

# IS JESUS' RESURRECTION FACT OR FAIRY TALE? (The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ)

“This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses.”<sup>1</sup>

—Acts 2:32

Did Jesus Christ die and then come back to life days later? All of Christianity stands or falls on the answer to that question. If Christ's Resurrection never happened, then Jesus' claims of divinity<sup>2</sup> were nothing but the ravings of a lunatic or the mendacity of a fraud, and Christianity is worthless. On the other hand, if Jesus truly came back from the dead, then Christianity is Truth itself and the hope of the world.

If you are skeptical of claims about a miracle that occurred almost 2,000 years ago, I quite understand. I grew up believing that miracles do not occur. Yet the alternative is truly startling, although it is seldom honestly confronted by the skeptics—if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then His followers **lied**. There is no middle ground, no other satisfactory explanation. But the idea that Jesus' followers made it all up is simply incredible, because it would mean they were the best—and the worst—liars history has ever known. However, I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's begin by laying a good foundation.<sup>3</sup>

## Laying the Foundation

We cannot discuss whether Jesus rose from the dead until we first establish three historical facts: (1) Jesus lived—that is, He was a real, historical person; (2) He was crucified by the Romans and was believed to be dead; and (3) His followers said that He had been raised from the dead and ascended into heaven. By historical standards, these are well established facts, for which there is ample proof. Let's take a look.

**Christian Sources.** We begin with the first-century witnesses: Peter, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James, and Jude.<sup>4</sup> These are the authors

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<sup>1</sup> All Biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard* translation.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the topic of Jesus' claims of divinity, see the article, “Why You Should Consider Christianity,” on this web site.

<sup>3</sup> The general outline of this proof is based on the sermons of the late Dr. Gene Scott, former pastor of Faith Center in Glendale, California.

<sup>4</sup> **Peter, Matthew, and John** were among Jesus' twelve apostles, although some doubt that the Gospels of Matthew and John were actually written by the apostles. See, however, John 21:20-24, where the author claims to have been a disciple of Jesus and one

of the books of the New Testament, all of which were written during the first century A.D.<sup>5</sup> Since Christ is believed to have died around 30-33 A.D., this means that most of these books were circulating during the lifetimes of some who had witnessed Jesus' life and death. For example, scholars believe the Gospel of Mark was completed no later than 70 A.D., Acts and the Gospels of Matthew and Luke by 80 A.D.,<sup>6</sup> and John's writings (his Gospel, three

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who knew Him in the flesh. And see 1 John 1:1-5, where he claims to have been an eyewitness to Jesus and His teaching. (For more on the apostles, see the article, "The Eleven Apostles Not Named Iscariot," on this web site.) The author of 2 Peter also claims to have been an eyewitness. See 2 Peter 1:16. According to Eusebius, who quotes Papias, 2<sup>nd</sup> century Bishop of Hierapolis, **Mark** (also known as John Mark) was Peter's interpreter in Rome, and based his Gospel on the speeches and recollections of Peter while Mark was with him in Rome. Irenaeus, 2<sup>nd</sup> century bishop of Lyons, says the same. Mark also travelled with Paul and Barnabas. Mark is specifically mentioned in Acts 12:25, 13:13, and 15:37-39; Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24; and 1 Peter 5:13. **Paul** was a Jewish Pharisee (religious leader) who had a miraculous vision of Christ on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9:3-9, 22:5-11, and 26:12-18). (For more on Paul, see the article, "Paul (Saul) of Tarsus," on this web site.) **Luke**, "the beloved physician" (Colossians 4:14), was one of Paul's early converts who became one of his travelling companions (see Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11; and compare Acts 16:8 and 16:10, where "they" becomes "we"). Luke wrote Acts and the Gospel of Luke, and he asserts that he did so after careful investigation. See Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1. **James** and **Jude** were brothers—or possibly half-brothers—of Jesus (see Galatians 1:19 and Jude 1:1). James—also known as "James the Just"—became the head of the Christians in Jerusalem (see Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18; Galatians 2:9 and 2:12).

<sup>5</sup> The estimated dates for the writing of the New Testament books are as follows (all dates are A.D.):

Matthew	ca. 70-80	1 Timothy	ca. 61-63
Mark	ca. 50-70	2 Timothy	ca. 64-68
Luke	ca. 60-80	Titus	ca. 61-63
John	ca. 80-100	Philemon	before 68
Acts	ca. 64-80	Hebrews	ca. 80-95
Romans	ca. 55-58	James	ca. 44-48
1 Corinthians	ca. 55-57	1 Peter	ca. 64
2 Corinthians	ca. 57	2 Peter	ca. 67
Galatians	ca. 47-58	1 John	ca. 90-100
Ephesians	ca. 57-63	2 John	ca. 90-100
Philippians	ca. 61-64	3 John	ca. 90-100
Colossians	ca. 58-63	Jude	ca. 95
1 Thessalonians	ca. 50	Revelation	ca. 95
2 Thessalonians	ca. 50		
1 Timothy	ca. 61-63		

<sup>6</sup> I believe Acts was probably written no later than about 68 A.D. because of what it leaves out. Acts ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome, awaiting a hearing on his

letters, and Revelation) by 95 A.D. The thirteen letters ascribed to Paul in our New Testament are even earlier than the Gospels, since all were written before 68 A.D., and most were written during the 50's and early 60's A.D. The letter of James probably predates even Paul's letters.

Some people assume that writings that old must have been corrupted along the way, through copying errors or intentional alterations, and thus what we have now is not what was written back then. But in the case of the New Testament, the facts are otherwise. The New Testament is in fact the most reliable ancient historical document in existence. Let's look at why that is true.

Writing in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. (when the New Testament books were written) was usually done on papyrus, which decays rapidly except in very dry climates. Because of this, **original** manuscripts for the New Testament books, or any other ancient writings, simply do not exist. Thus, we do not have samples of the handwriting of Paul or Tacitus or Julius Caesar. And since the printing press would not be invented for another 1,400 years,<sup>7</sup> sharing and preserving these writings required that a person hand-copy them, word-by-word. Because this was usually a time-consuming process, these copies—which I will henceforth refer to as “manuscripts”—were expensive. Most of them ended up in libraries or in the private collections of wealthy people, and later in churches and monasteries. If the manuscripts were not well cared for, or if their repository was destroyed by fire, war, or other calamity, they were simply lost. And any writing which was not deemed important enough to bother copying is of course gone forever. Perhaps we should be surprised that any writings from that time period survived. But manuscripts of the New Testament books did, and in amazing numbers.

Several manuscripts of portions of the New Testament have been found from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., with the earliest dating from about 130 A.D.<sup>8</sup> A manuscript containing the Gospels of Luke and John has been

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appeal to the Emperor. (See Acts 25:11-12 and 28:16-31.) Early Christian writings tell us that Paul was subsequently released and traveled to Spain before later being imprisoned a second time in Rome and beheaded in about 64-68 A.D. Since Acts omits these later events, I believe it was completed before Paul's release from house arrest.

<sup>7</sup> Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1439 A.D.

<sup>8</sup> The John Rylands manuscript, dating from about 130 A.D., has part of John's Gospel. It was found in Egypt, and is now in the John Rylands Library, Manchester, England. Other 2<sup>nd</sup> century manuscripts include the Bodmer Papyrus II, from 150-200 A.D., which contains most of John's Gospel; the *Diatessaron*, compiled by an Assyrian Christian named Tatian, dates from about 160 A.D., and is a harmony of the four Gospels (although only a small portion of the *Diatessaron* still exists); and the Chester Beatty Papyri, from about 200 A.D., which contains large portions of the New Testament.

dated about 175-225 A.D. Manuscripts from as early as 325 to 350 A.D. include virtually the entire New Testament.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, we have many manuscripts from the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries in various languages, including Syriac (Christian Aramaic), Coptic (Egyptian), Latin, and of course Greek. And much of the New Testament could also be reconstructed from the writings of Christians during those early centuries,<sup>10</sup> as well as from lectionaries<sup>11</sup> from the 6<sup>th</sup> and later centuries.

Compared to other ancient writings, there is simply no comparison. The earliest manuscripts for any of Plato's writings date from about 900 A.D., 1,300 years after Plato wrote them. For Aristotle, the date is even later—1,100 A.D. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote near the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D., yet the earliest copies of his two major works—*Annals* and *Histories*—are two partial manuscripts from the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. Similarly, the earliest manuscripts for Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, Herodotus' *History*, and Thucydides' *History* date from about 900 to 1,100 A.D. Most of the manuscripts for Livy's *History of Rome* date from the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D., although we do have a partial manuscript from the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Homer's *Iliad* fares better, since the earliest partial manuscript is from about 400 B.C., but that is still about 400 years after the *Iliad* was written. And the earliest complete manuscript of the *Iliad* is from the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

When we talk about the number of manuscripts, the New Testament again compares favorably with other ancient literature. We have about 500 manuscripts of the New Testament that predate 500 A.D., and almost 25,000 total. Compare that to 50 copies of the *Iliad* that are dated within 500 years of the time it was written, and 643 total. We have 200 manuscripts for Demosthenes, only 20 for Livy's *History of Rome* and Tacitus' *Annals*, and

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<sup>9</sup> For example, the *Codex Vaticanus* dates from about 325-350 A.D., and the *Codex Sinaiticus* is from about 350 A.D.

<sup>10</sup> For example, the seven epistles of Ignatius, who was martyred in about 110 A.D., contain quotations from 17 of the 27 New Testament books, including the Gospels of Matthew and John. Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-212 A.D.) quotes the New Testament about 2,400 times, and quotes from 24 of the 27 books. The writings of Irenaeus, the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Bishop of Lyons, contain 1,038 quotations from the Gospels and 781 quotations from other New Testament books. Justin Martyr, who died in 166 A.D., quotes the Gospels 268 times and other N.T. books 62 times. Origen, who lived in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., quotes the Gospels 9,231 times and other N.T. books 8,761 times. Other early Christian writers that quote the New Testament include Barnabas (ca. 70 A.D.); Hermas (ca. 95 A.D.); Tertullian (ca. 160-220 A.D.); Tatian (ca. 170 A.D.); Hippolytus (ca. 170-235 A.D.); and Cyprian (died 258 A.D.).

<sup>11</sup> Lectionaries were Scriptural lessons intended to be read during Christian worship services.

ten or less for Plato, Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, Herodotus' *History*, Thucydides' *History*, and Pliny Secundus' *Natural History*. If we judge other ancient literature by the standard some wish to use for the New Testament, nothing would be left.

Perhaps more important, the New Testament manuscripts agree with each other on 99.5% of the verses. Thus, only about one-half of one percent are in any way questionable. Compare this to about five percent of the *Iliad* and ten percent of India's *Mahabharata*. Indeed, the language of Shakespeare's 37 plays is probably more in doubt than the verses of the New Testament.<sup>12</sup> In addition, these differences between New Testament manuscripts concern relatively unimportant matters.

Thus, there are more and older copies of the New Testament in existence, with fewer discrepancies between manuscripts, than any other document of similar antiquity. A number of the manuscripts predate the rise of Christianity to a position of wealth and status (which did not even begin until the Roman persecutions ended in 323 A.D., under the Emperor Constantine). Furthermore, the manuscripts' very numbers, geographical dispersal, and varied languages effectively exclude the possibility of any systematic tampering.

Nor is there much doubt about the authenticity of most of the New Testament books. The Muratorian fragment<sup>13</sup> informs us that, as early as 180 A.D., Christians accepted all of the New Testament books as being authentic and sacred except Hebrews, James, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter, and 3<sup>rd</sup> John. By the time of Eusebius, in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., all were accepted as genuine and scriptural except Hebrews, James, 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> John, Jude, and Revelation. This means that the early Christians viewed all four Gospels, Acts, 1<sup>st</sup> John, and all of Paul's letters as authentic and scriptural from a very early date. And lest you think that the early Christians were not very discriminating, many works failed to gain acceptance, including alleged letters from Paul to the Laodiceans and the Alexandrians, as well as the *Revelation of Peter*, *Letters of Barnabas*, *Institutions of the Apostles*, *Pastor*, *Gospel of Peter*, *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of the Hebrews*, *Acts of Andrew*, *Acts of Paul*, *Acts of John*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Apocalypse of Peter*, and others. The first list of accepted New Testament books that corresponds to our current New Testament was set forth in a letter of Athanasius, the 4<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 10, quoting John Lea's *The Greatest Book in the World*, at page 15: "But in every one of Shakespeare's thirty-seven plays there are probably a hundred readings still in dispute, a large portion of which materially affects the meaning of the passages in which they occur."

<sup>13</sup> The Muratorian fragment is named after Muratori, who discovered it in 1740 A.D.

century bishop of Alexandria, in about 367 A.D. This list was confirmed by the Synod of Hippo in 393 A.D.

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that, for most of the New Testament, we know that the books were written by people who knew Jesus, or by their close associates, that the books were written within the lifetimes of many of the people who knew Jesus, and that we have highly accurate versions of what they actually wrote. So what did they say?

You will not be surprised, I'm sure, by the fact that each of the New Testament authors writes about Jesus as if he were a real, historical person, or that most of them mention his crucifixion at the hands of the Romans.<sup>14</sup> But if you are not familiar with the New Testament, you might be surprised to learn that all except James and Jude mention Jesus' resurrection from the dead,<sup>15</sup> and Luke describes His physical ascension into heaven,<sup>16</sup> while Peter and Paul place Him at the right hand of God in heaven.<sup>17</sup> The story of Christ's resurrection was thus central to the Christian message—and not only among the New Testament writers.

In the writings of Christians during the first three centuries A.D., Christ's resurrection and ascension feature prominently. For example, Clement of Rome wrote, in about 95 A.D., that Christ's apostles were “fully

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Matthew 27:33-50; Mark 15:22-37; Luke 23:33-46; John 19:17-30; Acts 2:22-23, 2:36, and 4:10; Romans 6:6; 1 Corinthians 1:13, 1:23, 2:2, 2:8, and 15:3-4; 2 Corinthians 13:4; Galatians 2:20 and 3:1; 1 Peter 2:23-24 and 3:18; and Revelation 11:8.

<sup>15</sup> **Peter:** See 1 Peter 1:3, 1:21, and 3:21-22; see also the following verses in Acts, which talk about Peter (as well as Jesus' other disciples) proclaiming Christ's resurrection: Acts 2:24, 2:32, 3:15, 4:2, 4:10, 4:33, 5:30, and 10:40-41

**Luke:** Luke 24:1-51; Acts 1:1-3

**Paul:** Romans 1:4, 7:4, 10:9, 14:9; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, 15:12-20; 2 Corinthians 4:14, 5:15; Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 1:20, 2:6; Philippians 3:10; Colossians 1:18, 2:12; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 2 Timothy 2:8; see also the following verses in Acts, which talk about Paul preaching Jesus' resurrection: Acts 13:30-31, 17:3, 17:18, 17:31, and 26:23

**John:** John 20:1-21:24

**Matthew:** Matthew 28:1-10, 16-20

**Mark:** 16:1-7 (see also Mark 16:9-19, although these verses are not found in some of the oldest manuscripts, leading scholars to question whether they were part of the original)

<sup>16</sup> **Luke:** Luke 24:51; Acts 1:2 and 1:9. Similarly, Mark 16:19 says “when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven.” However, Mark 16:9-20 is not found in the oldest manuscripts, and therefore many scholars believe these verses were added later.

<sup>17</sup> **Peter:** 1 Peter 3:22

**Paul:** Ephesians 1:20 and 2:6

assured through the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>18</sup> Ignatius, the bishop of Syrian Antioch, who was martyred early in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., mentions Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection in his letters to the *Smyrneans* and the *Trallians*.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, each of the following early Christian writings mentions Christ’s resurrection and/or His ascension: the *Letter of Barnabas*, written about 130 A.D. (resurrection); Aristides’ *Apology*, written between 138 and 161 A.D. (resurrection and ascension); Polycarp’s *Letter to the Philippians*, probably written in about 110 A.D., and certainly prior to his martyrdom in 155 A.D. (resurrection, and portrays Jesus as sitting at God’s right hand); Justin Martyr’s *Apology*, written in about 150 A.D. (resurrection), and his *Dialogue with Trypho*, written prior to 165 A.D. (resurrection and ascension); Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies*, written prior to 180 A.D. (resurrection and ascension); *Stromata*, by Clement of Alexandria, written about 195 A.D., as quoted by Eusebius (ascension); *Acts of Thomas*, written between 160 and 200 A.D. (resurrection and ascension); various writings of Tertullian, all written prior to 222 A.D. (resurrection and ascension); and *The Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, written about 225 A.D. (resurrection). In addition, both the resurrection and the ascension were part of the earliest Christian statements of belief, including the Creed of Caesarea (prior to 325 A.D.), the Creed of Nicaea (325 A.D.), the creed of Marcellus, Bishop of Ancyra (ca. 340 A.D.), the Dedication Creed (341 A.D.), and the Nicene Creed (451 A.D.). While these sources do not prove that Jesus rose or ascended, they do demonstrate that the story of Christ’s resurrection and ascension was told by His followers from a very early date.

### **Secular Sources**

Next we turn to non-Christian sources, beginning with Cornelius Tacitus, a Roman historian who wrote about 115 A.D. In a passage of unquestioned authenticity, Tacitus mentions Christ’s death while describing Nero’s persecution of Christians in about 64 A.D.: “The one from whom this name originated, Christ, had been executed during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of the procurator, Pontius Pilate.”<sup>20</sup> (See the Appendix for this quote in context.) Only a few years earlier, in about 112 A.D., Plinius Secundus (also known as Pliny the Younger), Roman Governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), wrote a letter to the Roman Emperor

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<sup>18</sup> Clement of Rome, *Epistle to the Corinthians*, xl. sqq., quoted in *Documents of the Christian Church*, pp. 62-63. (For a more complete quote, see the Appendix.)

<sup>19</sup> *More Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 131. Ignatius also mentions the resurrection in his letter to the *Magnesians*.

<sup>20</sup> Tacitus’ *Annals*, XV.44, as quoted in *The Early Christians*, p. 61.

Trajan, seeking advice about trials of Christians. In this letter, Pliny not only mentions Christ, but also implies Christian worship of Him, noting that Christians sang hymns to Him “as to a god”:

An anonymous accusation was presented denouncing a large number of persons by name. I felt that I should acquit those who denied that they were or had been Christians if they followed my example and called upon the gods; if they offered before your image incense and wine, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose with the statues of the gods; **and if they reviled Christ besides.** It is said that those who really are Christians cannot be compelled to do any of these things in any circumstances. Others, whose names had been given by an informer, first said they were Christians but then soon denied it, saying in fact they had been but had ceased to be, some saying three years ago, others longer, and some as long as twenty years ago. All of these worshiped your image and the statues of the gods **and cursed Christ.**

They continued to maintain that the sum of their guilt or error lay in this, that it was their custom to meet on a fixed day before daylight and, alternating with one another, to **sing a hymn to Christ as to a god.** They also bound themselves mutually by an oath, not in order to commit any crime, but to promise not to commit any theft, robbery, or adultery; not to break their word; and not to deny entrusted goods when claimed. <sup>21</sup>

Suetonius, another 2<sup>nd</sup> century Roman historian and chief secretary to the Emperor Hadrian, mentions the Emperor Claudius’ expulsion of the Jews from Rome in about 49 A.D.: “He drove the Jews out of Rome who were rioting because of Chrestus.” <sup>22</sup> (Luke mentions this same expulsion, in Acts 18:2: “And he [Paul] found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had

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<sup>21</sup> As quoted in *The Early Christians*, pp. 63-65 (emphasis added). The full letter and Trajan’s reply are set forth in the Appendix.

<sup>22</sup> Suetonius’ *The Twelve Caesars*, “Claudius,” 25, as quoted in Keller’s *The Bible as History*, p. 379. See also, Durant’s *The Story of Civilization*, p. 554, which says: “Suetonius . . . reports Claudius’ banishment (*ca.* 52) of ‘Jews who, stirred up by Christ [*impulsore Chresto*], were causing public disturbances. . . .’ ” Claudius was Emperor of Rome from 41 to 54 A.D.

commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.”) We do not know the extent of the Christian presence in Rome at this time, but it was obviously significant enough to upset the city’s Jewish population, “who were rioting because of” the Christians.

These Romans—Tacitus, Pliny, and Suetonius—were all writing within 80 to 100 years after Christ’s death, and all viewed Christianity as a superstition, a false religion. If doubt about Jesus’ existence as a real, historical person had been prevalent, they surely would have mentioned it. But they accepted without question the fact that Jesus had been a real person. Tacitus even mentions His execution by Pontius Pilate, while Pliny’s letter shows that Christians worshiped Him even at that early date.

We can also add the testimony of Lucian of Samosata, a Roman satirist from the mid- to late-2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., who referred to Jesus as “the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced this new cult into the world. . . .”<sup>23</sup> And in an apparent reference to either Jesus or Paul, Lucian says: “. . . and then it was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, Lucian provides corroboration not only for Christ’s death, but for His death by crucifixion (which was a standard method of execution for non-Romans in 1<sup>st</sup> century Rome), as well as for the fact that Christians worshipped Him.

The Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, also mentions Jesus. Josephus was born in 37 A.D., only a few years after Christ’s death, and by about 94 A.D. he completed a history of the Jews—*Antiquities of the Jews*—which mentions Jesus and His crucifixion in a brief passage:

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, *if it be lawful to call him a man*, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. *He was the Christ*, and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; *for he appeared to them alive again on the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things*

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted from Lucian’s *The Death of Peregrine*, 11-13, as quoted in *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 121 (for full quote see the Appendix).

<sup>24</sup> *The Passing Peregruis*, by Lucian, quoted in *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 84.

*concerning him.* And the tribe of Christians so named from him are not extinct at this day.<sup>25</sup>

The italicized portions are highly suspect, since they refer to Jesus as the Christ (i.e., the Messiah), and seem to accept His resurrection as fact. Yet many scholars contend that the rest of the passage is authentic, and that the italicized portions were added at a later date. Consider also a 4<sup>th</sup> century Arabic version<sup>26</sup> of that same passage, which does not contain most of the suspicious language, and may be a translation of the original version or something close to it:

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 his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive; accordingly, he was perhaps the Messiah concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.<sup>27</sup>

However questionable this passage may be, the authenticity of another reference to Jesus by Josephus is not really in doubt. Josephus states that the high priest Ananias “convened the high council of judges and brought before them **James, the brother of Jesus (called the ‘Messiah’)**, and several others. He accused them of transgressing the laws and had them stoned.”<sup>28</sup> This allusion to Jesus lends credibility to the earlier passage, since, as Josh McDowell points out, such a passing reference “does not make sense unless

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<sup>25</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XVIII, 33, as quoted in *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 125 (italics added by the latter). This passage is also known as the “Testimonium.”

<sup>26</sup> Although this version was written in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the manuscript from which it is taken was copied in the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

<sup>27</sup> *Antiquities of the Jews*, xviii.33, by Flavius Josephus, quoted in *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 85, taken from an Arabic manuscript entitled *Kitab Al-Unwan Al-Mukallal Bi-Fadail Al-Hikma Al-Mutawwaj Bi-Anwa Al-Falsafa Al-Manduh Bi-Haqq Al-Marifa*, which would be roughly translated as *Book of History Guided by All the Virtues of Wisdom, Crowned with Various Philosophies and Blessed by the Truth of Knowledge*

<sup>28</sup> *Antiquities of the Jews*, xx.9:1, by Flavius Josephus (emphasis added), quoted in *The Early Christians*, p.62 (see the Appendix for a fuller version of this passage)

Josephus has provided a longer discussion about Jesus earlier in his *Antiquities*.”<sup>29</sup> Josephus also mentions John the Baptist and his death at the hands of King Herod,<sup>30</sup> which corroborates the Gospel accounts.<sup>31</sup>

A letter written by a Syrian, Mara Bar-Serapion, to his son, Serapion, sometime between the late 1<sup>st</sup> century and the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century, contains an apparent reference to Jesus, although not by name:

What advantage did the Athenians gain from putting Socrates to death? Famine and plague came upon them as a judgment for their crime. What advantage did the men of Samon gain from burning Pythagoras? In a moment their land was covered with sand. **What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise king? It was just after that their kingdom was abolished.** God justly avenged these three wise men: the Athenians died of hunger; the Samians were overwhelmed by the sea; **the Jews, ruined and driven from their land, live in dispersion.** But Socrates did not die for good; he lived on in the statue of Hera. **Nor did the wise king die for good; he lived on in the teaching which he had given.**<sup>32</sup>

The reference in this letter to the dispersion of the Jews undoubtedly refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. and the *Diaspora*, or “Dispersion”—that is, the flight or enslavement of virtually all Palestinian Jews which followed the city’s destruction. The letter’s discussion of the execution of the “wise king,” and the enduring nature of his teaching, seems to refer to Jesus.

A Samaritan historian, Thallus, writing in about 52 A.D., also wrote about Jesus and His crucifixion. We know this not because we have Thallus’ original writings, which have been lost, but because Julius Africanus, an early 3<sup>rd</sup> century Christian, wrote a rebuttal to Thallus in about 221 A.D.: “Thallus, in the third book of his histories, explains away this darkness

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<sup>29</sup> *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 126

<sup>30</sup> *Antiquities of the Jews*, xviii.5.2, as quoted in *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 56 (see the Appendix for the quote).

<sup>31</sup> The New Testament contains many references to John the Baptist, such as: Matthew 3:1-14, 4:12, 9:14, 11:2-14, 11:18, 14:2-12, 16:14, 17:13, 21:25-26, 21:32; Mark 1:2-9, 1:14, 2:18, 6:14-29, 8:28, 11:30-32; Luke 1:13-17, 1:60, 1:63, 3:2-20, 5:33, 7:18-28-30, 7:33, 9:7-9, 9:19, 11:1, 16:16, 20:4-6; John 1:6-8, 1:15, 1:19-36, 1:40, 3:23-30, 4:1, 5:33, 10:41-42; Acts 1:5, 1:22, 10:37, 11:16, 13:24-25, 18:25 19:3-4.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 89 (emphasis added)

[which accompanied Christ's crucifixion] <sup>33</sup> as an eclipse of the sun—unreasonably, as it seems to me (unreasonably, of course, because a solar eclipse could not take place at the time of the full moon, and it was at the season of the Paschal full moon that Christ died).” <sup>34</sup> Julius Africanus also quotes a history written by Phlegon which made the same argument as Thallus—i.e., that the darkness at the time of Christ's crucifixion resulted from a solar eclipse. Note that both Phlegon and Thallus accepted as fact that Jesus was a real person who had been crucified, as well as the darkness which descended upon Jerusalem at the same time, and sought to explain this darkness naturally.

Even Julian “the Apostate,” Roman Emperor 361-363 A.D., writing against Christianity more than 300 years after Christ's death, did not question the fact that Jesus was a real person:

Jesus . . . has now been celebrated about three hundred years; having done nothing in his lifetime worthy of fame, unless anyone thinks it a very great work to heal lame and blind people and exorcise demoniacs in the villages of Bethsaida and Bethany. <sup>35</sup>

In another writing (quoted by Cyril of Alexandria), Julian discusses Jesus and the rapid spread of Christianity during the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D.:

Neither Paul, nor Matthew, nor Luke, nor Mark had the audacity to say that Jesus is God. But the worthy John, realizing that by that time a vast number of people in many of the Greek and Italian cities were infected with the disease, and hearing, I fancy, that the tombs of Peter and Paul were being worshipped (privately, no doubt, but still worshipped), John, I say, was the first to have the audacity to make this assertion. <sup>36</sup>

Each of these men—Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny, Josephus, Lucian, Thallus, Phlegon, and Julian—lived much closer in time to the actual events,

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<sup>33</sup> See for example Matthew 27:45: “Now from the sixth hour [noon] darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour [3:00 p.m.].” See also Mark 15:33, and Luke 23:44.

<sup>34</sup> As quoted in *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 86

<sup>35</sup> *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 130, quoting Philip Schaff, *The Person of Christ* (New York: American Tract Society, 1913), p. 133

<sup>36</sup> Julian, *contra Christianos*, apud Cyril Alex. *Contra Julianum*, x (Op. ix., 326 sqq.), as quoted in *Documents of the Christian Church*, p. 20)

had access to documents and sources now lost to us, and were no friends of early Christianity. The fact that none of them questioned Jesus' existence should satisfy all but the most closed-minded skeptics. In addition, Tacitus, Lucian, Phlegon, and Thallus—and perhaps Josephus—provide strong corroboration for the Christian testimony that Jesus was crucified by the Romans, and the writings of Lucian and Pliny show that Jesus was worshiped from a very early date.

We have also seen that the story of Jesus' resurrection, and to a lesser extent His ascension, was central to the Christian narrative, in both the books of the New Testament and the writings of early Christians. Of course, proving that Jesus lived and was crucified doesn't mean that he rose from the dead, nor does the fact that the resurrection was preached mean that it was true. But what are the realistic alternatives?

### **The alternatives**

A variety of explanations have been put forward for why Jesus' followers told this resurrection story:

1. The disciples stole Jesus' body so they could claim that he had risen from the dead.
2. The disciples went to the wrong tomb, found it empty, and assumed Jesus had risen from the dead.
3. The Jews or the Romans moved the body, perhaps from fear that Jesus' disciples would steal it, so when the disciples went to the tomb and found it empty they assumed Jesus had risen from the dead.
4. Joseph of Arimathea, the man who took custody of Jesus' body after He died and laid it in a tomb,<sup>37</sup> moved the body, so the disciples found an empty tomb and assumed Jesus had risen from the dead.
5. Jesus did not actually die on the cross, but merely passed out. The Romans, thinking Him dead, allowed Joseph of Arimathea to take the body and entomb it, where Jesus revived.
6. The disciples had a hallucination. They did not really see Jesus alive again, but merely thought they did.
7. It was all a lie.
8. It was true.

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<sup>37</sup> See Matthew 27:57-60, Mark 15:42-46, Luke 23:50-53, John 19:38-42.

Let's look at these explanations one at a time.

*The Disciple Stole the Body.* The story that the disciples stole Jesus' body was apparently one of the earliest explanations for the resurrection story—so early in fact that Matthew mentions it, and feels the need to explain its genesis:

Now on the next day, the day after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I *am to* rise again.' Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go, make it *as* secure as you know how." And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone.<sup>38</sup>

[After the events surrounding Jesus' resurrection and initial appearance] some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened. And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, and said, "You are to say, 'His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.' And if this should come to the governor's ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble." And they took the money and did as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, *and is to this day.*<sup>39</sup>

The Jewish leaders spread this story that the disciples had stolen the body, and it continued to be circulated for many centuries thereafter, as

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<sup>38</sup> Matthew 27:62-66. This "guard" posted at Jesus' tomb has traditionally been viewed as a small group of Roman soldiers. However, Matthew is ambiguous on this point, and as Frank Morison points out in *Who Moved the Stone?*, Pilate's comment, "You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how," could indicate that he declined the Jewish leaders' request for a Roman guard. Morison argues that the Jewish leaders used Jewish Temple guards to guard the tomb. (See *Who Moved the Stone?*, at pp. 152-159. For a contrary view, see *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, at pp. 235-237.)

<sup>39</sup> Matthew 28:11-15

evidenced by the writings of early Christians such as Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, and John Chrysostom, who wrote rebuttals against it. This theory has some obvious problems, such as the fact that the guards could not have known what happened if they were asleep, or the presence of Jesus' grave clothes in the tomb,<sup>40</sup> which no thieves would have bothered to remove and leave behind. And no one seems to have arrested, or even investigated, Jesus' followers for this alleged grave robbing. But more importantly, if Jesus' disciples stole the body, then they must have lied about His resurrection, because they did not merely claim that His tomb was empty (which seems to have been an accepted fact by all involved, including the Jewish leaders), but that He had come back to life and later ascended into Heaven. So this first explanation turns out to be the same as explanation # 7—it was all a lie.

*Wrong Tomb.* According to theory # 2, Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary<sup>41</sup> watched Joseph bury Jesus' body from a distance, and then went to the wrong tomb when they returned on Sunday morning, naturally finding it open and empty. The women then told the other disciples, who assumed Jesus must have risen from the dead. Of course, this theory fails to explain why the Jewish or Roman authorities didn't simply produce Jesus' body from the correct tomb and kill the resurrection story before it could really get started. The Jewish leaders in particular had every reason to do so, since they viewed the Christians as heretics who were misleading the Jewish people, insulting the Jewish leaders (saying that they had killed God's Messiah), and blaspheming against God.<sup>42</sup>

But again, this explanation, like # 1, is really no different from theory # 7. Jesus' disciples did not merely preach an empty tomb. They insisted that they had seen Jesus alive and well after His crucifixion, and that they walked with Him,<sup>43</sup> ate with Him,<sup>44</sup> talked with Him,<sup>45</sup> and even saw and touched

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<sup>40</sup> See Luke 24:12 and John 20:5-7. See also, Matthew 27:59, Mark 15:46, Luke 23:53, and John 19:40.

<sup>41</sup> See Matthew 27:61, Mark 15:47, Luke 23:55

<sup>42</sup> The persecution of early Christianity by the Jews is well documented in the book of Acts. See, for example, Acts 4:1-3, 18; 5:17-18, 26-28, 40; 6:8-14; 7:57-60; 8:1-3; 9:1-2; 12:1-5; 13:45, 50; 14:2, 5, 19; 17:5-9, 13; 18:12-17; 20:3; 21:27-36; 22:22; 23:2, 12-15. Christians also suffered persecution from the Romans on occasion. See Acts 16:19-24; 19:23-40; 22:24-25.

<sup>43</sup> Luke 24:13-28

<sup>44</sup> Luke 24:42-43; John 21:9-13

<sup>45</sup> Matthew 28:9-10, 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-18 (but see footnote 10); Luke 24:15-32, 24:36-50; John 20:15-17, 20:19-23, 20:26-29; John 21:5-6, 21:9-12, 21:15-22; Acts 1:4-8

His wounds.<sup>46</sup> Paul proclaimed that Jesus appeared to Peter and James, to the twelve apostles, and even to 500 people at one time.<sup>47</sup> And Luke adds that Jesus “presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over *a period of* forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.”<sup>48</sup> If none of these stories was true, then the disciples lied, so we are back to theory # 7.

*Someone Moved the Body.* Theory # 3 is that the Romans or the Jews moved the body, perhaps to frustrate any attempt by Jesus’ disciples to try to steal it. But this theory gets us no further than # 2, for it suffers from the same infirmities. If the Jews or the Romans were in possession of Jesus’ body, they could have easily produced it as soon as the Christians began proclaiming the resurrection. And as with # 2, if this theory is true then the story told by Jesus’ followers *cannot* be true—they cannot have seen Him, eaten with Him, or touched Him. In other words, they lied.

Theory # 4—that Joseph of Arimathea moved the body—is a bit more intriguing, but only a bit. On the evening of the crucifixion, Joseph laid the body in his own new tomb.<sup>49</sup> This was probably done in haste, since the Sabbath, which began at sundown, was fast approaching.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps Joseph later decided to move the body to a more suitable or convenient location. So when the women arrived at the grave Sunday morning, they found it empty and everyone assumed Jesus had risen. Joseph, himself a Christian, knew the truth, but did not want to embarrass his friends, so he kept quiet and did not reveal the location of the body. Of course, we now run into the same problem as with explanations # 2 and # 3: we still don’t have a satisfactory explanation for why Jesus’ followers claimed that He appeared to them alive. The many stories of Jesus’ post-crucifixion appearances are still lies, which is theory # 7. The next two theories seek to explain these appearances.

*Jesus Did Not Really Die on the Cross.* In more recent times, theory # 5 came into vogue—that Jesus did not actually die on the cross. Unlike the two men who were crucified with Him, Jesus’ legs were not broken in order

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<sup>46</sup> Luke 24:39; John 20:27-29

<sup>47</sup> See 1 Corinthians 15:5-8. The “twelve” to whom Paul refers would not have included Judas, who committed suicide the night he betrayed Jesus (Matthew 27:3-5), but would have included Matthias, who replaced Judas (Acts 1:15-26).

<sup>48</sup> Acts 1:3

<sup>49</sup> See Matthew 27:59-60, Luke 23:53, and John 19:41. See also, Mark 15:46.

<sup>50</sup> See Luke 23:54 and John 19:42.

to hasten death, because He was already believed to be dead.<sup>51</sup> And when Joseph asked for Jesus' body, Pilate was surprised to hear that Jesus had died so quickly.<sup>52</sup> So theory # 5 presumes that the Romans jumped the gun in pronouncing Jesus dead, and that He was in fact still alive when He was taken down from the cross. He then revived in the tomb and came out to appear to His disciples. What recommends this theory is that it accounts for the insistence of Jesus' followers that they had seen a real person. But it fails on almost every other level.

The first problem with this theory is that no one associated with the event—the Roman soldiers, the Jewish leaders, the various onlookers—doubted that Jesus was dead. Only Pilate questioned it, and he received assurances from a Roman centurion on that very point—presumably the same centurion who had overseen the crucifixion.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, no one apparently questioned it later, for no ancient document claims that Jesus did not actually die on the cross. This theory was an invention of relatively recent history.<sup>54</sup>

Furthermore, if Jesus simply revived in the tomb, how was He able to roll away the heavy stone which blocked the entrance,<sup>55</sup> and then slip past the guards, who undoubtedly would have arrested Him? And what became of Him after His forty days of appearances to His followers? Did He die? Did He simply wander off and live out His days in some obscure location? While there are many stories about what happened to Jesus' disciples in the years that followed His death, some more reliable than others, history does not give us even one story or legend that hints that Jesus lived on and died somewhere else.

But the greatest flaw in this theory is that it ignores the evidence regarding what Jesus suffered, and what was said about Him afterward. The Romans beat and scourged Him to the point that He needed help carrying His cross to His own death,<sup>56</sup> and was then subjected to one of the cruelest tortures known to mankind: crucifixion. His wrists and feet were nailed to a cross and He was left to hang there, struggling painfully for each breath, for

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<sup>51</sup> See John 19:32-33.

<sup>52</sup> See Mark 15:43-45.

<sup>53</sup> See Matthew 27:54; Mark 15:39, 15:44-45; and Luke 23:47.

<sup>54</sup> J.N.D. Anderson reports that this theory was first proposed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by a man named Venturini. (*Christianity: The Witness of History*, by J.N.D. Anderson (Tyndale Press, 1969. Reprint, Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1970), as quoted by Josh McDowell in *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 258.)

<sup>55</sup> See Matthew 27:60, 27:66, 28:2; Mark 15:46, 16:3-4; Luke 24:2; John 20:1

<sup>56</sup> Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26

more than three hours.<sup>57</sup> And according to John's Gospel, death was further ensured when a Roman soldier pierced Jesus' body with a spear as it hung limply on the cross.<sup>58</sup>

Yet only a few days later He walked seven miles from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus.<sup>59</sup> He walked around Jerusalem, appearing to His followers near the tomb<sup>60</sup> and in Jerusalem itself,<sup>61</sup> and later walked with them to Bethany.<sup>62</sup> He met them by the Sea of Tiberias<sup>63</sup> (also known as the Sea of Galilee)—a distance of more than 60 miles from Jerusalem—and even cooked them breakfast.<sup>64</sup> He offered to let them touch His wounds.<sup>65</sup> Honestly, does this sound like a man who had almost died only days and weeks before? The Gospels and Acts present the risen Jesus as vibrant and healthy, not as a man in desperate need of a lengthy convalescence. Of course, Jesus' followers might have lied about His post-crucifixion condition, but that is theory # 7 again, isn't it? And in any event, they must have lied about His ascension.<sup>66</sup> So even if Jesus didn't really die on the cross—which seems ludicrous—the disciples still lied. That leaves us only one more theory to consider.

*Hallucinations.* According to theory # 6, the disciples didn't really see Jesus alive after the crucifixion—they just *thought* they did. The appeal of this theory lies in the fact that it provides an explanation for the disciples' incredible devotion to the resurrection story, despite the suffering they had to endure (as we shall see). After all, they really, truly believed it. This theory also explains the ascension, for it too was just a hallucination. Yet this theory falls short when we examine what science tells us about hallucinations.

Hallucinations do not just happen. They are almost always the result of drug use, mental or physical illness, or extreme emotional instability. Often the person is highly imaginative, and wants to see someone or

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<sup>57</sup> We know Jesus was on the cross before noon and remained there until at least 3:00 p.m. See Matthew 27:45-46; Mark 15:33-34; Luke 23:44-46.

<sup>58</sup> John 19:34

<sup>59</sup> See Luke 24:13-31.

<sup>60</sup> Matthew 28:8-10, John 20:11-17

<sup>61</sup> Luke 24:33-36, John 20:19

<sup>62</sup> Luke 24:50

<sup>63</sup> Matthew 28:16-18; John 21:1-8; and see Matthew 28:7-10, Mark 15:6-7.

<sup>64</sup> John 21:9-13

<sup>65</sup> Luke 24:39, John 20:26-27

<sup>66</sup> See Luke 24:51 and Acts 1:9.

something so badly that they subconsciously attach reality to imagination—such as when a person “sees” a loved one who is deceased. Furthermore, hallucinations are usually prompted by familiar times or places that bring to mind memories the person may wish to relive. And for obvious reasons, hallucinations are highly individualistic and subjective.

Now how does this compare with the story told by Jesus’ followers? First, Jesus’ resurrection appearances were not merely to individuals—He appeared to multiple persons on numerous occasions,<sup>67</sup> and at least once He appeared to more than 500 people at one time.<sup>68</sup> Nor did His followers just see Him; He was able to manipulate real objects, such as food,<sup>69</sup> and they were able to physically touch Him.<sup>70</sup> And unlike normal hallucinations, Jesus’ appearances lasted for extended periods of time—He walked along the road to Emmaus with two disciples, holding a lengthy conversation and explaining the Scriptures, before briefly joining them for supper.<sup>71</sup> He cooked and ate breakfast with several disciples by the Sea of Galilee, then had a conversation with them.<sup>72</sup> And of course, He continued to appear to His disciples for 40 days.<sup>73</sup> Then, except for Paul’s vision,<sup>74</sup> the appearances completely stopped; a hallucination, like insanity, does not vanish so abruptly. Nor were Jesus’ appearances limited in time or place—they occurred in both the morning and the evening, and took place in Jerusalem, Galilee, and elsewhere.<sup>75</sup> Finally, Jesus’ followers were hardly predisposed to “see” a resurrected Jesus—they were highly skeptical when they first heard of it and were hard to convince.<sup>76</sup> In fact, Jesus’ resurrection

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<sup>67</sup> Matthew 28:8-9, 16-18; Mark 16:12, 14-15 (these verses in Mark’s Gospel are not in the oldest manuscripts, and therefore may not have been part of the original); Luke 24:13-15, 33-36; John 20:19, 26, 21:1-12; Acts 1:2-4; 1 Corinthians 15:5-7

<sup>68</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:6

<sup>69</sup> Luke 24:30, 41-43; John 21:12-13

<sup>70</sup> Matthew 28:9; Luke 24:39-40; John 20:16-17, 25-28

<sup>71</sup> See Luke 24:13-32.

<sup>72</sup> See John 21:1-22.

<sup>73</sup> Acts 1:3

<sup>74</sup> Acts 9:1-6

<sup>75</sup> Morning appearances: Matthew 28:1-10; (Mark 16:14-18); John 20:1-18; John 21:1-23

Evening appearances: Luke 24:13-31; John 20:19-29

Appearances in Jerusalem: Matthew 28:1-10; (Mark 16:14-18); John 20:1-29; Acts 1:4-8

Appearances in Galilee: John 21:1-23

Other appearances: Luke 24:13-31 (on the road to Emmaus)

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, Matthew 28:17; Mark 16:10-11 (these verses of Mark’s Gospel are not in the oldest manuscripts); Luke 24:8-11, 36-42; John 20:24-29. And of course, Saul (Paul) was an enemy of Christianity when he had his vision of the risen Christ. See, for example, Acts 8:1-3, 1 Corinthians 15:9, and Galatians 1:13.

was so unexpected that on three occasions He was not even recognized when He initially appeared.<sup>77</sup>

However, the strongest argument against this explanation has yet to be made: if Jesus' resurrection appearances were just a hallucination, why didn't the Jewish leaders or the Roman authorities produce the body and discredit the story? They were certainly motivated to do so. The Romans were interested in civil order, and the Christians were upsetting that order. (We know this from the book of Acts,<sup>78</sup> as well as Claudius' decree expelling the Jews from Rome "who were rioting because of Chrestus.") And the Jewish leaders had an even stronger motive for disproving the disciples' story, because it portrayed those leaders as murderers of the long-awaited Messiah. Furthermore, this preaching was going on right under their noses, in Jerusalem itself. Yet neither the Romans nor the Jews were able to produce a body. So instead they tried to suppress the story through intimidation and persecution,<sup>79</sup> and spread the story that the disciples had stolen the body.<sup>80</sup>

While Luke attributes the Jewish leaders' persecution to jealousy,<sup>81</sup> I believe they saw what we seem to have lost sight of—if the disciples' story about the resurrection was not true, then they were liars and scoundrels, deliberately deceiving people and leading them to their ruin. Ultimately all of the possible alternatives really reduce to only these two: either Jesus' resurrection really happened and the disciples honestly reported what they saw, or it was all a hoax, a sham, a lie. So which explanation—truth or lie—is the more credible?

### **The Credibility of the New Testament: The Portrait of Jesus.**

If you are evaluating whether or not someone is telling you the truth, a good starting point is to consider what they say. And so we start with what the New Testament actually says about Jesus.

As I discuss in another article,<sup>82</sup> the Jesus of the Gospels is a very unique character among religious figures. The gods of the ancient religions all behave much like human beings—they marry, have sex, kill, and exact revenge. The only apparent distinction between them and us is that they have

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<sup>77</sup> See Luke 24:15-16, John 20:14-16, and John 21:4-7.

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Acts 8:57-59, 14:4-5, 14:19, 16:19-21, 17:5-8, 17:13, 18:12-17, 19:23-41, 21:27-36, 22:22, 23:10, 23:12-21.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, Acts 4:15-18, 5:18, 5:26-28, 5:40, 6:8-14, 7:57-60, and 8:1-3.

<sup>80</sup> Matthew 28:11-15

<sup>81</sup> Acts 5:17

<sup>82</sup> See "Why You Should Consider Christianity," on this web site.

immortality and tremendous power, and they don't always use that power for good. Even in monotheistic Islam, we see these human elements in the Qur'ân's portrayal of Hell, where Allah exacts eternal, inordinate, and pitiless revenge against unbelievers. Similarly, the Qur'ân's view of Heaven is decidedly anthropocentric, with a cornucopia of earthly delights such as abundant food and drink, luxurious clothing, and even sex.<sup>83</sup> Allah caters to human beings in Heaven while acting very much like a flawed human being in Hell.

Jesus behaves nothing like that. He always uses His power to help people.<sup>84</sup> He cures diseases,<sup>85</sup> raises the dead,<sup>86</sup> feeds the hungry,<sup>87</sup> and even provides wine for a wedding celebration when the host runs out.<sup>88</sup> Yet He refuses to demonstrate His power for the authorities,<sup>89</sup> and in fact tries to keep His miracle-working power from becoming widely known.<sup>90</sup> He forgives both those who crucified Him<sup>91</sup> and Peter who denied Him.<sup>92</sup> He tells memorable stories,<sup>93</sup> and even mixes in some humor.<sup>94</sup>

Yet *what* He teaches is more amazing than *how* He teaches, for His wisdom frankly runs counter to normal human thinking and behavior. The Sermon on the Mount (Chapters 5 through 7 of Matthew's Gospel) is full of counter-intuitive ideas: those who are blessed are not the rich and powerful, but the humble and persecuted;<sup>95</sup> do not resist those who mistreat you, but

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<sup>83</sup> For more on this topic, see the article, "The Problem With Islam," on this web site.

<sup>84</sup> The one exception is the withering of the fruitless fig tree. See Matthew 21:18-19 and Mark 11:12-14, 20-21. And it should be noted that this one exception involves no harm to people and was subsequently used by Jesus as a teaching moment about faith. See Matthew 21:20-22 and Mark 11:22-24.

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, Matthew 4:23, Mark 5:25-34, and Luke 4:38-40, 7:21.

<sup>86</sup> See, for example, Mark 5:21-24 and 35-42; Luke 7:11-15, 8:40-42, 8:49-56; John 11:1-44.

<sup>87</sup> See, for example, Matthew 14:15-21, 15:32-38; Mark 6:34-44, 8:1-9; Luke 9:12-17; John 6:2-13.

<sup>88</sup> See John 2:1-10.

<sup>89</sup> Matthew 12:38-39, 16:1-4; Mark 8:11-12; Luke 11:29

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, Matthew 8:4, 9:27-30, 12:15-16, 17:9; Mark 1:40-44, 3:11-12, 5:40-43, 7:32-36; Luke 4:41, 8:56.

<sup>91</sup> Luke 23:34

<sup>92</sup> See, for example, John 21:15-19.

<sup>93</sup> See, for example, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), and the parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4-15).

<sup>94</sup> See, for example, Matthew 7:3: " 'Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?' " Or Matthew 23:24: " 'You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!' " "

<sup>95</sup> Matthew 5:5, 10-12

be kind to everyone, even your enemies;<sup>96</sup> do not put your trust in wealth, but trust God to provide what you need.<sup>97</sup> Nor does He kowtow to public opinion or prevailing norms—He encourages the payment of taxes to the despised Romans,<sup>98</sup> while disapproving of divorce under most circumstances.<sup>99</sup> And unlike the Qur’ân, Jesus paints a picture of Heaven which is much different from our world.<sup>100</sup>

Jesus is unique among men and gods. In everything He says and does, he seems super-human, but He is nothing like the gods that men dream up. He doesn’t think like men, react like men, or value the things that men value. He also has very real, very human qualities that we seldom see in stories about mythical gods: He weeps;<sup>101</sup> He anguishes in the Garden of Gethsemane as His death approaches;<sup>102</sup> He cares deeply about others.<sup>103</sup> Is it possible that this portrait of Jesus is a lie? Is the Jesus we see in the Gospels merely a fantasy concocted by men? Not likely. As the famous historian, Will Durant, said: “That a few simple men should in one generation have invented so powerful and appealing a personality, so lofty an ethic and so inspiring a vision of human brotherhood, would be a miracle far more incredible than any recorded in the Gospels.”<sup>104</sup>

### **The Credibility of the New Testament: A High Regard for Truth.**

The New Testament writers display a remarkable level of honesty, for they include many details that are potentially embarrassing or apparently counter-productive. For example, let’s look at what they say about Peter, who became one of the prominent leaders of the Christians after Jesus’ death. Peter made the first public speech about Christ’s resurrection,<sup>105</sup> and was the first of the disciples to perform a miraculous healing in Jesus’ name.<sup>106</sup> When the disciples were arrested for preaching about Jesus, Peter

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<sup>96</sup> Matthew 5:38-46

<sup>97</sup> Matthew 6:19-21, 24-34 and 7:7-11

<sup>98</sup> See Matthew 22:17-21; Mark 12:14-17; Luke 20:22-25.

<sup>99</sup> See Matthew 5:31-32, 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-12.

<sup>100</sup> See Matthew 22:29-30 and Mark 12:24-25. (For a fuller discussion of what the New Testament says about Heaven, see the article, “Sharing Heaven,” on this web site.)

<sup>101</sup> Luke 19:41; John 11:35

<sup>102</sup> See Matthew 26:37-39; Mark 14:33-36; Luke 22:42-44

<sup>103</sup> See, for example, Matthew 9:36, 14:14, 15:32, 20:34; Mark 1:41, 6:34, 8:2-3; Luke 7:13.

<sup>104</sup> Durant’s *The Story of Civilization*, Vol. III (“Caesar and Christ”), p. 557

<sup>105</sup> See Acts 2:14-40.

<sup>106</sup> See Acts 3:1-8.

spoke for all of them.<sup>107</sup> He confronted the dishonest Ananias and Sapphira,<sup>108</sup> and the greedy Simon.<sup>109</sup> Peter was the first disciple to extend Christianity and Christian baptism to the Gentiles,<sup>110</sup> and then bravely defended what he had done, winning over those who believed that Christianity was just for the Jews.<sup>111</sup>

If you were inventing a new religion—a religion based on a lie—wouldn't you want to exalt this early leader into heroic, larger-than-life status? Yet the Gospel writers tell embarrassing stories about Peter that make him look dense, foolish, and cowardly. For example, all four Gospels admit that Peter denied knowing Jesus three times after His arrest,<sup>112</sup> after vehemently pledging to remain faithful even to the point of death.<sup>113</sup> Jesus rebuked Peter in harsh terms—"Get behind Me, Satan"—when he objected to Jesus foretelling His own death and resurrection.<sup>114</sup> When Jesus walks on water, Peter bravely tries it himself—but quickly fails.<sup>115</sup> At Jesus' miraculous transfiguration, where He is met by the supernatural Moses and Elijah, Peter foolishly asks if he should make tents for the three of them.<sup>116</sup> When Jesus stoops to wash the apostles' feet on the night He is to be arrested, Peter objects, and is once again rebuked by Jesus.<sup>117</sup> Peter is even criticized by Paul for hypocrisy regarding eating with Gentiles.<sup>118</sup>

Nor is Peter the only disciple to receive this humiliating treatment. The Gospel writers tell us that on the night Jesus was betrayed and arrested—during His hour of greatest need—His closest followers fell asleep when He went off to pray.<sup>119</sup> (Indeed, Matthew and Mark tell us that this

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<sup>107</sup> See Acts 4:1-12 and 19-20, and Acts 5:29-32.

<sup>108</sup> Acts 5:1-10

<sup>109</sup> Acts 8:18-23

<sup>110</sup> Acts 10:1-48

<sup>111</sup> See Acts 11:1-18.

<sup>112</sup> Matthew 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-18, 25-27

<sup>113</sup> Matthew 26:33-35; Mark 14:29-31; Luke 22:33; John 13:37

<sup>114</sup> Matthew 16:21-23 and Mark 8:31-33. For example, Mark says:

And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And He was stating the matter plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."

<sup>115</sup> Matthew 14:22-33

<sup>116</sup> Luke 9:28-36; Mark 9:2-10; Matthew 17:1-9

<sup>117</sup> John 13:3-10

<sup>118</sup> See Galatians 2:11-14.

<sup>119</sup> Matthew 26:40-45; Mark 14:37-41; Luke 22:45-46

happened more than once.) Then when Jesus was arrested, His followers all ran away and deserted Him.<sup>120</sup> The Gospels also frequently present Jesus' disciples as a bit obtuse, such as when they fail to grasp the real meaning of what He says and does,<sup>121</sup> or when they are slow to understand who and what He is.<sup>122</sup> And those writers provide other examples of the disciples' weaknesses and failings: their inability to cast out a demon;<sup>123</sup> their argument about which of them was the greatest;<sup>124</sup> their fear at seeing Jesus walking on water,<sup>125</sup> at His transfiguration,<sup>126</sup> and at the prospect of going to Jerusalem where Jesus would be condemned.<sup>127</sup> Even Paul, the great missionary for Christ, does not escape. His persecution of the church is prominently mentioned,<sup>128</sup> and he calls himself the "foremost" of sinners.<sup>129</sup> He talks openly about his own weaknesses and deficiencies,<sup>130</sup> and reveals problems within the churches that he had helped to plant.<sup>131</sup>

We must also remember that Jesus' disciples told these stories for many years before the New Testament writers finally recorded them. If you were fabricating a myth to make yourself look good, would you include

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<sup>120</sup> Matthew 26:56; Mark 14:50-52

<sup>121</sup> For example, see Matthew 16:5-12 and Mark 8:14-21 (the disciples misunderstand Jesus' meaning regarding the "leaven" of the Jewish leaders); Mark 4:13 (the disciples do not understand the meaning of Jesus' parable of the sower); Mark 9:31-32, Luke 9:44-45, and Luke 18:31-34 (the disciples do not understand Jesus' prediction of His own death and resurrection). See also, Matthew 13:36, 15:15-17; Mark 4:10, 7:17-18; Luke 8:9; John 3:1-10, 11:11-14, 12:16, 16:17-18.

<sup>122</sup> See, for example, Matthew 8:24-27 and Luke 8:23-25 ("Who then is this, that He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey Him?"). See also Matthew 14:25-26

<sup>123</sup> See Matthew 17:14-16, Mark 9:17-18, and Luke 9:38-40.

<sup>124</sup> See Mark 9:33-34, Luke 9:46, and Luke 22:24.

<sup>125</sup> Matthew 14:26; Mark 6:49-50; John 6:19

<sup>126</sup> Matthew 17:6; Mark 9:6

<sup>127</sup> Mark 10:32

<sup>128</sup> Acts 8:1-3, 9:1-2; 1 Corinthians 15:9, Galatians 1:13-14; Philippians 3:6; 1 Timothy 1:13

<sup>129</sup> 1 Timothy 1:15

<sup>130</sup> See 1 Corinthians 1:17, 2:1-5, 4:10, 9:22; 2 Corinthians 10:10, 11:30, 12:7-10, 13:4, 13:9

<sup>131</sup> For example, he criticizes the Corinthians for, among other things, their divisions and disunity (1 Corinthians 1:11-12), sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 5:1, i.e., a man sleeping with his step-mother), and lawsuits against one another (1 Corinthians 6:1-6). Paul was critical of the Galatian Christians for adopting the Jewish law and customs. (See, for example, Galatians 3:1-3, 4:21, and 5:2-4.) And he warned those among the Thessalonians who had become lazy busybodies. (2 Thessalonians 3:11)

stories that made you and your friends look foolish? For this reason alone, the New Testament exudes honesty and frankness. But there is more.

Matthew addressed his Gospel to a Jewish audience, as shown by his eagerness to prove that Jesus was their long-awaited Messiah who fulfilled many of the Messianic prophecies.<sup>132</sup> So we are not surprised that in Matthew's Gospel Jesus refers to Himself thirty times as the "Son of Man,"<sup>133</sup> the Messianic reference from the prophet Daniel.<sup>134</sup> But Mark and Luke wrote for Gentiles,<sup>135</sup> who were unfamiliar with the Jewish scriptures, and for whom "Son of Man" would seem like a refutation of Jesus' claims of divinity. So if Mark and Luke are merely inventing a deity, we would expect them to drop this inconvenient moniker. Yet we find Jesus referring to Himself as the Son of Man 14 times in Mark's relatively short Gospel,<sup>136</sup> and 25 times in Luke.<sup>137</sup> (The Gospel of John, the last of the four Gospels to be written, has 11 such references.<sup>138</sup>) This is a striking example of honesty solely for the sake of honesty.

Another example is the seven-weeks gap. Jesus' resurrection, according to all of the accounts, occurred mere days after his death. Yet Acts says that His followers did not proclaim this to the world until about seven weeks later, on the day of Pentecost.<sup>139</sup> If the resurrection never happened, wouldn't it make a better, more convincing story to say that the disciples were so excited that they announced the news almost immediately? Frank Morison puts it well in his book, *Who Moved the Stone?*:

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<sup>132</sup> For example, see Matthew 1:22-23, 2:1-6, 2:14-18, 3:1-3, 4:12-16, 8:16-17, 12:15-21, 13:34-35, 21:1-5, 27:3-10.

<sup>133</sup> See Matthew 8:20, 9:6, 10:23, 11:19, 12:8, 12:32, 12:40, 13:37, 13:41, 16:13, 16:27, 16:28, 17:9, 17:12, 17:22, 18:11, 19:28, 20:18, 20:28, 24:30 (2 times), 24:37, 24:39, 24:44, 25:31, 26:2, 26:24 (2 times), 26:45, and 26:64.

<sup>134</sup> See Daniel 7:13.

<sup>135</sup> We know this about Mark because of his explanations of Jewish terminology and customs, which would not have been necessary for a Jewish audience. For example, see Mark 5:41, 7:3-4, 7:11, 7:34. Luke was himself a Gentile, a Greek physician, and he wrote his Gospel for "Theophilus," Greek for "lover of God." See Luke 1:3.

<sup>136</sup> Mark 2:10, 2:28, 8:31, 8:38, 9:9, 9:12, 9:31, 10:33, 10:45, 13:26, 14:21 (2 times), 14:41, and 14:62

<sup>137</sup> Luke 5:24, 6:5, 6:22, 7:34, 9:22, 9:26, 9:44, 9:58, 11:30, 12:8, 12:10, 12:40, 17:22, 17:24, 17:26, 17:30, 18:8, 18:31, 19:10, 21:27, 21:36, 22:22, 22:48, 22:69, and 24:7

<sup>138</sup> John 1:51, 3:13, 3:14, 5:27, 6:27, 6:53, 6:62, 8:28, 9:35, 12:23, 13:31 (and see John 12:34)

<sup>139</sup> Acts 2:1 *et. seq.*

Why, in the first instance, this seven weeks' gap? It is a very pertinent and suggestive question. The date when Acts was first committed to writing by Luke was at least some thirty or forty years after the events in question. There was time for the legend of the Resurrection—if legend it was—to have assumed its fullest and most developed form. Many of the actual eye-witnesses had passed away and a broad gulf of years lay between those who remained and the events themselves. The story they would tell in A.D. 65 would either be the literal truth, which of course would be unassailable, or such a development of it as would carry the maximum conviction to the contemporary mind. The story would not tend to become *less convincing* as time went on. It would tend rather to lose its weak and incongruous elements, to shake out its awkward and inconvenient features.

Viewed, however, from the standpoint of pure legend, this seven weeks' gap is an inconvenient feature, an anachronism of the first order. It does not help the credibility of the apostles' story. It embarrasses it. It provides an unnecessary and even incomprehensible stumbling-block to faith. It leaves the door wide open for the entry of the gravest suspicion. People would say: If Jesus rose from the dead on Easter Sunday and appeared to His disciples, why did they not proclaim it from the housetops at once? Why wait for seven weeks, until people had begun to forget about the great tragedy, and then suddenly spring their announcement on the world?<sup>140</sup>

If the resurrection story was mere falsehood, this gap of seven weeks would never have become part of the story—or it would have been quickly discarded as unhelpful. Its presence in Acts lends great weight to the author's credibility.

An often overlooked example of the New Testament authors' brutal honesty is the fact that, in each of the four Gospels, *women* discover the empty tomb.<sup>141</sup> The significance of this is explained by Kreeft & Tacelli in their book, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*:

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<sup>140</sup> *Who Moved the Stone?*, p. 106 (Chapter 9)

<sup>141</sup> See Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 23:55 - 24:10; John 20:1-2

In first-century Judaism, women had low social status and no legal right to serve as witnesses. If the empty tomb were an invented legend, its inventors surely would not have had it discovered by women, whose testimony was considered worthless. If, on the other hand, the writers were simply reporting what they saw, they would have to tell the truth, however socially and legally inconvenient.<sup>142</sup>

In my experience as an attorney, liars almost always change or omit details that they believe are detrimental to their purposes. There is no evidence that the New Testament authors did that, and plenty of evidence that they did not—presumably, because they were either very stupid or scrupulously truthful.

### **The Credibility of the New Testament: Stories that Mesh.**

Any judge, attorney, or psychologist will tell you that people see and remember events differently, because we all have different perspectives and different filters. For example, a person witnessing an armed robbery from fifty feet away might remember many details about the robber's clothing and appearance, whereas the person actually being robbed may remember only what the gun looked like, because the victim and the witness are focusing on different things during the robbery. Witnesses often perceive and remember different aspects of the same event, and the complete truth becomes apparent only by piecing together their stories like a jigsaw puzzle, to make sense of what is otherwise unclear. We see this a lot in the New Testament.

For example, Luke, the author of Acts and a friend of Paul, mentions a dispute between Paul and Barnabas that was so serious that it split them up as a missionary team.<sup>143</sup> They argued over whether to take Mark along on their second missionary journey, after he had deserted them during their first trip.<sup>144</sup> As a result, Barnabas returned to Cyprus (Barnabas' home) with Mark, while Paul took along Silas and went back to Asia Minor.<sup>145</sup> Why was Barnabas so adamant that Mark should go with them? Luke doesn't tell us, but we can discern the likely answer from one of Paul's letters—Mark and Barnabas were cousins.<sup>146</sup> Thus, Barnabas was tied to Mark by family

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<sup>142</sup> *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (see Sources for full cite), p. 192

<sup>143</sup> Acts 15:36-39

<sup>144</sup> Acts 15:36-39 and 13:13

<sup>145</sup> Acts 15:39-41

<sup>146</sup> Colossians 4:10; the same verse implies that Paul and Mark had been reconciled by the time Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians

loyalty. Neither Luke nor Paul call attention to this consonance between their respective writings, but together they explain much.

This is but one example of many. In 1 Thessalonians 2:2, Paul mentions in passing that he suffered persecution in Philippi and faced much opposition in Thessalonica. Luke corroborates this story in Acts 16:12 – 17:9, where he describes these events in great detail. Further, Luke tells us that Paul stayed with a man named Jason while in Thessalonica, but doesn't tell us why.<sup>147</sup> Another of Paul's letters fills in the gap by informing us that Jason was Paul's kinsman.<sup>148</sup>

Here's another example.<sup>149</sup> When Jesus was crucified, Mark's Gospel tells us that three women were watching: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and Joses, and Salome.<sup>150</sup> But later, when His body was buried, only the two Mary's were present to see where he was laid.<sup>151</sup> Why? What happened to Salome? Matthew provides our first clue, since he tells us that among the women watching Jesus' crucifixion were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and "the mother of the sons of Zebedee."<sup>152</sup> If the last is Salome—which seems like the logical conclusion to draw—then she is the mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee.<sup>153</sup> This becomes important when we read the account of Jesus' crucifixion in John's Gospel, in which Jesus instructs John to look after Jesus' mother, Mary, which of course John did.<sup>154</sup> And that helps to explain why Salome was not at the burial—she was probably helping her son John take care of Jesus' grieving mother after His death. This explanation is admittedly a bit speculative, but it makes sense, and it illustrates how three different Gospel accounts—each incomplete in itself—fit together to explain what is otherwise mysterious.

All four Gospels tell the story of the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000.<sup>155</sup> Only Luke tells us where this miracle occurred—near the town of

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<sup>147</sup> Acts 17:5-7

<sup>148</sup> Romans 16:21

<sup>149</sup> This example is based on the discussion in *Who Moved the Stone?*, at pp. 70-71.

<sup>150</sup> Mark 15:40

<sup>151</sup> Mark 15:47

<sup>152</sup> Matthew 27:55-56

<sup>153</sup> See Matthew 4:21, 10:2; Mark 1:19, 3:17, 10:35; Luke 5:10.

<sup>154</sup> John 19:26-27

<sup>155</sup> See Matthew 14:15-21; Mark 6:35-44; Luke 9:12-17; John 6:1-13. Actually, 5,000 men, plus women and children, were fed. The total number of people fed probably numbered between 10,000 and 15,000.

Bethsaida.<sup>156</sup> But John adds an interesting detail to the story: before performing the miracle, Jesus turns to Philip and asks, “Where are we to buy bread?”<sup>157</sup> Why did He ask Philip? Why not Thomas or Matthew—or Judas, the keeper of the money bag?<sup>158</sup> Perhaps because Philip was from Bethsaida, as John tells us elsewhere in his Gospel.<sup>159</sup> The subtle agreement between Luke and John on this matter is impressive, and gives credence to both the story and the miracle.

More examples can be given. In Chapter 4 of *Who Moved the Stone?* (“A Psychological Parallelogram of Forces”), Frank Morison weaves together the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate,<sup>160</sup> discussing how they explain and corroborate each other. For example, Mark and Matthew seem to begin the trial with Pilate’s question to Jesus, “Are You the King of the Jews?”<sup>161</sup> This odd beginning suggests that something must have been omitted. Luke fills in the gap by explaining that this question was preceded by the Jewish leaders’ accusations that Jesus was “misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King.”<sup>162</sup> John’s Gospel begins even earlier, recounting Pilate’s question to the Jewish leaders: “What accusation do you bring against this Man?,” and the Jews’ surprising response, “If this Man were not an evildoer, we would not have delivered Him to you.”<sup>163</sup> Furthermore, Morison speculates that the Jews would not have uttered such an insolent response unless they had been led to expect that no trial would be necessary, and that Pilate would simply rubber-stamp the Sanhedrin’s earlier decision that Jesus should die.<sup>164</sup> John gives us no clue as to what might have induced Pilate to suddenly insist on proper Roman procedure, but perhaps Matthew does, for he tells us that Pilate’s wife sent him a message, “Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him.”<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Luke 9:10; Matthew and Mark only tell us that it was a “secluded place” which Jesus and His disciples reached by boat. See Matthew 14:13 and Mark 6:32.

<sup>157</sup> John 6:5

<sup>158</sup> John 13:29

<sup>159</sup> John 6:5

<sup>160</sup> Matthew 27:11-26; Mark 15:1-15; Luke 23:1-25; John 18:28-19:16

<sup>161</sup> Matthew 27:11; Mark 15:1-2

<sup>162</sup> Luke 23:2

<sup>163</sup> John 18:29-30

<sup>164</sup> See Matthew 26:65, 27:1; Mark 14:64

<sup>165</sup> Matthew 27:19. To accept this explanation, we must assume that Matthew’s account does not proceed in chronological order, since the message seems to come *during* the trial, or even near the end of the trial, rather than prior to it. However, this is not an

If the foregoing examples involve some degree of speculation or assumption, we are on very firm ground when we consider references to people in the New Testament. As you might expect, Jesus, Peter, and the other apostles are mentioned by multiple New Testament authors. But so are many other individuals. We have already seen that John Mark is named in both Acts and Paul's letter to the Colossians.<sup>166</sup> He is also mentioned in two of Paul's other letters, as well as 1 Peter.<sup>167</sup> And there is Paul, whose adventures are the subject of chapters 8, 9, and 13 through 28 of Acts; Paul is also the author of 13 books of the New Testament,<sup>168</sup> and is mentioned in 2 Peter 3:15. Other examples include such prominent Christians as Apollos;<sup>169</sup> Aquila and his wife Priscilla;<sup>170</sup> Barnabas (a/k/a Joses or Joseph);<sup>171</sup> James, brother of Jesus and head of the Jerusalem church after Christ's death;<sup>172</sup> Joseph of Arimathea;<sup>173</sup> Luke, "the beloved physician";<sup>174</sup> Martha and her sister Mary;<sup>175</sup> Mary Magdalene;<sup>176</sup> Silas (also called Silvanus);<sup>177</sup> Timothy;<sup>178</sup> and Titus.<sup>179</sup>

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unreasonable assumption. In Matthew, Pilate's question to Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?," **precedes** the Jewish leaders' accusations, which also seems out of chronological, and logical, order. See Matthew 27:11-13.

<sup>166</sup> Acts 12:12, 12:25, 13:5, 13:13, 15:37-39; Colossians 4:10

<sup>167</sup> See 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24; and 1 Peter 5:13.

<sup>168</sup> Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon

<sup>169</sup> See Acts 18:24, 19:1; 1 Corinthians 1:12, 3:4-6, 3:22, 4:6, 16:12; Titus 3:13

<sup>170</sup> See Acts 18:2, 18:18, and 18:26; Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19; and 2 Timothy 4:19.

<sup>171</sup> Acts 4:36, 9:27, 11:22, 11:30, 12:25, 13:1-2, 13:7, 13:43, 13:46, 13:50, 14:12, 14:14, 14:20, 15:2, 15:12, 15:22, 15:25, 15:35-37, 15:39; 1 Corinthians 9:6; Galatians 2:1, 2:9, 2:13; Colossians 4:10

<sup>172</sup> Two of Jesus' twelve apostles were also named James, but James the brother of Jesus was not one of those. He is referred to in Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3; Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 1:19, 2:9, 2:12; James 1:1; Jude 1.

<sup>173</sup> Matthew 27:57-59; Mark 15:43-45; Luke 23:50-51; John 19:38

<sup>174</sup> Luke is believed to be the author of both the Gospel that bears his name and Acts, but he is also mentioned by Paul in Colossians 4:14, 2 Timothy 4:11, and Philemon 24.

<sup>175</sup> Luke 10:38-41; John 11:1-2, 11:5, 11:19-21, 11:24, 11:28, 11:30-32, 11:39, 11:45, 12:2-3; see also Luke 7:38-39, which appears to parallel John 12:2-3

<sup>176</sup> Matthew 27:56, 27:61, 28:1; Mark 15:40, 15:47, 16:1, [16:9 – but this verse is not in the oldest manuscripts]; Luke 8:2, 24:10; John 19:25, 20:1, 20:18

<sup>177</sup> Acts 15:22, 15:27, 15:32, 15:34, 15:40, 16:19, 16:25, 16:29, 17:4, 17:10, 17:14-15, 18:5; 2 Corinthians 1:19; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; 1 Peter 5:12

<sup>178</sup> Acts 16:1, 17:14-15, 18:5, 19:22, 20:4; Romans 16:21; 1 Corinthians 4:17, 16:10; 2 Corinthians 1:1, 1:19; Philippians 1:1, 2:19; Colossians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 3:2,

Many otherwise obscure persons also show up in multiple books, such as Alexander the coppersmith;<sup>180</sup> Archippus;<sup>181</sup> Aristarchus, a traveling companion of Paul;<sup>182</sup> Crispus, a Corinthian;<sup>183</sup> Demas;<sup>184</sup> Epaphras;<sup>185</sup> Erastus;<sup>186</sup> Gaius, another of Paul's traveling companions;<sup>187</sup> Jason;<sup>188</sup> Lucius of Cyrene;<sup>189</sup> Onesimus;<sup>190</sup> Rufus;<sup>191</sup> Sosthenes,<sup>192</sup> Trophimus the Ephesian;<sup>193</sup> and Tychicus.<sup>194</sup> (On the other hand, many other persons are only mentioned in a single book.<sup>195</sup>)

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3:6; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; 1 Timothy 1:2, 1:18, 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:2; Philemon 1; Hebrews 13:23

<sup>179</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:13, 7:6, 7:13-14, 8:6, 8:16, 8:23, 12:18; Galatians 2:1, 2:3; 2 Timothy 4:10; Titus 1:4

<sup>180</sup> Mark 15:21; Acts 19:33; 1 Timothy 1:20; 2 Timothy 4:14

<sup>181</sup> Colossians 4:17; Philemon 2

<sup>182</sup> Acts 19:29, 20:4, 27:2; Colossians 4:10; and Philemon 24

<sup>183</sup> Acts 18:8; 1 Corinthians 1:14

<sup>184</sup> Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:10; Philemon 24

<sup>185</sup> Colossians 1:7, 4:12; Philemon 23

<sup>186</sup> Acts 19:22; Romans 16:23; 2 Timothy 4:20

<sup>187</sup> Acts 19:29, 20:4; Romans 16:23; 1 Corinthians 1:14; 3 John 1

<sup>188</sup> Acts 17:5-7, 17:9; Romans 16:21

<sup>189</sup> Acts 13:1; Romans 16:21

<sup>190</sup> Colossians 4:9; Philemon 10

<sup>191</sup> Mark 15:21; Romans 16:13

<sup>192</sup> Acts 18:17; 1 Corinthians 1:1

<sup>193</sup> Acts 20:4, 21:29; 2 Timothy 4:20

<sup>194</sup> Acts 20:4; Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7; 2 Timothy 4:12; Titus 3:12

<sup>195</sup> For example: Achaicus (1 Corinthians 16:17), Ampliatus (Romans 16:8), Andronicus (Romans 16:7), Apelles (or Appella) (Romans 16:10), Apphia (Philemon 2), Aristobulus (Romans 16:10), Artemas (Titus 3:12), Asyncritus (Romans 16:14), Carpus (2 Timothy 4:10), Claudia (2 Timothy 4:21), Crescens (2 Timothy 4:10), Epaenetus (Romans 16:5), Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25, 4:18), Eubulus (2 Timothy 4:21), Euodia (Philippians 4:2), Fortunatus (1 Corinthians 16:17), Hermas (Romans 16:14), Hermes (Romans 16:14), Herodion (Romans 16:11), Julia (Romans 16:15), Junias (or Junia) (Romans 16:7), Lazarus (John 11:1-2, 11:5, 11:11, 11:14, 11:43, 12:1-2, 12:9-10, 12:17), Linus (2 Timothy 4:21), Narcissus (Romans 16:11), Nereus (Romans 16:15), Nicodemus (John 3:1, 3:4, 3:9, 7:50, 19:39), Nympha (or Nymphas) (Colossians 4:15), Olympas (Romans 16:15), Onesiphorus (2 Timothy 1:16, 4:19), Patrobas (Romans 16:14), Philemon (Philemon 1), Philologus (Romans 16:15), Phlegon (Romans 16:14), Pudens (2 Timothy 4:21), Quartus (Romans 16:23), Secundus (Acts 20:4), Simeon (a/k/a Niger) (Acts 13:1), Sopater (Acts 20:4), Sosipater (Romans 16:21), Stachys (Romans 16:9), Stephanas (1 Corinthians 1:16, 16:15, 16:17), Syntyche (Philippians 4:2), Tertius (Romans 16:22), Tryphaena (or Tryphena) (Romans 16:12), Tryphosa (Romans 16:12), Urbanus (Romans 16:9), and Zenas (Titus 3:13).

These are but a few examples of the seemingly unintentional agreement among different New Testament writers. Does this prove they are truthful in all they write? Of course not. However, such agreement does render untenable the contention that we are dealing with pure fiction here. Clearly, these writers are discussing people and events with which they are familiar. And the agreement among different writers certainly adds to their credibility. But let us delve even deeper.

### **The Credibility of the New Testament: Archaeology and Secular History.**

It's not enough for a person to seem credible, because some people are very good liars. One of the best ways to determine if someone is telling the truth is to see if other evidence corroborates or refutes their story. We have seen that the New Testament books have a lot of apparent credibility and internal consistency, but what does history and archaeology say about them?

We begin with the book of Acts, which has been repeatedly shown to be historically accurate. Indeed, the famous British archaeologist, Sir William Ramsay, who was taught that Acts was a historically inaccurate product of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., learned differently later in life: "I gradually came to find it a useful ally in some obscure and difficult investigations."<sup>196</sup> Indeed, most of the 54 cities named in Acts, once lost to history, have now been found by archaeologists. And we have already seen how Luke's passing mention of Claudius' expulsion of the Jews from Rome<sup>197</sup> is corroborated by the Roman historian, Suetonius.

Chapter 19 of Acts discusses one of Paul's visits to the city of Ephesus, in western Asia Minor (now Turkey), during which the people rioted over the economic and religious impact of Christianity on the city's cult worship of the goddess Artemis (Roman name, Diana), twin sister of the god Apollo. Acts mentions the temple of Artemis,<sup>198</sup> and quotes the people as crying out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians."<sup>199</sup> History informs us that Ephesus had a very special relationship with this particular goddess, and the city's Temple of Artemis was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The Temple was destroyed in the fifth century A.D., but archaeologists found its remains in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Archaeologists have

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<sup>196</sup> Original quotation is from *St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen*, by Sir William Ramsay, as quoted in *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 62.

<sup>197</sup> See Acts 18:2.

<sup>198</sup> Acts 19:27

<sup>199</sup> Acts 19:28, 34

also found the theater where, according to Acts, the rioting Ephesians dragged several Christians.<sup>200</sup> The theater could hold 25,000 people. Luke's account is therefore entirely consistent with what history tells us about Ephesus.

Luke's terminology in Acts was once thought to be inaccurate, but no more. In Acts 13:7, Luke refers to Sergius Paulus as the "proconsul" of Cyprus. A Roman province under the jurisdiction of the Roman Senate was ruled by a proconsul, but a province under the jurisdiction of the emperor was ruled by a procurator—like Pontius Pilate in Judea. Cyprus was thought to have been an imperial province, until historians discovered that it was changed to a senatorial province in 22 B.C., confirming that Luke was right. Luke's description of Gallio as "proconsul of Achaia" has been verified by an inscription at Delphi which refers to Gallio by the same title. Similarly, Luke's reference to Publius as "leading [or first] man of the island" of Malta in Acts 28:7 matches Maltese inscriptions that give him that very title. Luke's use of the Greek word *politarchs* for the authorities in Thessalonica<sup>201</sup> and *meris* to refer to a "district" of Macedonia<sup>202</sup> were once thought to be wrong, but in each case his terminology has proven to be correct.

John's Gospel offers an impressive example of history confirming the New Testament. In John 19:13, the author describes the location of the trial of Jesus:

Therefore when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out, and sat down on the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha.

The Hebrew word, *Gabbatha*, means "raised ground." Herod I, the King of Judea at the time of Jesus' birth, built a castle-like structure just outside the walls of the Jewish Temple: the imposing Tower of Antonia, which stood on a rocky eminence—thus, on "raised ground." At the base of this Tower, archaeologists have discovered a 3,000-square-yard pavement which apparently dates to the time of Jesus. So John has been proven to be accurate. What makes John 19:13 all the more impressive is that John's

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<sup>200</sup> Acts 19:29, 31

<sup>201</sup> See Acts 17:6: "When they did not find them, they *began* dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, 'These men who have upset the world have come here also. . . .'"

<sup>202</sup> Acts 16:12 says: ". . . and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a *Roman* colony; and we were staying in this city for some days."

Gospel is believed to have been written near the end of the first century A.D.—perhaps about 90 A.D. In 70 A.D., the Romans sacked Jerusalem after suppressing a Jewish revolt. The Romans destroyed the city, including the Tower of Antonia, leaving this Pavement covered in debris and lost to history for centuries. John’s familiarity with this feature of the city, which had not been seen for about 20 years, demonstrates that he was careful about his facts, and lends credence to his claim that he was an eyewitness to the events surrounding Jesus’ death and resurrection.<sup>203</sup> By the way, in 1888 archaeologists found what is almost certainly John’s Pool of Bethesda (see John 5:2).<sup>204</sup>

Romans 16:23 is one of those verses that most of us gloss over, for it is one of many in which Paul conveys greetings from those who were with him—and what possible relevance could that have for us? In this case, one whom Paul mentions is “Erastus, the city treasurer.” Paul’s letter to the Romans was probably written from the Greek city of Corinth,<sup>205</sup> in about 55-56 A.D. Thus, we may surmise from Paul’s letter that Erastus was the city treasurer for Corinth. Excavations of Corinth in 1929 uncovered a first century pavement inscribed: “Erastus, curator of public buildings, laid this pavement at his own expense.” If this is not Paul’s Erastus, then it is an astounding coincidence. But if this is the same Erastus, then it is yet another confirmation of the accuracy and reliability of the New Testament writers.

So far we have seen that the New Testament writers were brutally and embarrassingly honest about their own shortcomings; they were consistent with each other, even about seemingly minor details; and they have been confirmed by history and archeology in many of their facts. Although history was not their purpose, the New Testament writers appear to have

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<sup>203</sup> John 21:24, referring to the famous “disciple whom Jesus loved,” says: “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true.” The “disciple whom Jesus loved” is referred to in John 13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7, and 21:20. The implication is that he was one of Jesus’ twelve apostles—and thus, many have concluded that he was John, the son of Zebedee.

<sup>204</sup> John 5:2: “Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep *gate* a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticoes.”

<sup>205</sup> Gaius, who was hosting Paul when he wrote the letter to the Romans (Romans 16:23), was a member of the Corinthian church (see I Corinthians 1:14), implying that Paul was in Corinth at the time. In addition, in Romans 16:1-2, Paul commends Phoebe (who probably carried Paul’s letter to the Romans), a member of the church at Cenchrea, which was located in close proximity to Corinth. (Corinth was located on the narrow isthmus (about 4 miles wide) connecting southern Greece (Peloponnesus) to the rest of Greece, and Cenchrea was its eastern port.)

been excellent historians. Yet even excellent historians are capable of lying. And so we turn to the most convincing proof of all.

**The Most Convincing Proof of All.** What would you regard as conclusive proof that Jesus rose from the dead? We have eyewitness testimony, from John, Peter, and Paul,<sup>206</sup> and perhaps Matthew, and we have second-hand reports from Mark and Luke. And we can be confident that we have what they actually said and wrote, at least in substance, since the New Testament books are among the most reliable ancient documents in existence, with more and older copies, and fewer discrepancies between manuscripts, than any comparable writings. But did the eyewitnesses and their close associates lie?

The skeptic will point out that the witnesses are biased. Of course they are. How could they not be? If you witnessed a dead person come back to life, it would be a life-changing experience. No one could remain neutral. So perhaps the key to deciding where the truth lies is not what these witnesses said, but what they did.

As an attorney, I have seen many examples of people accused of crimes who denied their guilt when questioned by the police, only to later admit guilt in court. They lied because they thought it would make their situation better, but when they learned otherwise they changed their story. Some people have even admitted guilt to crimes they did not commit, because they believed, rightly or wrongly, that by doing so they would receive more lenient treatment. Call me a cynic, but I believe most of us would lie under the right circumstances, such as to avoid death or severe suffering. On the other hand, how many of us would be willing to suffer or die **for a lie**?

Make no mistake, Jesus' followers suffered a great deal. We have already seen how Tacitus, the Roman historian, discusses the persecution and executions of Christians by the Emperor Nero in about 64 A.D., some 30 years after Christ's death. Suetonius also mentions this persecution by Nero: "punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a set of men adhering to a novel and mischievous superstition."<sup>207</sup> And the letter of Pliny the Younger talks of his harsh punishment of obstinate Christians in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. In fact, the Romans carried out ten major persecutions of

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<sup>206</sup> While Paul did not see the risen Jesus in the flesh, he did have a vision of the risen Christ. See 1 Corinthians 15:8.

<sup>207</sup> Quoted from Suetonius' *Vita Neronis* (i.e., *Life of Nero*), xvi, as quoted in *Documents of the Christian Church*, p. 2). For a fuller quote, see the Appendix.

Christians in the first 300 years after Christ's death,<sup>208</sup> and many more lesser persecutions. In Acts we read that the Romans beat and imprisoned Paul and Silas when they were in Philippi.<sup>209</sup> Christian preaching in Ephesus caused a riot,<sup>210</sup> and such preaching was the likely cause of Emperor Claudius' order expelling the Jews from Rome, as reported by Suetonius and Acts.<sup>211</sup> For three centuries, Christians frequently faced the loss of property and position, enslavement, torture, and even death because of their faith. Yet until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70A.D., Christians often faced the most zealous persecution from their monotheistic cousins, the Jews.

In the days after Pentecost the Jewish leaders ordered that Peter and the apostles be jailed and flogged to dissuade them from preaching about Christ's resurrection.<sup>212</sup> To please the Jews, King Herod had Peter arrested and jailed—likely to await execution—until he miraculously escaped.<sup>213</sup> Paul faced opposition from the Jews in many of the cities he visited,<sup>214</sup> even though he had previously been the chief persecutor of the Christians.<sup>215</sup> In Lystra, a mob, incited by Jews from nearby towns, tried to kill Paul by stoning him,<sup>216</sup> and Acts tells us about at least two plots against his life.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> The ten official Roman persecutions were as follows:

1<sup>st</sup> Roman persecution: ca. 64 A.D.

2<sup>nd</sup> Roman persecution: ca. 81 A.D.

3<sup>rd</sup> Roman persecution: ca. 108 A.D.

4<sup>th</sup> Roman persecution: about 177-180 A.D.

5<sup>th</sup> Roman persecution: 202-211 A.D.

6<sup>th</sup> Roman persecution: 235-238 A.D.

7<sup>th</sup> Roman persecution: 249-251 A.D.

8<sup>th</sup> Roman persecution: 257-261 A.D.

9<sup>th</sup> Roman persecution: 274-275 A.D.

10<sup>th</sup> Roman persecution: 303-311 A.D. (but continued in the eastern Roman Empire until 323 A.D.)

For more on the Romans' persecution of Christianity, see the article, "Roman Persecution of Christianity," on this web site.

<sup>209</sup> See Acts 16:12 and 16:19-24

<sup>210</sup> See Acts 19:23-41.

<sup>211</sup> See footnote 12 and Acts 18:2.

<sup>212</sup> Acts 4:1-3, 5:17-18, 5:40

<sup>213</sup> Acts 12:3-11

<sup>214</sup> Acts 13:45-51 (Pisidian Antioch), 14:1-6 (Iconium), 14:19 (Lystra), 17:5-8 (Thessalonica), 17:13 (Berea), 18:12-13 (Corinth), 20:3 (unspecified city in Greece)

<sup>215</sup> See Acts 8:1, 9:1-2, 22:4-5, 26:9-11; 1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13, 1:23

<sup>216</sup> Acts 14:19-20

<sup>217</sup> Acts 9:23-25 and 23:12-15

Paul, while defending himself against some of his critics, lists his many difficulties in 2 Corinthians 11:23-27:

Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine *lashes*. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. *I have been* on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from *my* countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; *I have been* in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

Paul also mentions that he and the other apostles are “both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless”; furthermore, they are “without honor,” persecuted, slandered, and like “the scum of the world, the dregs of all things.”<sup>218</sup>

Such maltreatment was not limited to the Christian leaders. Persecution, suffering, and insults were the lot of many early Christians, as discussed by several New Testament writers, who encouraged Christians to bear these difficulties with patience and endurance.<sup>219</sup> Yet despite their sufferings, Jesus’ followers traveled throughout the Roman Empire, and beyond, to spread their message. We know from Acts that Philip went to Samaria, Gaza, and Caesarea;<sup>220</sup> that Peter traveled to Samaria and several

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<sup>218</sup> See 1 Corinthians 4:9-13.

<sup>219</sup> See, for example, John 15:20-21; Romans 8:17-18; 1 Corinthians 4:8-12; 2 Corinthians 1:4-9, 4:8-11, 4:16-17; Galatians 5:11, 6:12; Philippians 1:27-29; 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 2:14-16, 3:3-4; 2 Thessalonians 1:4-7; 2 Timothy 1:8, 1:12, 2:3, 2:9-10, 3:11-12; James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 2:19-20, 3:13-17, 4:1, 4:4, 4:12-16, 4:19; Revelation 2:9-10

<sup>220</sup> See Acts 8:5-13 and 8:26-40. There is some uncertainty about whether this Philip is the apostle Philip or the Philip of Acts 6:1-5. The latter was a Greek Jew, one of the seven “deacons” of the early church (Acts 6:5), and was known as Philip the Evangelist. I believe the Philip of Acts 8:5-13 and 8:26-40 was Philip the Evangelist, primarily because Acts 8:14 says that “when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God” as a result of Philip’s preaching, they sent Peter and John to Samaria, apparently to check on the situation there. Such supervision would seem

cities in Palestine; <sup>221</sup> and that Paul—accompanied at times by Barnabas, Mark, Silas, and others—went to Syria, Cyprus, Asia Minor (Turkey), Macedonia, and Greece. <sup>222</sup> The reference to “Babylon” in 1 Peter 5:13 <sup>223</sup> probably indicates that Peter wrote the letter from Rome (which Christians considered to be a center of evil like the Babylon of Old Testament days). Peter’s presence in Rome is confirmed by early Christian writers such as Jerome and Eusebius.

Christian writers of the first three centuries after Christ’s death tell us that one or more of the apostles, or their close associates, traveled to Asia Minor, Greece and Macedonia, Syria and Lebanon, Spain, France, Egypt, Libya, Armenia and other areas near the Black Sea, Mesopotamia, Iran, India, and other locations. Even if we did not have these sources, or the New Testament, the rapid spread of Christianity in its early years would necessarily imply extensive travel by the early Christians. We have already seen that the Christian presence in Rome by 49 A.D.—less than 20 years after Christ’s death—was significant enough to produce an uproar among the Jews that resulted in an imperial decree expelling the Jews from Rome. Fifteen years later the Christians in Rome were so numerous that the Emperor Nero was able to use them as a scapegoat for the burning of Rome and make their systematic execution part of the Roman Games.

Nero’s persecution of Christians is believed to have claimed the lives of both Peter and Paul. Clement of Rome, a 1<sup>st</sup> century Christian bishop, in a letter to the Corinthians written in about 97 A.D., tells us that both suffered martyrdom, and later Christian writers tell us that Paul was beheaded and Peter was crucified, both in Rome. Their fate was similar to that of many of Jesus’ closest followers. As we saw earlier, Josephus reported that Jesus’ brother, James, <sup>224</sup> was stoned to death along with some fellow Christians.

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unnecessary and even perhaps insulting for a fellow apostle, but quite appropriate for a deacon.

<sup>221</sup> Peter traveled with John to Samaria, which was northern Palestine (Acts 8:14). He also went to the towns of Lydda (Acts 9:32), Joppa (Acts 9:38-39), and Caesarea (Acts 10:24-25).

<sup>222</sup> See Acts 11:25-30, 12:25-21:14.

<sup>223</sup> 1 Peter 5:13 says:

She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings, and  
*so does* my son, Mark.

<sup>224</sup> This James should not be confused with either of the apostles named James, who are known as James the Greater and James the Lesser. (James the Greater was the son of Zebedee and brother of John. James the Lesser was the son of Alphaeus.) Jesus’ brother James—known as James the Just—became the leader of the Christians in Jerusalem. See

Acts records the deaths of two Christians—James the son of Zebedee, who was executed on the orders of King Herod,<sup>225</sup> and Stephen, who was stoned to death by the Jews.<sup>226</sup> And early Christian writings unanimously record the martyrdoms of the apostles Thomas and Philip, as well as Barnabas' cousin John Mark. (On the other hand, all agree that John, the son of Zebedee, died of old age, as did Barnabas.<sup>227</sup>)

The fate of some of Jesus' other followers is less clear. Christian sources agree that the apostles Andrew, Bartholomew, Jude, Simon the Zealot, and Matthias<sup>228</sup> were all martyred, but stories conflict about the methods and locations of their individual martyrdoms. Luke and Matthew may have died natural deaths, although conflicting stories claim that they too were martyred. And the fate of the apostle James the Lesser is unknown, because he is too often confused with the other two men of the same name (i.e., James the Greater, the son of Zebedee, and James the Just, the brother of Jesus).

Thus, we have strong evidence that many of Jesus' followers traveled, suffered, and ultimately died because of their insistence that this story of Jesus' resurrection was true. Would they have done that if the story was just a lie?

Furthermore, were these the type of men you would expect to suffer and die for *anything*? Three times Peter denied even knowing Jesus because he feared what might happen if he were discovered. All of Jesus' closest followers deserted Him when He was arrested, and only John and a few women showed up to watch Him die on the cross. When Jesus returned alive, He found them huddled behind locked doors, hiding from the Jewish authorities.<sup>229</sup> Yet something changed each of them into an impregnable fortress of courage, strength, and determination, even to the point of death. Could a lie really effect such a change?

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Acts 12:17, 15:13, and 12:18; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 1:19, 2:9, 2:12; James 1:1; and Jude 1:1.

<sup>225</sup> Acts 12:1-2

<sup>226</sup> Acts 7:57-60

<sup>227</sup> For more on the lives, travels, and deaths of Jesus' apostles, see the article, "The Eleven Apostles Not Name Iscariot," on this web site. Similarly, for more on the great missionary Paul, see the article, "Paul (Saul) of Tarsus," on this web site.

<sup>228</sup> Matthias was a replacement for Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus and subsequently killed himself. See Acts 1:23-26.

<sup>229</sup> John 20:19

## Two Inescapable Conclusions.

As we have seen, there are really only two alternatives to explain what Jesus' followers claimed to have seen after His death—either (1) they told the truth about what they witnessed, in which case the Resurrection is a fact of history, or (2) they lied. Yet if we adhere to the second alternative, two conclusions seem inescapable.

First, they were the worst liars history has ever seen, in every sense of the word, “worst.” First, they were absurdly foolish, because they seem to have obtained *nothing* that the world considers valuable. None achieved a position of power, and none accumulated wealth—indeed, they were suspicious of the latter, considering the love of money to be “a root of all sorts of evil.”<sup>230</sup> If they hoped to achieve revenge against those who had murdered Jesus, that effort was a colossal failure, too. However, revenge seems an unlikely motive anyway; like Jesus Himself, His followers renounced violence and revenge, while advocating kindness and forgiveness.<sup>231</sup> And they excused the ruling authorities for executing Christ, while instructing Christians to obey them.<sup>232</sup>

On the other hand, if the disciples' purpose was merely to avoid the kind of trouble that resulted in the death of their leader, that also failed miserably. Their story actually brought more trouble than they could have imagined: hardship, suffering, imprisonment, exile,<sup>233</sup> and for many, an early and painful death. And yet history records not a single one of Jesus' followers who ever renounced this Resurrection story. To continue telling a lie that brings only suffering, hardship, and death is just stupid—as well as immensely unlikely. And let us not pretend that they were somehow

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<sup>230</sup> 1 Timothy 6:10; see also, Matthew 6:19-21, 19:21-24; Mark 4:18-19, 10:21-25; Luke 1:53, 6:24-25, 12:16-31, 12:33-34, 16:19-25, 18:22-25; Romans 1:29 and Colossians 3:5 (“greed”); 1 Timothy 3:3, 3:8, 6:7-9, 6:17-19; 2 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:7, 1:11; Hebrews 13:5; James 1:10-11, 2:2-6, 5:1-6; 2 Peter 2:14; Revelation 3:17-18

<sup>231</sup> (forgiveness & non-violence): See, for example, Matthew 5:38-46; Luke 6:27-36; Romans 12:14, 12:17-20; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; 2 Corinthians 2:7, 6:1-3, 6:6; Galatians 5:22-23, 6:1; Ephesians 4:31-32; Colossians 3:12-13; Hebrews 13:2; James 3:17-18; 2 Peter 1:7;

<sup>232</sup> See Acts 3:14-17; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Corinthians 2:6-8; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13-14, 2:17; see also, Jude 1:8

<sup>233</sup> The author of Revelation—believed to be John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee—was temporarily exiled to the island of Patmos, a Roman penal colony, during the Second Roman Persecution, under the Emperor Domitian, in about 81 A.D. John was released in about 96 A.D. when Domitian died, and returned to Asia Minor where he died a few years later. For more on John's life, see the article, “The Eleven Apostles Not Named Iscariot,” on this web site.

motivated by recompense in the next life, because if the Resurrection was a lie, then so too was the promise of eternal life.

Yet if Jesus' followers held out any hope for another life, they also must have known that they were hopelessly unworthy of it, because they were also the "worst" liars in history from a moral perspective. This lie they had fabricated and then perpetuated was unspeakably despicable. They led countless others into persecution and death, *knowing* Christianity was based on a lie. And they did so while strongly advocating honesty, truthfulness, and sincerity—and insistently affirming their own.<sup>234</sup> Could there be greater evil and hypocrisy than this?

The second inescapable conclusion is that these men and women were also the **best** liars history has ever seen, because they told an incredible whopper—and actually convinced huge numbers of people that it was true. However gullible our ancestors may have been about some things, they were no fools. They knew from long and repeated experience that dead people don't come back to life. They laughed at Jesus when He told them that a dead girl was merely "asleep."<sup>235</sup> So people in the first century A.D. must have been no less skeptical than we would be when the Christians told them Jesus had been crucified and then come back to life. Such things just didn't happen, then or now. Yet many people who had never even known Jesus in the flesh became so convinced that this Resurrection story was true that they too willingly suffered loss of property, imprisonment, enslavement, and even death—as Pliny's letter shows us—rather than renounce it. As Frank Morison says, in *Who Moved the Stone?*:

Now the peculiar thing about this phenomenon is that, not only did it spread to every single member of the party of Jesus of whom we have any trace, but they brought it to Jerusalem and carried it with inconceivable audacity into the most keenly intellectual center of Judea, against the ablest dialecticians of the day, and in the face of every impediment a brilliant and highly organized camarilla could devise. *And they won.* Within twenty years the claim of these Galilean peasants had disrupted the Jewish church and impressed itself upon every town on the Eastern littoral of the Mediterranean from

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<sup>234</sup> (honesty, truthfulness): See, for example, Romans 12:9; 1 Corinthians 5:8, 13:6; 2 Corinthians 1:12, 2:17, 6:7; Galatians 2:11-14; Ephesians 4:15, 4:25, 4:28, 5:8-9, 6:5, 6:13-14; Colossians 3:22; James 3:17; 1 Peter 2:1; 1 John 3:18

<sup>235</sup> Matthew 9:18-19, 9:24; Mark 5:35-40; Luke 8:49-53

Caesarea to Troas. In less than fifty years it had begun to threaten the peace of the Roman Empire.

When we have said everything that can be said about the willingness of certain types of people to believe what they want to believe, to be carried away by their emotions, and to assert as fact what has originally reached them as hearsay, we stand confronted with the greatest mystery of all. *Why did it win?*<sup>236</sup>

Simply put, it won because Jesus' followers were changed. Before Jesus' crucifixion they were foolish and dense. Six weeks later, they were unshakable defenders of the faith, instructing others about the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Peter was changed from a coward who denied his Master into a man who boldly preached the gospel in the face of opposition, threats, and beatings. Paul was changed from a violent opponent of the new faith into its greatest missionary. Thomas was changed from an insistent skeptic into a humbled believer. All of Jesus' followers were changed from frightened rabbits, hiding behind locked doors, into fearless lions carrying the Gospel all over the Roman Empire and beyond, and willing to suffer any consequence, including death, for the sake of their message. As one pastor said, "Men are changed by lies, but seldom for the better."<sup>237</sup>

Furthermore, the contemporaries of Jesus' followers had an opportunity to personally observe their demeanor, their credibility, and the way they lived their lives. The slightest hint of prevarication or hypocrisy, or even self-delusion, would have permanently crippled the credibility of the Resurrection story and this infant Christian movement. Instead, the movement grew exponentially, despite everything Judaism and the Roman Empire tried to do to stop it.

Anyone who claims that Jesus' Resurrection was a fairy tale must satisfactorily answer two questions: **How** were Jesus' followers able to fool so many people into believing this fantastic story? And **why** did they bother? It may be hard to believe that Christ's Resurrection really happened, but after you have looked at the evidence it is even harder to believe that it didn't.

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<sup>236</sup> *Who Moved the Stone?*, p. 115

<sup>237</sup> The quote is from a sermon by Dr. Gene Scott, the late pastor of Faith Center in Glendale, California.

**Sources.** The following sources were consulted in connection with the preparation of this article:

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- (21) “The Search for the Truth About the Resurrection of Jesus Christ,” by Dr. Gene Scott, printed in *The Twin Peaks Sentinel* (Dolores Press, March 1986 (reprinted from Volume 1 of *Jesus Christ . . . Super Nut or Super-Natural?*)
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## APPENDIX

Tacitus' *Annals*, XV.44, as quoted in *The Early Christians*, p. 61-62:

No humane endeavors, no princely generosity, no efforts to placate the gods were able to dispel the scandalous suspicion that the burning of the city [i.e., Rome] was the result of an order. To silence this rumor, Nero pushed the Christians forward as the culprits and punished them with ingenious cruelty, as they were generally hated for their infamous deeds.

The one from whom this name originated, Christ, had been executed during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of the procurator, Pontius Pilate. For a time this pernicious superstition was suppressed, but it broke out again, not only in Judea where this evil thing began, but even in the city itself where everything atrocious and shameful from all quarters flows together and finds adherents.

To begin with, those who openly confessed were arrested, and then a vast multitude was convicted on the basis of their disclosures, not so much on the charge of arson as for their hatred of the human race. Their execution was made into a game: they were covered with the skins of wild animals and torn to pieces by dogs. They were hung on crosses. They were burned, wrapped in flammable material and set on fire as darkness fell, to illuminate the night. Nero had opened his gardens for this spectacle and put on circus games. He himself mingled with the crowd, dressed as a charioteer or stood up high on a chariot. Although these people were guilty and deserved the severest penalty, all this gave rise to compassion for them, for it was felt that they were being victimized, not for the public good, but to satiate the cruelty of one man.

Suetonius' *Life of Nero*, xvi, as quoted in *Documents of the Christian Church*, pp. 2-3:

In his [Nero's] reign many abuses were severely punished and repressed, and as many new laws were instituted; a limit was set to expenditure; the public banquets were reduced to gifts of food; the sale of cooked food in taverns was

forbidden, except for pulses and greens, whereas formerly every kind of delicacy was offered; punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a set of men adhering to a novel and mischievous superstition; he put a stop to the pranks of the charioteers, who from long immunity had assumed the right of ranging at large and cheating and robbing for amusement; the pantomimes and their companies were banished.

Correspondence of the Emperor Trajan with Pliny, *Letters* X.96-97, A.D. 112, as quoted in *The Early Christians*, pp. 63-65:

Gaius Pliny, Governor in Asia Minor, to the Emperor Trajan:

It is my custom, Sire, to report to you everything about which I am in doubt, for who could better guide my uncertainty or instruct my ignorance?

I have never been present at trials of Christians; therefore I do not know what or how much to punish or to investigate. I am also very unsure whether age should make any difference, or whether those who are of tender age should be treated just the same as the more robust; whether those who repent should be pardoned, or whether one who has once been a Christian shall gain nothing by having ceased to be one; finally, whether the name [of Christian] as such should be punished even if there is no crime, or whether only the crimes attributed to this name should be punished.

Meanwhile I have followed this procedure with those who were denounced to me as Christians: I asked them whether they were Christians. If they confessed I repeated the question a second and third time and, moreover, under threat of the death penalty. If they persisted I had them led away to their death, for I had no doubt that, whatever it was that they confessed, their stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy certainly deserved to be punished.

There were several others, Roman citizens, who showed the same madness, and I noted them to be sent to the city. As often happens during legal investigations, the crime became more widespread and there were some particular incidents. An anonymous accusation was presented denouncing a large number of persons by name. I felt that I should acquit those who denied that they were or had been Christians if they

followed my example and called upon the gods; if they offered before your image incense and wine, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose with the statues of the gods; and if they reviled Christ besides. It is said that those who really are Christians cannot be compelled to do any of these things in any circumstances. Others, whose names had been given by an informer, first said they were Christians but then soon denied it, saying in fact they had been but had ceased to be, some saying three years ago, others longer, and some as long as twenty years ago. All of these worshiped your image and the statues of the gods and cursed Christ.

They continued to maintain that the sum of their guilt or error lay in this, that it was their custom to meet on a fixed day before daylight and, alternating with one another, to sing a hymn to Christ as to a god. They also bound themselves mutually by an oath, not in order to commit any crime, but to promise not to commit any theft, robbery, or adultery; not to break their word; and not to deny entrusted goods when claimed. After doing this, it was their custom to part from one another and then to meet again to share an ordinary and harmless meal. But even this they said they had ceased to do since my edict in which, in compliance with your injunction, I had forbidden closed societies.

I thought it all the more necessary, then, to find out finally what was true by putting to torture two girls who were called serving girls. But I found nothing but a depraved and enormous superstition. Consequently I adjourned the investigation and now turn to you for advice.

The matter seems to me worthy of consultation especially because of the large number of those imperiled. For many of all ages, of every rank, and of both sexes are already in danger, and many more will come into danger. The contagion of this superstition has spread not only in the cities but even to the villages and to the country districts. Yet I still feel it is possible to check it and set it right. Of this much I am sure, that people are beginning once more to frequent the beautiful temples which have been almost deserted, so that the long-neglected sacred rites are being restored and so that fodder for the animals to be sacrificed, for which there was until now scarcely any demand, is being bought and sold again. From this it is evident

that a very great number of people can be brought back to better ways if they are given the opportunity to repent.

Trajan to Pliny:

Pliny Secundus, you have followed the correct procedure in examining those who were accused before you as Christians, for in general no hard and fast rule can be laid down. They should not be sought out. Those brought before you and proved guilty should be punished provided that anyone who denies that he is a Christian and actually proves this by worshiping our gods is pardoned on repentance, no matter how suspect his past may have been. Anonymous accusations, however, should not be admitted in any criminal case, for this would give a very bad precedent and would not be worthy of our age.

*Antiquities of the Jews*, xx 9:1, by Flavius Josephus, as quoted in *The Early Christians*, p. 62:

When the Emperor [Nero] learned of the death of Festus, he sent Albanus as procurator to Judea. The King [Herod Agrippa II] took the office of high priest [in Jerusalem] away from Joseph and gave it to the son of Ananos, who was also called Ananos. The younger Ananos was an extremely violent and bold character. He belonged to the group of the Sadducees, who are more cruel in trials than the rest of the Jews.

Being this kind of man, Ananos thought that now was a favorable time for him since Festus had died and Albanus was still on his way. Therefore he convened the high council of judges and brought before them James, the brother of Jesus (called the "Messiah"), and several others. He accused them of transgressing the laws and had them stoned. Those citizens who were regarded as the most reasonable and law-abiding were vexed by this and sent secretly to the King to ask him to order Ananos not to do this kind of thing again, for he had not acted rightly in this case.

*Antiquities of the Jews*, xviii.5.2, by Flavius Josephus, as quoted in *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 56:

Now, some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, who was called the Baptist; for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another and piety towards god, and so to come to baptism.

Lucian's *The Death of Peregrine*, 11-13, as quoted in *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, p. 121:

The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account. . . . You see, these misguided creatures start with the general conviction that they are immortal for all time, which explains the contempt of death and voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them; and then it was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws. All this they take quite on faith, with the result that they despise all worldly goods alike, regarding them as common property.

Clement of Rome, *Epistle to the Corinthians* 42, as quoted in *Documents of the Christian Church*, p. 63 (italics added):

The Apostles for our sakes received the gospel from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was sent from God. Christ then is from God, and the Apostles from Christ. Both therefore came in due order from the will of God. Having therefore received his instruction *and being fully assured through the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ*, they went forth with confidence in the word of God and with full assurance of the Holy Spirit, preaching the gospel that the Kingdom of God was about to come. And so, as they preached in the country and in the towns, they appointed their firstfruits (having proved them by the Spirit) to be bishops and deacons [overseers and ministers] of them that should believe. And this was no novelty, for of old it had been written concerning bishops and deacons; for the

Scripture says in one place, “I will set up their bishops in righteousness, and their deacons in faith” (Is. lx.17).