

CAN YOU TRUST THE BIBLE ABOUT THE RESURRECTION?

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We Doubt

If we're being honest, we've all had experiences of doubt. But there are different degrees of doubt.

I doubt that I can make it through the day without a Tim Horton's coffee. I doubt that the Toronto Maple Leafs have a sound strategic plan for victory. Those aren't really huge doubts though.

What about this: I doubt my kids are safe. Or, I doubt if so-and-so loves me. That's more serious.

What about: I doubt if the Gospels are reliable. Or, I doubt if I can trust what the Gospels say about the resurrection. That's serious too.

Doubt can be like rust. Rust on your car can take over unless you do something about it. In your faith, doubt can become spiritual rust and take over, jeopardizing the integrity of your whole system if you don't do something about it.

Help From Indiana Jones

To help us get into this whole topic let's use a scene from one of the *Indiana Jones* movies. Indiana is played by Harrison Ford. He's a man of learning in a world of mystery. And in this one scene he has to get across a huge gorge. There is no way he can do it. He can't jump that far. But his map indicates he must walk across, and he must hurry to help his friend who is awaiting his help. So he tries. He takes "a leap of faith," as he says, and discovers that his weight is supported. There *is* a bridge there after all! It was an optical illusion. He walks across. And when he gets to the other side he takes some sand and throws it back over the bridge reminding him that it's there. A bridge across.



I like this scene for 2 reasons:

1. We are often asked to take a huge leap of faith—maybe for something like the resurrection. But when we get into the details and background and reliability of the Gospels, what we discover is that the leap is often not as big as we think.
2. Second, when Indiana gets across to the other side, he takes some sand and throws it back over the bridge. It reminds him that the way is trustworthy. That's what I hope this document helps with. By getting into the details and background I'm about to share, it's us taking sand and throwing it back over the bridge, giving us more confidence in our leap of faith.



Pictured above is Codex Sinaiticus, a complete copy of the Bible (plus two other books) dated to the mid-4th century. It is on public display at the British Museum.

We live in a time that isn't particularly friendly to your faith. Maybe you've heard of (or read) biologist Richard Dawkins' best-selling book called *The God Delusion* where he argues that there is no God and basically that all of us who believe are naïve imbeciles. Or maybe you've watched the popular movie *The Da Vinci Code* that claims Jesus wasn't divine, that he was married, and that the early church made up stories about him to make themselves more powerful.

NOTE: For reading more directly related to understanding the authority of the Bible and help for how to interpret it, you can read something I wrote called "Alive and Powerful" available here: <http://matthewruttan.com/resources/>

So what I'll do in this document is draw from the research and writing of people like Richard Bauchkam,¹ Tom Wright² and Tim Keller³ as we seek to throw some sand on the bridge.

Let's start with 2 very important pieces of background:

Background 1: Biblical books are among the most widely preserved historical documents in the entire world

To put it in perspective, Tacitus' *Histories* and *Annals* were written about 100 years after Christ. They contain history of the Roman Empire. How many ancient copies exist today? Two. What about the Magna Carta, which is about 800 years old? It's the foundational document for modern British Law. Today 4 ancient copies exist.



So what about the Gospel manuscripts? 14,000. They're not all preserved in their entirety. But that's a lot. On the right you can see Papyrus 52—a small portion of the Gospel of John that paleontologists put around the turn of the 1st century, or perhaps a bit later.

Background 2: Jesus is, therefore, the most historically documented figure in human history

Most of the documentation about Jesus is from the New Testament, yes. But his renown spread much further. One of the most significant writings giving evidence of Jesus that is *not* in the Bible is from the 1st century Jewish historian named Josephus. Remember that this man is not a Christian and has no interest in seeing Christianity spread. He is a third-party observer. Here is his report from the same century as Jesus:

“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 amongst 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 the third day, as the divine prophets foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct to this day.” (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 18, chapter 3)

So let's proceed with some of the most popular objections or reasons why people distrust the reliability of the Gospels and resurrection stories:

OBJECTION 1: HOW COULD PEOPLE ACCURATELY REMEMBER ALL THAT DETAIL ABOUT JESUS?

ANSWER 1: IT WAS CUSTOMARY FOR PEOPLE TO REMEMBER AND CAREFULLY TRANSMIT IMPORTANT INFORMATION FOR LONG PERIODS

We live in a technologically modern time. We don't really have to use our memories because we can write things down. We don't have to use that mental muscle, so we don't. But that doesn't mean it isn't capable of great things.

I have endeavoured to commit the book of Colossians to memory, word for word. When I was in Toronto one of the Bible study groups at my church committed all 16 chapters of Mark's Gospel to memory, word for word. They did it. In Jesus' time the culture was highly illiterate. (Unlike today.) So people made a significant effort to commit to memory important information, and often. We hear about boys committing whole books of the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) to memory in preparation for Bar Mitzvahs.

Some of the most compelling information is from research collected by professor Richard Bauckham from psychologists on "recollective memory."⁴ He concludes that the Gospel stories have certain characteristics suggesting they were most likely preserved according to these traditions; they carry clues within the text suggesting they were preserved with a high amount of accuracy based on the capacity of "recollective memory." It also would have been very hard to alter these traditions because so many tellings and manuscripts were in circulation.

We need to take seriously the fact that it was customary for people to remember and carefully transmit important information for long periods.

OBJECTION 2: HOW COULD THE STORIES BE ACCURATE IF WRITTEN DOWN MANY YEARS AFTER JESUS' DEATH?

ANSWER 2: THE TIMING OF THE WRITINGS IS TOO EARLY FOR THEM TO BE MADE UP

I hear this very frequently. People wonder: How could the information be accurately preserved? My response is that the timing of the writings is too early for them to be made up. Eyewitnesses were everywhere at the time of the circulation of the early stories, proving their reliability. Here's what I mean:

Many passages could be referenced but take a look at a few of these:

Mark 15:20-22 ²⁰ After mocking [Jesus], [the soldiers] stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him. ²¹ They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. ²² Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull).

Why is that detail there about "the father of Alexander and Rufus"? It's the ancient version of footnotes. They are there because Mark (the Gospel writer) is telling us that if we want to confirm this detail go talk to Alexander and Rufus. They know. They live up on such-and-such-a-street, go check it out for yourselves. Ask them.

Or this, from one of Paul's letters:

1 Corinthians 15:3-6 ³ For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ and that he was buried, and that he was

raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.

It's his way of saying that he's passing on information *that can be corroborated by many eye witnesses*. In fact, hundreds! Many of whom "are still alive." The witnesses are there to confirm the stories. If there *didn't* confirm them, they simply would have been disproven and the movement would have passed away. But it didn't. It grew exponentially.

The timing of the writings was too early for them to be made up. Eyewitnesses made the case. If they weren't real eyewitnesses, the movement would have come to an abrupt halt.

An additional note needs to be added here:

WHAT GOSPELS MADE IT INTO THE BIBLE?

One of the false statements of the movie *The Da Vinci Code* is that Constantine and church leaders decided what Gospels would be included in the Bible in 325 at a famous council meeting.⁵ And they did so in a way that would simply further their own interests to prove that Jesus was divine, and not human.

This is totally false. In fact, much in the Gospels frequently talk about how Jesus is hungry or angry or upset (very human traits.) And with respect to how the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John made it into the Bible,⁶ that process was underway and gaining wide consensus (not be a power-hungry few) about 150 years before this famous church council meeting. In fact, there were four general criteria. Here they are:

1. The Gospel needed to be ancient (near to the time of Jesus)
2. It needed to be written by an apostle or companion to an apostle
3. It needed to have wide-spread acceptance among churches
4. And the views contained within needed to be right teaching (orthodox)⁷

Stories were circulating much too early for them to be made up. Further, the four Gospels in our Bibles today were deemed 'authoritative' by a wide group of agreeing Christians on clear guidelines (not by a small power-hungry few).

OBJECTION 3: THE STORIES SOUND LIKE FICTION.

ANSWER 3: THE LITERARY FORM OF THE GOSPELS IS TOO DETAILED TO BE MADE UP

This might sound theoretical but stay with me.

When we think of modern day "fiction" as a literary form, it has really only been "details driven" in the past 300 years, meaning that authors started to include details in stories to give them the illusion of reality. If you read ancient fiction from Jesus' time, these kinds of details simply weren't present. It was more of a 'birds-eye-view' of events, including only the details needed to further the main plot.

But what we notice in the Gospels, written over 1900 years ago, is that *there are a lot of details*. This was a very unique feature. For example:

Mark 4:38 ³⁸ But [Jesus] was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

Why is that detail there about the cushion? Mark's Gospel preserves it even though it has no purpose in the story other than to tell us, 'Hey, I saw this; I was there; I'm passing on this irrelevant detail to prove I am an eyewitness.'

Mark 6:39 ³⁹ Then [Jesus] ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass.

The same goes for the green grass. It gives you the impression of a seen-reality.

John 21:11 ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.

Why is that detail there about 153? Why not just say "many"? Scholars debate what the number could mean. But the detail is there to give us confidence and proof of eyewitness testimony.



C.S. Lewis was a world-class literary critic. Here is what he wrote about all this:

I have been reading poems, romances, vision literature, legends, and myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know none of them are like this. Of this [gospel] text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage... or else, some unknown [ancient] writer... without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern novelistic, realistic narrative..."⁸

So, the Gospels were either "reportage" (by which he means detail an eyewitness is reporting), or the Gospel writers got together and decided to simultaneously anticipate a new style of fictional literature 1700 years before it emerged. Um, not very likely.

The literary form of the Gospels is too detailed to be made up.

PAUSE: THE IMPORTANCE OF DETAIL

Let me pause for a second to highlight the importance of detail. And remember that all this detail is helping us throw sand on the bridge over the cavern.

Some of you will remember when Neil Armstrong landed on the moon in 1969. He famously said: "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." But that's not actually what he said. It's recently come to light that what he actually said was: "That's one small step for A man, one giant leap for mankind." Back at NASA, people thought he flubbed the line (it was pre-rehearsed). But Armstrong confirmed he said it right. What happened? The recording skipped omitting the word "a." Sure, that's interesting. And I think that the word skipped was kind of insignificant. But what if "man" or "mankind" was omitted?

My point is that details matter. When it comes to trusting the Bible's reliability, what key detail are we missing? How is what we're missing negatively impacting our understanding?

OBJECTION 4: DIDN'T PEOPLE JUST RECORD STORIES THAT WOULD HAVE ADVANCED CHRISTIANITY, AND KEPT SILENT ON THOSE THAT WOULDN'T?

ANSWER 4: THE CONTENT IS TOO COUNTERPRODUCTIVE TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF CHRISTIANITY TO BE MADE UP

This is a big one in *The Da Vinci Code*. The argument goes that surely the early leaders in the church silenced the stories that would hurt the advancement of Christianity, and emphasized the stories that would help their power-hungry cause.

But when you look at it, there is much content that is counterproductive to the advancement of Christianity *that was kept in*. Here are a few examples:



Mark 14:36 "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."

If your agenda is to only include passages that stress Jesus' divinity, why is a passage included that says "remove this cup from me" possibly suggesting that Jesus and God weren't totally on the same page? Well, it's there because *it actually happened that way*. The actual detail is too honoured to be tampered with, even if it would have hurt the cause of advancing Christianity in the world.

Here's another:

Matthew 27:46 ⁴⁶ And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

First, the original utterance out of Jesus' mouth is preserved because his actual words held power, and it would have been important to preserve very powerful sayings in a way that was as true as possible to their original form. And even in addition to that, why is "why have you forsaken me" there? I know as a student of the Bible that is a quote from Psalm 22—a psalm that ends not in defeat but in victory. But to the first-time observer, it seems as if Jesus is saying God has forsaken/abandoned him. So why would it be there? There is no reason except that that is what happened. That statement would have *hurt* the cause of early Christianity, not helped it.

Here's a powerful one from the morning of the resurrection:

Matthew 28:1 After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

In all the Gospels, women were the first eyewitnesses to the resurrection. That's huge. And remember that the resurrection is the foundational event for the Christian faith. Here's why it's huge: In the 1st century, the testimony of women was *not admissible* in a court of law. A woman's testimony was considered not reliable

enough. So why on earth would all the Gospels record women as the first witnesses especially when it would have hurt their cause? Only one reason: Because that's how it happened.

Lastly, consider the leadership in the early church. Frequently in the Gospels we hear about the disciples just not getting it. And once, Jesus even calls Peter 'Satan'! Whoa. If there was some secret agenda to only include stories in the Gospels that served to advance Christianity, why are so many stories preserved of the early church leaders (Peter, James, John etc.) that make us question their character. Those stories are there, despite being potentially unhelpful to the advancement of Christianity, because they happened.

The content is simply too counterproductive to the advancement of Christianity to be made up.

OBJECTION 5: I BELIEVE IN GOD, BUT I DON'T BELIEVE IN MIRACLES LIKE A RESURRECTION

ANSWER 5: YOU CAN'T BELIEVE IN A CREATOR GOD, AND NOT BELIEVE IN THE POSSIBILITIES OF MIRACLES

I'll only take a minute on this one because the whole idea of miracle is so big. But let me just say this to help those who take this view to perhaps reconsider the foundation of their view.

Most theories about creation involve some statement about God creating something out of nothing. But friends, that's a miracle. Here's how Tim Keller says it: "if [God] created everything out of nothing, it would hardly be a problem for him to rearrange parts of it as and when he wishes."⁹



If you believe that God somehow created something out of nothing, it's within your own schema of logic to allow that God can perform miracles too (...even if you don't personally see them very often).

OBJECTION 6: BACK THEN, PEOPLE WEREN'T SCIENTIFIC; THEY WOULD HAVE BELIEVED IN RESURRECTION MORE EASILY THAN WE WOULD TODAY

ANSWER 6: RESURRECTION WAS JUST AS MUCH OF A STUMBLING BLOCK FOR PEOPLE THEN AS IT IS NOW

I think we need to be humble about this one. I don't think it's fair to say that people weren't "scientific" in Jesus' day. Sure they didn't have modern science as we think about it. But remember that they earnestly sought God and valued reason like us. If our world is still around in 2000 years, those people will look back on us in 2014 and perhaps think that we were pre-scientific Neanderthals!



But here's the main point I want to share. The two main groups discussed in the New Testament are the Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews). You'd think the Jews, the people of God, would be open to the idea of resurrection. But Richard Bauckham did a survey of Jewish literature of the time. And although some Jews did think resurrection was possible, they knew it only to be something God would do at the "end time" or Judgment Day. So the fact that God would raise a man to life *before* that time would have been a big stumbling block. It was almost inconceivable.

And what about the non-Jews, the Gentiles? Dominant among Greek (Gentile) thought was the idea that the material, or body, or fleshly, was bad and corruptible. Conversely, the invisible, spiritual and soul-ish was good. So why on earth would God use as his decisive event in history the resurrection of a (mortal, corruptible, fleshly, bad) body?

So, the idea of resurrecting a body was both a stumbling block for Jews and Gentiles. It was a stumbling block then too! Maybe even more so than today.

POINT 7: CHANGED LIVES

When you see the risen Jesus, things change. And that's what happened.

How do we account for what happened to the apostles? In the Gospels they are often portrayed as not "getting it" and even fleeing Jesus' side in his toughest hours. But after the resurrection they are transformed into soldiers of courage—virtually all martyred for their bold faith in the resurrected Jesus. Here is how Tim Keller puts it: "How do you account for the hundreds of eyewitnesses to the resurrection who lived on for decades and publicly maintained their testimony, eventually giving their lives for their belief?"¹⁰



Peter, the chief apostle who Jesus once called Satan,¹¹ had a total about face. He himself was martyred in the form of crucifixion. Do you go to your death defending a lie? No. You go to your death defending the truth of a man brought back to life. Peter was so reverential toward Jesus that he didn't feel he deserved to even be crucified in the same way as Jesus—so he requested

he be crucified upside down with his feet in the air. And so he was.

Or what about so many of the Jews? Jews adhered to a strict monotheism—worshipping and serving the one God of Israel with an intense loyalty rooted in an ancient tradition. How is it that hundreds of them started worshipping Jesus as Lord virtually overnight?¹² I'll tell you how: They saw him alive again.

This principle extends to us today as well. There's a saying that only 1 in 10 people will read the Bible. But 9 out of 10 people will read *the person* reading the Bible. When others look at you, do they see a transformed life? A life that reflects the fact that you follow a dead man who is alive again?

I want to leave you with something Tim Keller said: "Be skeptical of your skepticism."¹³ Ask yourself who is feeding your information about your faith that undermines the reliability of the Gospels and of the resurrection? Is it innocent? Or is there an agenda?

Be skeptical of your own skepticism.

Here are some of the main arguments I have tried to (briefly) summarize:

1. Biblical books are among the most widely preserved historical documents in the entire world

2. Jesus is, therefore, the most historically documented figure in human history
3. It was customary for people to remember and carefully transmit important information for long periods
4. The timing of the writings is too early for them to be made up
5. The Gospels were deemed 'authoritative' by a wide group of agreeing Christians (not a small few)
6. The Literary form of the Gospels is too detailed to be made up
7. The content is too counterproductive to the advancement of Christianity to be made up
8. You can't believe in a Creator God, and not believe in the possibilities of miracles
9. Resurrection was just as much of a stumbling block for people then as it is now
10. Changed Lives

Think back to Indiana Jones. Sometimes we are asked to not take a leap of faith, but a huge, giant running leap over a cavern. But sometimes when you take a closer look, the leap isn't as large as you think.

Can you trust the Bible about the resurrection? Only you can answer that question. As I've done my own prayerful study I have come to answer a resoundingly confident, Yes.

But as you go about your own search, make sure you have the right kind of information in your tool kit before you come to a working conclusion. Throw some dirt back over that bridge.

Perhaps there will always be some doubt. But use it to grow an even stronger faith. Don't let it turn into spiritual rust.

Remember "doubting Thomas"? He was, in a sense, a modern man. He wanted physical proof of the resurrection:

"Then [Jesus] said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him...

And here I believe Jesus is speaking not just to Thomas but to those of us many years later across the canyons of time:

... "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (John 20: 27-31)



¹ Principally from *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (2006).

² Various writings.

³ Mostly from the research he has compiled in: *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (2008).

⁴ See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (2006), starting at page 319.

⁵ The Council of Nicea.

⁶ Other “gospels” existed such as the Gospel of Thomas or Mary or James etc. (I have these in my study, you can borrow them to read them if you wish.)

⁷ This is taken from the helpful summary in: Bart D. Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code: A Historian Reveals What We Really Know About Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Constantine* (2004), pages 85 to 88.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, 155.

⁹ Tim Keller, *Reason for God*, 89.

¹⁰ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*, 219.

¹¹ See Mark 8:33.

¹² There is a very illuminating and helpful article in Richard Bauchham’s *Jesus and the God of Israel* about Christ, the divine identity, and how 2nd temple Jews in 1st century Palestine could come to call Jesus “Lord.”

¹³ Tim Keller, *Encounters with Jesus*, 2012.