

the possibility that the Gospels' authors had religious or political agendas (or were copying from other writers' work) makes them less than completely reliable on the subject.

Did Jesus perform the miracles ascribed to him in the Gospels? A moral atheist would say that this is extremely unlikely — these stories fall into the category of extraordinary claims. There are many ways that such stories could have arisen, and all of them are much more likely than the possibility that Jesus really could do magic.

Jesus the man may indeed have existed, and this is not a problem for atheists. It's when we start talking about Jesus the god that an atheist is going to require more proof — and lots of it.

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DID JESUS EXIST?

A Question of Moral Atheism

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Some atheists don't believe that Jesus existed even in this most basic sense. They consider stories about Jesus to be mythological in nature, perhaps derived from earlier pagan stories.

Most moral atheists, however, consider it reasonable that Jesus was an actual person. There is as much evidence that Jesus existed as there is that some other accepted historical figures existed, and the fact that Biblical texts contain some claims that might require extraordinary proof does not mean that they can't be used to bolster much less extraordinary claims, such as the claim that someone named Jesus existed. It also may be more likely that exaggerated stories of miracles would grow around a real person than around a purely legendary figure.

Did Jesus say the things attributed to him in the Bible? Maybe yes; maybe no. As soon as we get into matters that are not pure historical fact, the New Testament must be divided into three groups of claims — independently verifiable, not independently verifiable, and extraordinary. Jesus' quotes fall into that second category. They cannot be independently verified, and

THE NEW TESTAMENT is a collection of ancient documents about Jesus. Christians believe that Jesus was the son of God. Who do atheists think Jesus was?

Before we can tackle this question, we have to agree what we mean when we refer to Jesus. An atheist believes that Jesus was *not*:

- The son of God.
- Part of the same substance as God.
- A miracle worker.
- Born of a virgin.
- The fulfillment of prophecies.
- Resurrected after death.

Since a Christian would believe all (or most) of the above, do Christians and atheists mean the same person when referring to Jesus? In a strictly philosophical sense, probably not. But for the sake of argument, let's define Jesus as the person who lived in the early first century about whom the Gospels were written.

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QUESTIONS OF MORAL ATHEISM: INSTRUCTIONS

We appreciate your interest in helping us spread information about moral atheism! To make copies of this pamphlet for your own use or to share with friends, follow these simple steps:

1. Print pages one and two of this document, one on each side of the same piece of paper (if you don't have access to a duplex printer, print page one, put the page back in the paper tray upside down, and print page two — depending on the type of printer, you may have to experiment a bit).
2. Cut the printout in two, using the thin rules across the middle of the page as a guide.
3. Fold the two pieces of paper in half, making a pair of small pamphlets.
4. Keep one of the pamphlets to read, and give the other away to an interested friend or stranger.

That's it! If you have any questions, suggestions, or comments, we invite you to share them by leaving a comment on blog.iamanatheist.org. Thanks!
