

## **WANTED: DEAD (BUT PREFERABLY) ALIVE** **Can We Trust the Gospels?**

### **Introduction**

The movie “The Passion of Christ” ignited a whole fire of controversy a few months ago. The media assured us that the movie would fuel “anti-Semitism,” that it would make people anti-Jewish. Numerous pastors and professors lined up to say the movie was profoundly inaccurate and unhistorical. On March 3, during an interview with Jewish scholar Daniel Matt on NPR, the interviewer asked him what he thought of the movie. Matt replied,

I see Jesus as a Jewish mystic, I see him as a profound Jewish teacher... The Gospels’ presentation of Jesus and of the tragedy of his death does not necessarily reflect the historical reality of Jesus’ own lifetime. And I think the problem with the movie is that it assumes that the Gospels are totally historically accurate...It’s impossible to know what actually went on in the 1<sup>st</sup> century between Jesus and other Jews of his time. We certainly know that Jesus had no intention of starting a new religion; that he wanted simply to live Judaism and to find God through the Jewish faith and to bring other Jews to God.<sup>1</sup>

That’s an amazing statement in and of its self. Matt says it’s impossible to know what actually went on in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. Then he goes on to say that we know Jesus didn’t want to “start a new religion.” How do we know that? Where is this written?

When Mel Gibson was interviewed by Diane Sawyer on February 16, 2004, she really drilled him about the sources for his movie. Didn’t he think it would incite hatred for the Jews? How did he know this is what happened? Why so much blood? Finally, Gibson said, “Critics who have a problem with me don’t really have a problem with me and this film. They have a problem with the four Gospels. That’s where their problem is.”<sup>2</sup> And he’s right.

The bottom line is this: we have almost no historical documents from Judea at the time of Jesus. There was no Jerusalem Times archived for us to go back and read. There was no CNN or Rome News. If we want to know what was going on in Israel at the time of Jesus, we have a small handful of non-biblical sources. One is the *Antiquities* of Josephus. If we read the antiquities, this is what we learn about Jesus:

At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus, and his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon their loyalty to him. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive. Accordingly they believed that he was the Messiah, concerning whom the Prophets have recounted wonders.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Broadcast during *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio (WHYY), March 3, 2004

<sup>2</sup> [http://abcnews.go.com/sections/Primetime/Entertainment/mel\\_gibson\\_passion\\_040216-1.html](http://abcnews.go.com/sections/Primetime/Entertainment/mel_gibson_passion_040216-1.html), last accessed April 19, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18:63-64.

We also have a small quote from the Talmud, an arrest warrant for Jesus. It says:

They hanged Yeshu on the Sabbath of the Passover. But for forty days before that a herald went in front of him (crying), “Yeshu is to be stoned because he practiced sorcery and seduced Israel and lead them away from God. Anyone who can provide evidence on his behalf should come forward to defend him.” When, however, nothing favorable about him was found, he was hanged on the Sabbath of the Passover.<sup>4</sup>

And that’s it. Anything else you want to know about Jesus, you need to learn from the Gospels. So these documents become incredibly important. If the four Gospel documents can be discredited as unreliable, then we are free to believing anything we want about Jesus, his teachings and his life. So people have done everything they can to paint the Gospels as a collection of pious myths and legends that bury the “real” message of Jesus, whatever that might be.

### **The “Traditional” Picture of the Gospels**

The modern view of the Gospels that you see on TV when you’re watching the Discovery Channel or a Peter Jennings’ documentary is this: Jesus was a nice guy who taught people not to fight and love one another. Because he was so nice, people followed him, which made the Roman authorities nervous. So they killed him. Later on, the people who followed him felt like he was still alive, through his teaching. So they told people Jesus would live in them if they did what he did. After a few years, other people started to take this kind of talk literally, and believed that Jesus has really come back to life. Writers wrote down miraculous stories about this Galilean prophet, putting words in Jesus’ mouth to justify their own prejudices. Four of these stories became “Gospel truth,” literally: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. You’ve read it in Time, you’ve seen it on TV, now you’ve heard it here. This is what people like Daniel Matt have in mind when they say “the problem with the movie is that it assumes that the Gospels are totally historically accurate.” We *know* they’re not, right?

That whole approach to the Gospels is absolutely dependent on this one thing: that the Gospels were made up after the fact, and are not true reflections of Jesus’ life and teaching. This is our task for tonight: to consider whether the Gospels are accurate reflections of what Jesus said and did, or are more myth than accurate memory. I’d like to approach the problem from three angles. The first is by looking at the other New Testament documents and their reliability. The second is by looking at some of the archaeological support of these New Testament documents. Lastly, we will look at the most important and most often-attacked section of the Gospels – the account of the Resurrection of Jesus.

### **Dating of Other New Testament Documents**

There are two New Testament documents we can date close to the time of Jesus’ life, one a history book and the other a letter. Let’s look at those two documents.

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<sup>4</sup> *Babylonian Talmud*, 43a, [http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~hummm/Topics/JewishJesus/b\\_san43a.html](http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~hummm/Topics/JewishJesus/b_san43a.html), last accessed April 19, 2004.

## Acts

First of all, let's consider the "fifth" Gospel. No, not the Gospel of Thomas, or Mary or Peter, but the fifth Gospel in the New Testament: the Acts of the Apostles. The Acts are supposedly written by Luke, the same one who claims to have written the Gospel of Luke. In fact, Acts is the second volume of a two volume set, the first volume being the Gospel.<sup>5</sup> Halfway through Acts the pronouns change to the first person plural "we", assuming that the person writing the book was part of the action.<sup>6</sup> If Acts was written by Luke, and Luke is who he claims to be, an eyewitness companion of Paul's journeys, then the Gospel of Luke would be dated very close to the lifetime of Jesus.

What would lead us to believe Acts was written early? First of all, there is no mention of the fall of Jerusalem. Jerusalem fell to the onslaught of the Roman army in 70 AD, thus finishing the job Pompeii started 60 years before Jesus' birth. The Temple was destroyed, and ancient Judaism along with it. What 9/11 is to us, so the destruction of the Temple was to early Jews and Christians. If Acts was written after the destruction of the Temple, why is there is no mention of the event? It would be like reading a current book about terrorism and never once reading about the attacks on the World Trade Center. Second, there is no mention that James, the bishop of Jerusalem, died at the hands of the Sanhedrin in 62 AD. If the book was written after the event, we would expect the author to mention that the James of Chapter 15 would later be killed by the Jews. Third, there is the sudden ending to the book. Paul is still alive, in Rome. We are fairly certain Paul was executed in Rome in the 60s AD, so why is there no record of his death? In fact, the book seems to end as if there was every intention of writing a sequel – volume III.

There's also the archeological support for the book. Place names that Luke mentions in Acts (Acts 14:6), like Lystra and Derbe, that were thought for a long time to be misplaced by Luke, turn out to be exactly where Luke said they were.<sup>7</sup> Luke mentions the Proconsul Gallio of Achaia in Acts, (Acts 18:12), long thought to be a mistake since Achaians supposedly called their rulers by another name. Now we have an inscription from Delphi that reads: "Lucius Junius Gallio, my friend, and the Proconsul of Achaia."<sup>8</sup> I could go on, but I will urge you instead to look up the evidence for yourself. Acts has turned out to be a masterful piece of historical writing by someone who knew the geography and politics of the Mediterranean from first hand experience. If Luke can be trusted in all the historical details, can we trust the other details of his Gospel as well?

## 1 Corinthians

Another important document in the New Testament is Paul's letter to the Church in Corinth. It's important, first of all, because there are almost no scholars who dispute it was written by Paul. There is also almost no debate, either among believers or unbelievers, that it was written around 55 AD – no more than 20 years after the events of Easter. The letter is also quoted in numerous

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<sup>5</sup> "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach." (Acts 1:1, NIV)

<sup>6</sup> "From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days." (Acts 16:11-12, NIV).

<sup>7</sup> Josh McDowell and Bill Wilson, *A Ready Defense*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 109.

<sup>8</sup> McDowell, 111.

other, later letters outside the Bible, like the letter of Clement the Bishop of Rome, the Letter of Barnabas, and the Shepherd of Hermas.<sup>9</sup> But secondly, it is important because of its 15<sup>th</sup> chapter, in which Paul goes to great lengths to defend the reality of the resurrection of Jesus. I just want to read a little bit of the letter so you can get a feel for Paul' rhetoric:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (1 Cor. 15:3-8)

In other words, to defend the resurrection of Jesus, Paul is appealing to eyewitnesses. He is basically saying, "Go check out these people and find out what they saw." That's definitely not something you want to do if you're not sure you're telling the truth. What if one of the 500 eyewitnesses isn't in on the "story"? I'm reminded of Lisa Simpson going to Rev. Lovejoy to ask about whether God would condone snake-whacking day. Rev. Lovejoy assures her it's all in the Bible, but when she asks to see where, Lovejoy won't tell her. Why? Cause it's not there. You don't appeal to that many eyewitnesses if you know what you're talking about is a fabrication.

So without even looking at the Gospels, we have one book and one letter that support what the Gospels will tell us about Jesus. Acts tells us that at least one of the Gospels was written by either an incredible detailed and meticulous writer of historical fiction, or by an actual eyewitness living within the lifetime of Jesus. 1 Corinthians tells us that a real eyewitness to the resurrection could point to other eyewitnesses to defend his claim. Now: what about the Gospels themselves?

### **Dating of the Gospels**

As I said before, many people believe the Gospels are myths or legends based on a few true historical teachings and happenings in Jesus' life. In order for that to be true, the Gospels must be removed by at least a couple of generations from eyewitnesses to what Jesus was actually like. Otherwise, they would have been rapidly discredited. People could read them, ask someone who was actually there, and find out much of it isn't true. So the Gospels were long thought to be written between 100 and 200 AD, maybe even later.

Someone who used to believe and teach those dates, Dr. William F. Albright, well known in New Testament scholarship, changed his mind as the evidence started to come in. He said, "We can already say emphatically that there is no longer any solid basis for dating any book of the New Testament after about 80 AD, two full generations before the dates given by the more radical New Testament critics."<sup>10</sup> What would convince a liberal scholar like Albright that the Gospels were written so early?

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<sup>9</sup> Norman Geisler, *Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Geisler, 529.

First, there is the archaeological evidence. A piece of scroll containing John's Gospel was found in Egypt dating to around 100 AD. A fragment of Mark's Gospel was discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls that can be dated to around 50 AD. Fragments of other gospels have been found that date them reliably to 60-70 AD.<sup>11</sup>

Second, there's the manuscript evidence. Consider some other documents from the time of Jesus. Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, for example, exists in 9-10 copies. Tacitus' *Annals*, another source of Roman history, exists in only 2 copies. Homer's *Iliad*, one of the most well-attested ancient documents, exists in 643 copies. Most of those copies are dated 500-1000 years after the originals were likely written. But that's nothing compared to the New Testament. We have over 5,680 copies of the New Testament, with more being found all the time. And we have complete copies of the New Testament we can date to within 100 years of the originals. Not to mention the quotes from the New Testament we can find in other letters and documents even earlier than that. Sir Frederick Kenyon, a textual scholar and authority on ancient manuscripts, writes: "The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, and early translations from it, and of quotations from it...is so large that it is practically certain that a true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient authorities. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world."<sup>12</sup>

### **Archaeological Testimony of their Accuracy**

Next in considering the reliability of the Gospels is considering the evidence from within the Gospels themselves. Luke, for one, takes great pains to place his gospel in a real, historical setting, giving us the names of rulers, places, and dates that anybody could check up on.

If you're familiar with the Christmas story from Luke, you'll recognize this passage from his Gospel: "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register." (Luke 2:1-2, NIV). Scholars used to assume that Luke made up this detail to explain how Joseph and Mary got to Bethlehem from Nazareth. It turns out from archaeology that that is exactly what really happened during a Roman census. Consider these scroll fragments from censuses taken around 100 AD:

To Ptolemais, village secretary...from Horos, the son of Horos, the son of Horos, his mother being Herieus, of the aforesaid village of Bacchias...I register myself and those of my household for the house-by-house census of the past second year of Hadrian Caesar our Lord." (119 AD census)

Gaius Vibius Maximus, prefect of Egypt, says: the house to house census having started, it is essential that all persons who for any reason whatsoever are absent from their homes be summoned to return to their own hearths, in order that they may perform the customary business of registration. (104 AD Census Edict)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Geisler, 530.

<sup>12</sup> Geisler, 533.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Maier, *In the Fullness of Time*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1991), 4.

Pontius Pilate was once thought to be a figment of the Gospel writer's imaginations. But in 1961, in Caesarea, an inscription was unearthed that reads: "Caesariens: this Tiberium Pontius Pilate Dedicated to You."<sup>14</sup> Joseph Caiaphas, the high priest responsible for Jesus' arrest, was also thought to be an imaginary character by scholars. But the sarcophagus bearing his bones has now been found.<sup>15</sup> It was also thought that synagogues didn't come into existence until well after the Temple was destroyed. Therefore Jesus could not have taught in any synagogues as the Gospels record. But synagogues have now been discovered archaeologically that date back to the time of Jesus.<sup>16</sup>

Even John's Gospel, long thought to be the most likely to have been fabricated, has turned out to be one of the most geographically accurate. It contains geographical details and descriptions that only someone intimately familiar with Palestine at the time of Jesus could have described. The details were so stunning that Anglican Bishop John Robinson, who had once denounced traditional Christianity,<sup>17</sup> did a 180 turn and wrote a book stating that John's Gospel was probably the most historically accurate account of Jesus' life.

Time after time archaeology and research have proved, rather than disproved, the details of the gospels. But what about the most disputed part of the Gospels: the accounts of the resurrection of Jesus? Paul writes this in 1 Corinthians: "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead." (1 Cor. 15:14-15, NIV) So let's examine this crucial final question: did Jesus really rise with his body from the dead?

### **The Resurrection Accounts Themselves**

One of the first criticisms of the resurrection accounts is that they seem to contradict each other. How many women were at the tomb? What or who did they see at the tomb? What did Jesus say or look like when they saw him, if they really saw him at all?

#### The Differences

It's worth quoting philosophy professor William Lane Craig at this point: "For a philosopher, if something is inconsistent, the law of contradiction says... "Throw it out!" However, the historian looks at these narratives and says, "I see some inconsistencies, but I notice...they're all in the secondary details."<sup>18</sup> In other words, there is actually an awful lot of agreement between the gospels on the question of the resurrection:

- There was a tomb for Jesus' body
- Women went early Sunday morning to embalm the body
- When they got there, the body was gone
- Strange men or angels told them Jesus had risen

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<sup>14</sup> Maier, 145.

<sup>15</sup> Maier, 112.

<sup>16</sup> Maier, 102.

<sup>17</sup> In his book *Honest to God*.

<sup>18</sup> Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 215.

- Later, a risen Jesus appeared to them

The other differences actually reinforce the historicity of these accounts. If all four gospels recorded the exact same story, we would have all the more reason to assume the story had been made up. We'd be forced to assume the witnesses had colluded. The fact that the witnesses weren't afraid to tell the story as they remembered it means we are likely dealing with a real event.

### *The Insistence on Eyewitnesses*

Not only the gospels but all the New Testament documents insist that the resurrection was a real, historical event. They insist by appealing to the eyewitnesses. Consider these verses:

He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (1 Cor. 15:4-8)

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. (1 John 1:1)

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. (2 Peter 1:16)

God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. (Acts 2:32)

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

If you're claiming something you know is fantastic, what else would you say but "I saw it with my own eyes!" Even faced with death, Paul, Peter and countless other Christians refused to recant their belief that they had seen Jesus die, and then they saw him alive. Michael Grant, an English professor and a skeptical historian, writes "True, the discovery of the empty tomb is differently described by the various gospels, but if we apply the same sort of criteria that we would apply to any other ancient literary sources, the evidence is firm and plausible...that the tomb was indeed found empty."<sup>19</sup>

### *Alternate Beliefs*

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<sup>19</sup> Strobel, 215.

What are some of the other possible explanations, if we assume the disciples didn't make up the story of the resurrection, but we don't want to believe Jesus is actually alive? First of all, there's the possibility that it was all a hallucination. The problem with this explanation is that mass hallucinations on such a scale have never been recorded. Too many people claim to have seen Jesus at different times and in different places for it to be a hallucination. As Dr. Gary Collins, a noted psychologist, notes:

Hallucinations are individual occurrences. By their very nature only one person can see a given hallucination at a time. They certainly aren't something which can be seen by a group of people. Neither is it possible that one person could somehow induce an hallucination in somebody else. Since an hallucination exists only in this subjective, personal sense, it is obvious that others cannot witness it.

<sup>20</sup>

Some might suggest that Jesus wasn't really dead. People who believe that are unfamiliar with Roman execution practices. When you crucify, you crucify to kill. No Roman soldier would have left someone half-dead on the cross. Even assuming he weren't dead, a half-dead Jesus coming out of the tomb Sunday morning would hardly have convinced anyone he had been "resurrected."

Whatever happened, it was enough to give panicked disciples the courage to risk their life in spreading the message about Jesus. It was enough to convert Saul, a hardened anti-Christian, and make him into Paul, one of the greatest Christian missionaries ever. Whatever happened, it made Jesus unique among the hundreds of Jews of his time who claimed to be the Messiah: it gave rise to a movement that exists to this day.

### **Conclusion**

Tonight we've looked at some of the reasons why we can trust that the New Testament, and especially its testimony about the resurrection, is reliable. We've looked at evidence from archaeology, from history, and from the documents themselves. In the end, it is difficult except by faith to believe that the disciples made up these stories, created a religion out of whole cloth, and set out to evangelize the world. The alternative is at least worth considering: might Jesus have been who he claimed to be, the Savior of humanity, and the Son of God?

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<sup>20</sup> Strobel, 238.