This book is about one big question: *Did Jesus of Nazareth claim to be God?*

The seeds of my interest in who Jesus really claimed to be were first planted back in the early 1990s, when I was an undergraduate at Louisiana State University. I still remember vividly the day I walked into one of my introductory level classes, very excited to begin learning about the Bible. Although I had grown up Catholic and had even spent a fairly good deal of time reading the Scriptures, I had never before had the opportunity to study the Bible in an in-depth way.

At the time, I was especially excited to begin studying the Gospels. For me, the Gospels were the most familiar part of the Bible, and my personal favorite. In particular, I was hoping that I would be able to learn more about Jesus. As a Christian, I had always believed that Jesus was the divine Son of God, fully God and fully man. I worshiped him and tried to the best of my ability (which was often quite lacking) to live according to his teachings. So when it came time in the classroom to turn to Jesus and the Gospels, I was all ears.

Needless to say, I was somewhat taken aback when the professor began by saying:
“Forget everything you thought you knew about who wrote the Gospels.”

What was that? At the time, I was vigorously trying to take notes, so I couldn’t quite digest what the professor had said.

He continued:

“Although your English Bibles say ‘The Gospel according to “Matthew,” “Mark,” “Luke,” and “John,”’ these titles were actually added much later. In fact, we don’t really know who wrote the Gospels. Nowadays, modern scholars agree that the Gospels were originally anonymous.”

Got it. Titles added later. Gospels originally anonymous.

Wait a minute! I thought. We don’t know who wrote the Gospels? What about Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? Weren’t they disciples of Jesus? (As we will see in chapter 2, I was wrong to think Mark and Luke were disciples.)

At the time, these questions flashed through my mind in a matter of moments. Being a zealous undergraduate intent on getting straight A’s, I was more focused on writing down the professor’s words than on processing them. All the same, I do remember being struck by a thought. If what he was saying was true—which, of course, I never doubted, since I was an ignoramus and he was the professor—then how do we know what Jesus actually did and said? And, in fact, that is exactly what he proceeded to talk about: the so-called “quest for the historical Jesus,” in which modern scholars search for the truth about what Jesus really did and said, using contemporary tools of historical research.

Despite my initial surprise at the idea that we don’t know who wrote the Gospels, the whole notion of the quest for Jesus still fascinated me. After all, Christianity is a historical religion which claims that the God who made the universe actually became a man—a real human being who lived in a particular time and in a particular place. As a result, the idea of searching for the historical truth about Jesus made sense to me. So, somewhat blindly, that’s what I set out to do.
On the one hand, as I began to devour a steady stream of books about Jesus, I felt as if my whole understanding of him and his world was being opened up in new and exciting ways. For one thing, I began taking courses in ancient Greek so that I could learn to read the New Testament in its original language. It was thrilling. As a result, I added a religious studies major to my program in English literature and decided to spend my life teaching and writing about the Bible. Eventually, I was admitted to a master’s program at Vanderbilt University, which kicked off with a rigorous regimen of learning ancient Hebrew. I even had the privilege of studying under Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish professor of the New Testament. Unlike some professors these days, who seem to make it their goal to tear down their students’ faith, Dr. Levine was always extremely respectful of and concerned for her students’ beliefs. Even more, she sought to enrich our faith by helping us to see Jesus and the New Testament through ancient Jewish eyes. This was a life-changing gift for me. In fact, as we will see later, it was precisely her teaching us how to interpret the words and deeds of Jesus in their first-century Jewish context that would eventually help me to see clearly the Jewish roots of Jesus’s divinity. Without the insights I learned from her, I could never have written this book.

On the other hand, in the meantime, something else began to happen. I also began to encounter ideas about Jesus and the Gospels that were difficult to reconcile with what I had grown up believing. For example, in addition to the theory that the Gospels were originally anonymous, I learned that many modern scholars believe that the Gospels are not biographies of Jesus, that they were not authored by disciples of Jesus, and that they were written too late in the first century AD to be based on reliable eyewitness testimony. One of the textbooks I learned from—written by the now famous atheist New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman—even compares the way we got the accounts of Jesus in the Gospels to the children’s game of Telephone! These are the words I read all those years ago:
Nearly all of these storytellers had no independent knowledge of what really happened [to Jesus]. It takes little imagination to realize what happened to the stories. You are probably familiar with the old birthday party game “telephone.” A group of kids sits in a circle, the first tells a brief story to the one sitting next to her, who tells it to the next, and to the next, and so on, until it comes back full circle to the one who started it. Invariably, the story has changed so much in the process of retelling that everyone gets a good laugh. Imagine this same activity taking place, not in a solitary living room with ten kids on one afternoon, but over the expanse of the Roman Empire (some 2,500 miles across), with thousands of participants.¹

We’ll revisit the idea of the Telephone game later on in this book. As we will see, this so-called “analogy” is completely anachronistic and has no place in any serious historical study of Jesus and the Gospels.² But I didn’t know that seventeen years ago. At the time, let’s just say that it didn’t exactly inspire confidence in me that the four Gospels were historically reliable. To make matters even more complicated, I also discovered that there were lots of other ancient gospels outside the New Testament that I had never heard about before. In fact, some scholars argued that these “lost gospels,” especially the Gospel of Thomas, should get equal treatment as historical sources in the quest for Jesus. After all, if the four Gospels weren’t based on eyewitness testimony, why should we trust them instead of the lost gospels? Finally, and most significant of all, I began to realize that many contemporary New Testament scholars do not believe that Jesus of Nazareth ever actually claimed to be God. Of all the ideas that I encountered, this last one shook me to my core.

Liar, Lunatic, Lord, or Legend?

Don’t get me wrong. It wasn’t as if I had never before come across the idea of someone not believing in the divinity of Jesus. To the contrary, when I was an undergraduate, I had read very closely C. S. Lewis’s famous book Mere Christianity; in which he explains some of
the reasons he converted from atheism to Christianity. In that book, Lewis gives a classic argument against the common idea that Jesus was just a great moral teacher or a prophet. In Lewis’s own words:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. . . . Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God.4

When I first read these words, I found them to be compelling. After all, if Jesus went around claiming to be God, then he really did leave us with only three options:

1. Liar: Jesus knew he wasn’t God, but he said he was;
2. Lunatic: Jesus thought he was God, but he actually wasn’t;
3. Lord: Jesus was who he said he was — God come in the flesh.

At the time, this logical “trilemma” made sense to me, and I considered it, among other things, a good reason for continuing to believe that Jesus was divine.

However, as I continued to study the quest for Jesus, it slowly dawned on me that for many people, there was a fourth option: namely, that the stories about Jesus in the Gospels in which he claims to be God are “legends.” In other words, they are not historically true. Consider,
for example, the words of Bart Ehrman. This is how he responds to C. S. Lewis’s argument:

Jesus probably never called himself God. . . . This means that he doesn’t have to be either a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord. He could be a first-century Palestinian Jew who had a message to proclaim other than his own divinity.\(^5\)

Now, I suspect that some readers may be thinking: What is Ehrman talking about? Of course Jesus claimed to be God! What about when Jesus says, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30)? Or when he says “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9)? Here it is necessary to make two very important points.

On the one hand, most scholars admit that Jesus does claim to be divine in the Gospel of John.\(^6\) Think here of the two occasions on which Jesus is almost stoned to death because of who he claims to be:

The Jews said to him, “. . . Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? . . . Who do you claim to be?” . . . Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly; I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” So they took up stones to throw at him. (John 8:52, 53, 58–59)

[Jesus said:] “I and the Father are one.” The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of these do you stone me?” The Jews answered him, “We stone you for no good work but for blasphemy; because you, being a man, make yourself God.” (John 10:30–33)\(^7\)

Notice here that Jesus refers to himself as “I am” (Greek \(\text{ἐγώ εἰμι}\)) (John 8:58). In ancient Jewish Scripture, “I am” was the name of God—the God who had appeared to Moses in the burning bush on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 3:14). In a first-century Jewish context, for Jesus to take the name “I am” as his own is tantamount to claiming to be God. Should there be any doubt about this, notice that some of the people in Jesus’s Jewish audience get the point. That’s why they
respond by accusing him of “blasphemy” for making himself “God” (Greek theos). They even take up stones to kill him.

On the other hand, as I came to learn, many contemporary scholars, such as Bart Ehrman, do not consider the Gospel of John to be historically true when it depicts Jesus saying these things about himself. One of the most common arguments for this position is that Jesus does not make these kind of divine claims in the three earlier Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (known as the Synoptic Gospels). According to some scholars, we have three Gospels in which Jesus doesn’t claim to be God (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), and only one Gospel in which Jesus does (John). Now, if this were correct—and as we will see later on in the book, it isn’t—then it would raise serious doubts about whether Jesus ever actually claimed to be God. If the score is really 3–1, then the divine Jesus in the Gospel of John loses.

More than anything else, it was this idea—the idea that Jesus never actually claimed to be God—that led me personally to begin having serious doubts about who Jesus was. It slowly dawned on me that C. S. Lewis’s Liar, Lunatic, or Lord argument had assumed that all four Gospels (including John) tell us what Jesus actually did and said. Take that assumption off the table and everything changes.

(Almost) Losing My Religion

To make a long story very short: by the end of my studies at Vanderbilt, my grip on the Christian faith of my youth was starting to slip. By the time I was about to graduate, I didn’t know what I believed anymore. Little by little, what had started as a quest to find Jesus ended up with me on a path to losing my belief in him.

Then came a major turning point in my life. One evening, not long before I graduated, I was driving around the hills of Nashville by myself, and a thought suddenly dawned on me: Do I really even believe in Jesus anymore? By this point, I had pretty much accepted the idea that we didn’t know who wrote the Gospels and that Jesus may not have actually claimed to be God. Moreover, I didn’t know what to make of passages in the Synoptic Gospels where Jesus almost seems to deny
that he is God, such as when he says to the rich young man: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:18). (I promise we’ll look at this passage later.) This led me to start questioning: If Jesus didn’t really claim to be God, then was he? Or was he just a man? How could I believe in the divinity of Jesus if Jesus himself didn’t teach it?

At that moment, I made a decision. The only way I could really know was to try to say out loud that I no longer believed that Jesus was God. So, alone in the car, I tried. But I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t say it. Not because I was afraid to. After years of study, I had learned to follow the evidence wherever it led me. No. I couldn’t say it because something in me wasn’t yet fully convinced that Jesus wasn’t divine. Perhaps it was what I was learning about first-century Judaism, which was already helping me to understand Jesus and his words from an ancient Jewish perspective. Or perhaps it was just the last embers of my faith, still burning low. Whatever the case, I couldn’t honestly say the words. A part of me still believed that Jesus was God, even though I wasn’t sure how to reconcile this with some of the theories I had been learning. My faith and my reason had never seemed further apart, and the former was dangling over an abyss of doubt by a thread. But there was still a thread. So that’s what I hung on to.

In the end, I finished my master’s degree, graduated with honors, and did what any Christian on the brink of almost losing his faith would do: I entered a doctoral program in theology in order to earn my PhD in New Testament studies. And that’s when things slowly began to change.

What I Later Discovered

During the years I spent as a PhD student at the University of Notre Dame, I threw myself headlong into my studies. I went beyond just reading the writings of modern scholars and dove into the original sources themselves: the Hebrew Bible, the Greek New Testament, ancient Jewish writings outside the Bible, and the works of the ancient Christian writers known as the church fathers. I took courses
in advanced Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. I even learned Coptic, a
form of ancient Egyptian, just so that I could read the “lost” Gospel
of Thomas in its original language and see what it had to say. During
these intense but unforgettable years, I made three important discov-
eries.

First and foremost, given my interest in the quest for Jesus, I began
looking for the “anonymous” copies of the Gospels that I had learned
about during my undergraduate years. Surely, I thought, there must
be some anonymous manuscripts, since every textbook I had read
started with the assertion that the four Gospels were originally anony-
mous and that we don’t know who actually wrote them. But I wanted to
see for myself.

Guess what? I couldn’t find any anonymous copies. I even asked
one of my professors: “Where are all the anonymous manuscripts of
Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John?”

“That’s a good question,” he said. “You should do some research.”

And I did. What I quickly discovered is that there are no anonymous
manuscripts of the four Gospels. They don’t exist. In fact, as we will see
in chapter 2, the only way to defend the theory that the Gospels were
originally anonymous is to ignore virtually all of the evidence from the
earliest Greek manuscripts and the most ancient Christian writers.
Moreover, when you compare what the earliest church fathers tell
us about the origins of the four Gospels with what those same church
fathers say about the origins of the lost gospels, the differences are
striking. As we will see, there are compelling reasons for concluding
that the four Gospels are first-century biographies of Jesus, written
within the lifetime of the apostles, and based directly on eyewitness
testimony.

Second, and equally important, the more I studied first-century
Judaism, the more I began to see clearly that Jesus did claim to be
God—but in a very Jewish way: And he does so in all four first-century
Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But in order to see this
clearly, you have to take one very important step. You have to go back
and read the Synoptic Gospels from an ancient Jewish perspective.
Otherwise, it’s easy to miss what Jesus is really saying about himself.
To be sure, Jesus doesn’t go around shouting, “I am God!” But this doesn’t mean that he didn’t claim to be divine. As we will see, Jesus reveals the secret of his identity by using *riddles* and *questions* that would have made sense to a first-century Jewish audience. In fact, it was precisely because his audiences understood that Jesus was claiming to be God that some of the Jewish authorities charged him with “blasphemy” and handed him over to the Romans to be crucified. And by the way, in a first-century Jewish context, it wasn’t blasphemy to claim to be the Messiah. *But it was blasphemy to claim to be God.*

Third and finally, and most important of all, I gradually realized that confusion about who Jesus claimed to be is everywhere, and it’s spreading. Despite the arguments of writers like C. S. Lewis, the old notion that Jesus was just a prophet or a great moral teacher is still alive and well. It’s in the universities and college classrooms, where many students arrive as Christians and leave as agnostics or atheists. It’s in the television documentaries that air right around Christmas and Easter that seem specially designed to raise doubts about the truth of Christianity and are often full of everything except actual history. It’s in the dozens of books that are published every year claiming to reveal that Jesus was really a Zealot, or that he was really married to Mary Magdalene, or whatever the latest theory is. In fact, the idea that Jesus never claimed to be God may be more widespread today than ever before in history.9

That’s why I finally decided to write this book. In it I want to lay out the case for Jesus as I see it. I should emphasize from the start that it’s not a complete case. That would need a much longer book. It’s also not written for scholars, though I cite lots of them in the endnotes. It’s written for anyone—anyone who has ever had questions about exactly who Jesus of Nazareth claimed to be. And in my experience as a professor, that’s a lot more people than you might think. It includes both Christians and non-Christians, practicing and nonpracticing, believers and doubters, and those who are a little bit of both. In fact, many people who do believe that Jesus is God often can’t explain *why* they believe it, and many people who think that Jesus was only a good teacher or prophet often haven’t looked carefully at exactly *who* the
Gospels say he claimed to be. In both cases, people are often not able to see Jesus through ancient Jewish eyes. As a result, it’s easy to miss the Jewish roots of Jesus’s divinity.

So if you’ve ever wondered: Did Jesus really claim to be God? And how do we know?—then I invite you to come along with me on this quest. Whether you are Christian, Jewish, Muslim, agnostic, or atheist—whatever your religious outlook—if you’ve ever wanted to judge for yourself the biblical and historical evidence for Jesus, then this book is for you.

We will begin where my professor began, all those years ago: with the origins of the Gospels. Were the four Gospels originally anonymous?
Imagine for a moment that you’re browsing the shelves of your local bookstore, and you come across two biographies of Pope Francis. One of them is written by a longtime friend and contemporary of the pope. The other biography is anonymous. Which one would you buy? Most people, I would venture to guess, would go for the one written by someone who had actually spent time with him, someone who was a friend of Jorge Bergoglio, the man who later became pope.³ At the same time, I think most people would also view the anonymous biography with some level of suspicion. Who wrote this? Where did they get their information? Why should I trust that they know what they’re talking about? And if they want to be believed, why didn’t they put their name on the book?

When it comes to the biography of Jesus of Nazareth—or any historical figure, for that matter—we find ourselves in a similar situation. The first question we have to answer is How do we know what we know about Jesus? How is it possible for twenty-first-century people to know with any reasonable certainty what he did and said in the first century? Obviously, none of us was there when Jesus walked the earth. So how do we gain access to him as a historical person?
For many people, the answer to this question is simple: open up your Bible and read the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; they tell us what Jesus did and said. Indeed, for almost nineteen centuries, most Christians—and virtually everyone else, for that matter—believed that the Gospels of Matthew and John were written by eyewitnesses and disciples of Jesus and that the Gospels of Mark and Luke were written by companions of the apostles Peter and Paul.

Yet, as I mentioned in the first chapter, in the last century or so, a new theory came onto the scene. According to this theory, the traditional Christian ideas about who wrote the Gospels are not in fact true. Instead, scholars began to propose that the four Gospels were originally anonymous. In particular, this theory was formulated in the early twentieth century by scholars known as “form critics,” who believed that the Gospels were not biography but folklore. In the words of New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham:

The assumption that Jesus traditions circulated anonymously in the early church and therefore the Gospels in which they were gathered and recorded were also originally anonymous was very widespread in twentieth-century Gospels scholarship. It was propagated by the form critics as a corollary to their use of the model of folklore, which is passed down anonymously by communities. The Gospels, they thought, were folk literature, similarly anonymous. This use of the model of folklore has been discredited . . . partly because there is a great difference between folk traditions passed down over centuries and the short span of time—less than a lifetime—that elapsed before Gospels were written. But it is remarkable how tenacious has been the idea that not only the traditions but the Gospels themselves were originally anonymous.

“Tenacious” is just the right word. By the end of the twentieth century, when I was a student, the assumption that the four Gospels in the New Testament were not originally attributed to anyone was so widespread that it was rarely ever discussed, much less questioned. As a result, many scholars today believe that we do not know who wrote the four
The case for Jesus

Gospels, which are our primary historical sources for what Jesus did and said.

What are we to make of this theory? What evidence is there that the Gospels were in fact originally anonymous? In this chapter, we will take a closer look at the theory and see why there are some good reasons to doubt it.

The Theory of the Anonymous Gospels

In his recent book How Jesus Became God, Bart Ehrman provides a concise summary of the theory of the anonymous Gospels. It can be broken down into four basic claims.

First, according to this theory, all four Gospels were originally published without any titles or headings identifying the authors. This means no “Gospel according to Matthew,” no “Gospel according to Mark,” no “Gospel according to Luke,” and no “Gospel according to John.” Not for any one of the four. Just blanks. According to this theory, in contrast to many other ancient biographies published under the name of an actual author, the original authors of the Gospels deliberately chose to keep their identities hidden.

Second, all four Gospels supposedly circulated without any titles for almost a century before anyone attributed them to Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. Recall that in the ancient world, all books were hand-made copies known as manuscripts. Thus, according to this hypothesis, every time one of the Gospels was hand-copied for decade after decade, no one added any titles.

Third, it was only much later—sometime after the disciples of Jesus were dead and buried—that the titles were finally added to the manuscripts. According to the theory, the reason the titles were added was to give the four Gospels “much needed authority.” In other words, the inclusion of titles was a deliberate attempt to deceive readers into falsely believing that the Gospels were written by apostles and their disciples. As Bart Ehrman writes elsewhere, the titles of the four Gospels are a “not at all innocent” form of ancient false
Were the Gospels Anonymous?

15

were the gospels anonymous?

attribution or forgery—a practice widely condemned by both pagans and christians.⁸

fourth and finally, and perhaps most significant of all, according to this theory, because the gospels were originally anonymous, it is reasonable to conclude that none of them was actually written by an eyewitness.⁹ for example, for ehrman, the four gospels are the last links in a long chain of writings by anonymous storytellers who were not themselves eyewitnesses to jesus and who may never have even met an eyewitness.

this, in a nutshell, is the theory of the anonymous gospels.¹⁰ the theory is remarkably widespread among scholars and non-scholars alike. it is especially emphasized by those who wish to cast doubts on the historical reliability of the portrait of jesus in the four gospels.¹¹ the only problem is that the theory is almost completely baseless. it has no foundation in the earliest manuscripts of the gospels, it fails to take seriously how ancient books were copied and circulated, and it suffers from an overall lack of historical plausibility. let’s take a careful look at each of these weaknesses.

no anonymous copies exist

the first and perhaps biggest problem for the theory of the anonymous gospels is this: no anonymous copies of matthew, mark, luke, or john have ever been found. they do not exist. as far as we know, they never have.

instead, as new testament scholar simon gathercole has demonstrated, the ancient manuscripts are unanimous in attributing these books to the apostles and their companions. consider, for example, the following chart of the titles in the earliest greek manuscripts of each of the gospels.¹²
## The Manuscript Evidence: No Anonymous Gospels

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<th>Gospel Title</th>
<th>Earliest Greek Manuscript</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<td>According to Matthew</td>
<td>Codex Sinaiticus</td>
<td>4th century</td>
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<td>According to Matthew</td>
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<td>Codex Ephraemi</td>
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<td>Codex Bezae</td>
<td>5th century</td>
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<tr>
<td>According to Mark</td>
<td>Codex Sinaiticus</td>
<td>4th century</td>
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<td>According to Mark</td>
<td>Codex Vaticanus</td>
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