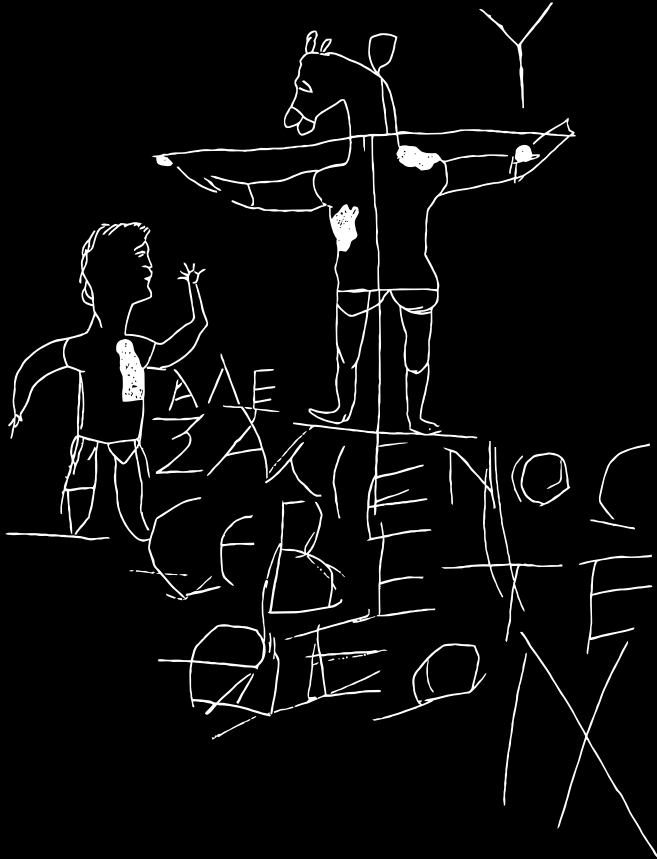


# HISTORY



**FANTASY, FACTS OR FAITH?**





Nero's Torches by Henryk Siemiradzki (1876)



## PILLAR & STEP

# HISTORY

## FANTASY, FACTS OR FAITH?

An exploration of the history of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

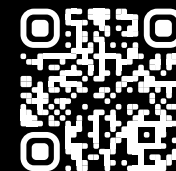
**WITH TOM HOLLAND & PETER J. WILLIAMS**

Hosted by Justin Brierley

Thursday 15 January 2026 | 7pm  
All Souls Langham Place, London, W1B 3DA

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HIS-STORY will be available to watch and share online from 5 February 2026 at 11am.  
[pillarandstep.com/watch](https://pillarandstep.com/watch)



### JUSTIN BRIERLEY

is a writer, speaker and broadcaster, known for hosting conversations between Christians and non-Christians on radio, podcast and video.

Justin's book *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God* was a finalist in Christianity Today's 2024 'Book Of The Year' awards. His latest title *Why I'm Still A Christian* was published in April 2025.

Justin is director of the media company Think Faith. He co-hosts the Re-Enchanting podcast and is the creator of the award-winning Surprising Rebirth Of Belief in God podcast documentary series.

This year he will be launching Uncommon Ground - a new video podcast that will bring together thinkers from varied perspectives to debate God, atheism, science, faith and culture.

Justin is married to Lucy and they have four amazing children - Noah, Grace, Jeremy and Toby.

[justinbrierley.com](http://justinbrierley.com)



### TOM HOLLAND

is an award-winning historian, biographer and broadcaster. He is the author of many books, including several novels and works of classical history. He is well known for the book *Dominion* (2019) on the history of Christianity.

He is co-presenter of a top ten podcast, *The Rest is History*. He was also the presenter of BBC Radio 4's Making History, and has written and presented a number of TV documentaries for the BBC and Channel 4.

[tom-holland.org](http://tom-holland.org)



### PETER J. WILLIAMS

is the Principal and CEO of Tyndale House, an international Bible research community in Cambridge, England, since 2007. He's a New Testament scholar who examines evidence from non-Christian sources and presents the case for the historical reliability of the Gospels in his book *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (2018), published in 15 languages.

He received his MA, MPhil and PhD from the University of Cambridge, studying ancient languages related to the Bible and was formerly a Senior Lecturer in New Testament at the University of Aberdeen. He is an Affiliated Lecturer at the University of Cambridge and a member of the Translation Oversight Committee of the English Standard Version. His latest book is *The Surprising Genius of Jesus* (2023).

[tyndalehouse.com](http://tyndalehouse.com)



## NON-CHRISTIAN SOURCES ABOUT EARLY CHRISTIANITY

**Passage from Tacitus' Annals 15.44 (c. AD 116) describes Emperor Nero's persecution of Christians following the Great Fire of Rome in AD 64**

But neither human help, nor gifts from the emperor, nor all the ways of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order [of Nero]. Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd called Chrestians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once

more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital [Rome] itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and become fashionable. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night.



Fire in Rome by Hubert Robert (1785)



The Christian Martyrs' Last Prayer by Jean-Léon Gérôme (1883)

**Passage from Pliny the Younger's Letters 10.96 (c. AD 112): his quandary as governor of Bithynia regarding how to handle accused Christians**

I interrogated them as to whether they were Christians. If they confessed I interrogated them a second and third time, threatening punishment. If they persisted I ordered them to be led off [to execution]. ... As for those who denied that they were or ever had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words given by me, and prayed with incense and wine offerings to your statue, which I had ordered to be brought for this very purpose along with images of the gods, and also cursed Christ (which it is said that no true Christian can ever be compelled to do), I thought they should be discharged. Others named in the document said they were Christians but later denied it saying they had been, but that they had ceased three years ago, or many years ago, or even as much as twenty. ... they said that this had been the full extent of their guilt or error: they

had been accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and to sing antiphonally a song to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by an oath not to some crime, but rather not to commit theft, robbery, or adultery, not to break their trust, and not to refuse to return a pledge when asked to do so. ... many people of every age, every rank, and of both sexes are being and will be called to trial. Nor is it only cities that are affected, but the disease of this superstition is also reaching villages and farmsteads. It seems possible to check and correct this. It is pretty well agreed that the temples, which had almost become deserted, have now begun to be frequented again, and all the sacred rites which had been neglected for a long time are recommencing and the flesh for sacrificial rites is being sold, for which up to now it was hard to find a purchaser.



THE EARLIEST BIOGRAPHIES OF JESUS CHRIST  
& OF THE ROMAN EMPEROR TIBERIUS

JESUS CHRIST C. 4 BC - AD 30

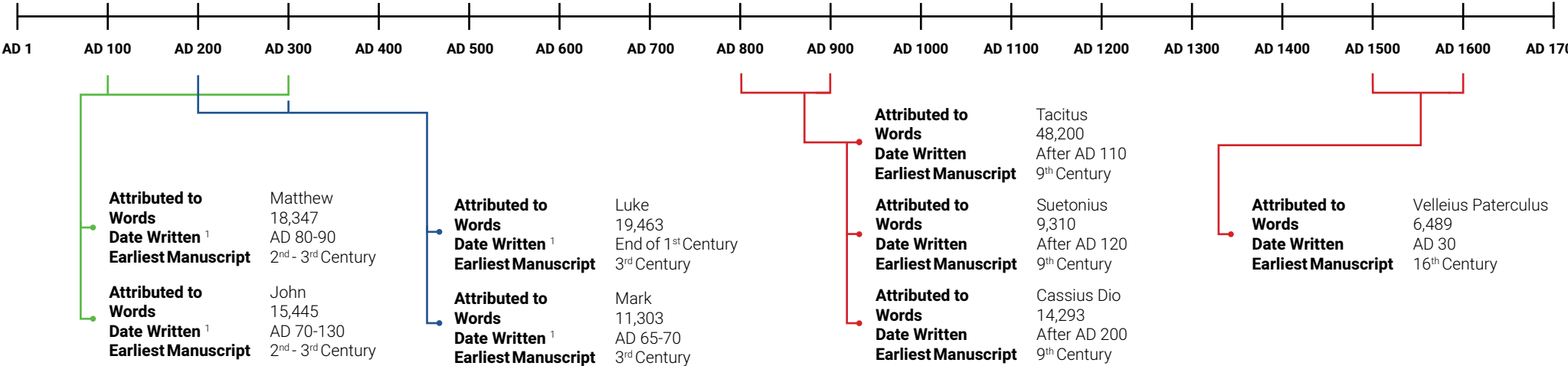


Head of Christ Crowned with Thorns (1620)  
by Guido Reni  
National Portrait Gallery

EMPEROR TIBERIUS 42 BC - AD 37



Tiberius enamelled terracotta bust (1849)  
by Angelo Minghetti  
Currently displayed at the Victoria and Albert Museum



<sup>1</sup> According to the world's best-known Bible sceptic Bart Ehrman



## EXTRACT OF A PARABLE ATTRIBUTED TO JESUS, HIGHLIGHTING LOCAL TERMINOLOGY

### LUKE 16:5-9 ESV



The Centurion Cornelius (The Unmerciful Servant) by Rembrandt (c. 1660)

of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes; you killed the fattened calf for him!" <sup>21</sup> And he said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>22</sup> It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."

**16** He also said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. <sup>2</sup> And he called him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.' <sup>3</sup> And the manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. <sup>4</sup> I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.' <sup>5</sup> So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' <sup>6</sup> He said, 'A hundred **baths** of oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' <sup>7</sup> Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' He said, 'A hundred **cors** of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' <sup>8</sup> The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than **the sons of light**. <sup>9</sup> And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of **unrighteous mammon**, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

<sup>10</sup> One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. <sup>11</sup> If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? <sup>12</sup> And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? <sup>13</sup> No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."

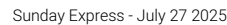
<sup>14</sup> The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. <sup>15</sup> And he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God." <sup>16</sup> "The Law and the Prophets were until John;



BY JUSTIN BRIERLEY

Some twenty years ago I began to host weekly radio conversations between Christians and non-Christians at a time when 'New Atheism' was a dominant cultural force. Anti-God books were topping the bestseller lists. The 'Atheist Bus Campaign' emblazoned red London buses

But as the years wore on, more and more of the non-believers I met distanced themselves from this aggressive form of non-belief. In fact, New Atheism grew old pretty quickly. Once they had agreed that God doesn't exist and religion is bad for you, it turned out there was very little else the new atheists could agree on. Tearing down belief in God was easy. Finding something to replace him with was much harder.



28 Saturday, August 16, 2025 | THE TIMES

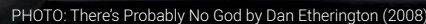
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**Comment**

WEEKEND ESSAY

Few would have predicted a comeback for Christianity, but a backlash against secularism looks less surprising set against the backdrop of global turmoil and a search for lost meaning and connection, writes **James Marriott**

**S**teering through the blurging and fog of a storm that is the size of the state of Florida, a 2006 Honda Civic is stuck in traffic on the I-95 highway in Jacksonville, Fla. The car is stuck in traffic because of the flooded highway. The car is stuck in traffic because of the flooded highway. The car is stuck in traffic because of the flooded highway.







**“The idea that a slave woman's sexual violation is abhorrent - that's an idea that comes from Christianity and was absolutely not universally recognised in the ancient world or many other cultures. I really do think that feminism comes out of Christianity and is completely reliant on Christian moral principles.”**  
- Louise Perry

In ‘The Surprising Rebirth Of Belief In God’ I chart the rise and fall of New Atheism and the growth of a new conversation among secular intellectuals who are reconsidering the value of Christianity. People like Jordan Peterson - a psychologist whose lectures on the Bible have reached millions of people. Or Louise Perry - a secular female rights advocate who came to startlingly Christian conclusions in the course of writing her book ‘The Case Against The Sexual Revolution’.

I've also had the pleasure of interviewing the podcaster and historian Tom Holland whose book ‘Dominion’ tells the story of how the Christian revolution shaped the West's moral imagination. Holland's own journey is an interesting example of the way the conversation on faith is changing.

He told me how his childhood faith had ‘sputtered out’ by the time he reached adulthood. He went on to pursue a successful career writing popular historical books about the ancient world. However, the longer Holland spent time ‘in the sandals’ of the Greeks and Romans, the more he came to realise how utterly alien their values were to his own as a modern twenty-first century Westerner.

The Greco-Roman world cared little for the lives of women and children. The mass slaughter and enslavement of enemies was celebrated. Slavery was an unquestioned part of the economy. A senior Roman male had sexual claim to anyone - man, woman or child - who

was his social inferior.

So where had Holland obtained his own modern outlook on human rights, equality, consent, compassion and freedom?

The historian came to realise that those beliefs hadn't come from science, reason or atheism. In fact, they came from a wandering preacher and miracle worker called Jesus who treated men, women, children with unfailing dignity, told his followers to love their enemies, and eventually died the kind of death reserved for rebels and slaves on a Roman cross.

Yet the movement that was launched by those who proclaimed his life, death and resurrection, went on to completely reshape the world that the historian lived in. Holland told me that, while he struggles to believe in the supernatural claims of Christianity, he had come to recognise that, when it comes to his values, ‘in almost every way I am a Christian’.

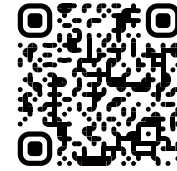
I believe more and more people are waking up to the fact that, in order to make sense of ourselves, we need a ‘better story’ than the one given to us by atheistic secular culture. Perhaps you've noticed some high profile influencers like former new atheist Ayaan Hirsi Ali and her husband, the historian Niall Ferguson, coming to faith? Likewise, recent surveys in the UK, Europe and beyond are charting a ‘Quiet Revival’ especially among Gen Z, taking a new interest in faith. There is a new conversation on God happening in our culture and I am encountering

a surprising number of people who, having been let down by the empty promises of secularism, are willing to give Christianity another look.

But I don't believe this is merely a ‘useful’ story that ‘works’. I believe the reason Christianity works is because it is true. It can only be useful if the claims at the heart of this story really happened. Along with many others, I have discovered that there are good reasons to believe not only that Jesus is the Son of God - but that he died and rose again in vindication of that claim.

If Jesus Christ is the person who stands at the centre of history and culture, then its worth exploring what he did, who he claimed to be, and whether we should accept his call to ‘follow me’.

**The Surprising Rebirth Of Belief In God podcast and book is available online.**



[justinbrierley.com/surprisingrebirth](https://justinbrierley.com/surprisingrebirth)



PHOTO: Abbie Trayler-Smith | Panos Pictures

**“That every human being possessed an equal dignity was not remotely self-evident a truth. A Roman would have laughed at it. [...] The origins of this principle - as Nietzsche had so contemptuously pointed out - lay not in the French Revolution, nor in the Declaration of Independence, nor in the Enlightenment, but in the Bible.”**  
- Tom Holland

## ALEXAMENOS GRAFFITO

In Rome's Palatine Museum, slabs of marble and limestone bear the scratches of ancient graffiti once etched across the walls of the Roman Empire. One of the most significant is the Alexamenos graffito. Believed to have been inscribed sometime in the late second or early third century AD (c. AD 100–200), it is the earliest known pictorial depiction of the crucifixion of Christ and a revealing window into how that belief was received by the surrounding culture. The image shows a crudely drawn crucified figure with the body of a man and the head of an ass, accompanied by a smaller figure with an arm outstretched in worship. Beneath them, a rough Greek inscription reads, "ΑΛΕΞΑΜΕΝΟΣ ΚΕΒΕΤΕ ΘΕΟΝ" — "Alexamenos worships his god."

To the Roman culture of the day, the idea of worshipping a God who had submitted to the brutality and shame of crucifixion was considered ridiculous and outrageous. From the early days of Christianity, this surprising and shameful reality has been at the heart of the faith, and has transformed societies in its wake.

Cover art depicts the etching



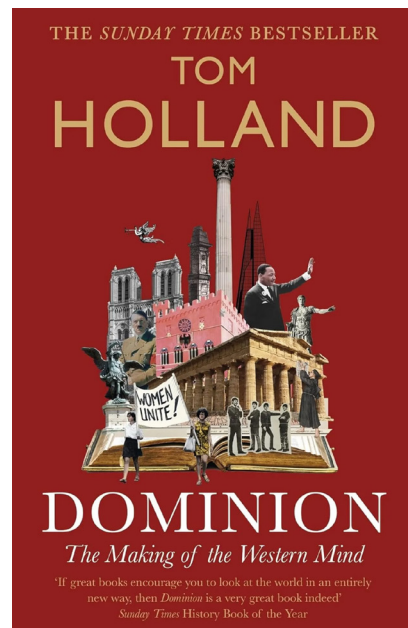


# FURTHER READING

## Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind

Tom Holland

Dominion tells the epic story of how those in the West came to be what they are, and why they think the way they do. Ranging from Moses to Merkel, from Babylon to Beverley Hills, from the emergence of secularism to the abolition of slavery, it explores why, in a society that has become increasingly doubtful of religion's claims, so many of its instincts remain irredeemably Christian. Christianity's enduring impact is not confined to churches. It can be seen everywhere in the West: in science, in secularism, in gay rights, even in atheism. It is - to coin a phrase - the greatest story ever told.

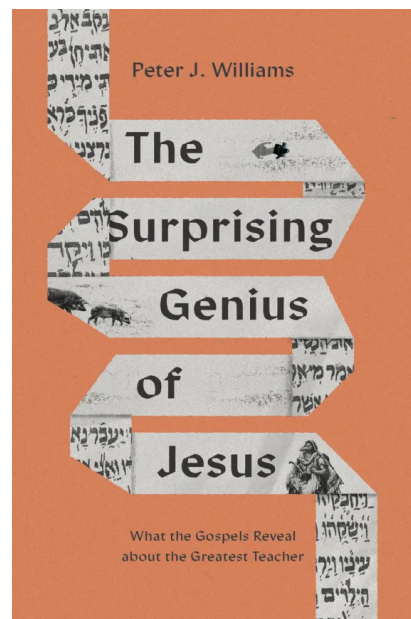
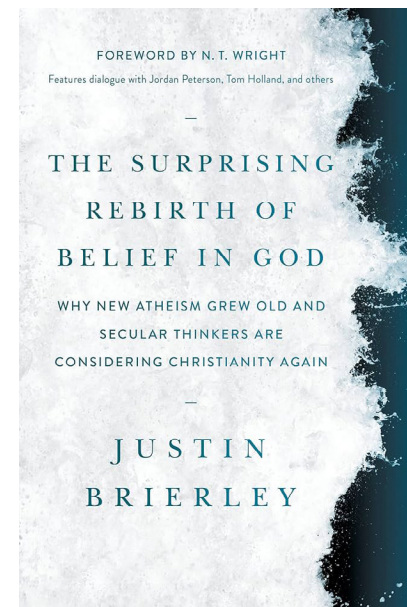


## The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God

Justin Brierley

Famously described as the "long, withdrawing roar" of the "Sea of Faith," the Christian narrative that shaped the West has been replaced by sweeping secularism. But is that the end of the story?

It was a conversation with agnostic journalist Douglas Murray that led Brierley to investigate whether a change was on the horizon. Speaking of the "Sea of Faith," Murray remarked that tides come back in again and that a number of his intelligent friends had converted to Christianity in recent years. Brierley was seeing a similar trend among the secular thinkers he had interviewed. Jordan Peterson, Tom Holland, Dave Rubin, and many others have found themselves surprised by the continuing resonance and relevance of Christianity, and they are joining in on conversations about faith.

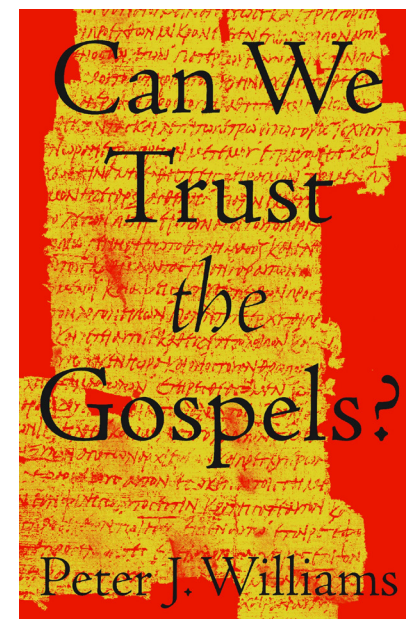


## The Surprising Genius of Jesus

Peter J. Williams

When someone thinks of Jesus, "genius" is not likely the first word that comes to mind. But when studied in detail, Jesus' teachings and interactions with others combined high levels of knowledge and insight, verbal skill, and simplicity - showing his genius.

In *The Surprising Genius of Jesus*, Peter J. Williams examines the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15 to show the genius, creativity, and wisdom of Jesus' teachings. He used simple but powerful stories to confront the Pharisees and scribes of the day, drawing on his knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures to teach his audience through complex layers and themes. Williams challenges those who question whether Jesus really was the source of the parables recorded in the Gospels, pointing readers to the truth of who Jesus is and why that matters for them today.



## Can We Trust the Gospels?

Peter J. Williams

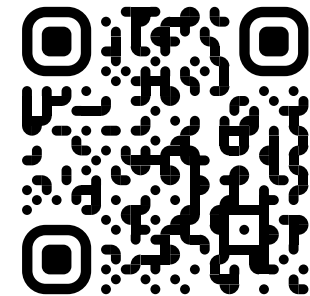
The Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, John - are four accounts of Jesus' life and teachings while on earth. But should we accept them as historically accurate? What evidence is there that the recorded events actually happened?

Presenting a case for the historical reliability of the Gospels, New Testament scholar Peter Williams examines evidence from non-Christian sources, assesses how accurately the four biblical accounts reflect the cultural context of their day, compares different accounts of the same events, and looks at how these texts were handed down throughout the centuries. Everyone from the sceptic to the scholar will find powerful arguments in favour of trusting the Gospels as trustworthy accounts of Jesus' earthly life.

HOW COULD A LOVING GOD SEND ANYONE TO HELL? WHY DO WE EXIST? ISN'T THE CHAOS IN THE WORLD A SIGN OF GOD'S ABSENCE? HOW MUCH AM I WORTH? DOES SCIENCE EXPLAIN EVERYTHING? **WHAT** DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT SEX? CAN I REALLY BE FORGIVEN? WHAT IS LOVE? IF GOD EXISTS, WHY IS THERE SUFFERING? DOES MY LIFE REALLY MATTER TO GOD? **IS** BELIEVING IN THE RESURRECTION RIDICULOUS? HOW CAN I TRUST WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS IS TRUE? WHAT IS TRUE HAPPINESS? WHERE CAN I FIND HOPE? WHAT IS THE CHURCH ALL ABOUT? ISN'T **CHRISTIANITY** JUST A WAY OF CONTROLLING PEOPLE? IS THERE MORE TO LIFE THAN THIS? ISN'T FOLLOWING JESUS **ALL** ABOUT FOLLOWING RULES? AREN'T ALL RELIGIONS BASICALLY THE SAME? WHY ARE CHRISTIANS SUCH HYPOCRITES? WHAT'S SO SPECIAL **ABOUT** JESUS? DOESN'T CHRISTIANITY JUST CAUSE CONFLICT? **?** WHY WOULD A DECENT PERSON LIKE ME NEED FORGIVENESS?

## EXAMINE A GOSPEL

**Christianity Explored** is a weekly opportunity to open the Bible to find answers to big questions in life. Join a small group investigating an eyewitness account of Jesus' life, explore who he says he is and how he offers us good news today. Whether you're curious, sceptical or have some faith, you'll find honest answers.



[allsouls.org/explore](https://allsouls.org/explore)

**EXPLORE CHRISTIANITY**



