

The Good Report

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Is Jesus History or Another Fairytale?

According to the apostle Paul, Christianity rises or falls not on the strength of its philosophy but on the historicity of a single event: the resurrection of Jesus. If you want to refute Christianity this is the single most important claimed event of the Christian story that you need to either disprove or surrender to.

Christianity doesn't *just* claim things like "there is life after death," "God has a purpose for you" and "heaven is open to all." These statements are somewhat difficult to scrutinize, but listen closely, and you'll hear claims like "Jesus lived in the Galilean village of Nazareth," or "he caused an uproar in the temple of Jerusalem around AD 30," or "he suffered crucifixion under a Roman governor named Pontius Pilate," or even "his tomb outside the city wall was found empty just a few days after his crucifixion, and his disciples with hundreds of others claimed to have seen him alive." These are not immune from historical scrutiny. To say that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the fifth governor of Judea is a claim which can be challenged, and many have.

Fortunately for us, these supposed events all would have taken place in a cultural and political melting pot - Roman Galilee and Judea - for which we have thousands of archaeological remains and hundreds of thousands of words of ancient inscriptions and written records. Now the message from evangelical atheists such as Richard Dawkins is that specialists in the field of history are highly questionable on the existence of Jesus and fabrication of the gospels. This assumption is dramatically false. It is somewhat fuelled by a large degree of ignorance.

Anyone who seriously dips into the academic literature about the figure of Jesus will quickly discover that trained scholars, regardless of their religious or irreligious conviction, suggest that we know quite a bit about the influential teacher named Jesus, and this is cemented by the fact that over the last 250 years the entire industry of "double-checking" the claims about Jesus of Nazareth has significantly developed.

Consider what the great physicist Albert Einstein said in his interview with George Viereck in 1929, when questioned whether he accepted the historical existence of Christ, he replied with, "unquestionably! No one can read the gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life. How different, for instance, is the impression which we receive from an account of legendary heroes of antiquity like Theseus. Theseus and other heroes of his type lack the authentic vitality of Jesus." Einstein's admiration for Jesus and his confidence that Jesus was a historical figure offer a nice contrast to the more recent dogmatism of best-selling atheists.

History is not made up

History is not a lesser subject in the field of knowledge. While the past can seem murky and full of myth and conjecture, the events uncovered by historians were once as real and valid as the

experiences you are having today. Those events are no longer here but through careful historical analysis of the remaining evidence, history is knowable. Not fully knowable, of course; probably less than 1% of evidence from ancient history remains today. But while 1% sounds like nothing, this is still enough to provide precious insight into the real lives of first-century men and women.

Let me give an illustration: imagine people two thousand years from now digging up London and discovering 1% of mail, 1% of city statues and inscriptions, 1% of shop receipts and 1% of parliamentary documents. While much of ordinary life from London would remain invisible to future historians, a great many other things could be reliably known. We would know the names of quite a few of the leaders of Great Britain and around the world. We would know something of what people valued. We would have some insight into the food people ate, how much things cost and how Londoners generally spent their money. And from just a small selection of government legislation and private correspondence, we would gain a pretty accurate picture of at least some aspects of life in London. In addition to their broad-brush impressions of 21st century London, historians 2000 years from now would have portraits of particular individuals, some famous. Much could be reliably said about the Prime Minister or the Queen, of course, but it would only take a bundle of letters from a few individuals to be able to piece together a detailed, even intimate, account of the lives of ordinary men and women of the time. So from just these few sources, future historians would get a fair glimpse of London culture and lifestyle. Ancient history is just like this; it is both frustratingly incomplete and yet remarkably intimate.

To give an example closer to the life of the first Christians, we have solid general evidence that the most influential Jewish rabbi in Roman Judea was a scholar named Hillel. But sadly, we don't have a single letter from this man, who was, by all accounts, an intellectual champion of the movement known as the Pharisees. By contrast, we have around 30,000 words of correspondence from a junior Pharisee, just a few decades after Hillel, named Saul of Tarsus. He is better known as the apostle Paul, the author of numerous letters now contained in the New Testament. These letters, while primarily read for their theological content, offer an enormous amount of random information about first-century language, rhetoric, religion, social history, travel and customs, as well as the inner life of one Jewish-born, Greek-educated man responsible for taking the Christian message throughout much of Turkey, Greece and beyond.

Now this is just one example, but the point is clear enough. The historic past is a genuine place on the map of human experience, while much will never be rediscovered about ancient Rome or Jerusalem, more than enough documents and artefacts have survived for us to offer a firm judgement about many things from the first century. The past isn't completely lost. And it certainly isn't when it comes to Jesus. There are plenty of biographies which were written about Jesus. A handful of Greek letters penned by St. Paul and other disciples offer us early detailed evidence of the beginnings of what would come to be called Christianity.

Historical investigation is the science and art of discerning how much of those tangible events of the past can be known today. But while we can apply the same historical method and judgement to evidence about Christ as we would with any other historical figure, that evidence can often be skewed in an overly supportive or dismissive manner. Why? Because, unlike many historical figures and statements which come with no psychological or moral baggage, the story of Jesus comes with provocative claims about God, our purpose, our ultimate responsibilities, heaven, hell and all that. The trick is to make our historical evaluation without letting our psychological sensibilities either get in the way or carry us away. Just because we may or may not believe in, say, "sin" or "God" does not mean we should doubt or assume the evidence that Jesus spoke about sin and taught that God offers us forgiveness. We must learn to not let our motives mislead, distort or discredit the evidence. So regardless of our research abilities, we must first make sure our intentions are pure. It is wise to acknowledge that in the pursuit of truth, intent is prior to content.

Now history itself used to be called a “science”, which is derived from a Latin word meaning “knowledge”. It is a straightforward fact that those specialising in the first century AD, regardless of their religious taste, agree overwhelmingly that we know a fair bit about Jesus. Consider the conclusion of E.P Sanders of Duke University, a confessed agnostic who is one of the leading scholars of the secular approach to studying Jesus over the last three decades, who concluded that *“there are no substantial doubts about the general course of Jesus’ life: when and where he lived, approximately when and where he died, and the sort of thing that he did during his public activity.”* He then offers a huge list of statements about the framework of Jesus’ life that are consistent with scripture and claims that these are almost beyond dispute. Sanders rightly regards the Gospels and the letters of Paul as important crucial resources for a good understanding of the events in Roman Galilee and Judea in the 20s and 30s AD.

How do we trust the past?

history is known from the testimony of those who were there at the time, but there are times when human testimony is flawed or malicious. So how can we trust the record of the past?

It’s not easy to trust what we are told. Someone we thought was a trustworthy expert turns out to be mistaken or wildly overconfident in their claims. Your friend who swore that something was true turns out to be a liar. Experiences like these dent our trust and faith in the testimony of others. They leave us sensitive to the possibility of human untrustworthiness and our own gullibility. And in one sense that’s good. Because hopefully, if we learn, these experiences leave us with the skills to distinguish between good and bad testimony, making us a little less vulnerable to false witness. You will notice that young children tend to trust everything they are told by grown-ups but adults have usually learned to be more cautious. We have instinctively learned to look for signs of falsehood. We even unconsciously apply a few simple tests to judge the internal coherence of someone’s testimony and the general reliability of the person testifying. But nonetheless, no matter who you are, in life we generally depend on testimony. So we must learn to discern the truth in the testimonies and claims we hear or read. Why? Because justified faith is a sturdy bridge to knowledge.

I know some might find it distasteful that I used the word “faith” in that context. The sceptical definition of “faith” as believing things without evidence has really only made it into our definition because of the recent usage in sceptical circles. This is how dictionaries work. They are not arbiters of the best use of terms. They record how people use words. And only relatively late in its history did the word “faith” come to be used, by some, in the derogatory sense of believing things with no good reason. For most of the history of the English language, as highlighted in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), faith has commonly meant “loyalty”, “credibility”, “reliability”, “assurance”, and most of all “trust” – two definitions of faith from this entry in the Oxford English Dictionary provide a perfect explanation of why faith is essential to knowledge in general, and to historical knowledge in particular:

- Firm trust or belief in or reliance upon something (e.g. the truth of a statement or doctrine; the ability, goodness, etc., of a person, the efficacy or worth of a thing); confidence; credence.
- Belief based on evidence, testimony, or authority.

Now, why does this matter in our investigation into history, and the history of Jesus in particular? Because our common-sense trust in testimony, which underlines much of our personal and academic knowledge of the world, is also crucial for gaining knowledge about the past. To do history means reading and reflecting on ancient literature or artefacts and deciding whether to rely on or reject those sources. We approach ancient testimony in much the same way we approach testimony in ordinary life. Historians ask questions like:

- How far removed is the source from the events they describe?
- Was the author in a good position to know the information reported?
- Does the author have the general character of someone reporting in good faith?
- Does what is reported fit with what is known more broadly about the time and place spoken of?
- Are any of the specific things the author reports supported at least in broad terms by the testimony of other authors?

Historians will commonly gather everything they can that relates to the geography, culture, politics and writings of the period in which the figure lived and then read the direct sources concerning the figure against background material. This allows us to judge whether we are dealing with a reasonable testimony, complex fantasy, or something in between.

But when we evaluate testimony we also need the humility to acknowledge that we may have motives that interfere, so that we are overly dismissive or supportive. Belief and doubt are psychological realities just as much as they are intellectual conditions. The Greek philosopher Aristotle was one of the first well-known thinkers to promote the psychology of belief. Aristotle offers three terms for the three parts of persuasion: The logical dimension he calls *logos*. The ethical aspect (that is, whether the persuader appears morally credible) he calls *ethos*. And the emotional dimension he calls *pathos*. *Logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*.

Each of these aspects of persuasion can be divided into numerous subcategories but the underlying idea is that persuasion works, or it doesn't, because of a range of factors, not just facts. For better or for worse, we interpret information based on our preferences and past experiences. We are influenced by the opinion of those we admire. We cannot help but be motivated (or led astray) by concrete things like age, health or even sleep patterns. In other words, we are not pure minds isolated from the world around us. We are also social, psychological and bodily creatures. This has significant implications for how we all approach evidence and testimony. So it is in the interest of wisdom to be honest about yourself and know your own cognitive and emotional influences.

Psychologist and professor Jonathan Haidt analysed 20 years of research into how we form and defend our beliefs about politics, religion, aesthetics and even science. Study after study shows that we tend to make up our mind intuitively, and then we prop up our positions with rational argumentation. This applies to conservatives and progressives, to both fundamentalists and even sceptics. Belief and unbelief are usually the result of a mix of factors. Now sure, rational argument fits in that matrix, but a significant role is played by our desires, preferences and life experiences that make up our "intuitive cognition". When we want to believe something, we ask "can I believe it?" But when we don't want to believe something we say "must I believe it?" In most cases, the answer to the first question is "yes" and "no" to the second.

Now before you jump on your high horse thinking that your intellectual achievements excuse you from this bucket, it is interesting that Haidt also describes the evidence showing that high-IQ individuals are no better than average IQ individuals at assessing the range of arguments on both sides of the matter. People with higher IQs may have the ability to rationalise their opinions to themselves and generate more reasons for their side of a debate, but they are no better than others at finding reasons on the other side. We are all on the same level field. People with higher IQs are just a little better at convincing themselves they are right.

Now the main point of explaining this is that it emphasizes the importance of being conscious of our own biases and preconceived motives, especially when exploring a subject like the history of Jesus. How people feel about Christianity and its claims will be a factor in how they assess the material related to Jesus' existence. We need to do our best to be as objective as we can about the evidence,

to listen to what History is saying, rather than what fits with our worldviews.

Is Jesus history?

Now let's get to the grit. Is Jesus part of History? Let me offer you just five works that are regarded as trustworthy and relevant in the secular academic world when it comes to the question of whether Jesus is historical:

1. The first is the famous single-volume *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (published by Oxford University Press) which summarises scholarship on all things Greek and Roman in over 1,700 pages. There is a several-page entry on the origins of Christianity which begins with an assessment of what may be reliably known about Jesus. Readers will discover that there are absolutely no doubts raised about the basic facts: that this teacher/healer really lived and really did die by crucifixion.
2. Next is the much larger, *Cambridge Ancient History* in 14 volumes (published by Cambridge University Press). Volume 10 covers the Augustan period, right about when Jesus lived. It has a sizable chapter on the birth of Christianity. The entry begins with a couple of pages outlining what is known of Jesus' life and death, including his preaching on the kingdom of God, his friendly association with sinners, outcasts and so on. Within it, no doubts are raised about the authenticity of these core elements of the story of Christ.
3. The third relevant standard work is the *Cambridge History of Judaism* in four volumes (*also published by Cambridge University*). Volume 3 covers the early Roman period. Several chapters refer to Jesus as an interesting figure of Jewish History, and one chapter, 60 pages in length, focuses entirely on Jesus and is written by two leading scholars. The chapter offers a first-rate account of what experts currently think of the historical Jesus. His teaching, fame as a healer, openness to sinners, selection of "the twelve" (apostles), prophetic actions (like clearing the temple), clashes with elites, and, of course, his death by crucifixion are all treated as beyond reasonable doubt. Unsurprisingly, the authors do not tackle the resurrection, but they do acknowledge, as a matter of historical fact, that the first disciples of Jesus "were absolutely convinced that Jesus of Nazareth had been raised and was Lord and that numerous of them were certain that he had appeared to them."
4. The next standard work comes from a different angle entirely and is very revealing for anyone who imagines there are doubts about Jesus' existence in mainstream secular scholarship. The monumental *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae* (published in Germany under De Gruyter) is a recent six-volume compendium of all the known inscriptions in Judea/Palestine for the thousand-year period from Alexander the Great to Muhammad. Some might be surprised to read entry 15 of the Jerusalem inscriptions which shows us that it is an absolute given that the Jewish figure of Jesus existed, that he caused a revolution of some kind, and that he ended up on a Roman cross.
5. The fifth example is *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World* (Published by Brill Academic). It is a classic compendium of Ancient History, now translated into English in 20 volumes. It has a 5000-word entry on the historical Jesus, and while it has no interest in supporting the Christian faith, it does not express the slightest doubt about Jesus' existence, the basic themes of his teaching, his reputation as a healer and his crucifixion.

None of these five works are remotely religious. They are standard secular reference sources to which scholars themselves turn to double-check certain details. Each volume treats the existence of Jesus the teacher, healer, and martyr as beyond doubt. So to say that Jesus did not exist is to stand against contemporary scholarship. All the standard secular compendiums of ancient history judge

the core of the story – that a popular Galilean teacher and reputed healer named Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem by order of Pontius Pilate – to be beyond reasonable doubt. And while further discoveries and many generations of critical discussion have continued, the best-kept secret is that this academic discipline has not become more sceptical of Jesus' life, but less.

Jesus vs Alexander the Great

To bring the argument home, let us compare Jesus with Alexander the Great in terms of historical assessment.

First, let's get to know Alexander. He was a king of the ancient Greek kingdom who at the age of just 22 set off on what would become a non-stop, decade-long military campaign eastwards from Greece. He took Asia Minor (Turkey) within months, and defeated the mighty Persians the following year. By 330 BC he was the master of Greece, Asia Minor, Syria, Israel, Egypt and even Mesopotamia down to the Persian Gulf. He continued east to see what else he could conquer. He crossed the Indus River in 326 BC and defeated the north Indian prince Porus. The next year he returned west where he enjoyed what you might call a sabbatical. After a rest, he resumed with fresh military and colonisation projects but then contracted an illness. After ten days of sickness, he died on 10th June 323BC at the age of just 32. What a crazy life.

It is difficult to calculate the lasting influence of Alexander's ten-year conquest. He passed through history in a brief blaze of glory, but his deputies then divided the conquered territory among themselves and established Greek-style kingdoms all across the Mediterranean and North East for the next couple of centuries until the Romans then rose to dominance. This meant that Greek language, culture, philosophy, and science were spread east and west in ways that can still be noticed today. It is fair to say that we are all partly influenced by ancient Greek modes of thought and conduct, whether for good or bad.

But how do we know any of these things about Alexander the Great? Some of our information comes from a few random inscriptions and from a large number of coins of that period. These tell us something about the extent of Alexander's reign and the titles he enjoyed. But the bulk of what we hold to be true about Alexander comes not from artefacts like these but from written sources composed after Alexander's death and faithfully copied over the centuries in manuscripts now stored in the world's great museums and libraries. Almost everything we know about ancient history, including about Alexander, we know from written testimony *composed decades after the fact* and preserved in manuscript copies. Within a generation of Alexander's death, numerous officials composed accounts of his conquering career. Because of this, there is wide agreement today about the general course of Alexander's career, the sorts of things he said and did, and the impact he made on the Mediterranean and ancient Near East.

But now let's consider Jesus of Nazareth, who is arguably the most recognisable name from all ancient history – even more than the great Alexander. I recognise that comparing Alexander the Great and Jesus of Nazareth is maybe not so reasonable, since not only were their career paths and leadership styles radically different but Alexander was by all natural interpretations, infinitely more influential in his day than Jesus was in his. The former was a tornado that swept across the world from Greece to India. Jesus, although he founded the world's largest religion, was still in his day just a big fish in the small pond of Galilee – set in the backwaters of the Roman Empire.

What this means is that we should not expect the historical evidence for Jesus to be equal to that for Alexander. While the quality and quantity of evidence for Alexander and Jesus will naturally be different, the historical principles for studying these figures are the same. And in some important respects, our evidence for Jesus is superior to that of Alexander. For example, the earliest

biographical information we have for Alexander is written 120 years after his death by a man named Polybius; and our best source was written by Arrian 400 years after his death. Yet what about our sources for Jesus? The Gospels offer our best biographical information about Him. It is commonly accepted that the Gospel of Mark was written within 40 years of Jesus' death. The Gospel of Luke and Matthew were written within 50 years, and the Gospel of John within 70 years. This means that the latest of those four biographical sources for Jesus, (which is John's Gospel), is closer in time to its subject than the earliest existing biographical source for Alexander.

But it doesn't stop there. If we then compare our best sources for the two figures, the comparison is even more interesting. The Gospel of Mark and Luke are generally considered to be of most historical worth for the study of Jesus. These books were written 40 and 50 years after Jesus' death. Arrian was written 400 years after Alexander.

Also, some of Paul's letters are our earliest source for the historical Jesus, dating to within 20 years of the events themselves. Their significance lies not only in their early dates but also in the way they show, by their multiple passing mentions of things Jesus said and did, that a great deal of information about Jesus was already known by Paul's readers before he wrote to them long before the Gospels were composed. And one passage in Paul's epistles (1 Corinthians 15 v 3-7) provides the professional historian with confidence that the core of the story was fixed - in creed and in memory - within the first months and years after the events themselves.

Now I can safely say that the writings about Jesus are the best-attested records from all classical history. Even the scholar Bart Ehrman, who frequently critiques and attacks Christian truth claims, has acknowledged that "textual scholars have enjoyed reasonable success at establishing, to the best of their abilities, the original text of the New Testament." There are at least three aspects of ancient written sources that are of great interest to today's scholars, whether they are studying Alexander the Great or Jesus, and they are *the date of the writing, what earlier sources are employed in the writing and how well-preserved the copied manuscripts are.*

Addressing the second concern of *which earlier sources are employed in the writings*, it is also well known that the gospel writers employed earlier sources within their works. They themselves wrote 30-70 years after Jesus, but they happily consulted much earlier material and incorporated it into their work. The opening paragraph of the Gospel of Luke alludes to previous writings and to his study of all the relevant material. In fact, Luke's Gospel allows us to do something important that we cannot do with many other ancient writings. We can test how faithful Luke was to his earlier sources. Scholars have developed a historical sub-discipline known as source analysis or redaction criticism, where experts keenly double-check the way a writer uses the source material in their works. For example, we can take a copy of the Gospel of Mark and compare it with Luke's use of Mark in his rendition of the gospel. About a third of Luke's material comes straight from Mark. When we compare Mark's Gospel with Luke's use of Mark's Gospel, it becomes clear that Luke was faithful to his earlier source. This tells us that the writer Luke had a tendency to conserve rather than innovate.

Moving on to the third question on *how well preserved the manuscript copies of the writings are*, the reason for our confidence in the text of the New Testament is not that Christians were so brilliant at the task of copying, which, if I'm honest, not all of them were, but it is the sheer number of ancient and medieval manuscripts in our possession that makes the difference. There are roughly 5500 manuscripts of the New Testament in the original Greek language that have been catalogued, and over 18,000 in early translations into Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Arabic, and other languages. There are over 40 thousand quotations of the New Testament by the early church leaders, who wrote between the 2nd and 4th centuries. Out of these quotations alone, the entire New Testament could be accurately reconstructed. Now the important thing is the vast number. The greater the number of

manuscripts, the easier it is to detect a “variant” or mistake in one of the copies. For example, imagine you have in your possession just three copies of a letter, and one of the copies differs in several paragraphs from the others. With so few copies, it would be difficult to know which wording was original and which was an alteration. But imagine you had hundreds of copies, then even thousands of the same letter. In that case, although the number of copying mistakes would increase, we would be justified in placing more confidence in the source material as the task of spotting errors and judging what is original would be far easier.

When you take the New Testament and compare it with many other authentic original documents, it comes out as the best-tested document from the ancient world which we have so far. Sir Frederic Kenyon, who was the director of the British Museum and the leading authority on ancient manuscripts wrote, *“The number of manuscripts of the new testament, of early translations and quotations from it is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient authorities. This can be said for no other ancient book in the world.”* The Roman Historian A.N. Sherwin-white said, *“any attempt to reject its basic historicity even in matters of detail must now appear absurd.”* Sir William Ramsay, regarded as one of the greatest archaeologists to have ever lived, set out to disprove the historicity of the New Testament but instead came away a confirmed believer in its authenticity.

Separate from the sheer number of manuscripts, a further argument is to do with the importance of memory and retaining what Jesus said. Today, we hardly use our memories at all. I for sure have a memory like a sieve, anyone who knows me well will tell you that. But in our day and age, why would we use our memories? We’ve got our phones, digital notepads and Google. But in ancient times, memory was regarded as a foundational intellectual organ, almost on a par with reasoning. Jewish Rabbis in the ancient world, just like philosophical teachers, often made their disciples learn key statements word-for-word by repetition. This was a way of safeguarding the most important ideas and texts. The first-century Jewish writer Josephus tells us that *“the Pharisees had passed on to the people certain regulations handed down by former generations and not recorded in the Laws of Moses”* (ANTIQUITIES 13.297). The key terminology here was “to pass on” and “to receive”: one was the duty of the teacher, the other the duty of the student. The rabbinical custom centred on passing down an oral tradition, and this practice would have assisted in preserving the rabbi Jesus’s words, especially when cross-referenced.

So to conclude on that matter, when we consider the ancient sources on the history of Jesus and ask: , when was it written, what earlier sources are employed in the writing and how well-preserved are the manuscript copies of the writing, on all three tests, the Gospels and letters of Paul now in the New Testament compare - to put it mildly - bloody well.

Digging up dirt - evidence of the gospel in archaeology

Archaeology is a highly regulated discipline that seeks to uncover the material remains of the ancient world - buildings, coins, inscriptions, domestic artefacts and so on - in order to bring these into conversation with the literary evidence of the period, in an effort to clarify the geopolitics, economics and ordinary life in the society under investigation. I’ll keep this part short, but I want to present just two interesting though trivial examples of archaeological discoveries in Israel that have and are yielding fascinating results for the study of Jesus in particular.

The first is that in the 5th Chapter of the Gospel of John, it mentions a public pool in Jerusalem featuring five colonnades (or rows of columns), in which Jesus is said to have healed someone. Now, a series of archaeological investigations in 1957 - 1963 uncovered a pool in the very area described by John, and yes, there were five colonnades, one on each of the four edges of the pool and one

across the middle, dividing the pool from west to east.

The second archaeological discovery is concerning the crucifixion. Many popular sceptics have suggested that Jesus would not have been buried in a tomb as the New Testament writers claim since most people who were crucified were usually left hanging there at the mercy of wild beasts, after which the remains were thrown into a common grave. Yet in 1968, Israeli archaeologists discovered a tomb just north of Jerusalem containing some Jewish burial boxes (ossuaries). One of these was inscribed "Jehohanan and Jehanan ben Johohanan", meaning that the box contained the bones of a father and his son of the same name. Now analysis of the bones revealed a male right heel bone that had been pierced through with an iron nail. This man was clearly a victim of crucifixion. The nail, which was 11.5 cm long, was badly bent and so had never been removed from the foot. A plaque of wood from an olive tree was still attached. It was a remarkable find, and it confirmed that some crucifixion victims certainly did receive a proper burial. Apart from the fact that the gospel accounts don't claim Jesus' burial was according to common practice, this find further discredits the common objection from sceptical circles that Jesus wouldn't have been buried as the New Testament tells us.

Now these are just two interesting cases, but archaeology actually confirms numerous incidental details of the New Testament, but it's real importance lies in the way it has unearthed deep cultural realities of first-century Galilee and Judaea which demonstrate that the portrait provided by the written Gospels is indeed rooted in the history of the time.

Did Jesus rise from the dead?

This is where it all hangs. Did Jesus rise again from the dead? It's a question that takes us to the 'pointy end' of Christianity. Hanging in the balance is the intellectual credibility of Christianity and its claimed eternal relevance.

Jesus provided an objective standard for his authority when he predicted "*after three days I will rise again.*" The resurrection was to be the evidence of his authority, one which the governors and religious leaders never disproved as they failed to find his body. Without the resurrection Christianity is ruined, it is just another social movement. As Paul wrote: "*And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied*" (1 Cor 15: 17-19). In other words, if you disprove the resurrection the whole of Christianity would crumble. Unlike many religions which are based on ideas or theories, Christianity claims to be falsifiable, based on this central historical claim.

Disprove the resurrection of Christ, and Christianity falls with it.

Now I have not mentioned much about Jesus as a healer. But the firm scholarly consensus today is, as Paula Fredricksen of Boston University states, that "*Jesus probably did perform deeds that contemporaries viewed as miracles.*" Professor Fredriksen makes clear that she doesn't personally believe that "God occasionally suspends the operation of what Hume called '*natural law*'", but she nonetheless acknowledges that the evidence is good enough for us to conclude that Jesus performed deeds that others regarded as miracles, whatever the explanation. Secular scholars may not believe that there is a God or that resurrections are possible, but they can and often do agree that there is good evidence that Jesus' tomb was empty shortly after his death and that many people thought they saw him alive after death, whatever explains that.

Numerous people sincerely claimed to have seen Jesus alive from the dead. We have strong evidence that men and women claimed to have seen Jesus alive in the days after his crucifixion. Very few

historians who have done serious research on this topic doubt it. Considering his sceptical contemporary historians, Gary R. Habermas gives three such examples: *“even the highly critical New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann agreed that historical criticism can establish ‘the fact that the first disciples came to believe in the resurrection’ and that they thought they had seen the risen Jesus. Atheistic New Testament scholar Gerd Ludemann concludes, ‘It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus’ death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ.’ Paula Fredriksen of Boston University comments, ‘I know in their own terms what they saw was the raised Jesus. That’s what they say and then all the historic evidence we have afterwards attest to their conviction that that’s what they saw. I’m not saying that they really did see the raised Jesus. I wasn’t there. I don’t know what they saw. But I do know that as a historian that they must have seen something.’ ”*

This broad consensus exists because our evidence is (1) widespread, (2) early, (3) unexpected, and (4) sincere. Most specialists today do not try to explain the resurrection story. They tend to remain agnostic about it all. New Testament scholar E.P. Sanders speaks for many when he writes *“that Jesus’ followers (and later Paul) had resurrection experiences is, in my judgement, a fact. What the reality was that gave rise to the experiences I do not know.”* This conclusion is typical of the secular study of Jesus: something very odd must have happened, but we cannot really probe what it was. Some experts, like Oxford’s great Geza Vermes, go further. In his famous book on the resurrection, he analyses and then dismisses the six well-known naturalistic explanations of the evidence about the resurrection (the disciples stole the body, Jesus did not really die and so on), only to leave readers hanging, unsure of what Vermes thought would explain the evidence for an empty tomb and the sightings of Jesus.

We have the kind of historical evidence a resurrection would leave behind and more evidence pointing in the direction of a resurrection than we would expect if the whole thing were a fraud, a mistake or a legend. For many historians, the early belief in Jesus’ resurrection is just a weird fact of history.

Professor Richard Swinburne of Oxford University, a scholar specialising in evaluating evidence, argues that based on available historic evidence today, it is 97% likely Jesus miraculously rose from the dead. Christopher Tuckett from the University of Oxford said, *“The fact that Jesus existed, that he was crucified under Pontius Pilate and that he had a band of followers who continued to support his cause, seems to be part of the bedrock of historical tradition. The evidence available can provide us with certainty on that score.”* Gerd Thiessen, a leading New Testament historian at the sceptical end of the theological spectrum, says: *“The mentions of Jesus by ancient historians allay doubt about his historicity”* and that, *“Jesus’ death as a consequence of crucifixion is indisputable.”* and also, *“it may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus’ death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ.”*

Hallucination theory

In an escapist manner, those who hold a worldview that forbids the possibility of Jesus’ resurrection while taking into consideration the historicity of the gospel, usually conclude that the appearances of a risen Christ were visions or hallucinations. But there are a series of issues with this proposition:

- While there are documented cases of mass psychogenic illness these involve hysteria and other involuntary behaviours but never auditory and visual hallucinations. The claimed resurrection appearances of Jesus involved sight, sound and touch. Groups of disciples claimed to have sustained conversations with Jesus, ate with him and physically touched him. The idea that this was all the result of successive group hallucinations seems incredulous.

- Hallucinations rarely withstand sceptical scrutiny. Not all of Jesus' disciples would have been satisfied with a fleeting hallucination as their temperaments varied greatly. For instance, Thomas was a born sceptic and demanded empirical evidence before accepting the testimony of the others.
- Hallucinations tend to be of an expected event. Hallucinations, as projections of the mind, can contain nothing new. Yet the resurrection of Christ was not in their heads at all; in fact, the most compelling appearances happened to a group of disciples who had locked themselves in a house, fearing their own deaths. They were uncertain, doubting and certainly not expecting a miraculous turn of events.
- Hallucinations reoccur over a relatively long period, either increasing or decreasing. But the appearance of Christ occurred frequently and then abruptly ceased. None of those first disciples ever claimed similar flesh-and-blood experiences again.
- Paul mentions five appearances of the risen Christ, including five hundred people at one "sighting." Seven appearances are recounted in the four Gospels and other ancient sources tell us that for forty days Jesus appeared constantly to numerous groups of people. The size of the groups and the number of the sightings make it virtually impossible to conclude that all these people had hallucinations. Either they must have actually seen Jesus or hundreds of people must have been part of an elaborate conspiracy that lasted for decades. It is difficult to imagine that the five hundred people who saw him at one time were collectively suffering from hallucinations. Paul suggests to his readers that they can go and talk to any of the hundreds of witnesses they like. He had confidence.
- Finally, hallucination theories about Jesus' resurrection fail to account for the empty tomb and all the other countless historical realities of this event.

The attempt to explain away the risen Christ as a collective hallucination is to gamble with a completely implausible scenario to reconcile the historical events to a sceptical worldview.

Now, if you then resort to concluding that the resurrection of Christ was a big hoax instigated by the disciples to keep the movement going is hard to take seriously. If the resurrection was a fraud held by Jesus' followers then don't you think they would have given up considering the consequences? Imagine a disciple saying *"Hey guys, I got a good idea. Let's make up that Jesus rose from the dead and when they decapitate us, crucify us, burn us at the stake, and feed us to lions unless we denounce our new faith then we will swear by it cuz that would make the hoax even more convincing."* If the witnesses had benefited from their claims, gaining wealth, comfort, and social status, we could claim they made it up for personal gain. But the opposite was the case. The first witnesses to the risen Jesus experienced social estrangement, loss of property, loss of religious status, imprisonment, whippings and even execution. They became outlaws.

We have evidence that four of the founding witnesses died for their faith in Jesus: the apostle James son of Zebedee (Acts 12:1-2), the other James who was the brother of Jesus (Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 20.200), as well as both Peter and Paul (1 Clement 5:1-7; Eusebius Ecclesiastical History 2.25.5-6). Early church tradition recounts all but one of Jesus' 12 apostles were eventually martyred for maintaining their testimony.

Ask yourself, who dies for a lie they know to be a lie?

There has to be some explanation for how the cowardly group of disciples were transformed into a group of leaders. Many of them went on to live sacrificial lives and many of them were killed for teaching that Jesus has been resurrected.

Drawing the threads together

Three fundamental lines of evidence intertwine to convince us that Jesus rose from the dead: the fact of the empty tomb, the testimony of numerous eyewitnesses and the long-term impact on the lives of Jesus's followers.

The conclusion is that Christ's resurrection falls into the category of a historical event. Historical events, by definition, cannot be seen or touched; they are known to us through testimony. But the evidence for the resurrection boils down to testimony that is early, widespread, and credible. It is not the sort of testimony we would expect if the resurrection were a later-developing legend; nor if it were a fraud. It is, instead, the kind of testimony we would expect if the first Christians really did find an empty tomb and really did experience what they took to be sightings of Jesus alive after his death.

So what are you left with? How do you escape the historical reality that Christ rose from the dead? It is easy to dismiss evidence that uncomfortably contradicts our worldview, but this is not honest. The rationality of believing in miracles is largely determined by our background beliefs about ultimate reality rather than the evidence itself. If you hold one view of the universe you are compelled to deny miracles despite the evidence. If you hold another view of the universe you are free to accept or deny claims of miracles under certain conditions. If I hold that the "laws of nature" define the limits of what is possible in the universe - in other words, that no lawgiver/God exists behind those laws, then, in principle, miracles cannot be viewed as rational, and no amount of evidence could be accepted as evidence that a miracle has taken place. My background belief determines my approach to the evidence. If I see the laws themselves as simply a description of how reality commonly operates without any outside interference, that leaves room for divine intervention within the natural order, which is what we perceive as miracles. It is rational to believe in miracles, where there is strong evidence in their favour.

The resurrection is not so much a historical problem as a philosophical and a personal one. What we do with the evidence for the resurrection involves background beliefs about the universe, our life experience, our preferences and much more. And so, as a minimum, I would say that the evidence for the resurrection is good enough to warrant any sceptical reader to pick up one of the gospels to study it with an open mind - and, dare I say, an open heart - attuned to the possibility that the figure described in these ancient sources is not only unique but potentially life-changing.

The best lines of historical reasoning today can, do, and probably should lead fair-minded people to the conclusion that the New Testament contains good testimony about the figure of Jesus. The early dating of the documents compares well with other ancient sources. The sheer number of surviving manuscript copies of the texts is impressive. The style of the Gospel fits with what we know of ancient historical biography. The corroboration between Paul's letters and the Gospels suggests a reasonably stable oral tradition in the 20-60 years between Jesus and the writings about him. The evidence from non-Christian writers in the century following Jesus also help provide corroboration of the basic facts. The Christian account of the resurrection carries the strongest explanatory power in regards to their belief and the growth of that initially tiny sect across the Roman empire. And, above all, the figure portrayed in the Gospels fits very plausibly into all that we know of his time and place; both the archaeological remains and the many Jewish and Greco-Roman writings of the time make clear that the Gospel recounts a genuine historical life.

One of the leading voices in the historical assessment of the Gospel today, Jens Schroter of Humboldt-University in Berlin, described the emerging consensus of scholars over the last 40 years: *"In recent research, one can discern a clear tendency to grant the Gospels the status of historical*

sources, thus to view their Jesus narratives – beyond the faith conviction that undoubtedly come to expression in them – as also relevant in historical perspective. This signifies a turning point in Jesus' research to the extent that they were denied this status for quite some time. The judgement that the Gospels are ultimately unfruitful for a historical presentation of the activity of Jesus due to their preachy character or their literary presentation can, however, no longer convince. Instead, they are perceived as narratives that are interwoven in diverse ways with the underlying events of the life and fate of Jesus of Nazareth."

Jesus is history. The resurrection is a fact of history.

The gospel reveals not a myth but an actual life with extraordinary events. No one can deny the significance of Christ. His life here was short and his ministry only lasted three years, yet his impact was unfathomable. Today he is still both worshipped and despised. Who in history is like him? Death is our great enemy yet he rose from it.

John Lennon once boasted that The Beatles were more popular than Jesus and would outlive the Christian faith. Lennon died tragically early and today most young people have no idea who I'm talking about. Jesus has been repeatedly crucified and buried but he rises up to outlive his pallbearers in history and in the hearts of his followers. Not only has the gospel been around for centuries conquering every kingdom and ideology it comes up against but Jesus Christ will be worshipped in glorious majesty for all eternity. C.S. Lewis put it this way: *" man can no more diminish God's glory by refusing to worship Him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word 'darkness' on the walls of his cell."*

This essay contains reference to "Is Jesus History" by John Dickson.