

# Skeptic Jesus

A Journalist Explores the Credibility  
and Impact of Christianity

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To all who seek to find  
meaning, identity, and significance.  
May you find what you seek.

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## Preface

**Y**ou and I have something in common. We are both searching for the same things in life. We seek to answer basic questions about ourselves.

*Who am I?* The question of identity

*What am I worth?* The question of value

*Where will I belong and be safe?* The question of belonging

*Why do I exist?* The question of purpose

Your quest to find meaningful answers to these questions is really what this book is about. At least, that's how it started for me.

As I moved through high school and college and then into my career as an investigative news reporter, I met people who were trying to answer these questions in every possible way—from fame and fortune to drugs and achievement.

As a reporter, I spent intimate moments observing the daily routines and emotions of millionaires, billionaires, celebrities, and professional athletes. I had the same access to heroin addicts, victims of trauma, prison inmates, and dehydrated immigrants stumbling across the Mexican border into Arizona.

In all those people, I noticed a universal hunt.

We all hunger to answer these same questions: *Who am I? What am I worth? Where will I belong and be safe? Why do I exist?*

I have seen that a person's answers to these questions will shape the course of their life—for better or worse—leading either to a life of freedom and joy or to a life that seems continually smaller and emptier.

How you choose to answer these basic questions will define your internal sense of peace, significance, and fulfillment.

I have seen firsthand that a person can be a world-famous millionaire but still be restless and unfulfilled if they do not have good answers to these questions. I have also seen that a person can be poor and unknown but entirely fulfilled and happy if they have good answers to these universal questions.

My work as an investigative reporter gave me a front-row seat to the many ways people attempt to find meaning and significance. I met millionaires who were depressed and impoverished missionaries who were deeply fulfilled. In this kaleidoscope of human experience, I found one thing at the core of the most fulfilled, stable, and heroic people I met. Time after time, these people found their identities, value, and purpose in a person I could not see—a man called Jesus Christ.

From NBA team owners to Grammy-winning musicians to doctors volunteering in poverty to humanitarian aid workers, I kept meeting people I wanted to be like. I wanted what they had in their internal lives, their behind-the-scenes lives. These people consistently claimed to find identity, purpose, and peace in one place—a “relationship” with a real God who relates to them through Jesus. Across different cultures and situations, this Jesus repeatedly surfaced as the center of the most centered people I met.

I struggled to understand how people could find such meaning and purpose in someone they could not see with their eyes, touch with their hands, or hear with their ears. I was not sure that a

God existed at all, let alone that Jesus was that God. At times, I wondered if these well-intentioned people had been duped into believing a myth.

Even if Jesus was a myth, the recurring evidence of changed lives was something I had to consider. So many of these people I admired were believers in this Jesus, and they demonstrated peace, significance, joy, and selflessness—all qualities that are exceptional across the human spectrum.

In time, I learned that one out of three people alive today claims to follow Jesus. This makes Jesus the most followed person in the history of the world by a large margin.

For all these reasons, I set out to consider this Jesus. I wanted to know if he actually lived, I wanted to read what he actually said, and I wanted to measure how his followers have impacted humanity.

*Could this Jesus provide significant answers to the universal quest for security, identity, and purpose?*

*Could Jesus's way of life set people on a path of freedom, achievement, peace, and significance?*

Because I am an investigative reporter, I applied a factual and skeptical approach to investigate Jesus. The result is a book that includes a library of images and hundreds of irrefutable facts. It is a resource that is unlike anything I encountered in my study of Jesus. I wanted to summarize academic and historical records in a way that makes this information available for anyone.

You will see that I never took off my skeptic's hat as I considered the history, evidence, and impact of Jesus. Instead, I measured Jesus with the same tools used in my award-winning news investigations.

This journey has taken me more than ten years and has covered everything from ancient manuscripts to modern individuals who claim to be radically transformed. In all of it, I found the life and story of Jesus to be notable. For anyone who hungers to answer

*Preface*

the universal questions of self and existence, this Jesus and his movement are worthy of consideration.

And so this book in your hands—*Jesus Skeptic*—is ultimately about you. It is about your journey to find your identity, your purpose, and your security. May you find each, and may you experience a life of freedom, purpose, and significance.

## Introduction

If you are a skeptic who does not believe in God, you are safe here.

If you were raised as a Christian but are no longer sure what you believe, you are safe.

If you like Jesus but not the church, this book is a safe place for you.

If you are tired of Christianity being defined by bigots and political parties, you are safe too.

I have been all these things and more.

What follows is my own ten-year investigation into how Jesus and his followers have impacted our world. I call it *Jesus Skeptic* because that is how I began my investigation—as a professional skeptic, a research journalist.

In my news career, I have gathered evidence and facts to build dozens of investigations. I have exposed the lies and abuses of powerful people. I have used the power of the pen to fight for the rights of racial minorities, women, immigrants, and many others.

My news investigations have earned some of the highest journalism honors in the nation—including an award given by Christiane Amanpour of CNN, Tom Brokaw of NBC News, and executives from NPR and the *New York Times*.<sup>1</sup>

As important as those investigations were, I believe the findings of this book are even larger in scope because this book investigates the validity of the largest movement in world history—the movement that today claims one out of three people worldwide, the movement of Jesus’s followers, often known as Christianity.

**I aim to conclude whether the teachings of Jesus have anything meaningful to offer to you, to me, and to modern progressive society. As a research journalist, I committed to reach conclusions about Jesus from evidence rather than from opinion.**

I set out to answer questions such as:

*Did Jesus actually exist?*

*Can Jesus’s teachings actually provide peace, identity, and fulfillment today?*

*Do Jesus’s teachings block social justice and human progress—or do Jesus’s teachings further those causes?*

This book is unique. I am a millennial-generation journalist investigating Christianity’s record on matters of social justice, human rights, racial equality, and human dignity. This book presents numerous irrefutable artifacts and images rather than a collection of opinions or feelings. In the following pages, you will discover stories and facts that you never knew about Jesus and the people he inspired.

Jesus’s followers have occupied key places in history, often turning up in my research where I least expected to find them. One example is Frederick Douglass, who escaped slavery a decade before the Civil War and then spent his life fighting to end slavery in the United States. Douglass’s story is so inspiring that I now have his picture hanging on my office wall.

After physical and racial abuse, Douglass had every right to spend the rest of his life isolated, angry, and bitter about the injustices that had been done to him. But, instead, Douglass chan-

neled his anger into a fearless, positive, and tireless fight to end slavery and secure human rights for millions of others.

Long before the Civil War, Douglass traveled the country, speaking to packed auditoriums in the Northern states. He described to white audiences the horrors of slavery in the South. Pro-slavery mercenaries frequently showed up to kill Douglass. On more than one occasion, pro-slavery activists attempted to burn down lecture halls where he spoke.

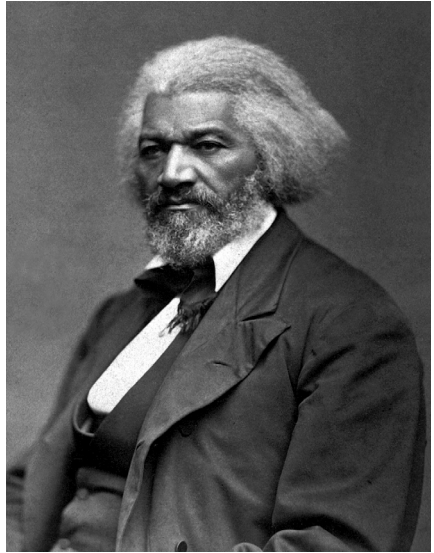


Figure 0.1. Frederick Douglass.

Yet Douglass continued to fearlessly declare his case against slavery. As I read Douglass’s writings, I was surprised to discover that he cited the words of Jesus as formative for his own identity and also as his moral authority for declaring slavery evil. In Douglass’s own account of his life, he described his deeply held Christian faith.

Here is an excerpt from Douglass’s autobiography, in which he described his conversion to Christianity.

In my loneliness and destitution, I longed for someone to who I could go, as to a father and protector. The preaching of a white Methodist minister, named Hanson, was the means of causing me to feel that in God, I had such a friend.

I consulted a good colored man named Charles Lawson, and in tones of holy affection he told me to pray, and to “cast all my care upon God.” This I sought to do; and though for weeks I was a poor, broken-hearted mourner, traveling through doubts and

fears, I finally found my burden lightened and my heart relieved. I loved all mankind, slaveholders not excepted, though I abhorred slavery more than ever.

I saw the world in a new light, and my great concern was to have everybody converted. . . . The good ole man had told me that the “Lord had great work for me to do,” and I must prepare to do it.<sup>2</sup>

(Note: As with every quotation in this book, the source information can be found in the notes section at the back of the book. In addition, the images and evidence in this book can be searched and shared at [JesusSkeptic.com](http://JesusSkeptic.com).)

Douglass became one of the most unstoppable forces to end slavery in the United States and then around the globe. By his own account, his journey was as much a spiritual quest—motivated by the message of Jesus—as it was a humanitarian quest.

Douglass’s life story—written by his own hand—is what I refer to as “Primary Evidence.” This evidence speaks directly and unequivocally about Jesus’s impact on Douglass’s life and person.

Primary Evidence is the most tamper-proof, bias-proof type of information we can use in any investigation. It allows us to see for ourselves what key people in history believed about Jesus. We can learn from their writings what motivated them to make the world a better place. We will review a kaleidoscope of Primary Evidence in the pages of this book.

On our journey, I will share more about my career as an investigative reporter, my own exploration of Jesus’s impact on society, and the impact this project has had on my search for personal identity and purpose. But first, I want to give you a sneak peek at the quality of Primary Evidence we will be investigating in this book.

PART 1

# Skeptics Welcome

one

## A Dead Body

**M**y stomach turned when I saw the bruises on the dead body. As an investigative reporter, I had documented death, but I had never seen anything like this.

At least a dozen pockmarks were scattered—like hail damage—along the side of the human corpse. The chest and torso looked as if they had been beaten repeatedly with a baseball bat. One massive bruise of yellow, black, purple, and blue the size of a pizza wrapped around the man’s upper body.

Juan Farias’s face was in even worse condition: swollen lips, blood in the mouth and nostrils. A deep gash sliced

into the cartilage on his nose. Another bruise spread across his forehead.

I compared these autopsy photos to a picture taken when Farias had entered the county jail. Juan Farias had been unbruised and uninjured when he had walked into the jail.

In the first moments of my investigation, when I held those autopsy photos, I suspected Farias had been beaten to death while in the county jail. But I needed more evidence to either confirm or disprove my hunch.

As a reporter, I needed to dig deeper to learn *who* had beaten to death Farias, a Mexican immigrant who had died in an Arizona jail. Had he died due to abuse from jail guards? Or had he gotten into a fight with other inmates? Was the death of Farias—a racial minority and an immigrant—part of a larger pattern of abuse in that jail? I needed more evidence.

No one else in the world was asking about Farias's death. And so it was my job, as a journalist, to draw attention to it, to learn the truth behind his death, to seek justice.

I contacted the county medical examiner, asking for a written autopsy report on Juan Farias's dead body. I requested more photos. I filed multiple public records requests with jail authorities and began contacting relatives and witnesses.

A growing stack of data revealed an unsettling story: the evidence suggested that jail guards had beaten Juan Farias to death, even after he had been handcuffed and posed no threat to them.

With further research, I uncovered an apparent cover-up by jail officials. Videos, photos, and written reports all indicated that jail guards had surrounded Farias, struck him repeatedly, soaked him in pepper spray, fastened a Hannibal Lecter-style "spit mask" over his face, and then sat on his chest during a beating that dragged on for the better part of an hour.<sup>1</sup>

To find the truth about Farias's death, I had to uncover evidence from inside the jail. I had to file legal records requests with county

authorities multiple times and ways. I had to search court records. My newspaper even had to file a lawsuit against the sheriff who oversaw the jail.

Eventually, I secured Primary Evidence. Primary Evidence is what I am always looking for in any serious investigation. It enables us to see the difference between opinions and reality.

In the case of Juan Farias's death, the Primary Evidence included the following:

- witness statements that guards had written after Farias died
- twenty-five hundred pages of paperwork
- employment logs from inside the jail
- Farias's autopsy and photos from the county medical examiner
- video security footage from inside the jail, and much more

The resulting investigation exposed a scandal of injustice, corruption, and abuse in one of the nation's largest jails.

Uncovering the truth makes my heart sing. It is why I doggedly work to conduct investigations such as the one just described. Nobody in a position of power stood up for Juan Farias during his life, but at least I could stand up for him in his death by writing the truth of his story for thousands of people to read.

My investigation into the jailhouse murder of Juan Farias is just one of my award-winning investigations.<sup>2</sup> There are many others, including the unveiling of a \$990 million financial scam and a medical doctor who performed surgeries while high on cocaine.

Those investigations affected lives and deaths, laws and lawsuits. But none of them are as broad in scope as the inquiries of this book. This is an investigation into the largest social movement in human history—Christianity. And this investigation is unique. We will measure if the people who follow Jesus make the world

a worse or better place. We will measure if Jesus's existence is a matter of myth or fact.

## **Primary Evidence**

For this investigation into Christianity, I have applied the same standard of Primary Evidence that I use in my news investigations. With a topic as broad as Christianity, we could easily line up ten “experts” who call Christianity “the best thing in world history,” and then, the next day, we could find another ten “experts” who declare Christianity “the greatest evil in history.” Clearly, the opinions of “experts” can contradict one another when it comes to complex matters. But just as with the best news investigations, Primary Evidence is clear and convincing if we take the time to view it.

The following wealth of Primary Evidence about Jesus's followers speaks clearly and has never before been compiled in one place. The evidence tells a compelling story about Jesus's impact on social justice and human progress.

In this chapter, I want to give you a sample of the quality of Primary Evidence we will see on our journey. My aim in this chapter is not to present any conclusions but rather to provide some examples of the evidence that exists for a serious investigation of Christianity.

## **Sample Primary Evidence regarding Jesus's Existence**

When I investigated whether Jesus actually lived, I was surprised to find fifteen ancient writers from the time of Jesus who wrote about his existence and early followers. None of these writers were Christians, and none of their writings are in the Bible. These writers were Jewish, Roman, and Greek, and they did not believe that Jesus was God (as Christians do).

The outlined section on the page in figure 1.1 is one instance in which the ancient writer Flavius Josephus wrote about Jesus.<sup>3</sup> Josephus described Jesus as a dynamic teacher who was crucified by a ruler named Pilate. He wrote that Jesus was followed by spiritual disciples, reportedly resurrected from the dead, and was believed by his followers to be the Messiah (the Jewish concept of God on earth to rescue humanity).

Josephus is one of many ancient witnesses—outside the Bible and outside Christianity—who wrote about Jesus existing as an actual person. Here is an English translation of Josephus’s ancient account:

At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. His conduct was good and [he] was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive; accordingly he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning who the prophets have recounted wonders.<sup>4</sup>

These ancient accounts—outside the Bible—surprised me, and I will walk through several of them in chapter 13. For now, I present this as a preview of the quality of Primary Evidence we will use in our



Codex Parisinus gr. 2075, 45v. / Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Figure 1.1. Copy of a page written by Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian who lived during the same era as Jesus. Josephus was not a Christian.

investigation. Rather than asking an internet forum if Jesus existed, we can look at historical artifacts and make a fact-based conclusion—just as I would do with any news investigation.

Each of the ancient writers who wrote about Jesus presents unique Primary Evidence. For example, two emperors (from the era when Jesus lived) discussed Jesus and his early followers with their advisors. Today we have not only those ancient writings but also coins bearing the faces of those emperors.

This is the sort of Primary Evidence we will consider when we investigate whether Jesus actually existed.



Iron33, CC BY-SA 3.0 / Wikimedia Commons

Figure 1.2. On this coin, “Hadrianus” is inscribed next to a silhouette of the head of the Roman emperor Hadrian. In ancient written records, Hadrian’s secretary Suetonius<sup>5</sup> referred to Jesus’s followers and described a movement started by a Jew named Jesus (Christus or Christ).

## Sample Primary Evidence regarding Christianity and Human Rights

Where better to start an investigation into human rights than with Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK)? MLK is perhaps the most famous advocate of racial equality and human rights in history. When I studied the Primary Evidence about MLK’s beliefs (his documented writings and recorded speeches), I found that MLK credited Jesus and Christianity for his beliefs about human equality and for his motivation in the struggle for equality.



Figure 1.3. Martin Luther King Jr.

Here are two historically verified quotations from MLK. Each is Primary Evidence.

Jesus still cries out in words that echo across the centuries: “Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; pray for them that despitefully use you.” This is what we must live by. We must meet hate with love. Remember . . . if I am stopped, this movement will not stop, because God is with the movement. Go home with this glowing faith and this radiant assurance. [said after a bomb was thrown into his house in Alabama on January 30, 1956]<sup>6</sup>

If one is truly devoted to the religion of Jesus he will seek to rid the earth of social evils. The gospel is social as well as personal.<sup>7</sup>

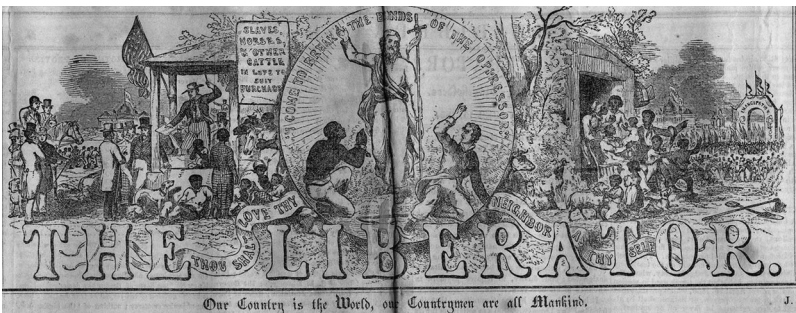


Figure 1.4. Masthead of the popular anti-slavery newspaper *The Liberator*, which circulated before, during, and after the Civil War.

In the decades leading up to the American Civil War, anti-slavery newspapers such as *The Liberator* swayed the minds of millions of people, convincing the nation to uproot slavery at any cost. The men and women who printed these anti-slavery newspapers and who wrote the articles within them were strongly Christian. We do not need an expert to tell us whether these people were anti-Christian or pro-Christian because we can read their words for ourselves. Consider also the following details in *The Liberator* masthead shown in figure 1.4:

- The ribbon along the bottom reads, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” This is a quotation from Jesus, as recorded in the Christian Gospels.<sup>8</sup>
- The coin in the middle of the logo features Jesus standing between a black man and a white man. The men are kneeling on equal footing, with the Christian cross in the background.
- Around the edge of the coin is written, “I come to break the bonds of the oppressed.” This is another saying of Jesus, also taken from the Christian Gospels.<sup>9</sup>

This physical *Liberator* newspaper, which we can hold in our hands today, is Primary Evidence about the impact of Jesus and his followers on the overthrow of slavery.

The samples of Primary Evidence we have considered in this chapter are real manuscripts; real, historic people; and real, tangible artifacts. This is a preview of the quality of Primary Evidence we will consider together.

Our investigation will not be a collection of opinions and hunches. Instead, we will examine undeniable artifacts that we can view with our own eyes. As we gather and examine this evidence for ourselves, we can discover for ourselves the impact of Jesus’s movement on the world.