



Did Jesus Exist?



Aims

- Was Jesus a real person?
- How do we know?
- Was he real but later became legendary?

Starter game

Who's real, who's not?

How can we tell? Evidence and legacy

Suggestions for making a game

Choose people your group will recognise and make a set of cards. This could include or exclude legendary and fictional characters. Suggestions below

Either:

- Sort the cards into real/not real
- Put the cards into 3 bands according to how much evidence they think we have.
- Do a diamond 9 game with the real people according to how much evidence we have on people, placing them from plenty of evidence at the top of the diamond down to little evidence at the bottom.

Real – in approximate order of reliable evidence

1. Winston Churchill: Very real & much evidence.
2. Mother Teresa - known in the Catholic Church as Saint Teresa of Calcutta, was an Albanian-Indian Roman Catholic nun and missionary. Very real & much evidence.
3. Jesus Christ of Nazareth: an incredible amount of authenticated evidence, comparable with modern age. More than for Julius Caesar. He left an incredible legacy of teaching.
4. King John: Real but the popular view has become entwined with the Robin Hood legend. Different sources give very different information and views on him.
5. William the Conqueror: Real but sources are limited
6. Julius Caesar Real but sources are limited. Born 100BC
7. St Nicholas Real but stories vary. (Nikolaos of Myra, 270- 343 AD was a Christian saint and Greek Bishop of Myra, in Asia Minor. Numerous stories, some miraculous, are told about him. His legendary habit of secret gift-giving gave rise to the traditional model of Santa Claus.)
8. Queen of Sheba Real but became legendary
9. King Arthur Probably real but became legendary. Little real evidence

Not real

10. Robin Hood probably a mixture tales based on certain types of people
11. Sherlock Holmes
12. Jack Frost
13. Dr Who
14. Loch Ness monster
15. Big Foot / Yeti
16. Yoda
17. Pokemon
18. Father Christmas
19. Tooth fairy

Historical evidence

So what about Jesus? What evidence do we have that he existed?

Well there are a number of reliable historical documents as well as the legacy of his teachings as recorded in the gospels. Examine the quotes below. How reliable do you think each piece of evidence is? Which one do you think is the strongest?

1. The Talmud, a Jewish holy book from 2nd century AD was written by the Jewish authorities who were Jesus' enemies. This has a number of hostile references to him. It says that he was the "son of an adulteress" and claims that his father was a Roman soldier. It also said:

"On the eve of Passover, they hanged Yeshu.
He practised black magic and led Israel astray."

People who do not exist do not have real enemies. Calling him 'Yeshu' instead of 'Yeshua' (Hebrew for Jesus) means that they wished his name to be wiped from history.

2. Tacitus, a Roman historian, 56-120AD

"Nero falsely accused and executed ... the people called Christians (concerning the fire of Rome). Their originator, Christ, had been executed in Tiberius' reign by the Procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate."

3. Pliny, Roman Governor, 61-113AD "Christ is worshipped as a god."

4. Mara bar Serapion, a Syrian philosopher wrote in 73AD:

"For what advantage did the Jews gain by the death of their wise king?
He lived on in the teaching which he had given."

Jesus' legacy of teaching

Jesus left an extraordinary legacy of teachings. If he didn't write it then who did? It had to be the work of someone who stood out as being different from anyone else in his culture. It is universally recognized that these teachings are recorded in the New Testament documents.

Most of the New Testament was written or influenced by eye witnesses. Gospel writers Matthew and John were Jesus' personal disciples and Mark was a close friend of the disciple Peter. It takes time and great imagination for myths and legends to evolve. In the case of Jesus, the time gap is too short for this as many eye witnesses were still alive when the accounts were written. Leading archaeologists¹ are now certain that all the New Testament documents were written between 20 - 50 years of the events.

Luke's writings have been scrutinized by researchers who have concluded that 'Luke is a historian of the first rank whose work is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness.'²

Extra notes for older groups

Josephus - AD93.

Josephus was a Jewish writer, born in Jerusalem around the time Jesus was killed. He wrote a vast history of the Jewish people and served in the court of the Roman Emperor. He wrote the following about Jesus.

"Now, around this time there lived Jesus, a wise man – if it is lawful to call him a man. He did amazing works and was a teacher of those people that receive the truth gladly. He won over many, both Jews and Gentiles. He was the Messiah. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that had loved him did not abandon him. He appeared to them alive again the third day, for the prophets of God had foretold these and a thousand other incredible things about him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day."

Elsewhere in his book, Josephus refers to the stoning of the apostle James.

"the brother of Jesus who was called the Messiah".

Do you think some of this text is too overtly Christian to have been written by someone who was not of the Christian faith? What parts are the most reliable?

Sources

¹ Professor William Albright; Dr John Robinson

² Sir William Mitchell Ramsay

<http://www.motherteresa.org/>

<http://www.stnicholascenter.org/pages/who-is-st-nicholas/>

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/caesar_julius.shtml

<http://www.historyextra.com/article/feature/7-myths-about-robin-hood>

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle_ages/robin_01.shtml

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