PERSON OF INTEREST

WHY JESUS STILL MATTERS IN A WORLD THAT REJECTS THE BIBLE

J. WARNER WALLACE

"AMERICA'S FOREMOST COLD-CASE DETECTIVE"
“You can have a seat if you’d like,” offered my sergeant as he guided me into his office.

Instead, I stood next to the chair, hoping to shorten the meeting.

“Jim, I need you to carry the Hayes case across the finish line,” he said, pointing to the chair. “Can you do that for me?” Kyle was more than my supervisor; he was also my friend. We had worked together for years as part of our undercover team and then on SWAT. Now we were both assigned to the homicide unit. I was the lead investigator in our cold-case detail; Kyle supervised my team along with the other homicide detectives.

“I was afraid you were going to ask for that,” I said as I resigned myself to sitting in the chair beside his desk. “You know how I feel about that case.”

“I also know you can solve it,” he replied with an all-too-familiar smile. Kyle barely attempted to disguise his order as a request, and I knew I would eventually have to acquiesce.

“I really want this case solved, and I’ll do all I can to help you,” he said.

“That’s because the case matters to you. I’m up to my neck in two others right now, and they’re much stronger. How can I possibly add a third case with so little evidence?”

“That’s why I said I would help you,” he replied.

I knew Kyle was an outstanding investigator in his own right, but since he was a sergeant supervising an entire team of detectives burdened with “fresh” homicides, I feared he would be too distracted to help much with an old unsolved murder.

“I’m not even sure it’s true her husband killed her,” I said, hoping to demonstrate
how much work still needed to be done in the case. Steve Hayes had been the primary person of interest in his wife Tammy’s disappearance for nearly ten years, but no one had been able to collect enough evidence to prove she had been murdered. I read the case but had prioritized it behind several other cold homicides that were stronger evidentially.

“Look, Jim, I’m going to retire next year, and you’re not far behind me. I remember when this crime occurred. I was a brand-new patrol sergeant, and it was the first homicide I had to work as a supervisor. It does matter to me. I’d really like to see it solved before we’re retirees.”

I walked back to my office and looked at the stack of notebooks and reports on my desk. How was I going to add Tammy Hayes to my caseload? Not a single piece of physical evidence had been booked under her case number. Worse yet, we didn’t even have her body.

Tammy’s disappearance appeared to be a “no-body homicide” case: she and her husband, Steve, moved to our city in April 2000. A month later, Steve reported her missing (three days after having an argument). He claimed Tammy drove off in anger and still hadn’t returned. The initial officer took the report as a missing person case because that’s all he believed it to be. Tammy’s husband seemed certain that she would return, and Tammy—raised in the county foster care system—didn’t have any other close relatives to interview. As a result, the officers trusted Steve’s version of the story. No one photographed Tammy’s home, and CSI wasn’t called to collect any evidence. The detective later assigned to the case interviewed Steve and set the case aside with the expectation Tammy would return once she “cooled down.”

And that’s the way the case remained for years.

By the time another generation of detectives decided to follow up on Tammy’s disappearance (to close the case for recording purposes), Steve had completely remodeled their home. A new detective contacted Steve, expecting to find that Tammy had returned. She hadn’t. She never came home, never tried to call Steve, never wrote to ask him for a divorce. Instead, Tammy had vanished. No contact. No credit history. No sightings. It was clear something happened to Tammy, but detectives were unable to determine the truth about her disappearance. The case
went cold. Steve remained a person of interest, but detectives were frustrated by the lack of evidence.

That was about a decade before my conversation with Kyle.

WHAT’S TRUE AND WHAT MATTERS

“I’d like to go tomorrow,” Susie said one Saturday afternoon. “Ben and Arlene promised to meet us in the parking lot and sit with us during the service.”

For three years I'd successfully postponed this day. Susie had wanted to go to church for years, but when we moved to a new town, I tried to extend the delay. I wasn't raised in a Christian home, and I didn't have any Christian friends during my high school or college years. Most of the outspoken believers I met at work were people I had occasion to arrest. I wasn't impressed, and I often mocked Christians in front of my friends and coworkers.

God didn't matter to me because I didn't think he existed, and the Bible didn't matter to me because I didn't think it reported anything true.

I was similarly disinterested in the Loch Ness Monster, Bigfoot, and Grimm’s Fairy Tales. There’s a relationship between what’s true and what matters. Few of us order our lives around, spend time thinking about, or make decisions based on our belief in Bigfoot. As a thoughtful nonbeliever, I considered Jesus and the Bible equally fictional and irrelevant.

But I loved my wife, so I told her I would be willing to go to church, at least occasionally. She wasn’t a Christian, but she believed in God and wanted to raise our kids with a similar belief. I didn’t like the idea, but I agreed to visit our friends’ church.

As we entered the huge sanctuary, I could see Ben was watching me. We had been friends for years, and I recognized the mischievous expression on his face.

“You’re making me nervous,” I said. “Stop staring at me.”

“I’m just watching to see if you’re going to spontaneously burst into flames,” he joked. He knew it was my first time in an evangelical church for anything other than a wedding or a funeral.

“Very funny. Will the holy water burn?” I replied.

“You’re safe. We don’t use holy water here.”

The assembly space resembled a large open warehouse, the music was loud, and
the atmosphere was very informal. Susie, who attended Catholic masses as a child, leaned over and whispered, “It doesn’t seem very reverent, does it?”

Eventually the pastor appeared on the stage and started preaching from a Bible. He was surprisingly ... normal. He talked with charm and confidence, referencing New Testament passages as though they were true. None of this impressed me, however, until he said something that grabbed my attention:

“Jesus was the smartest man who ever lived.”

Really? That’s a bold claim, I thought. But he didn’t stop there.

“The teaching of Jesus transformed the world because Jesus is God incarnate.”

What? God incarnate?

“What does that mean?” I asked Ben.

“It means Jesus, who is God, became a man,” he whispered.

I thought about it all the way home. This pastor acted like Jesus mattered, like Jesus was something more than an ancient fairy tale told by uneducated, unscientific people in an uninspiring era. At one point he said Jesus even claimed he was God. If that were true, why would anyone think Jesus was the smartest man who ever lived? I was more inclined to think Jesus was crazy.

Maybe that’s why Susie looked surprised when I told her I wanted to buy a Bible. The pastor’s words piqued my curiosity. How could he—or anyone else—think Jesus was the smartest man in human history? Why did he believe Jesus was God? Why would someone foolish enough to claim this about himself matter to anyone, let alone me?

I purchased a small pew Bible to find out. I spent less than seven dollars; I saw no point in wasting money to answer these simple questions. I began to read through the Gospels and found Jesus’s teachings admirable in several ways. He preached a high, counterintuitive moral standard. His concern for the disadvantaged was extraordinary. His love of the disaffected was remarkable. He called his followers to live a life of love, sacrifice, and service. The New Testament recorded the life and teaching of Jesus, along with his miracles, death, and resurrection.

I didn’t think any of it was true.

Why would someone trust this ancient collection of carefully crafted myths?
This tale of a miracle-working Jesus who thought he was God might have been impressive to ancient shepherders and farmers, but why would anyone raised in the twentieth century (or beyond) believe it? Why would anyone think this ancient, fictional character matters?

I spent the next six to eight months trying to determine if the Gospels were anything more than irrelevant fiction. I investigated the claims of the Gospels using every tool I possessed as a detective. I tested the Gospels as eyewitness accounts, investigated the history of early Christianity, evaluated the nuanced differences among the New Testament texts, and applied forensic statement analysis to the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I’ve written about this analysis in *Cold-Case Christianity*, but there was another important aspect of my investigation I’ve never written about, until now:

I also investigated Jesus as if he were a person of interest in a “no-body homicide” case.

The Hayes case lacked a crime scene. No scene was ever photographed or recorded in any way. Not a single piece of physical evidence existed when I reopened the case at Kyle’s request. To make matters worse, we didn’t even have Tammy’s body. Yet five years later, we successfully prosecuted Steve for his wife’s murder. It wasn’t easy, but I took a unique approach tailored to cases that lack a body and a crime scene.

The case for Jesus can be investigated in a similar way. As in the Hayes case, we don’t have Jesus’s body, and we don’t have a “crime scene” to provide us with physical evidence. Despite these limitations, we can still make a case for the historicity and deity of Jesus. We can do it without a body—and without any evidence from the New Testament.

You read that correctly.

The more I investigated the existence and deity of Jesus, the more I realized the Bible wasn’t the only available source of information. I didn’t need the evidence provided by the Gospels to know the truth about Jesus. If some evil regime had destroyed every Christian Bible before I was born—if there hadn’t been a single New Testament manuscript to testify about the life or deity of Jesus—I would still have been able to determine the truth about him. If I had investigated the case for Jesus like a “no-body homicide” cold case, I would have discovered everything I needed to know.

Join me as I employ the simple investigative strategy I used to solve the Hayes “no-body homicide” case. Once I’ve revealed it to you, we’ll apply this approach to
the case for Jesus. If you’re someone who rejects the New Testament as I did, you may be shocked at how much you can still learn about Jesus. If you’re already a believer, this book will help you understand why Jesus still matters.

As in my other books, I’ll teach you how to be a good detective. You’ll learn some of the techniques I’ve used to solve our agency’s most difficult cases. Many of my investigations have received national attention. I’ve been told by network producers that I’ve appeared on NBC’s Dateline more than any other detective in the country. For this reason, I’ve changed several names and swapped details of my criminal cases to protect the identity of victims (and suspects) and to safeguard the progress of cases still under investigation. Despite this, you’ll discover the truth about what happened to Tammy, and you’ll also discover the truth about Jesus.

If Jesus was truly the smartest, most interesting, and most transformative man who ever lived—if he was truly God—we ought to be able to make a case for his existence and impact, even without a body or any evidence from the New Testament. When our investigation is complete, we’ll determine if Jesus matters. We’ll discover if he was a work of fiction, just another ancient sage, or history’s uniquely divine person of interest.
Chapter 1

THE FUSE AND THE FALLOUT

Jesus without the New Testament

Truth will come to sight; murder cannot be hid long.
—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

It’s like all those quiet people, when they do lose their tempers they lose them with a vengeance.
—AGATHA CHRISTIE

I stepped back from the whiteboard and stared at the diagram.
“Admiring your own work?” asked Kyle as he entered the conference room.
“Not much to admire . . . yet,” I replied.
Kyle stood with his hands on his hips and an incredulous look on his face. “Yeah, no kidding! What does this have to do with the Hayes case?” Kyle was a general contractor before becoming a police officer, and his diligent, workman-like, “I can fix anything” attitude was incredibly helpful in a team investigation.

My background, on the other hand, was in the arts. I earned a degree in design and another in architecture before shifting careers and adopting the profession of my father. When I was a young man, literature, the visual arts, music, education, and science were what mattered most to me. Homicide investigations allowed me to exercise some of these interests as I tried to find creative ways to solve our most difficult cases. So while my diagram may have looked confusing to Kyle, I knew it was the key to solving the case and presenting it to a jury.

In the center of the drawing was a bomb illustrated as a cluster of dynamite sticks. Concentric rings radiated from the bomb, delineating the blast radius. A long bomb fuse draped to the left of the dynamite.
“I’m taking an approach that will help us solve the crime and prosecute the killer,” I explained. “This diagram is the key.”

“Oh, I’m waiting . . .” he replied.

“Look, we don’t have any evidence from a crime scene, and we don’t even know where Tammy’s body is. But here’s what we suspect: something terrible happened to Tammy the day she vanished. If she was killed, an explosion of anger occurred in that moment.” I pointed to the bomb. “It was as though a bomb was detonated.”

Kyle leaned in. He seemed a bit more interested in my diagram now.

“That didn’t happen out of the blue,” I continued. “There’s a reason Tammy disappeared when she did.” I pointed to the fuse. “These kinds of crimes are typically the result of an increasingly hostile sequence of events that preceded them, right? If Steve killed Tammy, a fuse was burning in their relationship leading up to the explosion. Our investigation of the fuse will reveal any growing anger between them. It’ll also reveal any planning or preparatory steps Steve took. If he’s responsible, the evidence from the fuse will point to him.”

“It’ll also explain why he did it when he did,” interjected Kyle.

“Exactly,” I replied. I pointed to the concentric rings of the blast radius. “And just as every bomb begins with a fuse,
the blast results in fallout, the debris that bombs inevitably cause. I’ll bet Steve’s life was different after the explosion. If he killed her, we should find evidence of his involvement in the debris.”

“Then let’s get started,” said Kyle. “I’ll help you do some interviews if we can identify the people in Steve’s life who might have known him in those days.”

“Thanks, I could use the help.” I labeled the fuse and fallout areas of my diagram. “This case will be solved once we are able to explain the events leading up to Tammy’s disappearance and the response after her disappearance. The fuse and the fallout will tell us if Steve is a felon.”

Over the next year, our cold case team identified and interviewed people who knew Tammy and Steve at the time of Tammy’s disappearance. This painstaking process revealed a series of fuse events and fallout responses. With each revelation, the questions surrounding Tammy’s disappearance were replaced with answers.

**Fuse Length and Blast Radius**

Less significant crimes can be committed successfully with a smaller degree of preparation. Shoplifting, for example, takes little time to plan, while committing a burglary after the store is closed requires more planning. Planning a successful murder is
even harder. It takes time for the evil desire to mature. And it takes effort to plot out the manner of death, obtain the right weapon, and formulate a successful alibi.

The more consequential the crime, the longer the fuse.

Lesser crimes are also easier to overlook and involve less fallout. If someone steals five dollars from the center console of your unlocked car tonight while it’s parked in your driveway, you may not even notice the money is missing for several days. When you do, you might mistakenly conclude it’s been misplaced rather than stolen. But if the same thief steals your car, you’ll probably notice and file a police report.

When a high-impact event (like a homicide) occurs, it leaves a mark. It takes a while for the fuse to burn, and the debris is difficult to miss.

As we investigated Tammy’s disappearance, I expected to find a long fuse and significant fallout, but I was looking for more. If someone killed Tammy, I expected the fuse to reveal why the killer chose that night in May 2000. Why didn’t they kill Tammy in January or June or September? Why 2000 instead of 1999? Was there a deadline unique to the killer? If Steve, our person of interest, was responsible for Tammy’s disappearance, the nature and timing of the fuse should match the growing anger, the intensifying pressure Steve may have experienced, and the unique deadline he may have faced.¹

In a crime as tragic as murder, the fallout is significant. A killer who seeks to hide their victim’s body is particularly active after the murder has occurred. But
beyond that, it’s often difficult for a killer to carry on as if they didn’t just murder their significant other. They tend to misspeak, behave unusually, or inadvertently reveal their involvement. All these behaviors are important aspects of the fallout.²

If investigated thoroughly, the fallout should also reveal the killer uniquely. Unless more than one person was involved in Tammy’s disappearance, the evidence in the fallout should point uniquely to one suspect. If Steve committed this crime, the debris in the fallout should implicate him, and no one else, as our person of interest.

Finally, I’ve learned to be open-minded and watchful when investigating evidence in the fallout. Some fallout evidence occurs immediately after the crime occurs; other forms of evidence take years to develop. If Steve killed Tammy, virtually every aspect of his world may eventually have been affected. His future romantic relationships, the way he parents his kids, the topics he discusses with friends, the kinds of movies he prefers, where he lives, how much alcohol he drinks—all these areas of Steve’s life can provide us with data and help us to determine if Steve was responsible for Tammy’s disappearance.

THE EXPLOSION KNOWN AS “JESUS”

I stood in the history section of the Books-A-Million store in Longview, Texas, scanning the shelves and growing more frustrated. The bookshop employee must have noticed the expression on my face.

“Can I help you find something?” she asked.

“I’m not really sure if you have what I’m looking for,” I replied. “Do you have any books about ancient history, right before or after the life of Jesus?” I was on vacation with my father in Northeast Texas, and I spotted this bookstore while eating at a restaurant across the street. Only a few weeks had passed since the pastor’s statement, and I had just finished my second reading of the Gospels.

The employee took a few steps and pointed to the bottom shelf. “There are some good books here, but they are rather expensive.” She was right on both counts. “There’s more about early church history in the Roman Empire in our section on Christianity,” she said as she gestured toward the next row.

OBJECTION: THERE IS NO “REAL” EVIDENCE FOR GOD OR JESUS

In legal terms, evidence is any type of material item, statement, or assertion of fact (if allowed by a judge) that is used to convince a judge and/or jury of facts or claims related to a case. This definition is intentionally broad because anything can be used as evidence to prove a case. That’s why we must be open-minded and creative when collecting evidence in the fuse and the fallout. Everything we collect has the potential to be used as evidence.
Person of Interest

On the way out, my dad recognized an important oversight on my part: “How are you planning on getting all those books home in your luggage?”

Thus began my first extraordinary collection of investigative materials related to the existence, life, and activity of Jesus of Nazareth. Every two or three years since, I’ve donated books to libraries, ministries, students, and bookstores to make room in my office for my next investigation. Although I no longer have the books I bought in Longview, they helped me examine the case for Jesus as though I was investigating a “no-body homicide.”

If that pastor was correct, Jesus’s explosive appearance would demark the pivotal point of history. Even as an atheist, I recognized that the birth of Jesus divided BCE (“Before the Common Era”) from CE (the “Common Era”). Something about Jesus initiated a new historical epoch. His appearance was the explosion that broke the human timeline into two “eras.”

This explosion, like the explosive event in the Hayes case, was preceded by a fuse and created its own fallout. And just as in the Hayes case, I knew I could determine if Jesus was history’s unique person of interest if I examined both sides of the timeline—even without referencing the New Testament documents.

THE JESUS FUSE AND FALLOUT

If Jesus was who Christians claim, I would expect the fuse to be long. Impactful events, after all, typically have longer fuses. The events building toward the appearance of Jesus should span centuries if he was the person the pastor described.
I also expected the fuse to act as a timer. If Jesus was something more than human, was the timing of his appearance significant? Was there a reason why he didn't arrive centuries earlier or decades later? Was there a historic “deadline” he had to meet? The fuse would reveal the answer.

If the pastor was right about Jesus, I would also expect significant fallout after the life and teaching of Jesus. He clearly affected our calendar, but if he’s the divine person of interest the pastor described, I would expect a considerable “ripple effect” beyond the demarking of time.

In addition, the evidence in the fallout would point uniquely to Jesus as the cause of the transformation. In fact, I would expect to identify Jesus specifically and reconstruct the details of his life robustly from nothing more than the debris, even without the descriptions offered on the pages of Christian Scripture. The debris on this side of the explosion would describe Jesus in an unmistakable way.

Finally, if Jesus was truly the smartest, most transformative, and most influential man in history, I would expect the fallout to affect diverse aspects of our world. If Jesus was more than a mere human, I would expect the appearance and teaching of Jesus to change nearly every aspect of the world, and I should find evidence of this impact in unexpected places.

“Are you still at it?”

I had been studying and taking notes for hours, and Susie noticed the sunrise before I did. Prior to that first day in church, I had a very different morning routine, but everything changed when I started investigating the fuse and the fallout related to Jesus. Now I poured nearly as many hours into investigating Jesus off duty as I spent investigating Steve on duty.

Over the next several months, I developed the timeline for Jesus in much the same way I develop a timeline for all my “no-body homicide” cases. As the evidence and revelations found their place on one side of the Jesus explosion or the other, my presuppositions and doubts about Jesus were challenged and eventually vanquished.

Now that you understand the investigative template I typically use, let’s examine the evidence together as I share my startling findings. As the fuse and the fallout take shape, I’ll show you why Jesus still matters—even if you reject the Bible. I predict you’ll begin to see Jesus as more than merely a person of interest.