

# **Can We Trust The Bible?**



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## Faithful Preservation

In January 2015, *Newsweek* ran a cover story entitled: “The Bible: So Misunderstood it’s a Sin.” Kurt Eichenwald, the author of the piece, argued that the Bible is a collection of terribly corrupted documents with no divine supervision or intent behind them. In a paragraph entitled, “Playing Telephone with the Word of God,” he observed the following:

No television preacher has ever read the Bible. Neither has any evangelical politician. Neither has the pope. Neither have I. And neither have you. At best, we’ve all read a bad translation—a translation of translations of translations of hand-copied copies of copies of copies of copies, and on and on, hundreds of times.<sup>1</sup>

If Eichenwald is correct, then Christianity is in serious trouble. But is he correct? What the average reader of *Newsweek* may not be aware of is there are many scholars working in this field of New Testament studies—a field known as textual criticism. In their research, many have concluded that the Biblical text is *not* terribly corrupted. To the contrary: many scholars—even among the skeptical—admit that we can reproduce the original words of the New Testament with a high degree of certainty. What is the basis for these claims? Let’s dig a little deeper to find out.

### The Manuscript Evidence

When scholars examine ancient writings, one of the main things they look for is the number extant manuscripts available. Why? For at least two reasons: First, because we don’t have an original version—called an *autograph*—of any ancient historical document. This means we are completely dependent upon the copies of these originals that have come to down us in the historical record. These copies are known as *manuscripts*.

The second reason why scholars rely on the number of extant manuscripts, therefore, is because the more manuscripts they have available to them, the better they can determine the original wording of the autograph. In some cases, these scholars are limited to just a very few ancient manuscripts (eg. just three or seven manuscripts). In rarer cases, scholars have dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of manuscripts available to examine. Consider the following list of ancient authors as of 2014:

- Plato (ancient Greek philosopher—4th century B.C.): 219 Manuscripts.
- Tacitus (1<sup>st</sup> century Roman historian): 31 Manuscripts.
- Suetonius (1<sup>st</sup> century Roman historian): 300 Manuscripts.
- Homer’s *Iliad* (ancient Greek drama): 2,300 Manuscripts.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of ancient manuscripts, these writers rank on the *higher* end of the list. Compared to ancient figures like Julius Caesar or Aristotle, there is a considerable amount of manuscript support in their favor. But, they are not at the top of the list. In fact, there’s one ancient collection of documents that typically doesn’t get recognized for its staggering manuscript support: the New Testament.

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<sup>1</sup> Kurt Eichenwald, “The Bible: So Misunderstood it’s a Sin,” *Newsweek*, December 23, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/2015/01/02/thats-not-what-bible-says-294018.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Jonathan Morrow, *Questioning the Bible: 11 Major Challenges to the Bible’s Authority* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 96.

The manuscript support for the New Testament actually is so abundant that scholars have to break down the manuscripts by their language. Consider the following:

- Greek: 5,600 manuscripts.
- Latin: about 10,000 manuscripts.
- Other Languages (Coptic, Syriac, Gothic, and others): 10,000 manuscripts.<sup>3</sup>

In total, we have around 20,000 handwritten manuscripts for the New Testament, giving it first rank among any ancient collection of documents in terms of manuscript support. Moreover, the manuscripts we have for the New Testament also appear much *earlier* in history than the other documents do.

For example, the earliest manuscript we have for Plato's writings comes to us from 1,300 years after it was first written.<sup>4</sup> Homer's *Iliad* is better, but even its earliest copy is around 400 years after it was originally written.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the earliest New Testament manuscripts are within 100–300 years of the original. Dan Wallace points out, "If we are comparing the same period—300 years after composition—the average classical author has no literary remains at all."<sup>6</sup>

And yet, even with *less* and *later* manuscripts, scholars are able to say with a reasonable degree of certainty what Plato, Homer, and other ancient authors originally wrote. If this is the case for *other* ancient documents, then why wouldn't it be true for the New Testament? If skeptical scholars are going to be consistent when they question our ability to know the original message of the New Testament, then they must question our ability to know the original message of *every other ancient writing*—for which there is much *later* and much *less* evidence. Wallace concludes:

In terms of extant manuscripts, the New Testament [scholar] is confronted with an embarrassment of riches. If we have doubts about what the [original] New Testament said, those doubts would have to be multiplied by at least a hundred-fold for the average classical author. And when we compare the New Testament manuscripts to the very best that the classical world has to offer, it still stands head and shoulders above the rest... Further, if the radical skeptics applied their principles to the rest of the Greco-Roman literature, they would thrust us back in the Dark Ages, where ignorance was anything but bliss. Their arguments only sound impressive in a vacuum.<sup>7</sup>

## Back to the Original

All of this is significant, because the abundance of manuscripts enables New Testament scholars to get back to the original meaning. This is significant, because copyists occasionally made slight mistakes in the copying process. Additionally, some of the manuscripts we have are not ideal, being partially ripped, torn, or missing letters. These problems are alleviated by the number of manuscripts available for a particular document: the more manuscripts a document has, the better scholars are able to determine the original meaning by comparing them with each other. To better understand how this works, consider the following example:

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<sup>3</sup>Daniel B. Wallace, "Has the New Testament Text Been Hopelessly Corrupted?" in *In Defense of the Bible: A Comprehensive Apologetic for the Authority of Scripture*, ed. Steven B. Cowan and Terry L. Wilder (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 146.

<sup>4</sup> Murrow, *Questioning the Bible*, 97.

<sup>5</sup> Murrow, *Questioning the Bible*, 97.

<sup>6</sup> Wallace, "Has the New Testament Been Hopelessly Corrupted?" 148.

<sup>7</sup> Wallace, "Has the New Testament Text Been Hopelessly Corrupted?" 151, 152.

Have you ever been the victim of auto-correct on your phone? Have you ever texted back and forth with someone who apparently has bigger thumbs than the rest of us? In one way or another, we've all been either the victims or the perpetrators of very confusing text messages. Imagine you are in a text-message conversation with a friend who can't seem to get his message right, so he sends you the following three messages:

- Let's meet at Starbucks tomorrow near *Mane* Street
- Let's meet at Starbucks tomorrow near Main *Steer*
- Let's meet at *Starbakes* tomorrow near Main Street

When you look at these messages, there appear to be variants with the words: Main, Street, and Starbucks. Clearly, there are differences within the three messages with regard to these three words. But, just ask yourself: is there any confusion in your mind about what the sender intended to say? Even with three different messages containing three unique errors in them, the original message is clear: "Let's meet at Starbucks tomorrow near Main Street."

In the same way, scholars are able to compare the multiple copies of passages in the New Testament to determine their original meaning—even with the presence of variant readings. Consider the following example:

- I will never leav# you or forsake you
- I will never leave yo# or forsake you
- I will never leave you or f#rsake you

In each of these cases, you have a variant reading, but these variants in no way jeopardize our ability to know that the original message read, "I will never leave you or forsake you." Is this example a valid analogy to the variants in our New Testament manuscripts? Absolutely. Estimates vary, but the leading textual scholars in recent decades have estimated The New Testament is presently reconstructed with 98%–99.5% accuracy.<sup>8</sup>

Biblical scholar, Douglas Stuart once noted, "99 percent of the original words in the New Testament are recoverable with a very high degree of certainty...we may be confident that we are able to read, reflect upon, and act upon what is practically equivalent to the original itself."<sup>9</sup>

For the remaining percentage that is uncertain, there is *no single doctrine or command* that is in question. The small percentage of uncertainty remains in passages like Romans 5:1 where some manuscripts read, "*let us* have peace with God," while others read, "*we* have peace with God."

In other words, there is no confusion across our manuscripts with regard to core beliefs like the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, the Trinity, or any other essential Christian doctrine. Even the atheist New Testament scholar, Bart Ehrman, acknowledges this:

Most of the changes found in our early Christian manuscripts have nothing to do with theology or ideology. Far and away the most changes are the results of mistakes, pure and simple—slips of the pen, accidental omissions, inadvertent additions, misspelled words, blunders of one sort or another...Essential Christian beliefs are not affected by the textual variants in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 229.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Stuart, "Inerrancy and Textual Criticism," in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, ed. Roger R. Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 115, 116.

<sup>10</sup> Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, 55, appendix

## **Conclusion**

When we dig into the details, we discover a history of faithful transmission for the Biblical text. As scholars examine the textual history of the New Testament, they discover a remarkable amount of manuscript support. In effect, readers of the Bible can rest assured: what we read today is incredibly close to what was written back then.

# Historical Reliability

One of the fascinating features of The New Testament is the rich historical setting in which it was written. The stories of Jesus' life and ministry have been preserved for us in the Gospel accounts written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These accounts contain some very detailed features that have led many scholars to believe they are unique among other religious writings.

One implication of this is the claims of Christianity can be tested by history. They are not merely "once upon a time" or "in a land far, far away" stories. Rather, the claims and stories of Christianity can be examined and scrutinized on historical grounds. For many centuries now, people have rightly asked: can we trust the Bible? Is the Bible historically reliable?

When discerning the historical reliability of ancient documents, historians rely on a number of tests that help them evaluate the credibility of ancient documents. For our purposes, we'll focus in on four of those tests in the form of the following questions:

- Do We Have *Early* Testimony?
- Do We Have *Eyewitness* Testimony?
- Do We Have *Educated* Testimony?
- Do We Have *Embarrassing* Testimony?<sup>11</sup>

## Early Testimony?

In this test, we are asking if the writings of the New Testament were close to the events they record. Today, there is almost unanimous agreement among New Testament scholarship (believing and non-believing) that a majority of the New Testament documents were written within the first century.

When it comes to the letters of Peter, Paul, and the other apostles, there is virtually no debate whatsoever that these documents were written before or by AD 65—within thirty-five years of Jesus' life and ministry. In terms of historical proximity, that's *very* good.

The center of the debate regarding the early dating of the New Testament documents really focuses on the dating of the Gospels in particular. This primarily has to do with the fact that the Gospels contain the clearest and most elaborate traditions of Jesus that gave shape to the writings of Peter, Paul, and the other disciples (cf. John 16:12–15). As such, it is here that we'll spend most of our time.

At present, conservative estimates place the dating of the Gospels as follows:

- Mark: mid-late AD 50s
- Matthew: AD 50–60
- Luke: AD 58–60
- John: mid-late 80s or early 90s.<sup>12</sup>

As previously noted, these are conservative estimates that are not unanimously agreed upon. Some scholars date the Gospels even *earlier*. To give an example of why these scholars prefer an early date, some will point to Paul's use quotation of Luke in 1 Corinthians (1 Corinthians

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<sup>11</sup> This list is modified from Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 237 and C. Behan McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 19 especially tests 4 & 5.

<sup>12</sup> These dates come from Andreas J. Kostenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, The Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 229, 179, 256, 290.

11:23–26; cf. Luke 22:19–20). Virtually all scholars agree Paul wrote 1 Corinthians around 53–55 AD, so Luke’s Gospel must have been written *prior* to this time in order for Paul to quote from it.<sup>13</sup> However, more skeptical scholars like Bart Ehrman date the Gospels a bit later:

- Mark: AD 70
- Matthew and Luke: AD 80–85
- John: AD 90–95.<sup>14</sup>

For the average person each pair of dates could be troubling. If Jesus ministered around the year AD 30, then why did it take *decades* before the stories of His life were written down? Couldn’t legendary developments have crept in over this time? These are good questions. When considered in context of historical scholarship, however, neither of these collections is troubling.

In reality, both collections would count as *early* testimony. J.P. Moreland observes:

Even if these [later] dates for the Gospels are accepted, the Gospels were still written during the time when eyewitnesses who had seen Jesus and had experienced his ministry were alive. One would, therefore, still be on good historical grounds for treating them as solid historical sources.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, we are not obligated to accept these later dates. Even Bart Ehrman notes that these later dates are a “rough estimate.”<sup>16</sup> However, even if these are the best dates for the Gospels, this wouldn’t pose a problem. New Testament Scholar, Brant Pitre observes:

In our own times, in the last couple of decades, people who survived the Holocaust in the 1930s and 40s have been repeatedly interviewed precisely in order to record their memories of the events before their generation passes away. Yet some Holocaust survivors—such as Eli Wiesel, the famous author of *Night*—are still alive today, and we are well into the twenty-first century! In fact, Wiesel published two volumes of his memoirs in the late 1990s. In other words, some people die young; other people live long and write books.<sup>17</sup>

The point being: people have the ability to recount information that greatly matters to them—even if they write it down decades after the events took place. As we’ll see in a moment, this was all the more true for the disciples of Jesus. But for now, we simply observe that even if the Gospels *were* written late in the first century, this wouldn’t pose a problem for us to trust their historical accuracy.

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<sup>13</sup> J. Warner Wallace, *Cold Case Christianity A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2013), 165–170.

<sup>14</sup> Bart Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014), 92.

<sup>15</sup> J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 151.

<sup>16</sup> Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 90

<sup>17</sup> Brant Pitre, *The Case for Jesus*, 89

## Eyewitnesses Testimony?

Scholars and researchers are continually uncovering information that confirm the people, events, and stories recorded in the Bible. Speaking of John's Gospel in particular, New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg has documented 59 specific instances of historical reliability that indicate a strong eyewitness knowledge of Jesus' life and ministry.<sup>18</sup>

Speaking specifically of Luke's writings in his Gospel and the book of Acts, New Testament scholar Mark Strauss observes, "Particularly striking is Luke's attention to historical detail, providing names of cities and titles of government officials which are accurate for both time and place. This is especially significant since the names changed frequently."<sup>19</sup>

Consider the following example from Luke's Gospel:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, God's word came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. — Luke 3:1–2

Does this sound like a made-up story? Not at all. Luke is giving us precise information about people, dates, and key leaders who were known at this time. The original audience of this information would have been able to verify what Luke wrote if they wanted to. This means that Luke is writing as an eyewitness to the culture and times of the New Testament in the presence of *other* eyewitnesses of that same culture and time.

From a cultural standpoint, these surviving eyewitnesses could have provided resistance to the Christian movement by falsifying their historical claims. All they would have to do is point to the historical inaccuracies of the Gospel writers in order to discredit them and the information they shared. But, that's not what happened. Instead, as history shows us, the Christian movement flourished for centuries in the face of fierce persecution.

Luke goes on to explain that his tradition has been handed down by eyewitnesses, indicating he's not the first on the scene to give an account of Jesus' life and ministry. Notice what he says:

Many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed them down to us. It also seemed good to me, since I have carefully investigated everything from the very first, to write to you in an orderly sequence, most honorable Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed. — Luke 1:1–4

Notice a few things:

- Luke tells us that he's not the first to write about Jesus' life and ministry. Instead, "Many have undertaken to compile a narrative..."
- Luke has received his information from "the original eyewitness and servants of the word [who] handed them down to us"

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<sup>18</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 69–281.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus*, 386.

- Luke decided that he would “carefully [investigate] everything from the first.” Why? So that he could write “an orderly sequence” of the events.”
- Furthermore, Luke indicates that he is writing actual history. He tells his audience (Theophilus—probably a Roman official) that after reading Luke’s account, he can “know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed.”

When you compare Luke’s Gospel with Matthew and Mark’s, there is a substantial degree of overlap between them. As such, it’s not hard to imagine who some of these “original eyewitnesses and servants of the word” may have been. Indeed, “Luke often repeated or quoted entire passages that were offered previously by either Mark (350 verses from Mark appear in Luke’s gospel) or Matthew (250 verses from Matthew appear in Luke’s account).”<sup>20</sup>

It’s also interesting to note that the message each of these men wrote down was originally a message that was *verbally proclaimed* decades beforehand. At the heart of this proclamation was the resurrection of Jesus, which Luke tells us in the Book of Acts was proclaimed within weeks of Jesus’ crucifixion (Acts 2:14–41).

Not only was this message *proclaimed* early, but it was *believed* early—even by those who opposed Jesus. In other words, *Jews* who were in favor of killing Jesus became some of the first people to repent and believe that He had risen from the dead. Peter tells them: “Therefore let all the house of Israel know with certainty that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah (a distinctly Jewish term)” (Acts 2:36). How do they respond? Luke tells us:

When they heard this, they were pierced to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles: “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he testified and strongly urged them, saying, “Be saved from this corrupt generation!” So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about *three thousand people* were added to them. — Acts 2:37–41

People who were *hostile eyewitnesses* to Jesus ministry became some of the first converts. This is strong evidence of historical reliability. Were it not true, the earliest readers of this would have been able to easily discredit it as a fabrication of events that took place.

William Lane Craig, a prominent New Testament scholar, summarizes it well:

The Gospels were written in such temporal and geographic proximity to the events they record that it would have been almost impossible to fabricate events. Anyone who cared to could have checked out the accuracy of what they reported. The fact that the disciples were able to proclaim the resurrection in Jerusalem in the face of their enemies a few weeks after the crucifixion shows that what they proclaimed was true, for they could never have proclaimed the resurrection under such circumstances had it not occurred.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> J. Warner Wallace, *Cold Case Christianity*, 166. The second century church father Papias tells us that “Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ.” [Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.15, cited in *Strauss, Four Portraits, One Jesus*, 201]. Furthermore, there’s good reason to believe that the author of Matthew’s Gospel is the Matthew mentioned in Matthew 9:9 who became a follower of Jesus after being a tax collector. This evidence is not entirely conclusive, but it has broad support amongst scholars. Moreover, “The early church unanimously affirmed that the Gospel was authored by the apostle Matthew.” [Kostenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *The Cradle, The Cross, and the Crown*, 184].

<sup>21</sup> William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 341.

## Educated Testimony?

It's not uncommon to read internet writers declaring that we can't trust the Bible because it was written by a bunch of un-educated, un-enlightened Jewish peasants. Are the Gospels simply the work of ancient peasants who were making up a story?

Luke seems to indicate so when he says, "When they [the Jewish leaders] observed the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were *uneducated* and *untrained* men, they were amazed and recognized that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). What do we do with this?

These are good questions, but they are easily cleared up when considering a couple of features that characterized the intelligence of the Gospel writers:

### *1. The Gospel-writers wrote down stories that were imbedded in their memories.*

One reason the Gospels are written decades after Jesus' life is because the church was under constant persecution. Moreover, they were convinced that Jesus would return any day to alleviate their suffering. As such, their re-telling of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection would have primarily come through *verbal* proclamation.

Eventually, these early disciples realized the need to write down these accounts of Jesus' life and put them into circulation among the Christian communities. By constantly retelling the stories of Jesus through verbal proclamation, the Gospel writers would have developed a strong recall of the events they spoke about, thus enhancing their ability to accurately retell what they eventually wrote down.<sup>22</sup>

### *2. The Gospel writers had highly developed memory skills*

As modern people, we often take for granted the information constantly available to us. In the age of personalized calendars and instant alerts, we are very used to having things remembered for us. Prior to the modern era, however, people lived in cultures where they had to remember things for themselves.

New Testament scholar, Mark Strauss also observes that, "Ancient people tended to have better memories than we have today, and the oral tradition was considered to be as high as, and sometimes higher than written sources."<sup>23</sup> In no culture was this truer than ancient Israel. William Lane Craig points out:

In an oral culture like that of the first century, Israel, the ability to memorize and retain large tracts of oral tradition was a highly prized and highly developed skill. From the earliest age children in the home, elementary school, and the synagogue were taught to faithfully memorize sacred tradition.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Richard Bauckham notes, "Frequent recall is an important factor in both retaining the memory and retaining it accurately." *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels are Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006), 334.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 55.

<sup>24</sup> William Lane Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010), 189.

It's hard to believe, but ancient "rabbis were encouraged to memorize the *entire* Hebrew Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament), plus a sizable body of oral laws that grew up around them. Elementary education, mandatory for many Jewish boys from age five to twelve or thirteen, was entirely by *rote memory*; and only one topic was studied, the Bible."<sup>25</sup>

In other words: ancient Jewish culture was a culture that was highly developed in its ability to memorize and transmit sacred Scripture. This was the culture of Jesus' disciples. They were not uneducated peasants as some have claimed. Even if their occupational or social status wasn't very impressive, their educational abilities were just the opposite.

While they could not formally teach or interpret the Old Testament in the synagogues (Acts 4:13), their religious education still required them to know the Old Testament by heart. Think about that: could you imagine knowing Genesis, Exodus, or Proverbs *by memory*? Jesus' disciples did and it was just simply a part of their religious upbringing. As one scholar has noted:

Disciples in early Jewish settings were learners, and, yes, also reciters and memorizers. This was the way Jewish educational processes worked. In fact it was the staple of all ancient education, including Greco-Roman education....those who handed on the tradition would not have seen themselves primarily as creators but as preservers...<sup>26</sup>

Not only were these men highly developed in their ability to memorize sacred Scripture, but they would have understood Jesus' invitation to be His follower as a special invitation to study under a Jewish rabbi (see Mark 14:45; John 3:2). While Jesus did not receive formal training in the Jewish rabbinical setting (see John 7:15) the invitations and teachings He gave indicate He understood Himself to be the true and better Rabbi (master) who spoke on God's behalf—and the disciples believed Him.

As one scholar has noted, "Following Jesus as his disciple meant leaving behind one's home, parents, and livelihood. One could not follow Jesus simply by staying at home and studying his teachings or by going to his schoolhouse and attending his lectures."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, "Where Do we Start Studying Jesus?," in *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, ed. Michael J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 34–35. S When Luke tells us that the Jewish leaders were amazed at the boldness of Peter and John because they were "uneducated and untrained men," he's not saying they were ignorant peasants who can't be trusted. Instead, he's simply observing that unlike the Jewish leaders, Peter and John were not trained as formal Rabbis like the Jewish leaders were. The *ESV Study Bible* puts it well, "Uneducated and common ("nonprofessional") men like Peter and John were not expected to speak so confidently before the supreme court of the land. The two words do not mean that they were illiterate or unintelligent but rather that they had not gone through the advanced training of the rabbinic schools." *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway: 2008), Notes on Acts 4:13

<sup>26</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), 48, 80.

<sup>27</sup> John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 4. Vols., Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991, 1994, 2001, 2009), 3.53.

## Embarrassing Testimony?

One final test of reliability is the principle of embarrassment. Historians use this test to determine how trustworthy an ancient source is, because if a writer includes embarrassing details about himself, then it is probably accurate. How so?

Michael Patton puts it well:

Most people don't make stories up about losing a fight or being the bank employee who failed to lock the safe the night before. We normally cover up our mistakes or embarrassments in order to look more polished. When someone gets pulled over by the police late at night and the officer asks if they have been drinking, they would not say they had been drinking if they really had not. People don't lie on resumes and say they did not graduate high school when, in fact, they have a masters degree.

In the ancient world, this was no different. It was the tendency to omit, change, or lie about things that would bring shame upon the writer or his community. When histories are written by a nation, those in power want their nation to look as good as possible; therefore, they only include accounts that put them in the best possible light...

The basic idea is this: people always want to put their best foot forward when introducing themselves. How much more would we expect this to be the case in the Bible when the first Christians are attempting to convert others to Christianity?<sup>28</sup>

Philosopher J.P. Moreland agrees with this and notes, "If a document contains features which are embarrassing or counterproductive to the purpose for which it was written, then it has a high probability of being historical. There would be no sufficient reason other than their facticity for including such feature"<sup>29</sup>

When we come to the New Testament writers, we would expect them to portray themselves in the most positive light if they are fabricating the information. However, what we find is that they repeatedly describe themselves in a *negative* light. For example, the Gospel writers describe themselves and the other disciples as:

- *Dim-witted*: They fail to understand what Jesus is saying *multiple times*. (Mark 9:32, Luke 18:34, John 12:16)
- *Uncaring*: They fall asleep on Jesus twice while He's agonizing in the garden (Matthew 26:40–43).
- *Cowards*: They run away from Jesus when He is on trial (Mark 14:50). Peter denies Christ three times (Mark 16:66–72), and the women are the brave ones who visit Jesus' tomb (Luke 24:1–12).

This last observation about women being the ones to visit Jesus' tomb is very important. All the Gospels agree that women were the first eyewitnesses to Jesus' empty tomb. This would create a problem for the disciples if they were making up a story. Why? Because in the first century, women were not given the same status as men when they testified in a court of law (or almost any setting).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> C. Michael Patton, "8 Reasons the Gospels are Embarrassing," *Credo House Blog*, February 2, 2016, accessed September 4, 2018 <https://credohouse.org/blog/why-the-gospels-are-embarrassing>

<sup>29</sup> *Scaling the Secular City*, 146.

<sup>30</sup> Josephus—the most prominent first century Jewish historian—put it this way, "But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity [lack of seriousness] and boldness of their sex...since it is probable that they may not speak truth, either out of hope of gain, or fear of punishment." *Antiquities*, 4.8.15, quoted in Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004), 72.

Listing women as the principle eyewitnesses could've easily undermined their entire message—a risk not likely to be taken by a group of men trying to start a new movement. As McDowell and McDowell note:

If one were to fabricate an empty tomb and risen Jesus in first-century Mediterranean culture, one would not cite women as eyewitnesses, given their low status as credible witnesses in the eyes of the people and the courts. It is therefore reasonable to think that what is recorded actually happened. Why would the gospel writers make up these details to support their story? ... If they were making up a tale, they would not begin it with a story to cast their new religion in such a poor light. It would not be a proper way to begin their myth. Scripture's identification of women as the first witnesses of the empty tomb thus supports the historical veracity of the accounts.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

We have very strong reasons to believe the New Testament documents are historically reliable. Whatever questions remain, we can be confident they were written *early*, by *eyewitnesses*, who were *educated*, and who even included *embarrassing* details instead of fabricating information to cover their backs. Taken together, this information provides a cumulative case for the historical reliability of the New Testament.

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<sup>31</sup> Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017), 261. Likewise, Craig Keener writes, “The witness of women at the tomb is very likely historical, precisely because it was so offensive to the larger culture — not the sort of testimony one would invent. Not all testimony was regarded as being of equal merit; the trustworthiness of witnesses was considered essential. Yet most of Jesus’ Jewish contemporaries held much less esteem for the testimony of women than for that of men; this suspicion reflects a broader Mediterranean limited trust of women’s speech and testimony also enshrined in Roman law. Indeed, the male disciples are said not to believe the women (Luke 24:11)...Most [therefore] judge the report that the women are the first witnesses of the resurrection message to be historically accurate.” Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 331.

## Jesus and the Resurrection

The Christian faith is a faith grounded in history. While the Christian faith is certainly *more* than a historical faith, it is certainly not anything *less*. Without the literal, bodily, historical resurrection of Jesus from the grave, there is no Christianity (1 Corinthians 15:12–19).

In one of the earliest letters written to an early church, the apostle Paul declared that Christ was truly raised from the dead and this fact is central to the gospel-message of Christianity.

For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: 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, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. Then he appeared to over five hundred brothers and sisters at one time; most of them are still alive, but some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one born at the wrong time, he also appeared to me.  
— 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 CSB

Scholars are almost unanimous in dating the writing of 1 Corinthians to between 53–55 AD, which means that within about twenty years of Jesus’ ministry, the apostle Paul was declaring the physical resurrection of Jesus from the grave. Moreover, Paul was declaring that Jesus “appeared” to numerous people, even “over five hundred brothers and sisters at one time.”

These are very interesting claims. The question we want to ask here is: *are they true?* Is there any historical reason to believe that Jesus did in fact live, die, and rise again? Is there any historical *evidence* for the notion that Jesus may have appeared to people after he died?

In this article, we’re going to explore some of the common reasons why people reject the claim that Jesus rose from the dead and then examine a positive case for believing that Jesus rose from the dead.

### Was Jesus a Copycat?

One of the most common reasons for objecting to the historical resurrection of Jesus is the claim that Jesus is just a copycat savior. This argument is especially popular on the internet, although most historical scholars don’t take it very seriously.

The argument goes like this: long before Christianity was around, there were various pagan religions who worshiped some kind of dying and rising savior. The New Testament writers simply borrowed and adapted these stories to describe Jesus and establish a new religion.

For example, take a look at this impressive list of attributes ascribed to one of the ancient Persian mystery-saviors:

- Born of a Virgin
- Born in a cave
- Traveling teacher
- Had 12 disciples
- Sacrificed himself
- Rose from the grave

At first glance, any normal person would say these descriptions match well with the historical description of Jesus. But, this is actually the description of the ancient Persian god, Mithras, who lived around 1200 B.C. Mithras is just one example of several ancient “savior-gods” that

could be mentioned—all of whom shared almost identical features to the story we know as the story of Jesus and Christianity.

Proponents of this argument advocate that the writers of the New Testament copied and pasted these descriptions to Jesus, creating their own version of a legendary myth-religion. The end result is a Jesus that is not unique, not authentic, and not the Lord of our lives. In his book, *The Pagan Christ*, Tom Harpur makes this point very clear when he says:

There is nothing the Jesus of the Gospels either said or did... that cannot be shown to have originated thousands of years before, in Egyptian Mystery rites and other sacred liturgies...Not one single doctrine, rite, tenet, or usage in Christianity was in reality a fresh contribution to the world...The Church converted a whole mass of romantic legends or myths into so-called history, a multiplication of "fictitious stories." What emerged was in many ways a cult of ignorance.<sup>32</sup>

If Harpur is correct, then Christians may as well stop gathering on Sunday to worship Jesus. Instead, we ought to turn our attention to other matters and be on our way. As the apostle Paul said, "If the dead are not raised, then 'let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'" (1 Corinthians 15:32).

But before we jump to conclusions, let's just ask some honest questions: is any of this *true*? Is there any *evidence* for these parallels? Contrary to Harpur and many bloggers on the Internet, virtually no serious scholar takes this position seriously. Why? Because scholars have long-known that the descriptions popularly ascribed to these ancient mystery gods has almost *zero* historical evidence to support them. These arguments are often based on *assertion*, not *evidence*.

For example, when you look at the actual evidence we have for Mithras, what you discover is that he:

- Was born out of a rock (*not a virgin*).
- He didn't have 12 disciples.
- He didn't sacrifice himself, but he may have sacrificed a bull.
- We don't know anything about his death (*there was no resurrection*).<sup>33</sup>

As you can see, the historical evidence doesn't demonstrate a parallel between Mithras and Jesus. When we consider some of the more central claims about the death of Jesus in particular, we further realize these mystery religions had little-to-nothing in common with the kind of death Jesus is said to experience in the New Testament. For example:<sup>34</sup>

1. They are not *sacrificial*: Unlike Jesus, none of the other mystery-saviors die in place of someone else (see Romans 3:21–26; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 John 4:10).
2. They are not *global*: Unlike Jesus, the mystery-saviors do not die on behalf of the whole world. Instead, their deaths provided a limited benefit to people within a specific geographic locale (cf. John 3:16–18; 1 John 2:1–2).
3. They are not *singular*: Unlike Jesus, the mystery-saviors follow a cyclical pattern of dying & rising mimics the agricultural cycles for planting & harvesting crops (John 19:30; Hebrews 7:25–27)

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<sup>32</sup> Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ* (New York: Walker and Company 2004), 10.

<sup>33</sup>J. Warner Wallace, "Is Jesus Simply A Retelling of Mithras Mythology?" *Cold Case Christianity Website*, May 5, 2014, accessed October 15, 2016 <http://coldcasechristianity.com/2014/is-jesus-simply-a-retelling-of-the-mithras-mythology/>

<sup>34</sup> The following points are adapted from Ronald Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2003), 160–61.

4. They are not *historical*: Unlike Jesus, the stories about the mystery-saviors are not grounded in historical documents that can be cross-checked with other sources (Luke 1:1–4; 3:1–2).<sup>35</sup>
5. They are not *loving*: Unlike Jesus, the mystery-saviors do not voluntarily lay down their life as an act of compassion or love (John 3:16–18; 10:17–18; 1 John 4:10)<sup>36</sup>

In light of these obvious contrasts, why is the “copycat” thesis so popular? Ronald Nash helps us understand:

During a period of time running roughly from about 1890 to 1940, scholars often alleged that primitive Christianity had been heavily influenced by...pagan mystery religions... [However], largely as a result of a series of scholarly books and articles written in rebuttal, allegations of early Christianity’s dependence on its Hellenistic environment began to appear much less frequently in the publications of [various scholars]. Today most Bible scholars regard the question as a dead issue.<sup>37</sup>

According to Nash, even though this argument was dealt with long ago in the hallways of scholarship, the refutations have taken a long time to become mainstream in our culture. This is not too surprising, given that it often takes a few decades for matters of academic dispute to reach its way to popular circles.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, it is sad that some of those who promote this argument don’t take the time to investigate the credible responses made to it. In his book, *The Gospel and Greeks*, Nash looks at each potential parallel with ancient pagan religions to see if they truly compare to the Jesus of Christianity. The end result is that these mystery religions aren’t even in the same category as New Testament Christianity.<sup>39</sup>

Nash’s book is only one example of books written to demonstrate the uniqueness of the historical Jesus, but the general consensus of scholarship on this subject is: there is simply no historical evidence that connects Jesus and pagan mystery religions with each other. Even the agnostic New Testament scholar, Bart Ehrman acknowledges this when he says, “...the claim that Jesus was simply made up falters on every ground. The alleged parallels between Jesus and the “pagan” savior-gods in most instances reside in the modern imagination.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Nash observes, “Jesus’ death was an actual event in history. The death of the god described in pagan cults is a mythical drama with no historical ties; its continued rehearsal celebrates the recurring death and rebirth of nature...the early church believed that its proclamation of Jesus’ death and resurrection was grounded upon what actually happened in history.” *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 161.

<sup>36</sup> J. Gresham Machen observed, “‘He loves me’ says Paul, ‘and gave himself for me.’ There is absolutely nothing like that conception in the case of the pagan religions. Osiris, Adonis, and Attis were overtaken by their fate; Jesus gave his life freely away.” *The Origin of Paul’s Religion* (New York: McMillan, 1921), 315.

<sup>37</sup>Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, 1.

<sup>38</sup>William Lane Craig, “In Intellectual Neutral,” in William Lane Craig and Paul Copan, ed., *Passionate Conviction* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman and Holman, 2007) 2–16 accessed online on October 14, 2016 <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/apologetics-ministry-advice-to-christian-apologists>

<sup>39</sup> Rhodes-Eddy and Boyd observe, “The differences between Christianity and the mystery religions are far more pronounced than any similarities. While there are certainly parallel *terms* used in early Christianity and the mystery religions, there is little evidence for parallel *concepts*. For example...both Christianity and the mystery religious spoke of salvation—as do many religions throughout history. But what early Christians meant by this term had little in common with what devotees of mystery religions meant by it. To site just one difference, there was in the mystery religions nothing similar to Paul’s idea that disciples participate in the death and resurrection of their Savior and are adopted as God’s children by placing their trust in him.” Paul R. Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 142.

<sup>40</sup>Bart Ehrman, “Did Jesus Exist?” *The Huffington Post*, March 20, 2012, accessed October 17, 2016 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bart-d-ehrman/did-jesus-exist\\_b\\_1349544.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bart-d-ehrman/did-jesus-exist_b_1349544.html)

## A Resurrection? Really?

With this issue aside, we must still answer the question: is there any *positive* evidence for the resurrection of Jesus? To answer that question, we must further ask: what can we know about the events surrounding the rise of the early church?

In search of an answer, many scholars have utilized what they call a “minimal facts” argument.<sup>41</sup> The essence of this argument is that we can know with a high degree of certainty a *bare minimum* of facts surrounding the rise of the early church. These facts are widely agreed upon by both skeptical and believing scholars in the relevant disciplines of history and New Testament studies. It’s important to clarify: while the skeptical scholars don’t believe a resurrection accounts for the facts, they still believe in these facts.<sup>42</sup>

This argument is helpful because it establishes a common ground that both believers and non-believers can agree on. Once this common ground is established, the question becomes: what’s the best explanation of the facts? Since we’re all looking at the same information, what’s the best conclusion we can draw? Here are four of those facts:

1. After his crucifixion, Jesus’ empty tomb was discovered by a group of his women followers.
2. After his crucifixion, various people reported appearances of Jesus.
3. The earliest followers of Jesus sincerely came to believe God raised Jesus from the dead.
4. Saul of Tarsus converted to Christianity and became the apostle Paul.

Again, these facts are just four of the minimal facts (there’s about 12 in total) that scholars—believing and non-believing—say we can believe with a high degree of historical certainty. The question is: what is the best explanation of these facts?

Over the years, much has been written to explain these facts apart from appealing to supernatural intervention of any kind. We’ll examine two of them.

### Explanation #1: Conspiracy

This explanation amounts to saying the disciples lied about Jesus’ resurrection in order to gain some form of political or social advantage. In other words, it’s an explicit rejection of fact #3.

Let’s consider this scenario for moment: the disciples have just witnessed their leader brutally crucified at the hands of the Romans. They are in hiding, afraid that the Jews or the Romans might come for them next (see Matthew 26:56; Mark 14:15; John 20:19). But then one of the disciples (probably Peter) gets the bright idea to come out of hiding and publicly confront these people with the same message that got Jesus killed. Not only that, but they decide to announce that the physical resurrection of Jesus is clear evidence that God endorses Jesus as His unique messenger. By implication, God endorses the very message Jesus proclaimed and everyone—Jews and Gentiles—need to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus, otherwise they will fall under the eternal judgment of God (Acts 2:32–41).

Here’s the point: this scenario is incredibly unlikely. Additionally, to believe the disciples lied about the resurrection requires us to believe that they fabricated a story for *no benefit whatsoever*. The disciples knew they had nothing to gain by making up such a story—no

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<sup>41</sup>Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004), 43–77 and William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 361–370.

<sup>42</sup> To learn more about the reasons and background to this argument, see William Lane Craig, “The Resurrection of Jesus,” *Reasonable Faith Website*; Amy K. Hall, “Where Did These Minimal Facts about the Resurrection Come From?” *Stand to Reason Website*, July 26, 2014.

political power, no financial reward, and no social advantage. Quite the contrary, history shows that the disciples proclaimed the resurrected Jesus to their deaths. They all died alone, poor, and unpopular.<sup>43</sup>

The reason why fact #3 is so well supported among historical scholars is because *liars make terrible martyrs*. You may go to your death for what you *believe* to be true, but you don't go to your death for what you *know* is a lie. In order to believe the disciples lied about the resurrection, you have to believe they went to their deaths for a known lie and that no one cracked under the pressure of persecution.<sup>44</sup>

This evidence alone leads many scholars to conclude the disciples sincerely believed God raise Jesus from the dead. That doesn't demonstrate that God *actually* raised Jesus from the dead; but the disciples *belief* in Jesus' resurrection is hard to deny given the powerful personal transformations they experienced. William Lane Craig notes:

Critics...have universally recognized, one cannot plausibly deny that the earliest disciples at least sincerely believed that Jesus was risen from the dead, a conviction on which they staked their very lives...The transformation in the lives of the disciples is not credibly explained by the hypothesis of a conspiracy. This shortcoming alone has been enough in the minds of most scholars to sink the old Conspiracy Hypothesis.<sup>45</sup>

Pinchas Lapide was a New Testament scholar who was also an Orthodox Jew. While Lapide didn't believe Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, he did believe the resurrection of Jesus best explained the historical evidence. At one point, he observed how astonishing it would have been for this early band of Jewish disciples to believe God raised Jesus from the dead without some kind of supernatural event.

If the defeated and depressed group of disciples overnight could change into a victorious movement of faith, based only on autosuggestion or self-deception—without a fundamental faith experience—then this would be a much greater miracle than the resurrection itself. In a purely logical analysis, the resurrection of Jesus is “the lesser of two evils” for all those who seek a rational explanation of the worldwide consequences of the Easter faith. The true miracle is that this Jewish group of Jesus' followers came to faith .... Any kind of deception is excluded in any case, be it the theft of the body, trance, or the invention of a miracle.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to this, proponents of the conspiracy hypothesis must explain fact #2: how numerous people came to have some kind of supernatural experience of Jesus after his crucifixion. While skeptical scholars don't believe these experiences are explicable in terms of a literal resurrection from the dead, almost everyone agrees these people experienced *something*.

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<sup>43</sup> McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, 360–367.

<sup>44</sup>For additional study on this claim, see Sean McDowell, “Were the Apostles of Jesus Misguided?” *SeanMcDowell.org*, December 8, 2015.

<sup>45</sup>Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 372.

<sup>46</sup> Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 126. More recently, religion scholar Reza Aslan made the following claim, “One could simply . . . dismiss the resurrection as a lie, and declare belief in the risen Jesus to be the product of a deludable mind. However, there is this nagging fact to consider: one after another of those who claimed to have witnessed the risen Jesus went to their own gruesome deaths refusing to recant their testimony. That is not, in itself, unusual. Many zealous Jews died horribly for refusing to deny their beliefs. But these first followers of Jesus were not being asked to reject matters of faith based on events that took place centuries, if not millennia, before. They were being asked to deny something they themselves personally, directly encountered.” *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Random House, 2013), 174

Gurd Ludeman, an agnostic New Testament scholar, notes that, “It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus’ death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ.”<sup>47</sup> Norman Perin, who was a New Testament scholar at the University of Chicago, once noted, “The more we study the tradition with regard to the appearances, the firmer the rock begins to appear upon which they are based.”<sup>48</sup> Michael Licona helpfully summarizes the state of historical scholarship on this issue:

Historians may conclude that, subsequent to Jesus’ death by crucifixion, a number of his followers had experiences in individual and group settings that convinced them Jesus had risen from the dead and had appeared to them. We may affirm with great confidence that Peter had such an experience in an individual setting, and ... the same may be said of an adversary of the church named Paul. We may likewise affirm that there was at least one occasion when a group of Jesus’ followers including “the Twelve” had such an experience... This conclusion is granted by nearly unanimous consensus of modern scholars and may therefore be added to our “historical bedrock.”<sup>49</sup>

## Explanation #2: Hallucinations

The second explanation for the four facts above is one commonly known as the hallucination theory or the hallucination hypothesis. In the history of discussion on the resurrection, this explanation is the most popular counter-theory to the belief that God raised Jesus from the dead. Like the Conspiracy hypothesis above, the problems with this theory are many. Let’s observe a few:

First, while this theory might explain the motivation of the *disciples* to die for their belief, it would not explain the rise of early Christianity in the city in which Jesus was killed. William Lane Craig drives home the point when he says:

The Gospels were written in such temporal and geographic proximity to the events they record that it would have been almost impossible to fabricate events. Anyone who cared to could have checked out the accuracy of what they reported. The fact that the disciples were able to proclaim the resurrection in Jerusalem in the face of their enemies a few weeks after the crucifixion shows that what they proclaimed was true, for they could never have proclaimed the resurrection under such circumstances had it not occurred.<sup>50</sup>

In the presence of a hostile audience, the disciples of Jesus were able to proclaim the tomb of Jesus was empty. If there was one thing the people could’ve done to silence these disciples was go to the tomb and verify that Jesus’ body was present. If it was, they could’ve let the evidence speak for itself, or they could’ve exhumed the body and paraded it around the city. If they wanted to prevent an uprising or put a stop to a new movement, either of these options would’ve been readily accepted by the authorities in Jerusalem.

But that’s not what happened. In fact, Matthew tells us the authorities acknowledged the tomb was empty by trying to tell people that the disciples stole the body (Matt. 28:11–15). The problem is easy to see: if you have hallucinating disciples, then you have an *entombed Jesus*. If you have an entombed Jesus, then you don’t get thousands of converts in the city he was killed

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<sup>47</sup>Gerd Ludemann, *What Really Happened to Jesus?*, trans. John Bowden (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 8.

<sup>48</sup>Norman Perin, *The Resurrection according to Matthew, Mark ,and Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 80.

<sup>49</sup> Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 372.

<sup>50</sup>Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 341

(Acts 2:42–47) and you most certainly don't get a new worldwide movement that became the most widespread religious movement in the history of the world. N.T. Wright observes:

We may insist...that whatever else had happened, if the body of Jesus of Nazareth had remained in the tomb there would have been no early Christian belief of the sort we have discovered...Many other Jewish leaders, heroes and would-be Messiahs died within the same [time-period], but in no case did anyone suggest that they had been raised from the dead...The specific faith of the earliest Christians could not have been generated by a set of circumstances in which an empty tomb did not play a part.<sup>51</sup>

The first problem with the Hallucination theory is the problem of the empty tomb. The second problem is a general problem about the nature hallucinations altogether. Psychologists have noted that hallucinations rarely (if ever) occur among groups of people and if they did, groups of people would never experience the *exact same* hallucination. In this regard, hallucinations are a lot like dreams: they are subjective mental events that are unique to each person. They are not shareable or reproducible among groups of people. Dr. Gary Collins, the former president for the National Association of American Psychologists, has noted:

Hallucinations are individual occurrences. By their very nature only one person can see any given hallucination at a time. They certainly are not something which can be seen by a group of people. Neither is it possible that one person could somehow induce a hallucination in somebody else. Since hallucinations exist only in the subjective personal sense, it is obvious that others cannot witness it.<sup>52</sup>

In order to believe the disciples and the townspeople in Jerusalem experienced the same hallucination, you have to believe that multiple people and multiple *types* of people (eg. believers like Peter vs. non-believers like Saul of Tarsus) had the same hallucination of Jesus. Such a theory flies in the face of what the scientific evidence suggests.

Along with this problem of hallucinations is the fact that hallucinations are often experienced by people who fit a particular description. Licona summarizes the evidence: They are typically *female, elderly, and grieving* the loss of a loved one. As such “Approximately 15 percent of the general population will experience one or more hallucinations in their lifetime...[But] it should be of no surprise to learn that senior adults who are grieving the loss of a loved one are among those most likely to experience a hallucination.”<sup>53</sup>

Now, let's consider how this relates to the disciples. At most, the disciples could be described as individuals in a grieving state after they lost Jesus to a brutal and public form of execution. However, these men were not females and they were not elderly. Moreover, it's not hard to imagine *one* of the disciples experiencing a grief-hallucination, but the odds of *all* of them experiencing this are slim given how seldom hallucinations occur.

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<sup>51</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 695.

<sup>52</sup> Gary Collins, quoted in J.P. Moreland and Gary Habermas, *Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 119–120. Clinical Psychologist Gary Sibcy likewise notes, “I have surveyed the professional literature (peer-reviewed journal articles and books) written by psychologists, psychiatrists, and other relevant healthcare professionals during the past two decades and have *yet to find a single documented case of a group hallucinations*, that is, an event for which more than one person purportedly shared in a visual or other sensory perception where there was clearly no external reference.” quoted in Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 484 (Personal Correspondence)

<sup>53</sup> Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 483–84.

The problem becomes even worse, however, when we consider how this would apply to the hostile audiences who became followers of Jesus. None of these criteria would fit the hostile Jewish authorities in Jerusalem and they most certainly wouldn't describe one person in particular: Saul of Tarsus.

Saul was a passionate persecutor of the church and was eager to stamp out the Christian movement (Acts 7:58–8:3; 9:1; 1 Corinthians 15:10; 1 Timothy 1:15–17). If anybody *wasn't* grieved by the crucifixion of Jesus, it was Saul. If anybody *wasn't* predisposed to believe in the resurrection of Jesus, it was Saul.

One day when Saul was on his way to persecute more Christians, something happened. William Lane Craig summarizes the event and its implications:

The incident on the Damascus Road changed Saul's whole life. He was a rabbi, a Pharisee, a respected Jewish leader. He hated the Christian heresy and did everything he could to stamp it out...he was even responsible for the execution of Christian believers! Then suddenly, he gave up everything—including his position as a respected Jewish leader— and became a Christian missionary. He entered a life of poverty, labor, and suffering. He was whipped, beaten, and stoned; left for dead; shipwrecked three times; and remained in constant danger, deprivation, and anxiety. Finally, he made the ultimate sacrifice and was martyred for his faith at Rome. And it was all because on that day outside Damascus, he saw “Jesus our Lord” (I Cor. 9: 1).<sup>54</sup>

The reason why the conversion of Saul of Tarsus to become the apostle Paul is considered one of the four “minimal facts” of the resurrection is because this conversion is so hard to explain outside of a significant event like what we find described in the New Testament. A grief-hallucination simply won't fit the bill and one is hard pressed to demonstrate why Saul would trade everything to be involved in a self-defeating conspiracy. The better explanation of the historical data is that something happened that fundamentally changed the lives of these men and swept of the ancient world in its wake.

## **The Power of the Resurrection**

It's beyond question that the resurrection of Jesus is the central event in New Testament theology. Everything leads to it and everything flows from it. It's the pivotal event in the Biblical story and the stunning reversal in the great battle against good and evil.

When we examine the historical record about this event, we discover several things: first there is a good historical bedrock of scholarly consensus about certain events that took place surrounding the early church's confession that God raised Jesus from the dead. This historical bedrock is known as the “minimal facts” and they give us a common ground by which to discuss the evidence with each other.

Additionally, when we look for naturalistic explanations to these facts, the impression we're left with is that there are more problems to believing them than with believing the historical confession that God raised Jesus from the dead.

Finally, the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead genuinely explains all four of these facts in the following ways:

- *Explanatory Power*: the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead better explains each of the four facts individually and lacks the problems associated with naturalistic counter-theories.

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<sup>54</sup> *Did Jesus Rise From the Dead?* (Impact 360 Institute, 2014), Kindle Locations: 623–627.

- *Explanatory Scope*: the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead better explains all of the facts and the surrounding details involved in them than any of the counter-theories.
- *Simplicity*: the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead is not contrived or overly-complex, but explains these four facts without having to conjure up far-fetched scenarios.

In the end, there is good evidence to believe that Christ has indeed been raised from the dead—as the apostle Paul declared in 1 Corinthians 15. For these reasons we can have genuine hope that our faith is not grounded in wishful thinking, but in the actual events God brought about in time-space history.

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## Appendix #1: Addressing the Miracle Objection

One of the main reasons why non-Christian scholars don't believe God raised Jesus from the dead is because by definition, the resurrection would be a miracle. In the eyes of many, this simply cannot be what happened, because we live in an age that only accepts *naturally* provable explanations. Bart Ehrman articulates this view quite well when he says:

The resurrection claims...not only that Jesus' body came back alive; it came back alive never to die again. That's a violation of what naturally happens, every day, time after time, millions of times a year. What are the chances of that happening? Well, it'd be a miracle... and by definition, a miracle is the least probable occurrence.<sup>55</sup>

While Ehrman is right to point out that by definition a miracle is something that is rare, that doesn't mean that it's not a plausible explanation. Just because something is rare doesn't mean it didn't happen. On this logic, we'd have to rule out a number of events from happening—the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, the creation of Avengers: Infinity War, and even the individual birth of a person!

You cannot rule out an explanation simply because it's rare. Moreover, when you have a strong body of evidence that testifies to a miraculous event, the most responsible thing you can do is examine the evidence. Doug Groothuis observes:

The likelihood of... a miracle occurring is generally quite low. Yet, if we (1) have good evidence for the existence of a supernatural God who could work a miracle and (2) have a constellation of evidence supporting a miracle claim (as we do with Jesus' resurrection), the likelihood increases considerably.<sup>56</sup>

While it is true that many reject the evidence for the Jesus' resurrection, they often do so because of an anti-supernatural bias that leads them to rule out the possibility of miracles from the beginning. It should come as no surprise then that many New Testament scholars rule out the resurrection when they employ this method of research. Their anti-supernatural framework will simply not allow for a miracle.

Yet, the problem remains for them to devise a plausible explanation for the events that occurred after Jesus' crucifixion. Why did the disciples die for their faith? Why were thousands of people converted to belief in a resurrected Christ in the very city he was crucified in? Why did so many people have experiences of the risen Jesus when such experiences defy the boundaries of a hallucination?

A very good explanation of all the evidence is that God raised Jesus from the dead. No other theory accurately explains either the scope or the depth of the facts as the miracle of the resurrection does. Anyone is welcome to reject this conclusion and hold out for the possibility of natural explanation one day, but this would have to be done *in spite* of the evidence we have, not *because of* it.

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<sup>55</sup>Quoting from Barth Ehrman's debate with William Lane Craig, "Is There Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus?" College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts, United States – March 2006, accessed online on October 17, 2016 <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/is-there-historical-evidence-for-the-resurrection-of-jesus-the-craig-ehrman>

<sup>56</sup>Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Nottingham, England: IVP, 2011), 535.