

“Dealing With Doubts” Conference

Critical Questions – Compelling Answers

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The Uniqueness of Biblical Christianity

Introduction

- A. The **unique and necessary core** of Christianity is **the resurrection of Jesus** (1 Cor. 15:1-6a).
 - 1. The cornerstone of the apostles' preaching (Acts 2:29-32; 4:2, 33; 17:18-32; 23:6-8; 24:21-23).
 - 2. Without the resurrection, our faith is “worthless” (1 Cor. 15:12-19).
- B. Why believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus?

I. The Historical Conditions and Claims

- A. Widely accepted facts that must be explained:
 - 1. Jesus died by crucifixion. (Muslims deny that Jesus was crucified—Koran 4:157-158.)
 - 2. Jesus' tomb was empty.
 - 3. Various people testified that Jesus appeared bodily after his death.
 - 4. The early disciples were radically transformed and preached the resurrection.
 - 5. The early church suddenly began and rapidly expanded.
- B. The **early disciples did not expect** Jesus' resurrection.
 - 1. The Jewish doctrine of resurrection did not foresee it (Jn. 11:24 Martha talking about Lazarus).
 - a. Jewish view: Only resurrection *at the end of the world*.
 - b. Jewish view: Only a general resurrection of *everyone*, not resurrection of an *individual*.
 - 2. The disciples did not yet understand the Scripture about the resurrection (Jn. 20:9; Jn. 2:22).
- C. The disciples reported at least 11 **post-mortem appearances** of Jesus over 40 days (Acts 1:3):
 - 1. To Mary Magdalene (Jn. 20:11-18; Mk. 16:9) and the women (Matt. 28:8-10).
 - 2. To Peter (cf. Lk. 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5).
 - 3. To the two on the way to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13-32; Mk. 16:12-13).
 - 4. To the Eleven [minus Judas and Thomas] (Lk. 24:36-48; Jn. 20:19-22; Mk. 16:14).
 - 5. To the “Twelve” [including Thomas, minus Judas] (Jn. 20:24-29).
 - 6. To seven disciples at the Sea of Tiberias or Sea of Galilee (Jn. 21).
 - 7. To the Eleven on a mountain in Galilee (Matt. 28:16-20; cf. Matt. 28:7).
 - 8. To the 500 believers (that Paul mentions in 1 Cor. 15:6).
 - 9. To James, the brother of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:7).
 - 10. To many at Jesus' ascension (Acts 1:9-11).
 - 11. To Saul (St. Paul) (Acts 9:1-9; 22:1-11; 26:9-19).
- D. Jesus' disciples were **transformed** and opponents were **converted**.
 - 1. **Peter** and the **apostles** (book of Acts).
 - 2. **James**, a brother of Jesus (Matt. 13:55; Mk. 6:3; Jn. 7:5; Acts 15:12-21; Gal. 1:19; 2:9).
 - 3. **Saul** (St. Paul) (Acts 9).

II. The Resurrection Accounts were Based on Eyewitness Experiences.

- A. Being an eyewitness was a **requirement for an “apostle.”**
 - 1. Apostles must be eyewitnesses (Acts 1:1-5, 21-22).
 - 2. The Apostles preached the resurrected Christ, which they had personally witnessed (Acts 2:14-36; 3:12-26; 4:5-12; 5:29-32; 10:34-43).
- B. **John** (1 Jn. 1:1-3a): What we have heard and seen and touched, we proclaim.
- C. **Peter** (2 Peter 1:16-21): We did not follow myths but were “eyewitnesses” (vs. 16).
- D. **The Apostle Paul:**
 - 1. Became an eyewitness (e.g. Acts 9:1-30; Acts 26:1-23).
 - 2. Preached the resurrection as recorded by Luke (Acts 13:16-43; 17:1-3, 16-33; 21:37-40; 22:1-21; 23:1-11; 24:10-21; 26:1-29).
 - 3. Proclaimed the resurrection in his letters.
 - a. E.g. Galatians (1:1, 11-12) [48-53 AD]
 - b. E.g. 1 Thessalonians (1:9-10; 4:14) [51 AD]
 - c. E.g. 1 Corinthians (15:1-4) [55 AD]
- E. **Mark** and his Gospel (NOT an apostle nor an eyewitness—BUT ...).
 - 1. Referred to as John Mark (Acts 12:25; 15:37,39) and was the cousin of Barnabas’s (Col. 4:10).
 - 2. A traveling companion with **PETER** and **PAUL**. (Acts 12:25; 13:2-5; Col. 4:10; Philemon 24; 1 Pet. 5:13)
 - 3. **Papias** (c. 125 AD): Mark “had become the interpreter of Peter.” (Papias was a close associate of Polycarp who was a disciple of the apostle John.)
 - 4. **Irenaeus** (c. 170 AD): Mark was “a disciple and interpreter of Peter.” [Irenaeus was Polycarp’s disciple; Polycarp was John the Apostle’s disciple.]
- F. **Luke** (NOT an apostle nor an eyewitness—BUT ...).
 - 1. Luke: author of Luke and Acts (Lk. 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-2).
 - 2. Luke was a frequent traveling companion with **PAUL**.
 - a. First-person references in Acts (16:10,13,16; 28:1-2,10,16).
 - b. Paul calls Luke a “fellow worker” (Philemon 1:24).
 - c. Paul (probably in Rome) sends greetings from Luke (Col. 4:14).
 - d. Paul (probably in Rome): “Only Luke is with me” (2 Tim. 4:11).

III. Testimony about the Resurrection was Written Relatively Early After the Resurrection. (See CHART: “Earliest N.T. Books & Events”)

- A. The **earliest N.T. books** about the resurrection are from **Paul**, not the four Gospels.
 - 1. Galatians (Gal. 1:1, 11-12) [written 48-53 AD]
 - 2. 1 Thessalonians (1:9-10; 4:14) [written from Corinth, 51 AD]
 - 3. 1 Corinthians (15:1-4) [written 55 AD]

Archaeological note: The discovery of the Gallio Inscription in 1905 in Delphi, Greece helps determine that Paul was in Corinth in late AD 51 or early AD 52. Gallio judged Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:12-17).

- B. **The four Gospels.**
 - 1. Mark’s Gospel [60-70 AD].
 - 2. Matthew’s Gospel [late 50s-70s AD].
 - 3. Luke’s Gospel [59-63 or 70s-80s AD].
 - 4. John’s Gospel [85-90 AD].
 - 5. ALL FOUR Gospels claim that Jesus was raised from the dead (Matt. 28:1-10; Mk. 16:1-8; Lk. 24:1-7; Jn. 20:1-20).

- C. **Luke's book of Acts** [mid-60s or c. 70 or somewhat later].
- D. Was the **resurrection of Jesus a "legend"**?
 - 1. The earliest N.T. books are *consistent* in their big claim about the resurrection.
 - 2. The earliest N.T. books are based on even earlier writings and an established "tradition" (Lk. 1:1-4; 1 Cor. 11:2; 15:1-4; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6,14).
 - 3. There was not enough time for a "legend" to develop about Jesus.
 - 4. **Jesus' resurrection was preached** (1) publicly (2) in Jerusalem (3) within 50 days of Jesus' resurrection (4) in spite of severe opposition and persecution.

IV. On the Reliability of the New Testament.

- A. Prominent skeptic claim: The New Testament is not reliable.
 - 1. The New Testament is filled with countless inconsistencies and contradictions.
 - 2. We do not have any original documents; all we have are copies of copies of copies, and these copies have over 200,000 variations.

Bart Ehrman (a notable skeptic of Christianity): "Not only do we not have the originals, we don't have the first copies of the originals. We don't even have copies of the copies of the originals, or copies of the copies of the copies of the originals.... And these copies all differ from one another, in many thousands of places" (Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*, 10).

- B. What about all the **copies**?
 - 1. How do we determine the original? **Textual Criticism.**
 - 2. Comparing New Testament (NT) manuscripts with other ancient writings.

Greek N.T. Manuscripts and Other Ancient Writings

	Original Source Date	Earliest Available Manuscript(s)	Time Elapse (from Original)	Number of Manuscripts
Homer's <i>Iliad</i>	900 BC	c. 415 BC	485 yrs.	+1,900
Livy's <i>History of Rome</i>	25 BC	4 th Century AD	325+ yrs.	c. 475
Josephus, <i>Antiquities of the Jews</i>	93 AD	>800 AD	700+ yrs.	20
NT Greek Manuscripts	50-100 AD	130 AD	35-80 yrs.	> 5,800
(However, over 5,000 of these NT Greek manuscripts date to the 10th century AD or later.)				

- 3. **Erasmus:** a 16th century example. (See **CHART: "Greek N.T. Manuscript Timeline"**).
 - a. Erasmus (1516) published the first New Testament in Greek.
 - b. He (and the King James Version in 1611) only had **7 manuscripts** for their work, none of them older than 900 AD.
 - c. Erasmus had only **2 manuscripts for the Gospels**, and neither was older than 1100 AD.
- 4. **Today:**
 - a. N.T. Greek manuscripts go back nearly 900 years earlier than Erasmus had!
 - b. We have about 5,800 Greek manuscripts (though 5,046 are 10th century or later).

"We now have nearly a thousand times more manuscripts than were used by Erasmus in his first edition ..." (Peter Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*).

- c. We have about **124 Greek manuscripts within 300 years** of the NT writings. (Typical classical Greek/Roman authors have 0 manuscripts within 300 years of their writings.)
- d. We have **65 papyri within 200 years** of the NT writings.
- e. We have **10 papyri within 100 years** of the NT writings.
- f. The oldest papyri (P52) dates between 125-275 AD (from John 18). This would be within 35-85 years from the likely date of the Gospel of John.

5. **What have we learned** in 400+ years since Erasmus?
 - a. Of the 200,000+ variations among the 5,800 Greek manuscripts, **70% are spelling differences**.
 - b. **Less than 1%** of the variations are **meaningful** (may affect our understanding) and **viable** (with substantial and multiple manuscript testimony).

Bart Ehrman acknowledges: “The vast majority of these hundreds of thousands of differences are completely and utterly unimportant and insignificant and don’t matter at all. By far the most common differences simply show us that scribes in the ancient world could spell no better than most people can today (and the scribes didn’t have spell-check!) If we really want to know what the apostle Paul had to say about the importance of Jesus’ death and resurrection, does it matter to us how he spelled the word ‘resurrection’? Probably not.” *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford, 2016), p. 23. [emphasis added]

6. No major Christian doctrine is adversely affected by these 200,000+ variants!

Bart Ehrman: “The position I argue for in *Misquoting Jesus* does not actually stand at odds with Prof. Metzger’s position that the **essential Christian beliefs are not affected by textual variants** in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament” (*Misquoting Jesus*, 252) [2007 paperback edition with Appendix; emphasis added].

7. The explosion in the *number* of manuscripts and the quality of *older* manuscripts allow us to be *even more confident in the reliability of the text of the NT*.

C. What About All the Purported **Contradictions?** (E.g. the women at the tomb)

Matthew 28:1	Mark 16:1	Luke 24:10	John 20
¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb ...	¹ When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome ...	¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles,...	¹ Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early ... [She then tells Peter & John and returns with them to the tomb.]
⁵ But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.	⁵ And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe ...	⁴ While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel...	¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. ¹² And she saw two angels in white ,...
⁶ He is not here, for he has risen,	⁶ ... You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here.	⁵ ... the men said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here, but has risen.	[She then sees Jesus.] ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “ I have seen the Lord ”—and that he had said these things to her.

1. Differences do not necessarily mean “contradictions.”
2. Most purported inconsistencies or contradictions have very plausible, if not relatively simple, resolutions.
3. This does not mean that we can definitively resolve every apparent difference.
4. The differences are in the *details*, which is a characteristic of good witnesses; otherwise, we suspect collusion or conspiracy.
5. Even IF we concede inconsistencies in details, this would not, by itself, invalidate the primary claims of the Gospels: Jesus was raised from the dead!