

## Session # 1

### The Reality of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the Historical Reliability of the New Testament

(For more information on the series of talks of which this presentation is a part please go to <http://www.sspeterandpaul.net/giftsoffinestwheat.htm>)

Was the New Testament written as a deliberate fraud? Did a group of people who thought they could benefit from creating a new religious system invite what we have in this book?

Or did a group of well meaning, but foolish or deceived individuals, make an unintentional mistake and pass on falsehoods they believed to be true?

If either of these scenarios is the case than anyone who considers themselves to be a Christian and devotes their time, life, and effort to this is wasting their time. Is Christian faith based on a lie or possibly a horrible error? Or does careful study show that the essential Christian claims about Christ's divinity and saving resurrection are false? We need to be able to answer this question if we are going to make an intelligent decision about what role Jesus is or isn't going to be play in our lives.

#### *Did the Apostles make up the accounts of Christ's resurrection?*

Among the most prominent figures in the New Testament are the following fourteen men:

The original twelve apostles (Mark 3:13-:19, Matthew 10:1-:4, Luke 6:12-:16)  
Matthias who replaced Judas (Acts 1:15-:26)  
St. Paul

What happened to the 13 of these (14 minus the traitor Judas) who taught others about the resurrection of Jesus?

10 of the remaining original apostles are believed to have been executed  
St. Peter was killed by being crucified upside down  
St. John wasn't killed but died exiled to a prison island  
St. Matthias is believed to have been killed  
St. Paul was killed by being beheaded (this was actually a privilege compared to the alternative)

Are these the actions of men who were making something up?  
Would anyone die for something they didn't believe in?

We should note that, there is some uncertainty about the ultimate fates of some of these men. There is a great deal of historical evidence surrounding the deaths of Peter and Paul in Rome (of course there is also a fair amount of uncertain speculation and exaggeration

that has been built up around the core truth of their stories). For some of these other men we have less information, meaning our certainty about whether or not they really died as martyrs is reduced. But while there is uncertainty about the particular fates of some individuals it is clear that many Christians were killed for their faith during the first decades of the church's existence. We have prominent martyrs like Peter, Paul, and St. Stephen (Acts 7:1-8:1), as well as unknown believers who suffered for their faith.

If these people weren't 100% convinced Jesus had risen from the dead what would they have done when they faced prison, torture, and death for telling people that he had? They would have admitted that the story had been made up. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century there was nothing to be gained by claiming to be a Christian, unless you sincerely believed that faith in Jesus led to eternal life. So they might have been convinced of something that wasn't true, but they clearly weren't lying.

It is very interesting, from a historical and spiritual perspective, to compare the 1<sup>st</sup> century of Christian history to the 1<sup>st</sup> century of Islamic history. There was very much to be gained from a worldly perspective by being one of the first adherents to Islam. The initial territorial expansion of Islam was breathtaking. This occurred largely at the expense of the Christian Byzantine Empire.

- 632, Muhammad dies
- 635, Damascus falls
- 638, Antioch and Jerusalem conquered
- 651, Egypt has been conquered, remnants of Persian empire have been destroyed, Islamic empire stretches to the Atlantic Ocean<sup>1</sup>
- 711-713, Southern Spain falls<sup>2</sup>

Did Jesus gain anything, in a worldly sense, from his ministry? No. Did Muhammed gain anything from his proclamation? Yes. Was there anything, besides sincere religious belief, that could have motivated the majority of the first adherents to Christianity? No. Is there anything outside of spiritual conviction that could have inspired the first Muslims? Yes, they got to conquer the world.

Of course in later Christian history there were periods when it was economically, socially, politically, and militarily advantageous to be affiliated with the Church. We need to examine very closely the motivations of those who were Christians during times like those. However, this sort of examination does not raise any serious difficulties when it comes to the actual origins of Christianity. The same cannot be said when we apply the same standards to early Islam.

As a side note, it should go without saying that an atrocity committed by someone calling themselves a Christian in the 12<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century is just as horrible as an atrocity

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<sup>1</sup> Meyendorff, John, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions: The Church 450-680 A.D.* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), 356-357.

<sup>2</sup> Tyerman, Christopher, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades.* Cambridge, MA: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 52.

committed by someone calling themselves a Muslim in the 15<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century. But the Crusades, the later Islamic expansion into Eastern and Southern Europe, European colonialism, and modern terrorism tell us little or nothing about the *origins* of Christianity and Islam

The most prominent leaders of the early Church faced horrible consequences for claiming that Jesus had risen from the dead and that the only path to salvation was through him. Jesus said “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) This salvation is completely dependent on the reality of Christ’s resurrection. St. Paul said “if Christ has not been raised, then empty is our preaching; empty, too, your faith.” (1 Corinthians 15:14) He went on to say that “if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are the most pitiable people of all.” (1 Corinthians 15:19) Christian faith is not about Jesus being just one more divine messenger. It is not about Christianity being one religion among many. The early church would not have been persecuted if they had been willing to say Christ was just one god who could be placed among the crowd offered up by the other religions of that period.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the Church’s leaders, and countless unnamed more among the ordinary members of the church, suffered persecution, imprisonment, torture, and death rather than accept this devaluation of who Christ was and what he had done. They were clearly convinced of the truth of what they were saying. Perhaps they were sincerely mistaken, we shall discuss that next, but they were not deliberately lying. Any theory related to the origins of early Christianity which argues that the earliest leaders of the church pulled off some sort of fraud or conspiracy (many of these arguments center around the possibility that the apostles stole the body of Jesus to make their arguments more plausible) is clearly indefensible.

### ***Were the first Christians delusional when they said Jesus had risen from the dead?***

So the first Christians really believed Jesus had risen from the dead, but maybe they were just crazy. A number of different theories have been offered over the years which try to explain how this could be the case. Let’s take a look at some of these and see the strength of these arguments which are directed against the core of Christian belief.

#### *1. Maybe Jesus didn’t really die, but only passed out. Then when he woke up they thought he had risen from the dead.*

This might seem like a strange concept to us, but it’s the explanation offered by the Koran<sup>4</sup> and some modern scholars have tried to revive this theory.<sup>5</sup>

Reasons this explanation doesn’t work:

Roman soldiers were good at killing people, wouldn’t have screwed it up

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<sup>3</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1993), 178, 182.

<sup>4</sup> Surah IV: 156-157.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Jesus Scroll* by Donovan Joyce, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln, and *Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls* by Barbara Thiering.

Crucifixion didn't hurt people it killed them  
Beating might have left Jesus's muscles and organs exposed  
Both shoulders were dislocated  
Nerves in wrists and feet were destroyed by the nails  
Death by suffocation<sup>6</sup>

2. Maybe Jesus didn't really rise and people only hallucinated that he did.

He was seen by too many people in too many places, in too many places, on too many occasions for this to be believable.

To Mary Madgalene, John 20:10-:18, outside of his tomb  
To the other women, Matthew 28:8-:10  
To two disciples, Luke 24:13-:32, walking on road to the town of Emmaus  
To eleven disciples and others, Luke 24:33-:39, in Jerusalem  
To ten apostles and others, with Thomas absent, John 20:19-:23  
To the apostles with Thomas present, John 20:26-:30  
To seven apostles, John 21:1-:23, on the shore of the sea of Tiberius  
To the disciples, Matthew 28:16-:20, mountain top in Galilee  
To apostles before ascension, Luke 24:50-:52 and Acts 1:4-:9  
Paul's list of witnesses in 1 Corinthians 15:1-:11 very likely refers to some of these appearance, as well as to appearances not described in detail elsewhere in the bible<sup>7</sup>

Hallucinations just don't work like this. It would be completely unparalleled in history for this number of people to have essentially complementary hallucinations. The fact that these encounters with the risen Christ occurred at different times and locations makes it even more unlikely that these were hallucinations.<sup>8</sup>

***Have the New Testament texts as we have them, been preserved well enough to be trusted?***

There doesn't seem to be any sort of competing explanation that can account for what the New Testament presents us with, but maybe the New Testament texts haven't been preserved well enough for us to accept that we have reliable accounts of the experiences of those witnesses and apostles whose stories are told. This could have come about through the original texts being corrupted. This would mean the bible initially contained accurate stories about what happened after the death of Jesus but that the bible as we have it now has been fundamentally changed since it was first written. Or it could be the case that the original texts were written so long after when the events they are describing

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<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these points "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ" in the March 21, 1986 edition of the Journal of the American Medical Association, as well as the interview with Dr. Alexander Metherell in Chapter 11 of Lee Strobel's book *The Case for Christ*, or view the relevant sections of the DVD "Did Jesus Really Rise From the Dead" which has recently been produced by Ignatius Press.

<sup>7</sup> Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 231-236.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 238-240.

actually occurred that the authors cannot be realistically expected to have written with any sort of real accuracy. Let's take a look at the information we have concerning when the New Testament was written, and relevant information about when other documents from the ancient world were authored.

<b>Text</b>	<b>Date it Was Written</b>	<b>Oldest Copy That Still Exists</b>	<b># of Ancient Copies that Still Exist</b>
Tacitus, <i>Annals of Imperial Rome</i>	116 AD	850 AD	2, one from 850, 1 from 11 <sup>th</sup> century
Josephus, <i>The Jewish War</i>	1 <sup>st</sup> Century AD	4 <sup>th</sup> century AD	1 from 4 <sup>th</sup> cent. 9 Greek copies from 10 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> centuries, Several Russian copies from 11 <sup>th</sup> -12 century
Homer, <i>The Iliad</i>	about 800 B.C.	2 <sup>nd</sup> or 3 <sup>rd</sup> century AD	650, most of any ancient text besides the bible <sup>9</sup>
The Bible	45/50-95 A.D. <sup>10</sup>	125 AD (small	24,000 + copies from

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>10</sup> These dates reflect the general historical consensus when it comes to the dating of the dating of the New Testament. Among mainline scholars even the most liberal scholars will say that the first of St. Paul's letters were written around 50 AD, the Gospel of Mark was written around 70 AD, Matthew and Luke in the next 10 or 15 years after that. The Gospel of John will be dated until around 95 AD, and it will be acknowledged that the rest of New Testament literature was written during this period. A number of scholars will make arguments for earlier dates. They will accept the typical dates for the date of Paul's early letters, but will argue that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts were all written prior to 70 AD. This is a complex debate. I personally side with the more conservative scholars and their earlier dates, but the basic defense of the reliability of the New Testament is not significantly effected by the later dating of some scholars. For arguments in favor of a slightly later dating of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts see *An Introduction to the New Testament* by Raymond Brown, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* edited by Brown, Joseph Fitzmeyer, and Roland Murphy, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* and *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* by Ben Witherington, and *The Catholic Study Bible* edited by Donald Senior and John Collins. For arguments in favor of the earlier dating of these books see the relevant volumes of the *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible* edited by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, the relevant volumes of *The Navarre Bible* edited by the faculty of the Catholic University of Navarre in Spain, as well as *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* and *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* by Craig Blomberg. The previously mentioned *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel, and also his more recent *The Case for the Real Jesus*, both refer to scholars who hold a wide range of opinions on these issues, but tend to lean towards those who favor earlier dates for the composition of the books of the New Testament.

portion of Gospel of John) 2<sup>nd</sup> century to early middle ages<sup>11</sup>  
200 AD (portions of 12 of the 27 books of the New Testament)

350 AD (oldest complete copy of the bible)

There is quite simply no ancient text that we can place greater confidence in than the New Testament. The large number of ancient copies in existence is simply unparalleled, and the early dating of some of these manuscripts is incredible when we consider the period of history we are talking about

### Translation Problems

So it does seem that the New Testament documents were composed at a date soon enough after the events they described for us to be confident that these descriptions were essentially accurate. Is it possible that these original descriptions have been warped by the passion of time? Are the translation differences we see in various New Testament texts enough of an issue to prevent us from being to have a reasonable confidence concerning the message of the New Testament? Many people have argued this is the case. Recently the most prominent of these individuals has probably been a scholar named Bart Ehrman.<sup>12</sup>

I find this argument to be embarrassingly weak. I really have a hard time understanding how anyone could find this convincing, so we're not going to spend much time on this point. There are however helpful sources for studying this issue in more depth.<sup>13</sup>

Here's a little exercise which will help us begin to discuss this issue. What is the correct translation of each the following sentences?

*Jesus rose from the \_\_\_\_\_.*

*Jesus from \_\_\_\_\_ dead rose.*

*Jesus the dead from rose.*

*Jesus rose from \_\_\_\_\_ dead.*

*Jesus \_\_\_\_\_ from the dead.*

*Jesus from the dead rose.*

Does anyone have doubts that each of the sentences, despite the significant textual differences that exist, was written to communicate the same point?

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<sup>11</sup> Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 61-62.

<sup>12</sup> Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005)

<sup>13</sup> Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Grand Rapid, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 65-100.

Most of the differences between copies of the New Testament are like this. They are minor and are the result of words being left out or copied in the wrong order. These mistakes are not serious enough to raise any real concerns about whether or not we can really know what the bible says. Also, when difficulties arise the incredible number of manuscripts in existence means there are usually other texts to compare the problematic one with.

Simply put, this means that there are not convincing reasons for thinking that the New Testament as we have it now is substantially different from the original 1<sup>st</sup> century texts of these of documents.

***Is there anything that would lead us to believe the New Testament is more reliable than the texts of other major religions?***

**Buddha's Life**

6<sup>th</sup> century BC

**Christ's Life**

7 BC/4 BC (when the early church figured out their new calendar they got it a little bit wrong) through 30 to 33 AD

**Writing of Buddha's Biographies And Buddhist Scriptures**

1<sup>st</sup> Century AD<sup>14</sup>

**Writing of Biographies of Jesus (Gospels) and Other Christian Scriptures**

50-95 AD<sup>15</sup>

We should recognize that ancient cultures possessed a greater ability to preserve oral tradition that we do. Because other media and means of communication were not available to them they developed impressive memorization skills. But no matter how impressive these abilities are we need to recognize that the historical nature of a document written within decades of the life of the figure who is that document's main focus is categorically different than the historical nature of a document written approximately 600 years after the life of the figure who is the main focus of that document. Therefore the historical claims that can be made about Jesus are categorically different than those that can be made about the Buddha.

The Koran and other important Islamic sources were written during Muhammed's own life time, or shortly thereafter. So in this regard we do see a similarity between Christian and Islamic origins. So are we left with a rough parity between Christianity and Islam? Are Muslim claims in regards to the historic reliability of their texts as strong as those of Christians? I certainly don't believe so. Let's look at what grounds there are for accepting the unique validity and inspiration of the New Testament.

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<sup>14</sup> Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 87.

<sup>15</sup> See footnote # 10 above.

## Muhammed

Lived  
Taught  
Claimed to be God's Messenger  
Died  
Stayed Dead

## Jesus

Lived  
Taught  
Claimed to be God's Messenger  
Died  
Didn't (more on the apologetic significance of this in a moment)

It is a central claim of Islam that the Jews and Christians corrupted the scriptures that were entrusted to them. According to this view God set things right by entrusting the fullness of his revelation to Muhammed, doing away with the relevance of any of the books possessed by Jews and Christians. So in the Koran we find many of the same names that we find in the bible, but according to Islamic thought it was only in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century AD that the true teaching about Abraham, Jesus, Mary, and others was restored. Islam sees Jesus as only a prophet, one of the many who prepared the way for Muhammed who was the greatest and final prophet. Basic Islamic sources summarizing these beliefs can be found at <http://islam101.net> particularly here:

<http://islam101.net/comparative-religion-mainmenu-34/41-christianity/152-the-difference-between-the-bible-and-the-quran.html>,

and here:

<http://islam101.net/comparative-religion-mainmenu-34/41-christianity/150-basic-beliefs-christian-versus-muslim.html>

There are a number of good Christian resources that respond to Muslim claims. The best resource I've come across is *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross* written by Norman Geisler, a Protestant seminary professor, and Abdul Saleeb a former Muslim using a pseudonym.

Also, the most helpful response to Muslim claims is everything we have been discussing tonight. If the Christian understanding of Jesus of Nazareth, and of the Old and New Testaments, is correct than the basic claims of Islam simply aren't.

Let's look at it this way. Muhammed claimed the Jewish and Christian scriptures were corrupted and that God guided him so that they could be restored. Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures (Luke 4:16-:21 and elsewhere) and that he would always continue to be with and guide his followers (Matthew 28:16-:20, Acts 1:6-:9, John 16:1-:14, and elsewhere), the followers who wrote the New Testament. So this leave us with two incompatible claims about what we are to make of the combined books of the Old and New Testaments.

What authority do we have that Muhammed's claim is from God? He said that it was. What authority do we have that the claims of Jesus are truly authentic? He rose from the dead. What earthly reasons did the first people who accepted Muhammed's message have

for doing so? They could either face defeat at the hands of an invading force, or they could join this force. What earthly reasons did the first people who accepted Jesus's message have for doing so? They were persecuted, imprisoned, stoned to death, decapitated, crucified, and burnt alive. If I were a betting man I know which of these claims I would put my money on as being more reliable.

I believe that in Islam we have a situation comparable to that of the claims of the Mormons. Mormons believe that the true religion of Jesus Christ was lost to the world until it was revealed to Joseph Smith in New York state in the 1800s. So in the Koran we have one book, written in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, which claims to contain the true teaching about who Jesus is. In the Book of Mormon have another book, written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which claims to contain the same thing.<sup>16</sup> And we have another book, written in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, which makes the same claim. Again, let's think about what direction the smart money tells us to go in.

It seems necessary to include some side comments here. I find the basic claims of Islam to be unconvincing and the basic claims of Mormonism to be ridiculous. There are no grounds for seeing any sort of equality between the New Testament and the Koran. But strong and absolute theological disagreement does not do away with personal respect and the possibility of social and political cooperation. To very briefly delve into politics it seems absolutely clear that our world is going to be a pretty terrible place to live in for at least the next century if there is not real cooperation between non-Islamic political leaders and those Islamic states, organizations, and individuals who oppose the minority of Muslims who are fanatical in their use of force against non-Muslims.

Similarly, I do not in any way respect the Book of Mormon, but I've respected and gotten along with pretty much every Mormon I've ever met. In some very real ways Mormons are certainly a force for the better in American society. This personal respect and social cooperation is not dependent on any sort of recognition of the unfounded theological claims of Mormons.

***What about the so called lost or secret Gospels?***

<b>New Testament Books</b>	<b>Lost or Secret Gospels</b>
<b>Date Written</b> 50-95 AD	125-200 AD
<b>Written By</b> Those who names are on them or their direct followers (Paul wrote Paul's letter to the Romans)	Falsely attributed to people who had nothing to do with writing them (St. Thomas did not write the Gospel of Thomas)

In recent years, through books like the *The DaVinci Code* and *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, through the writings of "scholars" like Elaine Pagels, and through the occasional History

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<sup>16</sup> See the relevant sections of Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven* (New York: Doubleday, 2003) for a discussion of the origins of Mormonism.

or Discovery Channel TV special, certain texts that present an alternative version of Christian history have received large amounts of attention. These documents are typically associated with a group called the Gnostics (more on them in a little bit). The documents that have received the most attention are probably the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Mary*.

The Gnostics believed some strange things. The *Gospel of Thomas* teaches that women are not worthy of eternal life, so the Jesus written about in this book assures his disciples that he will make Mary a man so that she can be saved. The Gnostics in general took a very dim view of physical creation and the world we live in.<sup>17</sup> So the idea of Jesus really becoming a man, let alone the idea of God the Son experiencing death on the cross, was totally repugnant to them. Anything associated with sexuality and birth was looked down upon by the Gnostics. This means that the positive view of marriage and sexuality that we have in the Old and New Testaments, such as that given to us when we have a proper understanding of the Song of Songs, would have been totally foreign to the Gnostics.

There are a number of problems with seeing these documents as possessing the same historical value as those books that did make it into the New Testament. Study of the text of the *Gospel of Thomas* shows a literary dependence on documents written in the ancient Syriac language. The consensus on the dating of these sources means that the *Gospel of Thomas* was probably written sometime between 175 and 200 AD.<sup>18</sup> The *Gospel of Mary* was almost undoubtedly written between 150 and 200 AD.<sup>19</sup> Other prominent, and less prominent, Gnostic documents are reasonably dated to roughly the same period.<sup>20</sup>

This means that these documents are clearly not written by the figures; such as St. Thomas, St. Peter, St. Mark, and St. Mary Magdalene, whose names are associated with them. The New Testament books were written in a time frame where their authors had either known Jesus prior to his death and resurrection, or even if they themselves hadn't experienced this they were contact with those who had. The Gnostics falsely attached the names of individuals like this to their documents to try to bolster their credibility, but the late dating of the Gnostic texts means these individuals had nothing to do with their writing. The Gnostic texts are forgeries written by those who rejected what was taught by those who had truly known Jesus.

## Conclusion

At the very least it is difficult, I would personally say impossible, to find a parallel to the claims made by Christianity. When we look at the basic Christian message, those who knew Jesus before his crucifixion claiming that he displayed his power as Messiah and Savior by rising from the dead, there does not seem to be any other religions whose central claims are both so dramatic and so well supported. Buddhists can make extraordinary claims about the Buddha, but what sort of historical foundation is there for these claims? Muslims can describe the life of Muhammed with a high degree of historical certitude,

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<sup>17</sup> Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 39-41.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 35-39.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 46-47.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 23-63.

but the equally historically well documented Christian claims about Jesus show him to be far more than Muhammed was. Gnostic claims are clearly misrepresentations of the Christian tradition they attempted to co-opt. We have not really discussed the ancient pagan religions of Greece or Rome, or other ancient religious traditions such as the mythologies of natives of northern Europe and North America. These religions all make fantastic claims about various divine figures, but these events are always part of a dimly remembered ancient past. We never encounter anything like the claimed resurrection of someone whose home town, family, and public teaching were known even to his opponents. We also never encounter such a claim being made in the days, months, and years immediately following this person's life. The New Testament does seem to be unique in the combination of the extraordinary claims it makes, and the historical reliability that these claims seem to possess.