



# THE BEREHA PAGE

*“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11*

## Presenting a Case for Belief in Jesus: An Overview (1)

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In my files are class notes from different iterations, eighteen months apart, of the undergraduate Christian Evidences course my wife (then fiancé) and I took. A composite list from both includes eight topics in the unit on the deity of Jesus: [a] biblical claims and selected titles for Jesus; [b] the historicity of Jesus; [c] his claims for deity; [d] the virgin birth; [e] his sinless life; [f] predictive prophecy; [g] his miracles; and [h] the resurrection.

The historical skepticism prevalent today (see [here](#)) and specific challenges to the historicity of the gospels by critical scholars existed when we took the class, but had not yet been widely propagated at the popular level. My wife’s notes do include a reference to *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), the collaborative book edited by the English philosopher John Hick, but it had only recently been published when she took the course. The publicity campaign and writings of the Jesus Seminar, popular-level textual criticisms of Bart Ehrman, and books such as *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, 1982), the book behind Dan Brown’s depiction of Christian origins in *The DaVinci Code* (2003), would not be published for several years.

The popular-level dissemination of their claims—enhanced by internet articles and discussion threads—necessitates that current defenders of Jesus’s deity begin in a different place. The topics covered by our teacher are still needed and presentations that include only those subjects will suffice in some settings. But more people in our world, and in our churches, will expect to have the prior historical questions addressed first. We will need to explain why we trust the historicity of the gospels before we talk about the evidence for Jesus included in the gospels. One approach is to develop a basic case that addresses the following subjects: [a] the New Testament writings can be trusted; [b] Jesus claimed to be divine; [c] Jesus’s works display the character of God; [d] Jesus was raised from the dead. I will introduce a direction for the first of these in the space that remains.

### Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?

At the risk of oversimplification, those who challenge the veracity of the New Testament writings make two related claims. First, the gap in time between when the events occurred and the authors utilized the oral tradition to record the story is too great for the writings to be trusted to tell us what really happened. In a way similar to what occurs in the icebreaker [telephone game](#), the people who passed on the information orally invariably would have made changes from person to person and generation to generation; the story told by the last people in the chain would thus barely resemble what originally occurred. A corollary to this argument refers to the manuscript evidence to question the veracity of what we read. Critics point to the extensive length of time between the writing of the documents and the earliest extant manuscript copies and to the fact that there are discrepancies in those copies. How can we know what the original story was, or even what the authors originally

wrote? (For representative arguments for these claims, see Funk 1993, 25–28; Ehrman 2005; for responses, see Wilkins & Moreland 1995, Komoszewski, et. al. 2006, and Bock & Wallace 2007).

In response, we call attention to the evidence that the distance between the time of the events and the writings is not as great as critics allege. We also note that oral cultures are more reliable in passing on their stories than the critics claim. As Robert Stein wrote:

We must not forget that the ability to remember traditions and pass them on faithfully is not limited by our present-day inability to do this or conceive of this. The introduction of cheap writing materials into the world has had a negative impact in that it has paralyzed our abilities to memorize and to use the mind, rather than notebooks and files as a data-bank (Stein 1983, 227).

In fact, Eastern cultures down to modern times have demonstrated an ability to accurately transmit information that surpasses what we experience in the West, or which critics like the Jesus Seminar allege was possible in antiquity. The following is instructive in this regard:

In the East learning by heart is unto this day the normal way of transmitting even the longest texts, as the Koran and its commentaries. With the Jews both Mishna and Talmud were orally transmitted for centuries; in the synagogue it was long forbidden to say the Torah from a written scroll; also the Aramaic and Greek translations were originally given orally, but in a traditional fixed form.... The common memory of the circle and the "chain of traditionalists" were for long considered to be securer than script. (It must be remembered that here we do have to do with generations whose memory was not spoiled by magazines and dictionaries.) (Mowinckel 1962, 684)

As for the manuscripts, the evidence, in terms of the amount of time between composition and earliest copies, and in the number of copies available for comparison, is better for the New Testament than for the records of other ancient events and writings, the accuracy of which is generally accepted (see Barnett 2003; Bruce 1981, Komoszewski, et. al. 2006). Also, when checked against the documentation of historical events in external sources where such comparisons can be made, the accuracy of the New Testament writings has been consistently validated.

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Sermon notes from one of the "Existence of God" lessons in the *Some Things We Should Believe* series: "Where All Is New and Doubt Reigns Supreme" (page link [here](#)).

A key statement: "Is there a God? Has he spoken? Historically Christians have answered, not by calling people to 'just believe,' but by engaging them with the evidence for why we believe our convictions are true and meaningful. Now is not the time to shy away from that tradition."

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