

## In Defense of Easter

By the time this article has reached your desk, Easter will be but a few weeks away. If history is any guide, checkout lines at the local supermarket will be girded with tabloids heralding the ‘shocking discovery’ of Jesus’ real tomb and offering details into the conspiracy that spawned the resurrection myth. All the usual suspects like Bart Ehrman and Sam Harris will be on parade to ‘debunk’ the historicity of the Gospel accounts. News outlets such as CNN will publish articles designed to fertilize the seeds of doubt already growing in the collective consciousness.<sup>1</sup> Liberal theologians will submit ‘sophisticated’ and ‘nuanced’ readings of the resurrection story that find it to be an elaborate metaphor of our divine unity with God rather than a crass account of a literal reviving.<sup>2</sup> Under such an onslaught it seems wise to consider again the *evidence* for the resurrection. After all, “*if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God ... And if Christ be not raised ... ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable*” (1 Cor. 15:14-19). “In other words, Christianity without a risen Christ is pointless.”<sup>3</sup> It is not an overstatement to say that the entire Christian enterprise stands or falls on the historicity of the Easter miracle. This fact, however, introduces a vexing problem, namely, how do we know it's true? More specifically, by what criteria should we assess the veracity of an ancient historical account – particularly a miraculous one? It is not as hard as it sounds. Scholars view as authentic and reliable any documents that are (1) *independently and multiply attested*. Unquestionably, if more than one independent source reports an event, there is a higher likelihood that it really happened. (2) Historians also give credence to *enemy attestation*. If an event is documented by a source that is hostile to the account, it is more likely to be historical. (3) *Embarrassing details* add further weight since people aren't likely to make up elements much less include them in their story if those elements damage its credibility. (4) *Eyewitness testimony* is also essential; not only because it is much stronger than second-hand testimony, but also because such witnesses would not endure hardship to defend something they knew to be false. (5) *Early sources* are necessary too. The smaller the time between an event and its recording the better since it provides less time for legend to develop.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that these criteria are not unique to *biblical* accounts. *Any* alleged event that met such standards would have a credible claim to historicity. Thus, the approach of this article will be to analyze only those facts surrounding the Easter narrative that are so strongly corroborated that they are granted by virtually every scholar that has studied the subject, even those who reject Christianity.<sup>5</sup> Once those facts are presented and ‘established’ I will show that no alternative explanation can account for them as plausibly as the resurrection making it the best explanation. Although there are no less than twelve minimal facts concerning Christ's death and resurrection,<sup>6</sup> for the sake of simplicity I shall limit our discussion to four: (1) Jesus died by crucifixion and was buried in a known tomb. (2) Jesus' tomb was found empty by a group of His women followers. (3) Jesus' disciples *believed* that He rose from the dead and appeared to them. (4) Key Jewish figures who once were hostile and skeptical were converted to belief in and worship of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> Consider the evidence.

**Fact #1: Jesus died by crucifixion and was buried in a known tomb.** Jesus' death by crucifixion is independently and multiply attested. Not only do all four Gospels record it,<sup>8</sup> several non-Christian sources confirm it as well. For example, the famous Jewish historian Josephus wrote, “when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross...”<sup>9</sup> Also, the Roman historian Tacitus recorded that “Nero fastened the guilt [of the burning of Rome] and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate.”<sup>10</sup> Following Tacitus, Lucian of Samosata included this account in his work *The Death of Peregrine*, “The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2014/04/18/opinion/parini-jesus-easter/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/though-jesus-did-not-rise-the-dead>

<sup>3</sup> Douglas R. Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith*: Downers Grove, Ill. : Nottingham, England : IVP Academic ; Apollos, c2011, 2011), 529.

<sup>4</sup> Gary R. Habermas and Mike Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*: Grand Rapids, Mich. : Kregel Publications, c2004, 2004), 36.

<sup>5</sup> J. W. Wallace, *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels* (Colorado Springs, Colo: David C Cook, 2013), 41.

<sup>6</sup> Gary R. Habermas and Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ*: Joplin, Mo. : College Press, 1997, c1996, 1997), 158-167.

<sup>7</sup> Ross D. Inman, "The Resurrection of Jesus" (Classroom Lecture Notes, SWBTS, Spring 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Mt. 27:50-61; Mk. 15:37-47; Lk. 23:46-55 Jn. 19:33-42

<sup>9</sup> (Antiquities, 18.63-64), cf. Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), 480.

<sup>10</sup> Cornelius Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, ~115 AD

account.”<sup>11</sup> Facing such evidence, John Dominic Crossan, non-Christian critical scholar and co-founder of the Jesus Seminar, stated, “That he was crucified is as sure as anything historical can ever be.”<sup>12</sup> Jesus was also buried in a known tomb owned by a wealthy and high standing member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, Joseph of Arimathea.<sup>13</sup> This fact is not inconsequential, for not only does it give the precise location of the sepulcher, it also highlights the spectacularly embarrassing failure of Jesus' closest disciples. In His hour of greatest need, they deserted Him and fled and left the matter of His burial to a virtual stranger. Moreover, both of these facts and more had been codified into a memorable creed that was in circulation less than five years from the crucifixion itself – far too soon for any legend to develop.<sup>14</sup>

**Fact #2:** *Jesus' tomb was found empty by a group of his women followers.* Like the crucifixion and burial, the empty tomb is multiply and independently attested. Record of it occurs in the accounts of Mark and John, it is a hallmark of the speeches and preaching in Acts, and it formed an integral part of the earliest oral tradition taught to Paul at his conversion.<sup>15</sup> Hostile witnesses further substantiate the empty tomb. The earliest Jewish polemic against the resurrection was that Jesus' disciples stole the body. Such an argument presupposes that the tomb was empty. Further still, the earliest proclamation of the resurrection took place in Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified. It is inconceivable that Christianity could have taken root much less flowered if its founder's body still lay in the grave. Finally, Given the low status of the testimony of women in first-century Judaism, it is unlikely that the story of the discovery of the empty tomb *by women* is fabricated.<sup>16</sup> Such embarrassing details give an air of historicity to the empty tomb account.

**Fact #3:** *Jesus' disciples believed that He rose bodily from the dead and appeared to them.* Consider the facts, Jesus' postmortem appearance accounts over a forty-day period, on multiple occasions and under various circumstances are multiply and independently attested. Matthew records Christ's appearance to Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James. Luke chronicles His appearance to Cleopas and his traveling companion on the road to Emmaus. John tells of two appearances: one to all the apostles save Thomas and then a second when Thomas was present leading the dubious disciple to cry out, “*My Lord and my God.*”<sup>17</sup> The early Christian creed cited by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 records his appearance to more than five hundred people at once. And finally, Paul, himself, claimed to have seen Him personally as well.<sup>18</sup> In light of such evidence, among scholars, there is no dispute that the disciples experienced *something*. Even skeptic Gerd Lüdemann acknowledges, “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>19</sup> Further evidence of their belief that Christ had risen and appeared to them comes from their transformed lives. Take Paul as an example. We know that he was beheaded in Rome under Nero. By it itself that is not significant. Many people would die for what they believe to be true but no one willingly suffers and dies for what they *know* to be false.<sup>20</sup> This truth creates an important distinction between modern martyrs and the apostles. “Modern martyrs act solely out of their trust in beliefs that others have taught them. The apostles died for holding to their own testimony that they had *personally* seen the risen Jesus. Contemporary martyrs die for what they *believe* to be true. The disciples of Jesus died for what they *knew* to be either true or false.”<sup>21</sup>

**Fact #4:** *Key Jewish figures who were once hostile and skeptical were converted to belief in/worship of Jesus.* Among the many thousands of early converts to Christianity were two that were truly shocking. The first was Jesus' half-brother James. The other was the notorious Pharisee and strident religious persecutor Saul of Tarsus. Think of what it would take to convince you that one of your siblings, or a man whom you considered a fraud, justly condemned and executed, was not only alive again, but *God Himself*. It would require something truly extraordinary. Nevertheless, there is multiple, independent, and early attestation that both men came to just such a view. In the case of James, the Gospels report the embarrassing fact that Jesus' brothers including James were unbelievers before the resurrection.<sup>22</sup> Yet after Jesus appeared to him, he joined himself to the fledgling Christian

<sup>11</sup> Lucian, “The Death of Peregrine,” in *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, trans. H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, Vol. 4 (Clarendon: Oxford, 1949), 11-13

<sup>12</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009), 163.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 27:57-61.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 15:1-5, Ross D. Inman, “The Resurrection of Jesus” (Classroom Lecture Notes, SWBTS, Spring 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Mk. 16:1-8; Jn. 19:38-42; Acts 2:29; 13:36; 1 Cor. 15:3-8

<sup>16</sup> Ross D. Inman, “The Resurrection of Jesus” (Classroom Lecture Notes, SWBTS, Spring 2017).

<sup>17</sup> These accounts also include numerous embarrassing details the most obvious of which is that many of Christ's earliest and closest followers doubted the resurrection.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Mt. 28:9; Lk. 24:13-43; Jn. 20:19-29; 1 Cor. 15:3-8; 9:1.

<sup>19</sup> Gerd Lüdemann, *What Really Happened to Jesus?: A Historical Approach to the Resurrection*, trans. John Bowden (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 80. Lüdemann appeals to hallucinations as an explanation.

<sup>20</sup> [http://pleaseconvinceme.com/2013/the-minimal-facts-of-the-resurrection/#\\_ftn39](http://pleaseconvinceme.com/2013/the-minimal-facts-of-the-resurrection/#_ftn39)

<sup>21</sup> Gary R. Habermas and Mike Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*: Grand Rapids, Mich. : Kregel Publications, c2004, 59.

<sup>22</sup> Mk. 3:21, 6:3-4; Jn. 7:5, 19:25b-27

community and eventually became a leader of the church in Jerusalem. Ultimately he sealed his testimony with his blood suffering a cruel martyrdom by stoning.<sup>23</sup> Saul's history is, of course, well known. After a vicious career persecuting churches, he met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. His life was transformed radically to the point that he went to his death to affirm that Christ had risen again.

These four facts are both remarkable and beyond dispute. They cry out for an explanation that is adequate to account for all the relevant data. To that task, I will turn in the next article.

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<sup>23</sup> cf. 1 Cor. 15:7; Acts 1:14; *Antiquities*, 20.200 in, Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus : Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987)