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The Christ Files

Discussion question pointers, episode 1

- Where have you learned about Jesus? Which of these sources do you trust the most?
 - **This is just to get people thinking about how they know what they know.**
- Does Christianity "place its head on the chopping block of public scrutiny"? How important is the historical aspect of Christianity?
 - **Check out 1 Corinthians 15.14-15a: "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead."**
- What are the Gnostic gospels? Why didn't they make it into the Bible?
 - **Written in 2nd and 3rd centuries, not 1st like the Biblical Gospels – Gospel of Phillip, Gospel of Thomas are examples.**
 - **Written in Coptic (Egyptian), not Greek.**
 - **Focus on the most esoteric parts of Jesus' post-resurrection teaching, not his actions during his ministry. Here are some example passages:**
 - **"Do not scorn the Lamb. For without it one cannot see the King. No one who is naked will be able to find his way to the King."** (Gospel of Phillip 27)¹
 - **"The Lord went into the dye shop of Levi. He took seventy-two colors and threw them into the kettle. He took them out all white, and he said, 'Thus the Son of Man came, a dyer.'"** (Gospel of Phillip 54)
- How good is the evidence for the idea that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' girlfriend or wife?
 - **There's only one manuscript of the Gospel of Phillip.**
 - **It has holes right at all the interesting bits.**
 - **If Jesus was married, would that make any difference?**
- What is significant about the mentions of Jesus in secular historians?
 - **The references are incidental rather than trying to push a particular viewpoint.**
 - **Mostly they weren't interested in him.**
 - **Some of them hated Jesus, Christians, and anything remotely Jewish in origin.**

¹ Gospel of Phillip quotations are from *Lost Scriptures: books that did not make it into the New Testament*, by Bart D. Ehrman, Oxford University Press, 2003.

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Discussion question pointers, episode 2

- What's significant about the references to Jesus in Jewish sources?
 - **They weren't fans.**
 - **They confirm details that we know from Graeco-Roman writers and the New Testament.**
 - **one doubtful reference in Josephus; another that is undoubted, and it was “toned down” by some of its Jewish copyists**
- Are “religious texts” legitimate to use in historical investigation? Why or why not?
 - **Remember the Chelsea vs. Tottenham football match.**
 - **Bias is transparent and so can be tracked and compensated for.**
- What were some of the expected features of Graeco-Roman biography?
 - **Persuasive: written to argue a point.**
 - **Timely: written within the lifetime of the person, or of persons who knew them.**
- Do the Gospels have these features?
 - **John 20:30-31: “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”**
 - **Matthew & John were disciples of Jesus; Mark was a disciple of Peter; Luke was a disciple of Paul.**
- What is significant about the references to Jesus in Paul's letters?
 - **Some of the earliest Christian documents**
 - **Able to be located precisely within a geographical & cultural context**
 - **References to:**
 - **the Last Supper**
 - **the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus**
 - **David's descendant**
 - **teaching about marriage, love, treatment of enemies, betrayal**
 - **appearances after resurrection to eyewitnesses**
 - **Conclusion: the Jesus message we know from the Gospels was already being preached by missionaries by 50 ad or so**
- How soon were the Gospels known and considered authoritative by Christians?
 - **very soon after they were written – by the end of the 1st century**
 - **geographically distributed: Palestine, Asia Minor, Rome**
 - **Justin Martyr (circa 150 AD) speaks of them as already in use for a long time**
 - **no earlier documents available – older sources (Luke used them), but no earlier documents**
 - **absolutely unique and necessary for knowing Jesus, very reliable**
 - **basic order Mark (40s or 50s), Luke (60s), Matthew (before 70), John (sometime before 95 or so)**

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Discussion question pointers, episode 3

- What are the earliest written sources of historical information about Jesus?
 - **Paul's letters [or possibly James' letter]**
 - **then the Gospels**
 - **then the Jewish and Roman sources**
 - **then the non-canonical gospels (e.g. Gnostic gospels)**
- How do we know that Luke use other sources?
 - **His own admission (Luke 1.1-4)**
 - **The material he shares in common with Matthew and Mark**
 - **The material he shares in common with Matthew but not Mark (called Q)**
 - **The other parts of his gospel that don't "sound like him"**
- What do the date comparisons between the different historical figures and their biographies tell you about the biographies of Jesus?
 - **Buddha - 350 years later (400 BC → 50 BC)**
 - **Muhammad – 125 years later (632 AD → 760 AD)**
 - **Tiberius – 77 years (37 AD → 114 AD)**
 - **Jesus – 20 years (30 AD → 50 AD)**
- Why didn't people write about Jesus sooner?
 - **People didn't write! Books didn't start to be mass-produced and distributed widely until 1455 AD (Gutenberg Bible)**
 - **Books were considered less reliable than stories transmitted by mouth**
 - **Literacy maximum 10% [other sources suggest more like 4% literacy]**
- Should we assume that information which was transmitted orally is unreliable?
 - **There is long-term exposure, significance, and structure in the oral traditions, there is no reason to expect non-literate people to get them wrong.**
 - **We can confirm them from the different written quotations of this oral tradition.**
- Why is background and context important for understanding Jesus?
 - **Everyone has their own agenda to push – to paint an *accurate* picture of Jesus, we need to understand him as he was, not how the modern world makes him out to be.**
 - **Background lets us put what he did and said in perspective so we can apply his teaching and example to our lives more faithfully.**