

# The Case for Christ - Part 1

by Lee Strobel

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*Lee Strobel explores the case against James Dixon and parallels it with his own journey from skepticism to faith in Christ.*

**Duration:** 39:56

**Scripture:** Matthew 11:2-6, Matthew 14:22-33, Mark 6:45-52, Luke 7:18-23

**Topics:** "Biblical Evidence", "Christology"

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## Description

In this video, Blomberg and Strobel discuss the case for Christ. Blomberg explains that there are similarities and differences between the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and John's Gospel. He suggests that these differences do not necessarily mean there are irreconcilable contradictions between them. Blomberg also mentions the presence of miracles in Jesus' ministry, as seen in the Gospel of Q. Strobel compares the investigation of the case against James Dixon to the investigation of the evidence for Christ, encouraging viewers to challenge their preconceptions and seek out proof for their spiritual beliefs.

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## Transcript

Vondervan Audio Pages presents The Case for Christ by Lee Strobel. Prosecutors were convinced that the attempted murder case against James Dixon was a dead-bang winner. Open and shut.

Even a cursory examination of the evidence was enough to establish that Dixon shot Police Sergeant Richard Scanlon in the abdomen during a scuffle on Chicago's South Side. Piece by piece, item by item, witness by witness, the evidence tightened a noose around Dixon's neck. There were fingerprints and a weapon, eyewitnesses and a motive, a wounded cop and a defendant with a history of violence.

Now the criminal justice system was poised to trip the trapdoor that would leave Dixon dangling by the weight of his own guilt. The facts were simple. Sergeant Scanlon had rushed to West 108th Place after a neighbor called police to report a man with a gun.

He arrived to find Dixon noisily arguing with his girlfriend through the front door of her house. Her father emerged when she saw Scanlon, figuring it was safe to come outside. Suddenly, a fight broke out between Dixon and the father.

The sergeant quickly intervened in an attempt to break it up. A shot rang out. Scanlon staggered away, wounded in the abdomen.

Just then, two other squad cars screeched up and officers ran over to restrain Dixon. A .22 caliber gun belonging to Dixon, covered with his fingerprints and with one bullet having been fired, was found nearby where he had apparently flung it after the shooting. The father had been unarmed.

Scanlon's revolver remained in the holster. Powder burns on Scanlon's skin show that he had been shot at extremely close range. While his wound wasn't life-threatening, it was serious enough to earn him a medal for bravery.

As for Dixon, his rap sheet showed he had previously been convicted of shooting someone else. Apparently, he had a propensity for violence. And there I sat, almost a year later, taking notes in a Chicago courtroom while Dixon publicly admitted that, yes, he was guilty of the shooting.

Criminal Court Judge Frank Mahala ordered Dixon in prison, then wrapped his gavel to signal that the case was closed. Justice had been served. I ambled downstairs toward the press room.

At the most, I figured my editor would give me three paragraphs to tell the story in the next day's Chicago Tribune. Certainly, that's all it deserved. This wasn't much of a tale, or so I thought.

A couple of days later, I answered the phone in the press room and recognized the voice as one of my regular informants. "Lee, do you know the Dixon case?" he asked. "Yeah, sure," I replied, pretty routine.

"Don't be so sure. "The word is that a few weeks before the shooting, Sergeant Scanlon was at a party showing off his pen gun." "His what?" "A pen gun. "It's a .22-caliber pistol that's made to look like a fountain pen.

"They're illegal for anyone to carry, including cops." When I told him I didn't see the relevance of this, he said, "Here's the thing. "Dixon didn't shoot Scanlon. "Scanlon was wounded when his own pen gun accidentally went off in his shirt pocket.

"He framed Dixon so he wouldn't get in trouble for carrying an unauthorized weapon. "Don't you see? "Dixon is innocent." "Impossible!" I exclaimed. "Check the evidence yourself," came his reply.

"See where it really points." I soon learned that my informant had already passed along his suspicions to the prosecutor's office. Behind the scenes, a grand jury was being convened to reconsider the evidence. Amazingly, the once airtight case against James Dixon was being reopened.

As I began investigating the evidence myself, the strangest thing happened. All of the new facts that I uncovered, and even the old evidence that once pointed so convincingly toward Dixon's guilt, snugly fit the pen gun theory. First, witnesses said that before Scanlon arrived on the scene, Dixon had been pounding his gun on the door of his girlfriend's house.

The gun discharged in a downward direction. There was a chip in the cement of the front porch that was consistent with the bullet's impact. This would account for the bullet that was missing from Dixon's gun.

Second, Dixon said he didn't want to be caught with the gun, so he hid it in some grass across the street before the police arrived. I found a witness who corroborated that. This explained why the gun had been found some distance from the shooting scene, even though nobody had ever seen Dixon throw it.

Third, there were powder burns concentrated inside, but not above, the left pocket of Scanlon's shirt. The bullet hole was at the bottom of the pocket. Conclusion? A weapon had somehow discharged in the pocket's interior.

Fourth, contrary to the police report, the bullet's trajectory had been at a downward angle. Below Scanlon's shirt pocket, there was a bloody rip where the bullet had exited after going through some flesh. And fifth, Dixon's rap sheet hadn't told the whole story.

Although he had spent three years in prison for an earlier shooting, he had been freed because he'd been wrongly convicted. So much for his evidence of violence. Finally, I put the crucial question to Dixon.

If you were innocent, why in the world did you plead guilty? It was a plea bargain, he said, referring to the practice in which prosecutors recommend a reduced sentence if a defendant pleads guilty and thus saves everyone the time and expense of a trial. They said if I pleaded guilty, they would sentence me to a year in prison. I'd already spent 362 days in jail waiting for my trial.

All I had to do was admit I did it and I'd go home in a few days. But if I insisted on a trial and the jury found me guilty, well, they'd throw the book at me. They'd give me 20 years for shooting a cop.

It wasn't worth the gamble. I wanted to go home. And so, I said, you admitted doing something that you didn't do? Dixon nodded.

That's right. In the end, Dixon was exonerated and he later won a lawsuit against the police department. Scanlon was stripped of his medal, indicted by a grand jury, pleaded guilty to official misconduct, and was fired from the department.

As for me, my stories were splashed across the front page. But much more important, I'd learned some big lessons as a young reporter. One was that evidence can be aligned to point in more than one direction.

There had easily been enough proof to convict Dixon of shooting the sergeant. But the key questions were these. Had the collection of evidence really been thorough? And which explanation best fit the totality of the facts? Once the pen gun theory was offered, it became clear that this scenario accounted for the full body of evidence in the most optimal way.

And there was another lesson. One reason the evidence originally looked so convincing to me was because it fit my preconceptions at the time. To me, Dixon was an obvious troublemaker, a failure, the unemployed product of a broken home.

The cops were the good guys. Prosecutors didn't make mistakes. Looking through those lenses, all the original evidence seemed to neatly fall into place.

Where there had been inconsistencies or gaps, I naively glossed them over. But when I changed those lenses, trading my biases for an attempted objectivity, I saw the case in a whole new light. I allowed the evidence to lead me to the truth, regardless of whether it fit my original presuppositions.

The reason I've recounted this unusual case is because, in a way, my spiritual journey was a lot like my experience with James Dixon. For much of my life, I was a skeptic. In fact, I considered myself an atheist.

To me, there was far too much evidence that God was merely a product of wishful thinking, mythology, or primitive superstition. As for Jesus, didn't you know that he never even claimed to be God? He was a

revolutionary, a sage, and a cataclastic Jew. But God? No, that thought never even occurred to him.

I could point you to plenty of professors who said so, and they could be trusted, couldn't they? Let's face it, even a cursory examination of the evidence demonstrates convincingly that Jesus had only been a human being, just like you and me, although with unusual gifts of kindness and wisdom. But that's all I had ever really given the evidence, a cursory look. I had read just enough philosophy and history to find support for my skepticism.

A fact here, a scientific theory there, a pithy quote, a clever argument. Sure, I could see some gaps and inconsistencies, but I had a strong motivation to ignore them, a self-serving and immoral lifestyle that I would be compelled to abandon if I were ever to become a follower of Jesus. As far as I was concerned, the case was closed.

There was enough proof to rest easy that the divinity of Jesus was nothing more than the fanciful invention of superstitious people. Or so I thought. It wasn't a phone call from an informant that prompted me to re-examine the case for Christ.

It was my wife. Leslie stunned me in 1979 by announcing that she had become a follower of Jesus. I rolled my eyes and braced for the worst.

But instead, in the ensuing months, I became fascinated by the positive changes in her character, her integrity, and her personal confidence. Wanting to get to the bottom of these subtle but significant shifts, I launched an all-out investigation into the facts surrounding Christianity. Setting aside my self-interest and prejudices as best I could, I read books, interviewed experts, asked questions, analyzed history, explored archaeology, studied ancient literature, and for the first time in my life, picked apart the Bible verse by verse.

I plunged into the case with more vigor than any story I had ever pursued. I applied the training I'd received at Yale Law School as well as my experience as legal affairs editor of the Chicago Tribune. And over time, the evidence began to point toward the unthinkable.

It was like the James Dixon case revisited. Well, maybe you too have been basing your spiritual outlook on the evidence you've observed around you or gleaned long ago from books and teachers or friends. But is your conclusion really the best possible explanation for the evidence? If you were to dig deeper, to challenge your preconceptions and systematically seek out proof, what would you find? That's what this book is about.

In effect, I've retraced and expanded upon the spiritual journey that I took for nearly two years. I've crisscrossed the country to interview a dozen respected scholars, to elicit their expert opinions, to challenge them with the objections I had when I was a skeptic, to force them to defend their positions with solid data and cogent arguments, and to test them with the very questions that you might ask if given the opportunity. So who was Jesus, really? Who did he claim to be? And is there any credible evidence to back up his assertions? That's what we'll seek to determine as we board a flight for Denver to conduct our first interview concerning the eyewitness evidence for Jesus.

Now, every lawyer and every journalist knows that eyewitness testimony is powerful. One of the most dramatic moments in a trial is when a witness describes in detail the crime that he or she saw, and then points confidently toward the defendant as being the perpetrator. An eyewitness testimony is just as

crucial in investigating historical matters, even the issue of whether Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God.

But what eyewitness accounts do we actually possess? And, equally important, how well would these accounts withstand the scrutiny of skeptics? To get solid answers, I arranged to interview the nationally renowned scholar who literally wrote the book on the topic, Dr. Craig Blomberg, author of *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*. Blomberg is considered one of the country's foremost authorities on the biographies of Jesus, which are called the Four Gospels. He received his master's degree from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and his doctorate in New Testament from Aberdeen University in Scotland.

He later served as a senior research fellow at Tyndall House at Cambridge University in England, where he was part of an elite group of international scholars that produced a series of acclaimed works on Jesus. He has authored several influential books, and for the last dozen years has been a professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary. Since I sensed that Blomberg was a get-to-the-point kind of a guy, I decided to start my interview by cutting to the core of the issue.

Tell me this, I said. Is it possible to be an intelligent, critically thinking person and still believe that the Four Gospels were written by the people whose names have been attached to them? Blomberg set his cup of coffee on the edge of his desk and looked intently at me. The answer is yes, he said.

He sat back and continued. It's important to acknowledge that, strictly speaking, the Gospels are anonymous, he added. But the uniform testimony of the early church was that Matthew, also known as Levi, the tax collector and one of the twelve disciples, was the author of the first Gospel in the New Testament.

That John Mark, a companion of Peter, was the author of the Gospel we call Mark. And that Luke, known as Paul's beloved physician, wrote the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. How uniform was the belief that they were the authors, I asked.

There are no known competitors for these three Gospels, he said. Apparently it was just not in dispute. Even so, I wanted to test the issue further.

Excuse my skepticism, I said, but would anyone have had a motivation to lie by claiming that these people wrote these Gospels when they really didn't? Blomberg shook his head. Probably not. Remember these were unlikely characters.

Mark and Luke weren't even among the twelve disciples. Matthew was, but as a former hated tax collector, he would have been the most infamous character next to Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus. Contrast this with what happened when the fanciful, apocryphal Gospels were written much later.

People chose the names of well-known and exemplary figures to be their fictitious authors. Philip, Peter, Mary, James. Those names carried a lot more weight than those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

So there would not have been any reason to attribute authorship to these three less respected people if it weren't true. However, he was conveniently leaving out one of the Gospel writers. What about John, I asked.

He was extremely prominent. In fact, he wasn't just one of the twelve disciples, but he was one of Jesus' inner three along with James and Peter. Yes, he's the one exception, Blomberg conceded with a nod.

And interestingly, John is the only Gospel where there is some question about authorship. The name of the author isn't in doubt, it's certainly John. The question is whether it was John the Apostle or a different John.

You see, the testimony of a Christian writer named Papias, dated about A.D. 125, refers to John the Apostle and John the Elder. And it's not clear from the context whether he's talking about one person from two perspectives or two different people. But, granted that exception, the rest of the early testimony is unanimous that it was John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee, who wrote the Gospel.

And, I said, you're convinced that he did? Yes, I believe the substantial majority of the material goes back to the Apostle, he replied. However, if you read the Gospel closely, you can see some indication that its concluding verses may have been finalized by an editor. Personally, he said, I have no problem believing that someone closely associated with John may have functioned in that role, putting the last verses into shape and potentially creating the stylistic uniformity of the entire document.

But, in any event, he stressed, the Gospel is obviously based on eyewitness material, as are the other three Gospels. While I appreciated Blomberg's comments so far, I wasn't ready to move on yet. I finished off my coffee and put the cup on his desk.

With my pen poised, I prepared to dig deeper. Let's go back to Mark, Matthew, and Luke, I said. What specific evidence do you have that they were the authors of those Gospels? Again, said Blomberg, the oldest and probably most significant testimony comes from Papias, who in about A.D. 125 specifically affirmed that Mark had carefully and accurately recorded Peter's eyewitness observations.

In fact, he said Mark made no mistake and did not include any false statement. And Papias said Matthew had preserved the teachings of Jesus as well. Then Irenaeus, writing about A.D. 180, confirms the traditional authorship.

In fact, here, he said, reaching for a book, he flipped it open and read the words of Irenaeus. Matthew published his own Gospel among the Hebrews in their own tongue when Peter and Paul were preaching the Gospel in Rome and founding the church there. After the departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself handed down to us in writing the substance of Peter's preaching.

Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the Gospel preached by his teacher. Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned on his breast, himself produced his Gospel while living at Ephesus in Asia. In addition to the four Gospels, scholars often refer to what they call Q, which stands for the German word for source.

Because of similarities in language and content, it has traditionally been assumed that Matthew and Luke drew upon Mark's earlier Gospel in writing their own. In addition, scholars have speculated that Matthew and Luke also incorporated some material from this mysterious Q, which is absent from Mark. What exactly is Q? I asked Blomberg.

It's nothing more than a hypothesis, he replied. With few exceptions, it's just sayings or teachings of Jesus, which once may have formed an independent, separate document. You see, it was a common literary genre to collect the sayings of respected teachers, sort of like we compile the top music of a singer and put it in a best-of album today.

Q may have been something like that, he said. But if Q predated Matthew and Luke, it would constitute very early material about Jesus. Perhaps, I thought, it could shed some fresh light on what Jesus was really like.

If you isolate just the material from Q, I said, what kind of picture of Jesus do you get? Blomberg pondered the question for a moment. Well, you have to keep in mind that Q was a collection of sayings, and therefore it didn't have the narrative material that would have given us a more fully-orbed picture of Jesus, he replied. Even so, a significant scholarly book has argued recently that if you isolate all the sayings of Q, one actually gets the same kind of picture of Jesus, of someone who made audacious claims about himself, as you find in the Gospels more generally.

I wanted to push him further on that point. Would he have been seen as a miracle worker, I asked? Again, he replied, you have to remember that you wouldn't get many miracle stories per se, because they're normally found in the narrative, and Q is primarily a list of sayings. He stopped to reach over to his desk.

Pick up a leather-bound Bible and rustle through its well-worn pages. But, for example, Luke 7, verses 18 through 23, and Matthew 11, verses 2 through 6, say that John the Baptist sent his messengers to ask Jesus if he really was the Christ, the Messiah they were waiting for. Jesus replied, in essence, tell them to consider my miracles.

Tell them what you have seen, the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, and the poor have good news preached to them. So, even in Q, he concluded, there is clearly an awareness of Jesus' ministry of miracles. Feeling satisfied with Blomberg's answer concerning the first three Gospels, which are called the Synoptics because of their similarities, next I turned my attention to John's Gospel.

Anyone who reads all four Gospels will immediately recognize that there are obvious differences between the Synoptics and John. But I was curious. Does this necessarily mean that there are irreconcilable contradictions between them? Could you clarify the differences, I asked Blomberg.

His eyebrows shot up. Huge question, he exclaimed. After I assured him I was only after the essentials of the issue, he settled back into his chair.

Well, it's true that John is more different than similar to the Synoptics, he began. Only a handful of the major stories that appear in the other three Gospels reappear in John, although that changes noticeably when one comes to Jesus last week. From that point forward, the parallels are much closer.

There also seems to be a very different linguistic style. In John, Jesus uses different terminology. He speaks in long sermons.

And there seems to be a higher Christology, that is, more direct and more blatant claims that Jesus is one with the Father, God himself, the way, the truth, and the life, the resurrection and the life. I asked, what accounts for those differences? Well, for many years the assumption was John knew everything that Matthew, Mark, and Luke had written, and so he saw no need to repeat it. And he consciously chose to supplement them.

More recently, it has been assumed that John is largely independent of the other three Gospels, which would account not only for the different choices of material, but also the different perspectives on Jesus. There are some theological distinctives to John, I observed. No question, he said, but do they deserve to be called contradictions? I think the answer is no, and here's why.

For almost every major theme or distinctive in John, you can find parallels in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, even if they're not as plentiful. That was a bold assertion, and I decided to test it by raising perhaps the most significant issue of all concerning the differences between the synoptics and John. John makes very explicit claims of Jesus being God, which some attribute to the fact that he wrote later than the others and began embellishing things, I said.

Can you find this theme of deity in the synoptics? Well, yes, I can, he said. It's more implicit, but you find it there. Think of the story of Jesus walking on the water, found in Matthew 14, verses 22 through 33, and Mark 6, verses 45 through 52.

Most English translations hide the Greek by quoting Jesus as saying, Fear not, it is I. Actually, the Greek literally says, Fear not, I am. Those last two words are identical to what Jesus said in John 8, 58, when he took upon himself the divine name, I am, which is the way God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush in Exodus 3, 14. So Jesus is revealing himself as the one who has the same divine power over nature as Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament.

Well, that's one example I said. Do you have any others? Well, yes, I could go along those same lines, Blomberg said. For instance, Jesus' most common title for himself in the first three Gospels is the Son of Man.

And I raised my hand to stop him. Hold on, I said. Reaching into my briefcase, I pulled out a book and leafed through it until I located the quote that I was looking for.

I said, Karen Armstrong, the former nun who wrote the bestseller, A History of God, says that it seems that the term Son of Man simply stressed the weakness and mortality of the human condition. And so by using it, Jesus was merely emphasizing that he was a frail human being who would one day suffer and die. Now, if that's true, I said, then when Jesus called himself the Son of Man, that doesn't sound very much like a claim of deity.

Blomberg's expression turned sour. Look, he said firmly. Contrary to popular belief, Son of Man does not primarily refer to Jesus' humanity.

Instead, it's a direct allusion to Daniel 7, verses 13 and 14. He opened the Old Testament and read those words of the prophet Daniel. In my vision at night, I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven.

He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power. All people, nations, and men of every language worshipped him.

His dominion is like an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. Blomberg shut the Bible. So look at what Jesus is doing by applying the term Son of Man to himself, he continued.

This is someone who approaches God himself in his heavenly throne room and is given universal authority and dominion. That makes Son of Man a title of great exaltation, not mere humanity. In fact, in the words of another scholar I would interview later, Dr. William Lane Craig, the Son of Man was a divine figure in the Old Testament who would come at the end of the world to judge mankind and rule forever.

Thus, the claim to be the Son of Man would be, in effect, a claim to divinity. Blomberg continued. In addition, Jesus claims to forgive sins in the Synoptics, and that's something only God can do.

Jesus accepts prayer and worship. Jesus says, whoever acknowledges me, I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven. Final judgment is based on one's reaction to who? This mere human being? No, that would be a very arrogant claim.

Final judgment is based on one's reaction to Jesus as God. So as you can see, there's all sorts of material in the Synoptics about the deity of Christ that then merely becomes more explicit in John's Gospel. Now, in authoring the last Gospel, John did have the advantage of being able to mull over theological issues for a longer period of time.

So I asked Blomberg, doesn't the fact that John was writing with a more theological bent mean that his historical material may have been tainted and therefore less reliable? I don't believe John is more theological, Blomberg stressed. He just has a different cluster of theological emphases. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each have very distinctive theological angles that they want to highlight.

Luke, the theologian of the poor and of social concern. Matthew, the theologian trying to understand the relationship of Christianity and Judaism. Mark, who shows Jesus as a suffering servant.

You can make a long list of the distinctive theologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. I interrupted because I was afraid that Blomberg was missing my broader point. Okay, but don't those theological motivations call into question their ability and their willingness to accurately report what happened, I asked? Isn't it likely that their theological agenda would color and twist the history that they recorded? It certainly means that, as with any ideological document, we have to consider that as a possibility, he said.

There are people with axes to grind who distort history to serve their own ideological ends. But unfortunately, people have concluded that always happens, which is a mistake. He went on to say this.

In the ancient world, the idea of writing dispassionate, objective history merely to chronicle events with no ideological purpose was unheard of. Nobody wrote history if there wasn't a reason to learn from it. I suppose you could say that makes everything suspect, I suggested.

Yes, at one level it does, he replied. But if we can reconstruct reasonably accurate history from all kinds of other ancient historical sources, we ought to be able to do that from the Gospels, even though they too are ideological. Blomberg thought for a moment, then said, here's a modern parallel from the experience of the Jewish community that might clarify what I mean.

Some people, usually for anti-Semitic purposes, deny or downplay the horrors of the Holocaust. But it has been the Jewish scholars who've created museums, written books, preserved artifacts, and documented testimony by eyewitnesses concerning the Holocaust. Now, they have a very ideological purpose, namely to ensure that such an atrocity never occurs again.

But they have also been the most faithful and objective in their reporting of historical truth. Christianity, likewise, was based on certain historical claims that God uniquely entered into space and time in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. So that the very ideology the Christians were trying to promote required as careful historical work as possible.

However, I was thinking to myself, it's one thing to say that the Gospels are rooted in direct or indirect eyewitness testimony. It's another to claim that this information was reliably preserved until it was written down years after the life of Jesus. This, I knew, was a major point of contention, and I wanted to challenge Blomberg with this issue as forthrightly as I could.

Again, I picked up Armstrong's book, *A History of God*. Listen to something else she wrote, I said, as I read this excerpt to Blomberg. We know very little about Jesus.

The first full-length account of his life was St. Mark's Gospel, which was not written until about the year 70, some 40 years after his death. By that time, historical facts had been overlaid with mythical elements, which expressed the meaning that Jesus had acquired for his followers. It is this meaning that St. Mark primarily conveys, rather than a straightforward historical portrayal.

Tossing the book back into my briefcase, I turned to Blomberg and continued. Some scholars say the Gospels were written so far after the events of Jesus' life that legend developed and distorted what was finally written down, turning Jesus from merely a wise teacher into the mythological Son of God. Is this a reasonable hypothesis? Or is there good evidence that the Gospels were recorded earlier than that, before legend could totally corrupt what was ultimately recorded? Blomberg's eyes narrowed, and his voice took on an adamant tone.

There are two separate issues here, and it's important to keep them separate, he said. I do think there's good evidence for suggesting early dates for the writing of the Gospels. But even if there wasn't, Armstrong's argument doesn't work anyway.

Why not, I asked. The standard scholarly dating, even in very liberal circles, is Mark in the 70s, Matthew and Luke in the 80s, and John in the 90s. But listen, he said, that's still within the lifetimes of various eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus, including hostile eyewitnesses who would have served as a corrective if false teachings about Jesus were going around.

Consequently, these late dates for the Gospels really aren't all that late. In fact, we can make a comparison that's very instructive. The two earliest biographies of Alexander the Great were written by Arian and Plutarch more than 400 years after Alexander's death in 323 B.C., and yet historians consider them to be generally trustworthy.

Yes, legendary material about Alexander did develop over time, but it was only in the centuries after these two writers. In other words, the first 500 years kept Alexander's story pretty much intact. Legendary material began to emerge over the next 500 years.

And so, whether the Gospels were written 60 years or 30 years after the life of Jesus, the amount of time is negligible by comparison. It's almost a non-issue. I could see what Blomberg was saying.

At the same time, it seemed intuitively obvious to me that the shorter the gap between an event and when it was written about, the less likely those writings would be corrupted by legend or fall victim to faulty memories. Let me concede your point for the moment, but let's get back to the dating of the Gospels, I said. You indicated that you believe they were written sooner than the dates you mentioned.

Yes, sooner, he said. And we can support that by looking at the book of Acts, which was written by Luke. Acts ends apparently unfinished.

Paul is the central character of the book, and he's under house arrest in Rome. With that great climactic pause, the book abruptly halts. What happens to Paul? We don't find out from Acts, probably because the book was written before Paul was put to death.

That means Acts cannot be dated any later than A.D. 62. Having established that, we can then move backwards from there. Since Acts is the second of a two-part work, we know that the first part, the Gospel of Luke, must have been written earlier than that.

And since Luke incorporates some parts of the Gospel of Mark, that means Mark is even earlier. If you allow maybe a year for each of those, you end up with Mark no later than about A.D. 60, maybe even in the late 50s. If Jesus was put to death in A.D. 30 or 33, then we're talking about a maximum gap of 30 years or so.

He sat back in his chair with an air of triumph. Historically speaking, especially compared to Alexander the Great, he said, that's like a news flash. Indeed, that was impressive, closing the gap between the events of Jesus' life and the writing of the Gospels to the point where it was negligible by historical standards.

However, I still wanted to turn the clock back as far as I could to get the very earliest information about Jesus. Let's see if we can go back even further, I said. How early can we date the fundamental beliefs in Jesus' atonement, his resurrection, and his unique association with God? Well, it's important to remember that the books of the New Testament are not in chronological order, he began.

The Gospels were written after almost all of the letters of Paul, whose writing ministry began in the late 40s. Most of his major letters appeared during the 50s. To find the earliest information, one goes to Paul's epistles and then asks, are there signs that even earlier sources were used in writing them? We find that Paul incorporated some creeds, confessions of faith, or hymns from the earliest Christian church.

These go way back to the dawning of the church soon after the resurrection. The most famous creeds include Philippians chapter 2, verses 6 through 11, which talks about Jesus being in the very nature of God. And Colossians chapter 1, verses 15 through 20, which describes him as being the image of the invisible God who created all things and through whom all things were reconciled with God by making peace through his blood shed on the cross.

Those are certainly significant in explaining what the earliest Christians were convinced about Jesus. But perhaps the most important creed in terms of the historical Jesus is 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul uses technical language to indicate he was passing along this oral tradition in a relatively fixed form. Blomberg located the passage in his Bible and read it to me.

For what I received, I passed on to you as of first importance, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, that he appeared to Cephas, or Peter, and then to the twelve. After that he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

And here's the point, Blomberg said, if the crucifixion was as early as A.D. 30, then Paul's conversion was about 32. Immediately Paul was ushered into Damascus, where he met with a Christian named Ananias, and with some other disciples. His first meeting with the apostles in Jerusalem would have been about A.D. 35.

At some point along there, Paul was given this creed, which had already been formulated, and which was being used in the early church. Now, here you have the key facts about Jesus' death for our sins, plus a detailed list of those to whom he appeared in resurrected form, all dating back to within two to five years of the events themselves. That's not later mythology, as Armstrong suggested, from 40 or more years down the road.

A good case can be made for saying that Christian belief in the resurrection, though not yet written down, can be dated back to within two years of that very event. This is enormously significant, he said. Now you're not comparing 30 or 60 years with the 500 years that's generally acceptable for other data.

Now you're talking about two. I couldn't deny the importance of that evidence. It certainly seemed to take the wind out of the charge that the resurrection, which is cited by Christians as the crowning confirmation of Jesus' divinity, was merely a mythological concept that developed over long periods of time as legends corrupted the eyewitness accounts of Christ's life.

For me, this struck especially close to home, because as a skeptic, that was one of my biggest objections to Christianity. But even though this was important evidence, the time had come for me to subject all of this eyewitness material to the kind of tests that a lawyer or journalist would use to expose its weaknesses or underscore its strength. There are eight tests I'd like to ask you about, I said to Blomberg as we sat down after a 15 minute break.

Blomberg picked up a fresh cup of coffee and leaned back. Go ahead, he said. You are listening to The Case for Christ by Lee Strobel.

This concludes this side. Please turn the tape over for the continuation of the program. Thank you.

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