



GREG MONETTE

FOREWORD BY DR. CRAIG A. EVANS

THE WRONG JESUS

Fact, Belief, Legend, Truth...
Making Sense of What You've Heard

“There is no faith easier to defend on an intellectual basis than Christianity. You will see why as you read and even enjoy the powerful defense Monette mounts in *The Wrong Jesus*.”

—PAUL L. MAIER, professor of ancient history,
Western Michigan University; best-selling author

“There are many questions floating around about Jesus today. *The Wrong Jesus* makes sense out of what people are hearing. It is judicious, informative, and, above all, immensely fair. So bring your questions and what you have heard about Jesus here. You will find much help.”

—DARRELL BOCK, senior research professor of New Testament Studies,
Dallas Theological Seminary;
author of *Who Is Jesus?: Linking the Historical Jesus with the Christ of Faith*

“I commend *The Wrong Jesus* to those who desire solid answers to questions pertaining to the real Jesus.”

—MICHAEL R. LICONA, associate professor of theology,
Houston Baptist University;
author of *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach*

“I would have found this well-informed and well-argued book a great help when I went through my teenage doubts about the truth of Jesus and the Christian faith.”

—DAVID WENHAM, vice principal and tutor in New Testament,
Trinity College, Bristol, England;
author of *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?*

“Jesus is a great headline grabber, yet sadly there are more Jesuses out there than BBQ restaurants in Texas. Amidst this proliferation of weird and wrong Jesuses, Greg Monette provides a solidly researched account of what Jesus was really like.”

—MICHAEL F. BIRD, lecturer in theology, Ridley Melbourne College of
Mission and Ministry; author of *Are You the One Who Is to Come?:
The Historical Jesus and the Messianic Question*

“*The Wrong Jesus* is a much-needed, accessible handbook that clears up contemporary confusion and caricatures about the historical Jesus. Greg Monette is a wise, level-headed guide who peels back the layers to reveal the real, radical, and life-transforming Jesus of Nazareth.”

—PAUL COPAN, professor and pledger family chair of
philosophy and ethics, Palm Beach Atlantic University;
author of *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God*

“*The Wrong Jesus* is the right book for our times. Monette knows the academic issues associated with the historical Jesus and the biblical gospels, and he writes in a winsome, engaging style. This book delights even as it informs.”

— MARK ROBERTS, PhD, author of *Can We Trust the Gospels?*

“Everybody seems to have an opinion about Jesus these days. But can we get beyond opinion to find out who Jesus really was? Greg Monette helps walk the reader through a wealth of evidence in order to navigate to an answer. The Jesus who emerges is a Jesus who challenges all of us to reconsider his life and teaching afresh.”

— ANDY BANNISTER, PhD, adjunct research fellow,
Melbourne School of Theology

“This is not a book that gives easy answers, but that encourages those with doubts to face their questions concerning the Bible, Jesus, and Christianity, and not to settle for an elementary school picture of these things. Here is a spectacular post-modern apologetics for the many who are still nagged by questions about history, faith, and even the significance of Jesus.”

— EDITH M. HUMPHREY, William F. Orr, professor of New Testament,
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary;
author of *Scripture and Tradition: What the Bible Really Says*

“Wonderfully well written for the confused, the cautious, and the convinced, this book answers such key questions as, *Did Jesus really exist? Is the New Testament based on eyewitness testimony? Was Jesus a feminist?* Whether read alone or studied in a small group, the up-to-date scholarship will lead the reader to the *right* Jesus.”

— GRAHAM H. TWELFTREE, PhD, director of the PhD program,
school of divinity, Regent University; author of *Paul and the Miraculous*

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FOREWORD

For centuries in the West, if not in the entire world, Jesus of Nazareth has been viewed as the most significant person ever to walk the earth. His message not only transformed his followers (those who heard him teach, saw his mighty deeds, and witnessed his astounding resurrection from the dead), it transformed the world. Wherever the message of Jesus goes, wherever it is embraced, society is dramatically changed for the better.

The greatness of the person of Jesus and his life-changing message is not as clearly seen and understood in the modern West. Today our society is drifting into a postmodern period of subjectivity and self-indulgence. We have indeed become a society of “Do your own thing,” a society that prizes pleasure and immediate gratification above all else. In keeping with this new spirit, we want to personalize our understanding of God, to shape him according to our whims and personal preferences. This means we are open to new views of Jesus whether there is compelling, credible evidence or not. It is not surprising that outlandish views of Jesus appear every year. Numbers of people seem eager to learn about a Jesus no one has ever heard of before. But what about the Jesus of the “old story,” the Jesus who taught with authority and saved the lost?

This is why Greg Monette’s book *The Wrong Jesus* is so urgently needed. Greg lays out the evidence in a clear and convincing manner, showing that Jesus really is who he claimed he was; that his earliest

followers understood him and faithfully proclaimed his message and his amazing life, death, and resurrection; and that the four New Testament gospels got it right.

What I like about Greg's book is that it is addressed not to the scholar or the high-minded academic but rather to thinking, inquiring minds of all ages (especially those in college or university) who are not historians, archaeologists, philosophers, or scholars. *The Wrong Jesus* puts right the most important things about Jesus of Nazareth. It sets forth clearly everything that truly makes a difference.

Although written for nonexperts, *The Wrong Jesus* rests upon solid, critical scholarship of the first order. Greg knows his stuff. He has given his readers a reliable guide through a territory that for many is an unknown country. But this territory must not remain an unexplored country. I invite you to explore with Greg Monette. He will show you the way, enabling you to discover the one who is still the "way, the truth, and the life."

Craig A. Evans
Payzant Distinguished Professor of New Testament,
Acadia Divinity College

JESUS AND THE TIME MACHINE

I'm sure that in 1985, plutonium is available in every corner drugstore, but in 1955, it's a little hard to come by.

Dr. Emmett Brown, *Back to the Future*

Back to the Future was one of my favorite movie trilogies growing up. I loved the whole idea of being able to travel back in time. Yes, there's always the danger that messing with the past will alter the future, but would you do it anyway? If you had the opportunity to get into a time machine and turn the dial to any date of your choosing, would you do it? And if so, where would you go? Or maybe I should say, to when would you go?

Assuming it's like a genie in a bottle and I'd be granted three trips back in time, I know which places in time I'd like to visit:

1. I would go to the first century to spend a few years with Jesus of Nazareth. I'd need to remember to take my handy Aramaic phrase book with me! What sorts of vaccinations would be needed for that kind of environment?
2. I think I'd like to spend a few months sitting in prison next to the apostle Paul, working on my Greek and chatting about theology. I'd bring a few books about Paul back in time with me and see if any of his modern commentators have figured him out.

3. Without a doubt, my final date would be the year 2003. I would go back in time and give myself the book you're currently reading. In fact, I wrote this book with that crazy idea in mind. It was in 2003 when my doubts began.

“EASY” COURSES

I grew up in a devout Christian home, and although I was raised to love Jesus, I enjoyed competitive hockey just as much. This prevented me from attending church most Sundays in the wintertime. I can't say for sure that hockey contributed to this, but I always had doubts about my Christian faith. They bothered me at times, but they were nothing compared to what I experienced once I began university.

While working on a bachelor's degree, I thought I'd choose a few “easy” courses that would hopefully give me more free time and a couple of easy grades. With that in mind, I chose Introduction to Comparative Religions, Introduction to the New Testament, and The Life of Jesus. Boy was I wrong on the whole “easy course” thing. This was *not* Sunday school.

Instead of learning what I had been taught in church, I learned the Bible from a different perspective. It wasn't as though my professors were *trying* to be overly skeptical or dismantle the faith of the students in their classes. I recognize that now. They were just doing their jobs as educators in a secular environment.

You see, when you teach religious studies courses in a secular (non-religious) university, the material isn't usually taught in a pastorally sensitive manner. They just give you the facts most secular academics agree on and keep going.

The standard view on the history of religion is to take a very human approach to what you're teaching or studying. In other words, most non-religious universities and colleges teach students to view the ancient texts (the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament, the Qur'an) in a way that focuses on what makes sense in a world where miracles don't happen and God doesn't exist, and they teach

that it's best to assume an attitude of skepticism regarding the literature or topic in consideration.

Because of this, when discussing the Bible, my professors explained that the supernatural elements in the biblical stories were mythical. For example, the virginal conception of Jesus; Jesus as a healer, exorcist, and miracle worker; and especially the resurrection were explained as merely myths. I wasn't used to this! I was left to wonder, *Where does faith fit into all of this?* and *What do the history books say? Is any of what I believed real? Can it be supported?*

For the first time in my life, I was forced to ask the hard questions, not so I could respond to skeptical friends and family but so I could answer my own deep-rooted doubts. I had reached a point where I was ready to give up on my faith. It just didn't seem to add up with what I was being challenged with every day in class.

It was my mentor, Ron, who came alongside me when I was really struggling. Ron challenged me by saying, "Greg, if you care about your faith and seeing if it's true and real, you need to start reading books that argue both for and against what you believe. You need to come to a place where you know for yourself what you believe and why; otherwise, you will live in deep doubt for the rest of your life. This may be hard and painful, but other than a supernatural blast from God, there are no shortcuts!"

Now, when you're missing a foundation for knowing what you believe, it's a scary place to be. The tiniest objection to the faith can knock you over like a powerful wave. My conversation with Ron happened at just the right time, and his words drove me to begin my quest for answers. I didn't find them overnight. It was a process that took years. But I was building a foundation for knowing what was firm footing and what wasn't—what could be supported with facts and what couldn't.

WHERE FACT AND FAITH MEET

As I quickly learned that first year, in a secular university setting, "faith" is not a good answer to test questions. It's no longer good

enough to say, “The Bible said it, I believe it, and that settles it!” That’s what we call assigning yourself a failing grade.

It was this view on the Bible, my “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it!” attitude, that may have prevented me earlier from asking, “What good reasons do we have for believing this anyway?”

Because I had never really worked through the hard questions about faith and the Bible, *all* of my questions were really hard. Now, I’d say that on the one hand, Sunday school, church youth group, and church in general prepared me to have an overall knowledge of what the Bible says about Jesus and how to begin a relationship with him. But on the other hand, it didn’t prepare me to know *how* we can know what we believe about Jesus.

Historians ask questions like “What is the evidence to support your viewpoint?” When we think about religions (including Christianity), we should take a similar approach. What I mean is if Christianity is true, then what Christians believe about Jesus must line up with reality, with what really happened in the past.

Yes, the past no longer exists. But it’s crucial for us to know whether or not some events really happened. For instance, was Jesus resurrected from the dead? The apostle Paul said that “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17). Without the resurrection of Jesus, Christianity falls apart.

What I realized during my time of doubt and exploration is that all of the faith in the world is useless if it’s directed at something that isn’t true. I can put my faith and devotion in unicorns, but those don’t exist; my faith in them is useless. We have to be able to support what we believe.

DIVING INTO THE PROOF

Here’s the hard part of this process: Regardless of whether we’re skeptical or trusting of the Bible, we need to keep an open mind as to what history has to teach us. Sometimes when we examine the

facts against something we've believed, we find they don't exactly match. This may mean that our particular interpretation of certain parts of the Bible will need to be adjusted because during the historical quest, we're given new information. One thing we can't do is ignore the truth simply because it doesn't line up with our personal or traditional ways of seeing the world and the Bible.

When we *do* find those intersection points between religious beliefs and what can be shown from the past, our faith can be invigorated. This is definitely what's taken place in my life. Although my mental portrait of Jesus is incomplete, more and more of my questions are being answered (or re-answered), and I'm more amazed and in awe of the person of Jesus than ever before.

You might still be uncertain about this process. Maybe you're worried you'll uncover something that threatens what you've believed. I'm thankful Ron challenged me all those years ago to begin this journey of examining fact with faith, and I want to challenge you to do the same thing.

The good news you'll discover is that there *is* a foundation for a healthy and vibrant faith, which can allow you the freedom to live with some unanswered questions because you'll know that what you're standing on is solid ground.

This book was written to help you have an honest and secure foundation in Jesus of Nazareth and understand how taking the time to rethink what you know about him can literally change your life as you discover where faith and history collide. I'm convinced that by doing this, you'll avoid creating (and keeping) a portrait of the wrong Jesus and instead will have a healthy view of the real Jesus—a portrait that stands up under historical scrutiny and discovery.

The Wrong Jesus begins to answer many of the questions I had about Jesus during my time in university. I know that this book would have saved me from years of anxiety and pain if I'd been able to read it back in 2003.

Because I haven't been able to travel back to that time in my life (yet!), this book is written to help you, Christian or non-Christian, on your journey to understanding where the history of Jesus and faith in him intersect. It's my hope that when this happens, you'll consider the implications of his life and mission on your own life journey.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

You don't need to be a biblical scholar in order to read this book. It's written for the nonexpert—anyone curious about what we can know about Jesus historically.

The cool thing is that you have the freedom to read *The Wrong Jesus* any way you like. Some people prefer reading a book from beginning to end, others like to read the topics that peak their interests and jump around from chapter to chapter, and others might prefer reading this book in a small-group setting. Any option is completely fine.

You'll find discussion questions at the end of each chapter along with recommended reading for further investigation into the various topics presented in this book (not to mention plenty of notes near the back of the book with additional information).

I recommend grabbing a hot cup of tea or a mug of apple cider, sitting in a comfortable chair, and reading one chapter at a time. Have fun with it! I hope that you'll be enriched by your reading of *The Wrong Jesus* and, by doing so, see how the historical Jesus can be known where faith and history collide.

WHY DOES HISTORY MATTER?

History is an indispensable key to the correct interpretation of the figure and message of Christ. The originality of Christianity is rooted precisely in the affirmation that human history has embraced the indescribable event of the presence of God as man, redeemer of mankind through his mysterious death and resurrection.

Angelo Amato, cardinal and theologian, Roman Catholic Church

Imagine you're at a family reunion and there's one relative everyone looks forward to seeing each year but nobody can completely figure him out—everyone has conflicting views about that person. If you really like him enough, or even love him, you'll undoubtedly want to form some kind of relationship with him to understand who he really is as accurately as possible. You don't do it out of fear or pressure. You're going to try to understand him so you can get to know the true person as he really is because, quite frankly, you really like him and want to know him better and have a deeper relationship with the true person, not your preconceived ideas about him.

This is exactly why those of us who identify ourselves as Christians should care about history and trying to know what we can about Jesus. It's not that we have to have him all figured out in order to have a relationship with him, but it's a way we can show love and care to the person who means so much to us (and to the family of Christian believers). By getting to know important facts,

we can have confidence that the New Testament's portraits of Jesus are reliable and Jesus is who he says he is and we can trust him and follow him with confidence.

Now pause for a second. If right now you wouldn't consider yourself part of the family of Jesus and want to know if he's worth following, close this book, grab the Bible, and read the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). These writings are the earliest biographical portraits we have of Jesus and the best place to begin learning about him. Once you've read his bio(s), come back to *The Wrong Jesus*. This book is meant to be a second step after reading the stories about Jesus.

It's true that many people reject Christianity because they misunderstand Jesus or believe that what's written about him couldn't possibly be true. I hope this book will help you rethink him, as you might have the wrong Jesus in your mind.

I COULD BE WRONG ABOUT JESUS

I have to confess that I could be wrong about Jesus. There are nights when I lie in bed and stare at the ceiling wondering, *What if I'm wrong? What if it's all just too good to be true?* The evidence for Christianity sure seems to point toward it all being true, yet I sometimes wonder if I'm missing something.

This is a major question for many people. Maybe you've asked similar questions about your worldview. The reason it's so nerve-racking for many of us to ponder is that it's possible our eternal destinies depend on our beliefs. I have friends with alternative religious worldviews (Muslims, Jews, agnostics, atheists) who ask the very same question: *What if I'm wrong?* It really doesn't matter which worldview we hold when it comes to doubt; most of us will encounter times of intense questioning.

REASONS FOR DOUBT

There are many reasons people quit being Christians, wander away from following Jesus, or have very little interest in even considering

Christianity. These reasons include the popular (and maybe accurate in some cases) perception that many Christians are narrowminded, shallow, antiscience, exclusive, and antiintellectual.¹ James S. Spiegel has argued that some people stop believing in God or don't believe in God at all because they can't imagine a loving heavenly Father (God) either because they were young when their own fathers died or their fathers were horrible people (neglectful or abusive).² Many people reject Christianity or turn to atheism because they are drawn to lifestyles that don't align with what the Bible says is okay. They don't want to be held accountable to a moral lawgiver. One of the other major reasons young people drop out of Christianity is because they no longer believe Christianity is true. David Kinnaman interviewed thousands of young adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine and discovered that almost one-fourth of young adults who identified as being Christians had "significant intellectual doubts about faith."³

There may be some good reasons to have doubts in the first place, but there's no reason you need to remain stuck in your doubts. In fact, there's a way to experience some freedom. Because Christianity is based around its founder, Jesus of Nazareth, when we focus on the historical person of Jesus, we can see how firm the foundation of Christianity really is. The historical evidence underpinning the life of Jesus is very well substantiated.

Although I occasionally raise questions of doubt, the truth is that my faith has been rejuvenated in recent years by my study of history and how it intersects with the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth. I've come to realize that when we take the time to really pay attention to where faith and history collide, we see the truth of Christianity come alive. Historical study helps us be able to have faith, and for those who already have faith, it confirms what we already know and believe to be true through our experience of God in our lives. This is the power of faith and history coming together!

THE FAITHOMETER

Sometimes I can't get to sleep, so I watch late-night television. Every once in a while, I enjoy torturing myself by watching prosperity preachers tell people that they need to "*have more faith!*" If only you had more faith, you would be healed or would have more money or . . . whatever. They make it sound like there's a "faithometer" that exists somewhere and that humans can control how much faith they have like The Little Engine That Could, who kept saying, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can!"⁴

I'm convinced that you can't force yourself intellectually to believe something you don't actually believe. For many of us, we need good reasons to be able to have faith in something or trust something or someone.

The word *faith* has some negative connotations in today's world because for many people, faith equals believing in something when there's no evidence. This really isn't a good definition when you consider that the word *faith* means "trust." It's impossible to trust in something without good evidence. For example, let's say you purchased a new car and someone asked you if they could borrow it for a couple hours. You'd be foolish to put blind faith in just anyone to borrow your car for the afternoon. Instead, you'd want to be able to trust him, and this would require some evidence. Do you know him? Does he have his driver's license? What's his driving record like? How much has he driven, and has he ever been in an accident before? Does he have a reputation for driving over the speed limit or talking on a cell phone while driving? There are many questions you'd be justified in asking prior to letting someone borrow your car. The point is this: You would never just give the keys to your car to a complete stranger or to somebody you didn't trust. Now, when it comes to your entire worldview, it can require at least this level of research before being able to place your trust in a given ideology or set of beliefs. For some of us, we need some help to take us closer to making a decision to put our faith, or trust, in Jesus. As we dig into

some facts here as well as in the following chapters, the evidence will help you make an informed decision about whether or not you can and should put your trust in Jesus of Nazareth.

JESUS AND HISTORY

Because I've been putting so much emphasis on historical proof about Jesus and Christianity, you're probably wondering if there are any facts we can know with certainty about Jesus—anything followers and skeptics can agree about. E. P. Sanders, world-renowned historian of Jesus of Nazareth who does not believe the Bible to be completely reliable, provides a list of common facts practically every scholar and historian know with virtual certainty about Jesus. This list alone should show that there is much more to the history of Christianity and its founder, Jesus of Nazareth, than many people think:⁵

1. Jesus was born c. 4 BCE, near the time of the death of Herod the Great.
2. He spent his childhood and early-adult years in Nazareth, a Galilean village.
3. He was baptized by John the Baptist.
4. He called disciples.
5. He taught in the towns, villages, and countryside of Galilee (apparently not the cities).
6. He preached “the kingdom of God.”
7. About the year AD 30, he went to Jerusalem for Passover.
8. He created a disturbance in the temple area.
9. He had a final meal with the disciples.
10. He was arrested and interrogated by Jewish authorities, specifically the high priest.
11. He was executed on the orders of the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate.
12. His disciples at first fled.

13. They saw him (in what sense is not certain) after his death.
14. As a consequence, they believed that he would return to found the kingdom.
15. They formed a community to await his return and sought to win others to faith in him as God's Messiah.

There are many other details about Jesus' life that could be added to this list, but this is a good place to start if for no other reason than to show that historians take Jesus seriously and there is a set of generally agreed-upon facts about his life from which the majority of scholars begin their historical detective work.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

Unlike the analogy of the relative at a family reunion used at the beginning of this chapter, Jesus is not just your ordinary figure of history. More than two billion people have placed their faith and trust in Jesus of Nazareth. (Not too many uncles have this kind of devotion!) For this reason among many others, it's important to know what we can about Jesus historically. Also, because many people struggle with doubt about the Christian faith and find it difficult to maintain trust in the biblical depictions of Jesus, knowing where history and faith intersect is even more necessary. So without further ado, let's look at some of the most probing questions Christians and non-Christians have about where history and faith come together when we focus on Jesus.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you agree that faith and history need to intersect?
2. What keeps people from taking Jesus of Nazareth seriously?
3. What causes people to have increased faith/trust? Can you gain more trust by sheer will?
4. What are the reasons people leave Christianity?
5. If you were wrong about Jesus, what would change?

FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

***Refers to Most Recommended

Bauckham, Richard. *Jesus: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

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