and other textual hints, and often concern the subject of Jesus occupying his heavenly place on the right side of God's throne.<sup>45</sup>

While a bit different, it is widely agreed that there are also a number of brief sermon summaries within the Book of Acts which, like the other creedal materials, are much older than the book in which they appear.<sup>46</sup>

Among other crucial topics, these early creeds often applied the loftiest titles of deity to Jesus Christ.<sup>47</sup> Intriguingly, this entire subject arose from studies by critical New Testament scholars rather than from evangelicals.<sup>48</sup> Agnostic New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman both

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<sup>44</sup> The chief examples include 1 Cor. 11:23-26; 15:3; 1 Thes. 2:15; 1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11; Titus 3:8; Heb. 1:2-3.

<sup>45</sup> Major examples include those in Rom. 1:3-4; 4:25; 5:8; 10:9; 1 Cor. 8:6; Phil. 2:6-11, and Heb. 1:3. Cf. many others such as Eph. 1:20; Col. 1:15-20; 3:1; 1 Tim. 2:5-6; 3:16; Heb. 1:1; 1:13; 8:1; 12:2; 1 Pet. 1:21; 2:21; 3:18; 3:22.

<sup>46</sup> The most-commonly mentioned candidates for these sermon segments are in Acts 1:21-22; 2:22-36; 3:13-16; 4:8-10; 5:29-32; 10:39-43; 13:28-31; 17:1-3; 17:30-31. Those speaking of Jesus' deity include Acts 2:33, 36; 5:31.

<sup>47</sup> Like Acts 2:36; Rom. 1:3-4; 10:9; 1 Cor. 8:6; 11:23; and Phil. 2:6-11.

<sup>48</sup> This is one of those rare subjects where older studies are often seen as the most authoritative ones, such as what is often proclaimed as the classic work: Oscar Cullmann, *The Earliest Christian Confessions*, trans. by J.K.S. Reid (London: Lutterworth, 1943). Other major studies include Cullmann, "The Tradition" (59-99) and other essays in *The Early Church*, ed. by A.J.B. Higgins (London: SCM, 1956); C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980); Dodd, "The Primitive Catechism and the Sayings of Jesus," in *New Testament Essays: Studies in Memory of Thomas Walter Manson, 1893-1958*, edited by A.J.B. Higgins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), 106-118; Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. by Norman Perrin (London: SCM, 1966).

freely and often dates the earliest of these creeds to the 30s AD, sometimes within just 1-2 years after the crucifixion!<sup>49</sup>

Though we had to be necessarily brief in our treatment here, these five categories are very strong indications that Jesus claimed to be deity--clearly, often, and from very different angles, which indicate the presence of cumulative data. Jesus' own use of the two titles Son of God and Son of Man are major indications of his self-consciousness. Different manifestations of worshipping Jesus and the application of the loftiest and most sacred Old Testament names (such as YHWH) and other concepts to Jesus Christ occurred immediately after the crucifixion. Both were due to experiences that the disciples wholeheartedly believed were appearances of the risen Jesus, providing two other crucial pointers to this conclusion of Jesus' claims of deity. The exceptionally early creeds, many of which could well be apostolic in origin, also trace these incredible beliefs back to the very beginning.

Unlike the world religious teachers surveyed above, Jesus actually did make many crucial claims that are unlike those taught by any chief founder of the other major world religions. It is often assumed that these other founders made similar comments, but this cannot be substantiated from any reliable historical data. Neither can the non-Christian teachings be considered as just differing aspects of essentially similar messages, nor even minor variances to be accounted for by different cultures, either. Jesus' claims were ontologically different than the others, thus having to do with Jesus Christ's very nature, marking even deeper distinctions from the others.

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<sup>49</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), see pages 22, 27, 92-93, 97, 109-113, 130-132, 141, 144-145, 155-158, 164, 170-173, 232, 249-251, 254, 260-263; cf. 289-291.

## 2. Jesus Himself as the Path to Salvation

We have reviewed far more details for the first point than we will for any of the others, largely due to our survey of some major non-Christian religious founders. Of course, the indication that Jesus taught his own deity plays a major role in the overall teaching and authority of Jesus, too. However, we will not delve into as many details with the remaining categories of Jesus' uniqueness, stating the last five subjects more succinctly.

The second subject is that, in one way or another, often with differing messages and nuances, many major religious teachers have claimed to present God's way of salvation. Generally, as prophets and/or teachers, those who did so usually pointed to a path that often involved good works, though some other emphases such as worship, or specific religious disciplines also played major roles.

Examples of the different world religious roads to salvation certainly vary. As Hexham outlines it, for Judaism and Islam it might be "obedience to the law of GOD as expressed in their respective SCRIPTURES." Personal piety is also emphasized. For Hinduism and Buddhism, there are different teachings in the various traditions, but release from the cycle of birth and rebirth in various reincarnations is a very frequent goal. Buddhism also prescribes the Fourfold Path as the means of dealing with the perception of suffering and its cessation by eliminating one's desire. Further, the Buddhist Eightfold Path can be summarized under three headings: faith, morality, and meditation. In contrast, Christianity emphasizes God's grace being given freely so that humans may commit their lives in faith to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died for their sins and rose from the dead.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Irving Hexham, *Concise Dictionary of Religion*, pages 194-195, 85, 72, respectively (Hexham's emphasis); cf. also Levinson, *Religion*, 29-30, 94-95, 103.

As an example of works and worship working together, the Qur'an teaches, "O you who believe! Bow and prostrate yourselves, and worship your Lord, and do good, that perhaps you may prosper" (Surah 22:77). Another passage encourages Muslims to give charity, obey Allah, and believe (Surah 92:1-7).<sup>51</sup>

Jesus also declared that he was pointing out God's path of salvation, such as in calling out his disciples (Mk. 1:15-20). Some might view these passages as indicating the more-or-less typical prophet's call. But the Gospels also went much further than simply Jesus declaring the presence of a way or the path. Even in the critically-respected texts, Jesus also proclaimed more precisely that what his hearers did specifically with *him* and his message determined their entrance into the Kingdom of God and the eternal age to come.<sup>52</sup>

So while the major world religious teachers might commonly be content with teaching that they would help their followers discover God's path, or teach them the secrets of life, or similar ideas, only Jesus emphasized the *ontological* truth that what they did specifically with *him* determined whether or not they would enter the eternal Kingdom of God. It was *in himself* that his hearers were confronted with God's presence as well as God's message.

As a major example, Luke 14:25-35 specifies Jesus' radical demand that placed him first in his followers' lives, before their family members (vs. 25-26; cf. Mt. 10:37), before even their own lives (14:26-27), and before their possessions (14:33; cf. Lk. 12:32-34). Jesus called for his disciples to love him pre-eminently. Several other texts teach similarly.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See also Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion*, cf. 68.

<sup>52</sup> As in the so-called Q texts in Matt. 10:37-39 and Lk. 11:20. See also Mk. 10:26-30; Matt. 16:24-25 (cf. the *Gospel of Thomas* 55, 101a).

<sup>53</sup> See Lk. 9:57-62; Matt. 6:19-33; cf. the parables in Matt. 13:44-46.



Perhaps surprisingly, critical scholarship has long recognized the radical nature of Jesus' call regarding himself. Dietrich Bonhoeffer charged that, "The call to follow implies that there is only one way of believing on Jesus Christ, and that is by leaving all and going with the incarnate Son of God."<sup>54</sup> Another such striking declaration is: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."<sup>55</sup> Even Rudolf Bultmann cited a large number Synoptic Gospel texts (a few of which are Mark 10:25; Matthew 6:19-21, 24; 8:22; 13:44-46; Luke 9:61-62; 14:15-32) in order to acknowledge that Jesus demanded radical obedience, including to himself. This sense of commitment is a widespread and influential notion over the last century, especially among critical researchers.<sup>56</sup> More recent scholars like Vernard Eller, N.T. Wright, and James D.G. Dunn are typical of the continued dominance of these ideas.<sup>57</sup>

The difference between Jesus and all the other religious founders at this specific point, then, is between pronouncing the *epistemic* theme that others *knew* the path of life, and teaching the further *ontological* message that Jesus *was* that path *in himself*. It is both less radical as well as less unique to teach, "Here's the path, get on it" than it is to proclaim, "I am that path myself, so you need to place me above everyone and everything in your life." The latter is the message that Jesus taught, and this also made him more radically different.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> See Bonhoeffer's influential book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. by Reginald H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 67.

<sup>55</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 99. For an exceptionally challenging and convicting treatment of radical obedience, see pages 45-104.

<sup>56</sup> For details on many other prominent critical scholars such as Bultmann, along with Emil Brunner, Günther Bornkamm, Raymond Brown, as well as some their sources, see Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, 142-144 and the corresponding endnotes.

<sup>57</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus' Call to Discipleship*, Understanding Jesus Today Series, ed. by Howard Clark Kee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), particularly 4, 12-13, 25-26, 30-31, 125; N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 29-30, 82; Vernard Eller, *The Simple Life: The Christian Stance Toward Possessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973).

### 3. Jesus Performed Miracles in the Early Sources

It was already noted in detail that for some of the non-biblical religious founders, performing miracles was not even part of their ethical and/or social message, particularly if they did not share a supernatural view of reality in the first place. Further, most if not all of the chief holy books that report the major religious founders' teachings and actions present severe historical problems. These issues are often due either to the texts being written *centuries after* their founders died, and/or to the earliest extant copies of these works being dated even *far too long after that* to insure that no major changes occurred during the process of transmission.<sup>59</sup>

On the latter points, Buddhist scholar Edward Conze notes that many of the major writings of Buddha's teachings date from 600 to 900 years after Buddha's death, with oral teachings being the norm for the first 500 years. Conze then states clearly the corresponding issue that this causes: some of these myriad volumes of teaching *must* actually represent Buddha's originally teachings. The problem is that "we have, however, no objective criterion which would allow us to isolate the original gospel. All attempts to find it are based on mere surmise, and the discussion of the subject generally leads to nothing but ill will and fruitless disputes."<sup>60</sup> In other words, at least some of Buddha's original teachings must be among the

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<sup>58</sup> Of course, across the broad spectrum of liberal, moderate, and conservative views on these and related subjects, there are a variety of positions on the question of an *individual* scholar's views on the issue of Jesus' deity. We are not addressing the personal question here, though we have argued above several indications that Jesus taught his own deity, and that view is undergoing a bit of a renaissance at present.

<sup>59</sup> We may recall Frazier's note on the growth of, "Superstition, magic, and mythological beings" that "were entirely absent from early Buddhism" but which were included during the centuries after Christianity first began, which would have been about the time that many of the texts were actually written (Frazier, *Chinese and Japanese Religions*, 25-26).

<sup>60</sup> *Buddhist Scriptures*, ed. and trans. by Edward Conze, Penguin Classics, ed. by Betty Radice (London: Penguin, 1959), 11-12. Edwin M. Yamauchi places the possibility of some Buddhist supernatural elements a bit earlier than

ones we have, but we can never really tell which are which, because these documents are so late in origin.

The last issue just raised, beyond the actual date of composition, concerns the date of the earliest surviving copies. Hexham notes that, “The earliest extant Buddhist documents date from the seventh century A.D.”<sup>61</sup> This difference of at least some 1300 years after Buddha’s death fails to insure the creeping in of foreign ideas, which is one of Conze’s exact points: “Different schools wrote down different things.”<sup>62</sup> One result is that, “Scholars still dispute which school [Buddha] actually belonged to.”<sup>63</sup>

Other similar historical problems were also apparent even in our brief look at other major founders. This would include not only the earliest forms of Buddhism, but Confucianism and Taoism not even having supernatural beliefs, let alone producing miracles. The major Zoroastrian theological texts were not even *written* until some 1500 years after Zoroaster lived. But the actual *extant copies* of the Avestas date to about 1800 years after Zoroaster! For Krishna, the existing text of the Bhagavad Gita dates from 3300 to perhaps as late as 4200 years after him, for those who think that he even lived!

Lastly, no miracles are reported of Muhammad in the Qur’an beyond his recording the words themselves, though miraculous reports do appear in the Hadith tradition, beginning some

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Conze, while the majority of such accounts are clearly quite late (Yamauchi, *Jesus, Zoroaster, Buddha, Socrates, Muhammad*, Rev. Ed. [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1972], 6-7, 18). Stephen Neill points out that the Pāli Buddhist canon does not even *begin* to take its present form for 400 years (Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths: The Christian Dialogue with Other Religions*, Third ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 125, emphasis added.

<sup>61</sup> Hexham, *Concise Dictionary of Religion*, 40.

<sup>62</sup> Conze, *Buddhist Scriptures*, 11-12.

<sup>63</sup> Conze, *Buddhist Scriptures*, 34.

200 years later.<sup>64</sup> Interestingly enough, however, the Qur'an does state that Jesus performed miracles and even specified some of them (Surahs 3:49; 5:110).

Thus, these three huge issues involving the lack of miracles in the first place, plus the problems of much later writings, followed by the enormous gap with some of the extant copies plague and even sound the historical death toll for virtually all these non-Christian holy texts. For originators like Buddha, Confucius, and Lao-Tzu, miracles seem simply foreign to their original mission because of the rather naturalistic philosophical outlook. But for almost all of these founders, any texts that might record such occurrences were either actually written, and/or the remaining copies actually date from, literally hundreds to thousands of years after the founder's deaths. Such a track record totally disallows even the opportunity for reliable, historical miracle reports.<sup>65</sup>

Compared to the non-biblical founders of the major world religions, only Jesus has miracles reported of him in early sources.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, in the last couple of decades, almost all critical *scholars*, including the skeptical ones, have conceded that overwhelming data attest to the historicity of at least some of these special events. Not all scholars agree on what actually occurred on these occasions, but it is nearly unanimous that healing events such as those depicted in the Gospel accounts did indeed happen. At least two nearly exhaustive recent studies illustrate the strength of this conclusion. Each one gives attention to the factors that confirm and back up that many of these events occurred, employing a careful usage of the critical historical method, including the criteria of authenticity.

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<sup>64</sup> Yamauchi, *Jesus, Zoroaster Buddha, Socrates, Muhammad*, cf. 20.

<sup>65</sup> J.N.D. Anderson also agrees on there being no rival miracles among the non-Christian religions. (See Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion*, such as 46, 50-51.)

<sup>66</sup> Yamauchi, *Jesus, Zoroaster, Buddha, Socrates, Muhammad*, 40.

Summarizing the results of his over 400 page historical study on this topic alone, Graham Twelftree tallies a total of 29 different miraculous accounts narrated throughout the Gospels as the number of Jesus' individual miracle-claims. Twelftree determines that in 22 of these cases (approximately 76%), sufficient evidence is revealed to indicate that, with "high confidence," we may conclude that the events described in these texts actually happened. Again, he points out carefully that this by no means judges that the remaining reports are unhistorical—they could actually have occurred as well. Rather, this conclusion only means that the remaining seven instances just do not have the same quantity and/or quality of evidence as do the others.<sup>67</sup>

In another historical study, this time numbering over 500 pages in length, prominent historical Jesus scholar John Meier began with a similar number of Jesus' total miracle accounts in the Gospels, though the way Meier tallies the cases makes it difficult to provide exact totals. If just the "regular" exorcisms plus the healing miracles are counted, as critical scholars often group them, then just under half (approximately 45%) received a similar positive verdict to Twelftree's: these Gospel reports describe or otherwise specify "events that actually occurred in Jesus' lifetime."<sup>68</sup> In the three incidents where Jesus reportedly raised the dead, Meier decides with different degrees of historical probability in *favor* of all three accounts! If these are added to the earlier totals for healings and exorcisms, this raises Meier's overall positive verdict to about 52% of these accounts.<sup>69</sup> Quite stunningly, Meier determined that these accounts enjoy "as

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<sup>67</sup> Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity), see particularly pages 328-330, especially the summarized results; cf. even the skeptical inclination on page 427, note 21.

<sup>68</sup> John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Vol. 2: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, Anchor Bible Reference Library, ed. by David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1994), see 967-970 for his conclusions.

<sup>69</sup> Meier, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, Conclusion, 970. However, Meier only decides positively for just one of the six Gospel events that he states are "incorrectly labeled 'nature miracles.'" The only one receiving an affirmative verdict is the event that he terms "the feeding of the multitude" (970). If these six cases are tallied into

much historical corroboration as almost any other statement we can make about the Jesus of history.”<sup>70</sup>

Once again within our present limits, we also cannot construct here a historical argument for the *meaning* of these miracle-claims.<sup>71</sup> Still, according to various Gospel passages, Jesus taught that his miracles indicated the truth of message (Lk. 7:18-23; cf. Jn. 14:11). But his resurrection from the dead would be the chief sign that evidenced the truth of his message and indicated that his word was true, even for skeptical scholars.<sup>72</sup> This idea also appears in Acts and in the New Testament epistles. This includes both very early creedal statements that taught that Jesus’ resurrection would evidence the truth of his claims (Rom. 1:3-4; 1 Pet. 1:3-6), as well as at least three of the Acts sermon-summaries that argued similarly (Acts 2:22-24; 13:26-41; 17:30-31). One of the main ideas in these texts is that if Jesus was raised, then God must have performed the event in order to approve Jesus’ message. After all, dead men do not do much on their own!

#### 4. Jesus’ Death for Salvation

Furthermore, of the major world religious founders, only Jesus taught that his death would provide the means by which salvation would be available for the world. For instance,

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the total miracle count, then Meier’s overall favorable tally for all the categories of Jesus’ miracles is 45% affirmative cases.

<sup>70</sup> Meier, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, 970.

<sup>71</sup> For details of such a defense, see Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, especially Chap. 3.

<sup>72</sup> This includes the so-called “Q” text in Matt. 12:38-42; 16:1-4 (cf. Lk. 11:29). See also Matt. 28:19-20; Lk. 24:44-48; Jn. 20:24-31.

Jesus taught that his death would serve as a ransom for human sin, achieving what humans could not (Mk. 10:26-27; 10:45). Then at the Last Supper, Jesus specified that his blood would be shed for many (14:22-25, especially v. 24; cf. Matt. 26:8).

This message is definitely a central and favorite theme in early pre-Pauline creeds and other early traditions. For example, in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, which came “from the Lord,” both Jesus’ body as well as his blood were singled out as his sacrifice. Two other early credal texts are Romans 5:8, indicating that Christ died for sinners, and Romans 4:24-25, basing a believer’s delivery from sin on the death of the Lord, and their justification on his resurrection. Many other traditional statements follow closely these same ideas, both in Paul’s works that critical scholars view as the minimal number of “authentic” Pauline epistles,<sup>73</sup> as well as in other epistles.<sup>74</sup> The sermon summaries in Acts also contain texts that highlight the prominent theme of Jesus Christ’s death.<sup>75</sup> But it needs to be remembered that most of these texts *predate* the epistles in which they appear, as well as Acts, and were composed originally by others.

Thus, the message that Jesus Christ died and that he did so specifically for human sin was a central, indispensable part of the early Christian’s Gospel teaching and preaching. It was taught by Jesus and mentioned in literally dozens of early credal passages located throughout the New Testament epistles, as well as many of the sermon summaries in Acts. Many of these are typically dated in the 30s AD.

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<sup>73</sup> See Gal. 2:20-21; 3:13; Phil. 1:29; 2:8; 1 Thes. 1:9-10; 4:14; 5:10.

<sup>74</sup> See Eph. 2:5; 5:2; 5:25; 1 Tim. 2:5-6; 2 Tim. 2:11-13; Heb. 2:9; 10:12; 12:2; 13:20; 1 Pet. 2:21, 2:24; 3:18; 4:1.

<sup>75</sup> See Acts 2:23; 3:13-16; 4:10; 10:39, 43; 13:28-29; 17:3.

Neither a single Old Testament prophet nor Muhammad taught anything like *their own death paying for sins!* Anderson, a Muslim authority, states that the idea of sacrifice “holds no central position in the religion of Islam.” Of course, the Jewish sacrificial system was clearly central in the Old Testament.<sup>76</sup> However, the Old Testament concept teaches animal sacrifice and the Book of Hebrews capitalizes on Jesus’ Christ’s death being efficacious and far more valuable and distinctive than the prior practices. The Christian notion of Christ’s death as an atonement for sins remains unique.<sup>77</sup>

## **5. The Place of Real Pain and Suffering**

This next teaching can admittedly be a little tricky. But it seems at least worth mentioning that, in some sense at least, Christianity may be the only religion where its very Gospel message not only includes, but absolutely requires the existence of real evil, pain, and suffering.

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<sup>76</sup> Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion*, 68-69.

<sup>77</sup> Anderson works through a number of religions and their beliefs to agree firmly on this conclusion (*Christianity and Comparative Religion*, see particularly 31-33, 42-43, 46, 50-51, 52, 69-70, 72).



In other words, Christianity may be alone in admitting that the reality and centrality of pain is grounded in its central Gospel message of the death Jesus' died. As a result, its existence cannot be ignored, set aside, or explained away as unreal. Rather, these notions must be embraced, without allowing it to be explained by metaphor, illusion, or delusion. Since Jesus' crucifixion is at the very center of the Gospel facts, affirming evil and suffering is a literal fact and this requires its stark reality. Further, this type of suffering and pain is both physical as well as existential. It goes without saying that physical pain is a given in Roman crucifixion. After all, it may well be the most painful death to undergo.

Regarding the existential element, how are we to understand deeply the Son of God surprisingly crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk. 15:34). In spite of hearing the words of that terribly-anguished cry, it is impossible for us to understand all that is involved there between the Father and the Son. Then, seemingly to make matters worse, God did not even remove his Son from the cross!

Can it get still get more difficult? How are we to understand the teaching in Hebrews 5:8: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered" (ESV)? Moreover, in Hebrews 2:10, we are told that it was fitting that Jesus be made "perfect through suffering." What is going on in these verses? Some believers no doubt struggle with the idea that Jesus had to learn anything, though we often lose sight of the crucial truth that Jesus was fully human, too (see Lk. 2:52, for instance).

Well, not to disappoint, but we are far from being able to stop here in order to unpack any of these concepts.<sup>78</sup> Our best thinking needs to be brought to bear on the issue, for sure, though this would take many hours and a number of books! Our reflections might have much to do with Christianity not shirking the issues, but facing the literal pain and suffering head-on, whatever that entails. But for better or worse, pain and evil are real and need to be accepted as such.

Is the Christian view of evil's reality really a unique stance in religion? It largely depends on how the nature of particular Hindu and Buddhist beliefs are taken. Both Eastern philosophies have much to say about the nature of illusion. Among various scholars in these traditions, suffering may be conceived and dealt with differently, sometimes as among the illusions, and even at times as the very outworking of God.<sup>79</sup> Other times, evil is held to be ignorance and a part of the transience of all reality, which can be overcome.<sup>80</sup> Then as Stephen Neill states, while Buddhism does begin with suffering, it "adopts the most radical of all solutions: abolish the entity, and therewith we shall abolish the sufferer; abolish the ego, which believes that it suffers, and there will no longer be anything that can suffer."<sup>81</sup>

The chief point here is that, with some Eastern delineations, evil could be taken as being illusory, as ignorance, and/or as an entity that disappears when the ego is properly denied (with some overlap between these). On notions like these, there could be a much more specific

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<sup>78</sup> Hopefully to explore the possibility of some healing salve among other thoughts on these cognate issues and verses, see Gary R. Habermas, "Evil, the Resurrection and the Example of Jesus," in *God and Evil: The Case for God in a World Filled with Pain*, ed. by Chad Meister and James K. Dew (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 163-174; see also, "Suffering and Jesus' Resurrection: A Personal Account," Chap. 8 of Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, 187-197.

<sup>79</sup> Sri Aurobindo, Chap. 16 Readings, in *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, ed. by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), 575-609, particularly 589-597.

<sup>80</sup> Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion*, 78.

<sup>81</sup> Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths*, Second ed. (Oxford University Press), 107; Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion*, 80.

differences with the general Christian conception of evil and suffering, which could leave the latter as a fairly different and even unique contrast. On the predominant Christian view, the solution to evil is tethered closely to both *historical* figures as well as to the real, *material* world, and linked specifically to *early documents*.<sup>82</sup> These three ideas tends to make evil far more concrete and less amorphous than in the East, where it can almost seem as some kind of floating metaphysical notion. Each of these three Christian truths stand in stark contrast to many if not most of the Hindu and Buddhist concepts.

But because of the wide range of Eastern religious views, not all of their expressions are necessarily this much removed from Christianity. Thus, in other cases, the amount of juxtaposition may be lessened. Hence, this fifth area is not necessarily quite as unambiguously unique as are the others that we are highlighting in this small book.

## 6. The Bodily Resurrection of Jesus

Of the major religious founders of the world religions, only traditional Christianity holds that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and appeared to his followers in space-time history.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> This third point is important from another angle. If we recall the cautions of the Buddhist scholar Edward Conze, we cannot be at all sure of Buddha's original teachings (*Buddhist Scriptures*, 11-12). While it is true that Buddhism and Hinduism may survive without historical messages that are traceable to particular individuals, this would not only illustrate the contrast with the *historical* and *early* ideas in this sentence above, but such would also increase the tendency for the Eastern ideas to float more with "no objective criterion" (12), which is one of the main issues that Conze raises.

<sup>83</sup> For a number of relevant comparisons and contrasts on this subject, see Gary R. Habermas, "Resurrection Claims in Non-Christian Religions," *Religious Studies*, Vol. 25 (1989), 167-177.

The difference is even starker among those who teach that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead with an empty tomb left behind. For those who might judge that the best reasons favored the many comments by Jesus and the early New Testament authors that this event indicated that Jesus' teachings were true, the resurrection could potentially validate the truth of the entire Christian Gospel message. There is nothing comparable to this combination of event plus message in the world religions.

We have already determined from the outset of this book that we would only argue that certain key Christian messages are unique, without seeking to show that these distinctive messages are also well-evidenced or true. So providing a historical argument for the resurrection is not our purpose here. Still, throughout this book, we have also pointed out that when citing New Testament texts, the effort has been made to employ those passages that generally pass the historical test with critical scholars.

We will just add that no New Testament reports fit critical methodology better than do the historical fact that Jesus' died by crucifixion and the additional fact that he was seen afterwards by many people, not all of whom were believers. I have argued in many contexts what I term the Minimal Facts Method for the resurrection of Jesus. By using *only* those facts that are recognized as historical even by virtually all critical scholars, due to their more crucial recognition of the data that support these events, there is enough of a historical foundation for these and some related facts to be known as historical. Further, these facts can be known as historical even if the New Testament is viewed as an unreliable document.<sup>84</sup> That is because the

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<sup>84</sup> Of course, that is far from my personal view regarding the inspiration of Scripture, as held by Jesus himself, and which I have argued elsewhere (for one example, see Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, Chap. 10). But the salient point in this immediate context here is that even holding a very low view of the unreliability of the New

case is built on what is known to be historically true, not on items that are rejected. The latter do not nullify the former, since these established events actually occurred.

As mentioned, no apologetic case for Jesus' resurrection will be attempted or even outlined here. This is not our purpose. However, interested readers can find the case carefully set forth elsewhere in many other locations.<sup>85</sup>

It must also be remembered that the New Testament Gospel message of Jesus Christ's deity (see above), death, resurrection do not exist in a vacuum. If Jesus was resurrected but was only a mere man, he could not have raised himself from the dead. On the other hand, if God did it, as Jesus and the earliest church credal statements proclaimed (see a long list of the texts above), then it most likely was not because he was a heretic of some sort! That would be rather counterproductive as over against Jesus proclaiming the truth! It makes the most sense that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead in order to confirm at least his chief Gospel message.<sup>86</sup> Establishing such an argument would drive home the major thrust of Jesus' unique teachings.

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Testament text will not exempt one from the force of the resurrection argument taken from the reliable and critically-acknowledged Gospel data.

<sup>85</sup> For examples, a succinct version of the historical argument can be found in Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, Chap. 1. For an extended version including many additional details, see Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004). For the methodology itself, see Habermas, "The Minimal Facts Approach to the Resurrection of Jesus: The Role of Methodology as a Crucial Component in Establishing Historicity," *Southeastern Theological Review*, Vol. 3 (Summer 2012), 15-26. My website ([www.garyhabermas.com](http://www.garyhabermas.com)) includes many other relevant writings, lectures, and debates on salient features of this discussion. For a lengthy, well-documented, and brilliant overall argument in one volume, see Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2011). This text is also the focus of the *Southeastern Theological Review* just listed here.

<sup>86</sup> For a highly-detailed back-up argument for these statements, see Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, Chaps. 2-6.

## Other Potentially Unique Areas in Jesus Christ's Teachings

Both confirmations of our six categories as well as additional suggestions have been made by scholars who likewise consider such topics as candidates for Jesus Christ's unique teachings and actions. Initially, we will simply list a few scholars who have also pointed to items that are similar to our six topics here, though without duplicating the remarks that the researchers above have already mentioned.

In every one of these cases, we emphasized that Jesus was the only founder of a major world religion who taught or did these things: (1) Jesus referred to himself as deity.<sup>87</sup> (2) Jesus taught that in his person, Jesus was the actual path to the Kingdom of God and eternal life.<sup>88</sup> (3) Jesus was the only teacher among the non-Christian founders whose miracles are reported of him in the early sources.<sup>89</sup>

Moreover, (4) Jesus was the only one who taught that he would die for human sin.<sup>90</sup> (5) Jesus and the early Christian view of suffering may not quite be as exclusive a teaching, but it is

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<sup>87</sup> J. Ed Komoszewski, M. James Sawyer, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Reinventing Jesus: What the Da Vinci Code and other Novel Speculations Don't Tell You* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2006), especially Part 4, Chaps. 12-15; Norman Anderson, *The Teaching of Jesus*, The Jesus Library, ed. by Michael Green (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 151-160; Yamauchi, *Jesus, Zoroaster, Buddha, Socrates, Muhammad*, 40-41; Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths*, 233; Stephen Neill, *The Supremacy of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 79-80; 84; 86; 115; cf. 82.

<sup>88</sup> Anderson, *The Teaching of Jesus*, Part I, Chaps. 2-3; Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion*, 61; Neill, *The Supremacy of Jesus*, 63-65.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Neill, *The Supremacy of Jesus*, 63, 151-152.

<sup>90</sup> Michael Green, *The Empty Cross of Jesus*, The Jesus Library, ed. by Michael Green (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 171-180; Yamauchi, *Jesus, Zoroaster, Buddha, Socrates, Muhammad*, 39-40; Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion*, 50-51, 70, note 5.

still a very distinctive angle on the subject.<sup>91</sup> (6) Jesus' resurrection, especially the New Testament bodily version, along with this event validating his major teachings, is totally unrivaled,<sup>92</sup> especially when critical methods are emphasized.

Some additional, non-exhaustive but highly distinctive thoughts are also raised by others:

(1) Yamauchi adds that Jesus was the only founder to predict his resurrection ahead of time.<sup>93</sup>

(2) For Neill, Jesus' view of God is certainly "revolutionary" such as God's care for individuals, like the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15), with the very hairs of our heads being numbered (Lk. 12:7), not to mention God's concern for other living creatures (Matt. 6:26).<sup>94</sup> (3) Neill also points out Jesus' friendship with and love for his followers.<sup>95</sup> (4) Especially, in light of his miracles and resurrection, many scholars have remarked that Jesus' high view of the inspiration of Scripture should be adopted by those who agree that he was the Father's spokesperson.<sup>96</sup> Other topics could definitely be listed and pursued here, as well.

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<sup>91</sup> Green, *The Empty Cross of Jesus*, 168-171; Anderson, *The Teaching of Jesus*, 160-165; Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths*, 232; Neill, *The Supremacy of Jesus*, 66-67; 90.

<sup>92</sup> Norman Anderson, *Jesus Christ: The Witness of History*, Second Ed., Rev. (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1985), Chap. 4; Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion*, 31-43, 46, 50-51; Anderson, *The Teaching of Jesus*, 166-168; Neill, *The Supremacy of Jesus*, 155, 163-164.

<sup>93</sup> Yamauchi, *Jesus, Zoroaster, Buddha, Socrates, Muhammad*, 40.

<sup>94</sup> Neill, *The Supremacy of Jesus*, 46, 59, 79-8.

<sup>95</sup> Neill, *The Supremacy of Jesus*, 127-135.

<sup>96</sup> Several books to be noted include Steven B. Cowan and Terry L. Wilder, eds., *In Defense of the Bible: A Comprehensive Argument for the Authority of Scripture* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Academic, 2013), especially Cowan's argument in pages 443-462; John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, Second ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 187-188; Robert Lightner, *The Saviour [sic] and the Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1966), with Chap. 3 in particular presenting an intriguing approach to this topic; Anderson, *Christianity and Comparative Religion*, Chap. 4.

## Conclusion: The Uniqueness of Jesus' Central Message

All told, this is certainly a fascinating subject. However, this is an age where syncretism, pluralism, and, most of all, tolerance<sup>97</sup> are often favored and preferred above all else, *regardless* of whether the *facts* may point in other directions. It seems to be the case, at least in the popular media, that proper attitudes outweigh data and truth.

Even in the scholarly literature, whether from a simple lack of information, from other prejudicial looks, or something else, we almost never hear that in virtually all cases, the holy books for non-biblical founders and prophets are written far after the person lived, with the actual extant copies often dating even centuries later than that. But these facts do not seem to make the pages of most texts and the very large gaps between the founders, their writings, and the extant copies are actually quite difficult to track down, not to mention sometimes being devastating arguments against the historicity of their claims.

To conclude this small volume, we are left with a number of Jesus' teachings which at least appear to be rather singular when compared to the messages of the other major religious figures. All religions probably include distinctive elements depending on how these are delineated and counted. However, we mentioned six such areas, each of which was related in some way to the central Christian Gospel message. The crucial point to note here is that, due to

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<sup>97</sup> Parrinder reminds us that there are many different nuances and meanings for ideas like these. He reminds his readers that more than one religion shares some common views of general revelation, such as God's existence, forgiveness, and eternal life. Yet, the chief, unique difference for Christians is "Christ himself." (61) He also remarks that "it is not necessary to relax one's own faith a wit" in order to practice common courtesies such as politeness towards those in other religions (62)! (Parrinder, *Comparative Religion*, 60-66). Corduan makes some similar points regarding certain truths from natural revelation that are also shared by more than one religion (Corduan, *A Tapestry of Faiths*, Chap. 2 in particular, especially 53-54).



this central nature, *if* these six ideas are true (though we have not argued the details in this text), then Christianity is true. In brief, the Gospel facts indicate that Christianity is true. So we are at the center of the faith in these areas.

A few additional special beliefs were simply suggested at the end, too. In all cases, the dates of the actual Christian writings as well as the earliest existing copies are all much closer to the original teachings than with the other religions. In short, there is simply a wealth of back-up data to potentially support each of these themes in Jesus' teachings. Simply, nothing like this exists elsewhere in the history of religions.

In spite of complimenting Buddha and his appeal, world religions expert Stephen Neill makes a simply incredible comment concerning the uniqueness of Jesus' teachings:

For, if we take the Gospels seriously (*and at the same time as critically as you will*), Jesus is *not the least like anyone else who has ever lived*. The things that he says about God are *not the same as the sayings of any other religious teacher*. The claims that he makes for himself are *not the same as those that have been made by any other religious teacher*. . . . The demands he makes on men are *more searching* than those put forward by any other religious teacher.<sup>98</sup>

This summarizes very nicely many of the key features of our study. Critical interaction on these issues, as well as fair notions of politeness and human kindness, must be offered in the discussion of such issues.

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<sup>98</sup> Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths* (Oxford University Press ed.), 233 (emphasis added). For Neill's admiration of Buddha, see pages 99, 113 as well as *The Supremacy of Jesus*, 12, 52, 165.

**About Gary R. Habermas:**

Gary Habermas (Ph.D., Michigan State University) is the author, co-author, or editor of some 41 books, 21 of these on various aspects of Jesus' resurrection. Other topics include the historical Jesus, religious doubt, personal suffering, and near-death experiences. He has also contributed more than 70 other chapters or articles to additional books, plus well over 100 articles and reviews for journals and other publications. In recent years, he has been a Visiting or Adjunct Professor at about 15 different graduate schools and seminaries in the United States and abroad, having taught dozens of graduate courses in these settings. Presently, he serves as Distinguished Research Professor, teaching in the Ph.D. program at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary. He is also the Chair of the Department of Philosophy at Liberty University, where he has taught since 1981. He is married to Eileen, and they have seven children and 13 grandchildren, all living in Lynchburg, Virginia.

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