

# YOUR GOD IS STILL TOO SMALL

## Chapter 8

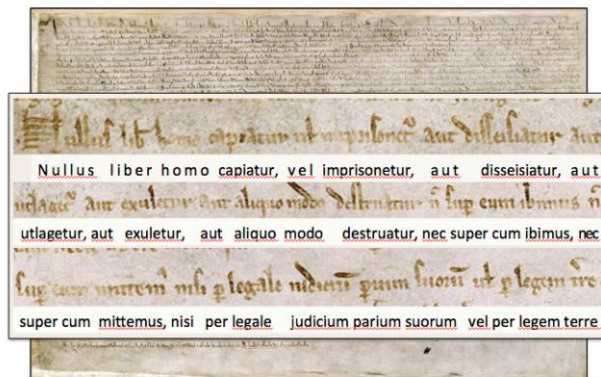
### *The Audacity of the Resurrection*

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*If your God cannot resurrect from the dead,  
Then your God is definitely too small!*

In the history of human civilization, mankind has used many approaches to determine historical truth, especially in the context of one making a claim that was open to dispute. For a while in history, these questions were posed to God (or gods) with religious rituals set up to discern the answer. Throughout a great bit of history, cases of “he said/she said” were decided through duels or some other trial by battle. As civilization progressed, wise or powerful people were designated to determine the truth. Frequently, these were either associated with the secular power structure (the king or other nobleman) or the religious power structure (the clergy).

In the eleventh century, Western civilization reached a milestone when William the Conqueror (c.1028-1087) began using citizen inquests to record financial matters. The role of ordinary citizens continued to grow in the legal system and in 1215, a core legal document for Western society was forced on King John of England. Called the Magna Carta (Latin for the “Great Charter”), significant parts of this law are still on the books in England, including clause 39, which read,

No Freeman shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed, or exiled, or deprived of his standing in any other way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send others to do so, except by the lawful judgment of his equals or by the law of the land.



1215 Magna Carta - Clause 39  
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From here, courts began a transition toward having disinterested groups of ordinary citizens (initially limited to white, citizen landholders, but that gradually changed) taking the role of “fact-finder.” The value of citizens to act as the finder of fact in disputes was one of the factors behind the Declaration of Independence. In the Declaration, the “facts submitted to a candid world” included the King of England,

depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of trial by jury.

Not surprisingly, the Bill of Rights adopted and ensured the right to a jury trial in the Seventh Amendment, which states,

In suits at common law, ... the right of trial by jury shall be preserved, and no fact tried by jury, shall be otherwise re-examined in any Court of the United States, than according to the rules of the common law.



The Declaration of Independence

This cornerstone of the American judicial system has its fans and critics. It is certainly not perfect, but it is still reckoned the most reliable system for determining fair and impartial findings of fact. “Finders of fact” is a phrase frequently used in legal circles for the jury. The judge, a legal scholar, is responsible for knowing and applying the law. But the determiner of facts, the ones who decide what truly happened in history, is the province solely of the jury. Generally consisting of twelve people, although sometimes groups of six, the idea is that a group of ordinary people brings collective memories and common experiences to bear on the decision process. In determining what ordinary events transpired (the “findings of fact”), these ordinary people trump the value of trained scholars and the world’s highest intellect. While trained scholars may disagree about whether they are more competent to uncover the facts of historical events, the historical consensus is that those experts bring biases in themselves, generally from a focus that is only through their academic or their training lens. A jury, on the other hand, has the benefit of listening to experts, the benefits of hearing pro’s and con’s, and the opportunity to comprehend, assess, and determine what is more likely or not the truth. The English writer Gilbert Keith (“G. K.”) Chesterton (1874-1936) wrote on many subjects, including philosophy, politics, and Christianity. Regarding the jury system, he wrote:

Our civilization has decided, and very justly decided, that determining the guilt or innocence of a man is a thing too important to be trusted to trained

men. If it wishes for light upon that awful matter, it asks men who know no more law than I know, but who can feel the things that I felt in the jury box. When it wants a library cataloged, or the solar system discovered, or any trifle of that kind, it uses up its specialists. But when it wishes anything done which is really serious, it collects twelve of the ordinary men standing round. The same thing was done if I remember right, by the Founder of Christianity.<sup>1</sup>



G. K. Chesterton

There are certainly times where juries get it wrong – they are, after all, made up of humans! Over time, various rules and structures have evolved that better insure valid jury results, and the simple truth is that the American judicial system, when it is working right and under its rules, remains a bulwark for citizens’ rights and for determining historical facts behind differing claims. The jury’s decision is so sacrosanct, that the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights ensures that it is not even open to re-examination absent some minor exceptions.

In this chapter, we want to take the resurrection of Christ, and subject it to the rigors and standards that we can glean from the judicial system and see what reasonable conclusion is best drawn from the evidence. We want to determine what happened to Jesus of Nazareth, as best as we can. Before we do so, we are going to set out certain important legal concepts and rules for guiding jury decisions. These are rules that are designed to eliminate jury mistakes in the jury’s role as the “finder of facts.”

## **TRIAL RULES AND PRINCIPLES**

Juries are charged with making their decisions based upon “evidence.” “Direct evidence” comes mainly from witnesses and documents. Additionally, juries are allowed to look at “circumstantial evidence.” That is evidence that is a reasonable inference from facts presented. As we look at the principles associated with juries and the evidence they consider, we should emphasize that there is more than we can put into one chapter. Law school generally takes three years! Still, this is a good core overview of what is built into the jury system to make it arguably the most effective determiner of historical fact in civilization.

## *Witnesses – Credibility*

Some of the witnesses are “fact witnesses,” which means they actually saw or witnessed something first-hand that is relevant. Other witnesses are “experts,” who are generally retained by someone and are paid to come and give their expert opinion on a matter that is better understood with “specialized” information not readily known by the common person. The jury is charged with the responsibility of determining the credibility of witnesses. Not all witnesses are viewed in the same light. A well-known historical example of witness credibility is found in the Old Testament account of King Solomon the Wise. When confronted by two women who both claimed to be mother to a child, Solomon ordered the baby cut in half. The woman who objected and spared the life of the child, Solomon deemed to be the more credible witness. Her claim as the child’s mother was the more credible claim because she was unwilling to see the child killed, something expected from a mother.

The determination of credibility can entail many things.<sup>2</sup> Among the important indicia of credibility are:

- *The mental condition of the witness.* A mentally unstable or challenged witness is generally less likely to be accorded credibility. Jurors will look for witnesses who seem convicted of their testimony, who will look the jurors in the eyes, who are ready and willing to give their testimony, without fear of it being heard or documented. Some witnesses are determined mentally challenged to such a degree that they are not allowed to testify at all.
- *The witness’s motives.* For some witnesses, the motive may be as simple as telling the truth. For others, especially expert witnesses, there is often an economic consideration. Some witnesses are paid for their testimony, which typically detracts from its credibility. Similarly, some witnesses have a personal stake in the outcome (*i.e.*, a defendant who might have to go to jail, a plaintiff who might win money or a defendant who might lose money).
- *Comparison of different witness accounts.* Frequently, juries are faced with multiple witness accounts to the same set of facts. In that circumstance, credibility often hinges, at least in part, on the relative merits of one’s testimony versus that of another. A weighing process can be involved, and when four witnesses agree on some issue or another, each witness’s credibility is enhanced by the testimony of another.

- *The character of the witness.* This is a very powerful influence in the credibility decision of jurors. So much so, that there are very strict rules about what character evidence can be offered about witnesses. For example, if a witness has a reputation for dishonesty, and there is evidence of such, then certain rules apply as to how and where that testimony can be offered. Clearly, a pathological liar will have less credibility over against an honest witness.

### ***Witnesses – Hearsay Testimony***

As a general rule, fact witnesses are only allowed to testify to what they witnessed first hand. The idea that a witness might say, “John told me that he saw ABC,” is not deemed testimony that ABC happened! It is simply testimony that John *said* he saw ABC. This is called, in courtroom vernacular, “hearsay.” It is when a witness tries to assert that what the witness “heard said” (the root of “hear say”) accurately related certain facts. Courts have recognized that once the factual examination includes statements of what others have said, a second layer of remoteness affects the strength of the comment. There are numerous exceptions to the inadmissibility of hearsay, often based upon whether the original speaker (“the declarant”) is available to offer the testimony first hand. For example, if the first speaker is not available to testify, then the statements of that speaker are admissible to a jury if they were given in another trial or proceeding, or if the declarant thought their death was imminent in some way related to the statements. Very importantly, if the first speaker’s statements were contrary to that person’s healthful pursuit of life (including effects to one’s economics, liberty, etc.), then the hearsay comments are admissible.

### ***Expert Witnesses – Junk Science***

Experts, generally paid witnesses in a case hired by one side or another, are allowed to testify to opinions arising from the expert’s particular knowledge, skill, experience, training or education. These opinions are allowed before a jury if based on sufficient facts or data, and if reliable principles and methods are applied to those facts to justify the opinions. Courts have continually refined this rule to make certain that jurors are not handed “junk science,” the term applied to far reaching opinions that have no real basis in reality. In a trial, the judge is the gatekeeper of whether an expert’s testimony is both relevant and adequately based upon science. There are multiple factors the court considers in making this determination. The core concern is that experts have an economic motive to their opinions that might move some beyond the realm of what is reasonably real and into the realm of the speculative.

### ***Bias, Sympathy, and Prejudice***

Jurors are instructed not to make decisions based upon bias, sympathy, or prejudice. In fact, those whose biases, sympathies, or prejudices are deemed too strong to be set aside, are removed from consideration for serving on that jury.

### ***Burden of Proof***

No trial is ever conducted based on the idea that one would be 100 percent certain of the facts. Determining the past is not a scientific matter like determining whether the Pythagorean theorem is right in claiming  $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$ . Math and science have a certainty that comes from dealing with universal truths. That is not the same as determining historical truths. As we have noted in earlier chapters, there is always the miniscule chance that reality as we see it is not even real (*i.e.*, we are “dreaming” this, or it is a computer program, *etc.*).

History is determined in trials based upon a “burden of proof.” One side or another has an obligation or burden to prove something as true (or false). That burden fluctuates, depending upon the matters in controversy. If the issue is a criminal matter, where someone’s liberty will be stripped away by a contrary finding, then the burden of proof is “beyond a reasonable doubt.” The approach is that one cannot strip away one’s liberty, or even one’s life in a capital punishment case, unless the finder of fact is convinced to the truth of the history “beyond a reasonable doubt.” In matters that deal with civil cases, for example, where person A brings a claim against person B for driving while drunk, causing a wreck, and injuring Person A. In those cases, the party required to prove their case must do so by “the preponderance of the evidence.” This means that the question for the jury in finding facts is simply, “what is more likely than not?” These burdens are important aspects of jury trials, because a 100 percent certainty would never be reachable in any case. It simply is not an option in historical fact reconstruction.

Certainly, there are other factors that have been left out of this consideration. Jurors are generally listening to advocates who present opposing sides to a fact situation. Although there are exceptions, jurors are generally not allowed to question witnesses themselves. Trials do not even occur until there has been a time of “discovery” where the witnesses are examined to see what they have to say, where facts are uncovered and where documents are examined. This is the time period when expert witnesses are retained and where arguments are marshaled for presentation.

Armed with these factors, we can now turn to the resurrection of Jesus, asking the question, “What *really* happened?” If we are ever going to get the most important finding of fact right, then this is the one! So, let us consider the question with civilization’s best tools:

## **THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS**

The witnesses to the death of Christ and his resurrection are numerous. We can classify them into categories as we consider the main points of their testimony:

### Direct Eyewitnesses:

- *Matthew.* The writer of the first gospel was an apostle, one of Jesus’s select twelve. Originally a tax collector, a job that required not only writing skills, but also careful and good record keeping, Matthew was called by Jesus from the tax collector’s booth to join his disciples. The details of this calling are given only in Matthew’s gospel (Matt. 9:9). Matthew’s gospel wrote up Jesus’ crucifixion, death, burial in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, the Roman guard at the tomb, the earthquake, and the resurrection. The resurrection account includes the direct testimony of two women (Mary of Magdalene and a second woman named Mary) about what they saw and their inspection of the tomb. It also includes what was apparently the common explanation of the body of Jesus missing from the tomb: the Jewish elders gave money to the soldiers to tell people that his disciples stole the body (Matt. 27-28).
  
- *John.* John was a fisherman who, along with his brother James, was called to leave his nets and follow Jesus (Matt. 4:21-22). His account, the fourth gospel, detailed Jesus’s last speech to his apostles where he explained he was leaving, but with an assurance he would return. John repeated the prayer Jesus offered in Gethsemane before his arrest, where Jesus affirmed his pre-existence with God, his mission on earth, and his oneness with God the Father. John then detailed the betrayal and arrest of Jesus, the confrontation with the Jewish authorities, the denial of Peter, the trial of Jesus before Pilate, and the crucifixion. John very carefully explained that Jesus died on the cross, with his side pierced by a spear in addition to the nail holes in his hands and feet. John explains the role of Joseph of Arimathea as well as the Jewish ruler Nicodemus in the burial of Jesus in Joseph’s tomb. John attested to the empty tomb by Mary Magdalene, the follow-up tomb inspection by Peter, and most scholars accord, John himself (he calls himself not “John,” but “the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved”). John and Peter saw the burial clothes, but the otherwise empty

tomb. John records visits of the resurrected Jesus to Mary Magdalene, as well as the disciples. John also records the encounter between the resurrected Jesus and the apostle Thomas, where Thomas at first doubted, wanting to see and touch Jesus and his wounds. Once the resurrected Jesus offered Thomas that very opportunity, Thomas's doubts immediately disappeared. Jesus made subsequent post-resurrection appearances documented by John, including one where Jesus cooked and ate a fish-and-bread breakfast with his disciples on the shore of Galilee. Jesus prophesied that Peter would die by crucifixion and that John would be the last apostle left alive.

- *Paul.* Paul was an eyewitness of a different sort! He was raised in a devout Jewish home, was one of the Jewish elite, educated in the highest and best Jewish academic environment, was fluent in at least Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, knew Greek poetry, was a multi-generational Roman citizen conversant with Roman law, and was a zealot among his people, living above reproach by Jewish law and tradition. Paul was part of the Jewish power structure that was violently against the church, seeking to arrest and, if need be, kill those who were trumpeting Jesus as a resurrected Messiah. A follower of Jesus named Stephen, the first known martyr for his Christian faith, was stoned under Paul's approval (he even held the cloaks of those involved.) While Paul was on a zealous crusade ravaging the church hauling both men and women to prison, he had an encounter with Jesus while on the road to Damascus. Jesus identified himself as Jesus, and instructed Paul on what he needed to do to resolve the blindness Paul suffered as a result of this encounter. Paul almost immediately began preaching of Jesus as a risen Messiah and recounted his encounter with the risen Jesus multiple times. Paul announced all over the known world that God had "raised him [Jesus] from the dead" (Acts. 17:31). In his writings to the Corinthians, Paul specified not only that:

Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter and then the twelve (1 Cor. 15:3-5).

Paul went on to add that the resurrected Christ appeared to over 500 men at one time, with most of them still alive lest anyone should want to check! Lastly, Paul affirmed that the resurrected Jesus appeared to his brother James and to Paul.

- *Peter.* Peter, like John, was a fisherman called to follow Jesus. After Jesus' arrest, Peter denied being an associate three times in rapid succession



for fear of his own safety. Ultimately, according to the gospel writers, Peter not only encountered the empty tomb, but also the risen Jesus as well. In one of his own writings, Peter spoke of the resurrected Jesus as,

a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God (1 Pet. 1:19-21).

Peter went on to write of his assurance that the resurrected Jesus would again return with a new heaven and a new earth (2 Pet. 3).

### Secondary Witnesses:

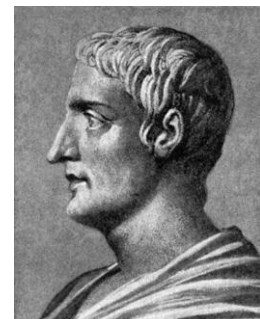
- *Mark.* According to historical records of the church, the second gospel (The Gospel According to Mark), is penned by the missionary Mark who worked under Paul, Barnabas, and Peter. Early historical church records also record that Mark reported the gospel of Peter. That would make Mark's gospel, "hearsay" in legal theory. We will look at the hearsay issue a bit later in this chapter. For now, we note his testimony. Mark's account confirms the crucifixion and death of Jesus. He also details the burial and involvement by Joseph of Arimathea. Mark recorded that on the Sunday following the crucifixion, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James came to the tomb to find it empty. An angel informed both women that Jesus was resurrected. The earliest copies of Mark's account end there. Later copies include appearances of Jesus to Mary, to a group of two disciples, and also to the entire group of eleven remaining disciples.
- *Luke.* Luke was responsible for writing the third gospel as well as the book of Acts. For the gospel, Luke was not an eyewitness, but he set out to "compile a narrative" from the "eyewitnesses" (Luke 1:1-2). He then set out to write "an orderly account" which came to include the early history of the church in Acts. Periodically in the Acts narrative, we read of Luke joining Paul on mission efforts and his writing then becomes eyewitness accounts. Luke explained not only the plot to kill Jesus, but the events that led up to the crucifixion. Luke told of the drama before the actual crucifixion including the difficulties carrying the cross to the site of Jesus' death. In addition to the death of Jesus, Luke added the burial by Joseph of Arimathea, giving extra detail about his role as a member of the Jewish council who had objected to the killing of Jesus. Luke detailed the story of the women coming to the tomb and finding the body missing. He added to the fact of Peter's investigation into the tomb where he found the linen

clothes but no body. Luke gave many more details than the other gospel writers about Jesus's post-resurrection appearances on the road to Emmaus and his encounter with the eleven when he offered to let them touch his wounds. This encounter was one where Jesus also ate some of the fish the disciples had. At the end of that encounter, Jesus explained to the apostles the Old Testament's teaching on both the fact of his death and resurrection and of the necessity of it. He finished with the assurance they would receive the Holy Spirit and the corresponding power. Luke ends recording the ascension of Jesus into heaven.

- *Early Church Fathers and Other Witnesses.* There are a slew of other witnesses relevant to the subject of Christ, including the group commonly known as the “early church Fathers.” These were people who gladly laid down their lives, convinced that Jesus was a resurrected Messiah who assured them of the reality of God, of sin, of atonement, and of a better life after this one is over. In addition to the church fathers, there are historical writers like Josephus (37-c.100) who wrote Jewish history for the Romans. Around 93-94AD, Josephus wrote of the martyr James who was identified as “the brother of Jesus, who was called Messiah [“Christ”].” He also identified Christ as executed by Pilate. Josephus has more to say about Jesus as resurrected, although some scholars believe parts of the account to be later adds by Christians who kept up with Josephus. In these accounts, Josephus is accorded to have said,

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 had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to Josephus, other Roman historians wrote of Jesus as the subject of worship among Christians. Tacitus (c.56 – c.117) wrote of the mass execution by Nero in July 64AD in the book called *Annals*, penned around 116AD. In his writing, Tacitus confirmed the death of Christ by crucifixion (“the extreme penalty”) under Pilate as arising from Nero's efforts to distract attention from his burning



Gaius Tacitus

of Rome:

to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular.<sup>4</sup>

Even before Tacitus, another Roman, commonly called Pliny the Younger (61-112), who was both lawyer and author, served for a time as a magistrate for the Roman Emperor Trajan and wrote about Jesus and Christians. In his capacity as Magistrate, Pliny pursued Christians for their illegal status within the Empire. Pliny explained the Christian practice of meeting on “a fixed day” (which scholars readily accord would have been Sunday, the resurrection day) and partaking of a meal (the eucharist). He also added that he made a point of following policy and executing those who would not recant.<sup>5</sup>

Considering these witnesses and their testimony, let us now shine the light of American jurisprudence on the evidence.

### ***Witnesses – Credibility***

No one has the ability to judge the credibility of these witnesses by looking them in the eye and focusing on their demeanor. Instead, we have the chance to examine their writings, and the writings of others about them. Those writings, in some ways, convey more relevant information on credibility than a two-hour examination might. The writings have been subject to near exhaustive analysis over the last 1900 plus years!

- *The mental condition of the witnesses.* No real scholar who has looked at the evidence from the witnesses has cobbled together an argument that the witnesses are mentally challenged or deranged. The writings of Paul, for example, are clearly lucid writings that exhibit well-reasoned logic, marvelous command of language, some of history’s most moving prose (1 Corinthians 13), profound theology (Philippians 2:5-11), knowledgeable confrontation with those he disagreed (Galatians 2:11-14), and more indicia of mental stability and competence.

- *The witnesses' motives.* There is not one witness among the many listed who could be seen as having an economic motive for subscribing to or supporting a resurrected Christ. In fact, the opposite is true. Christianity was not a supported religion in Jewish Judea. As we saw with Paul, the early believers in a resurrected Jesus faced persecution and death at the hands of Jews. The faithful Jews, including Paul before his conversion, believed that God had sent their forefathers into exile, and had removed the independence of their nation because they tolerated "other gods" besides the God of Moses. The idea of a resurrected Jesus who was ascribed as God and Savior was something that would only bring trouble to Judea from the hand of the true God, or so they reasoned. If the Lord's eleven apostles and other handful of followers (almost all of which abandoned him at the cross) were even remotely serious about their Jewish faith, then they would not sanely abandon it for a renegade idea about a resurrected Jesus, were they not truly convinced. Furthermore, if they were charlatans who trumped up the whole idea of a resurrection, then you would not expect a Peter, who denied the Lord three times in an effort to save his skin, to stick with the idea once it began resulting in imprisonment and death. The stoning of Stephen alone would have likely brought to an end any who were faking the resurrection.

If we consider more closely the motives of Paul, then we see something striking. Paul was a "Who's Who" among the Jews at the time. Having studied under Gamaliel, a teacher of the Jewish law so famous, that we have many of his sayings still extant today, Paul was in a position to be a top leader of the temple Jews. Paul cast his vote to stone Stephen (Acts 26:9-10 - a passage that leads some scholars to believe Paul was an active voting member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin). Paul had lived his life zealously adhering to Jewish laws. For Paul to lose his affluence, position, standards and practices of life, likely his family, and more than lose them, for Paul to deliberately turn his back on them, certainly provides a motive that is consistent with the view that he was convinced of something tremendous.

History records that Paul, Peter, Thomas, and most every other apostle eventually gave their lives and died martyrs' deaths out of their deep conviction that Jesus was resurrected from the grave. This is not a historical situation where some believed and others did not. Nor is this one where some of the people just went back to their normal life. History is clear that every one of the apostles exhibited a 180-degree turn in life and lived the rest of their days teaching and adhering to a faith that held no offer of any blessing in this life. The only motive was a firm belief in the truth of the resurrection.

Does the testimony or lives of the witnesses indicate they believed and bore witness to gain profit or fame? It sure seems hard to believe! There was no profit for Paul, Peter, James, Stephen, or any others associated with this. Nor was their fame (at least not in their lifetime). To the contrary, it made them outcasts and cost them their positions. Paul may have been a member of the Sanhedrin, one of the ruling class of learned rabbis of Jerusalem. He lost all that and lived as a beggar who by his own accord suffered "countless beatings often near death." Five times he received 39 lashes from the Jews. Three times he was beaten with rods. Once he was stoned. Three times shipwrecked. He choose a life "in danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from false brothers, in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure" (2 Cor. 11:23ff). He preached "free of charge" (2 Cor. 11:7) and worked as a tent maker to support himself in ministry. Finally, history records, Paul willingly died a martyr's death at the hands of Nero rather than budge on the truth of the resurrected Jesus.

Stephen martyred around 34AD because he would not deny the truth of the resurrection (Acts 6 and 7). James the brother of John ("James the Great") was martyred around 44AD because he would not deny the truth of the resurrection (Acts 12). A later historical record, written 70 years after James's death by Clement of Alexandria, notes that James's accuser listened to James's confession of faith and was so moved that he became a believer and was also martyred for his faith. James the brother of Jesus (referenced by Josephus earlier) was thrown from the parapet of the temple and clubbed to death because he refused to

#### **Motives and Claims of Others**

While no one in history has the multiple eyewitness accounts to a resurrection that we have with Jesus, there are other eyewitnesses who have claimed a resurrection. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an India-born yogi named Paramahansa Yogananda came to the United States and claimed to his followers that he had seen a resurrection at the hands of his Indian master Sri Yukteswar. While Yogananda made the claim, he was the only witness. He did not suffer any of the fallout incurred consistently by the eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection. In fact, he used his status as a prolific fundraiser, (making \$45,000 in three short months in 1925), he constantly used his position to leverage large sums of money from his followers, he enjoyed great fame, including a White House invitation, and he died with substantial property holdings. Those types of personal profits from a claim that are devoid from the eyewitnesses to a resurrected Jesus are examples of motives that detract from the truth of testimony. For more, see the doctoral dissertation of Polly Trout published as *Eastern Seeds, Western Soils*).

deny the resurrected Jesus (Clement of Alexandria). Hegesippus (writing 170 AD) recorded that James was pushed off the parapet because when called on to deny Jesus, rather than capitulate and save his life, James began testifying openly to Jesus' resurrection and coming return. A number of watching Jews were moved to faith by his testimony. It was to stop him from talking anymore, that the Scribes and Pharisees pushed him off. The apostle Andrew was martyred being hung on a cross for four days before finally dying. Each hour and minute of each day, he chose the misery and impending death rather than deny the truth of the resurrection. The list of martyrs among the eyewitnesses continues beyond those cited here.

Some might suggest that the apostles were willing to risk life and limb for the fame of starting a movement. This motive likewise fails. It is readily apparent from reading the witnesses that they all believed that Jesus was going to return and take them to a post-life glorified state very soon. Believers were selling all their goods and holding things in common to support the common good in light of what they thought was around the corner (Acts 2:44). Paul had to reassure the believers at Thessalonica that they had no need to worry about the return of the resurrected Christ and whether those who died ahead of time might miss out on the glory. Paul explained that just as Christ was resurrected, so would be those who died before his return (1 Thess. 4:13ff).

- *Comparison of different witnesses' accounts.* In a courtroom, the experience of this author is that anytime two stories are identical, there is a strong likelihood of collusion. The truth is, in any matter of history, some will notice one thing while others notice another. One may see two cars racing through an intersection while another person only notices the green one. That does not mean one is right and another wrong. It means that the stories need to be combined to see if they make sense. Much has been made over whether the eyewitness accounts are consistent or inconsistent. What can be easily said, however, is that on core matters, they are one hundred percent consistent. Only on minor matters are there different facts presented, none of which cannot be consistently combined with others to make a coherent narrative. First we note that all of the accounts have the crucifixion of Jesus, his death on the cross, his burial in the tomb of a noteworthy citizen who could certainly be examined for the truth of matters, his resurrection on the third day, attended by witnesses to the empty tomb as well as witnesses who encountered the physically resurrected Jesus.

- *The character of the witnesses.* Honesty is a virtue; it is just not always easy to tell when it exists. We have an expression that people need to “put their money where their mouth is” to prove their conviction of their claims. This is a way to *show* honesty. Each of the eyewitnesses gave all they had for their convictions about the resurrected Jesus. They put more than their money where their mouth was!

Another way to consider the character of the witnesses comes from the circumstantial evidence discussed in the legal section. This is evidence that is not direct, but rather reasonably derived from circumstances. For example, direct evidence of rain would be an eyewitness who says, “It is raining.” Circumstantial evidence is seeing everyone with an umbrella, wet hair, wet clothes, and a shudder when they come inside. In this sense, consider the eyewitnesses. Each of the eyewitnesses lived full and real lives. They had family and friends who knew their penchants for truth or the lack thereof. These are the people who successfully spread a message of Jesus’ resurrection to such a level that within two decades, it had spread throughout the Roman Empire. Considering the crucifixion of Jesus as occurring in the early to mid-30’s AD, we can read from the Roman historian Suetonius (c.69-c.122) about both Christ and Christians and the effects of the faith in Rome in 49AD, less than twenty years after the crucifixion. Suetonius wrote of the emperor Claudius expelling Jews from Rome because of the commotion they were causing over the teachings about Christ. (Luke wrote of the effects of this discussing Aquila and Priscilla’s departure from Rome in Acts 18:2). Is it reasonable to think that a handful of “nobodies” in the Roman Empire conquered it by spreading out from their own people and society?

### ***Witnesses – Hearsay***

We should begin this by noting that the testimony of Matthew, John, Paul, and Peter is not hearsay. They were eyewitnesses to what they recorded and to what they said. Mark and Luke have what a court would consider “hearsay.” They were not eyewitnesses, but recorded the information they received from others. Before a court would allow consideration of this testimony, it would need to meet an exception to the hearsay doctrine. Some of the testimony would come in as that offered in trial or a proceeding. Paul was testifying before King Agrippa when he began,

I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today... (Acts 26:2).

This testimony included his life as a pure Jew, living among the crème of his faith, his role in persecuting the Christians and “doing many things opposing the name of Jesus.” He locked up Christians, cast his vote to put them to death, and even persecuted them beyond the confines of Jerusalem. Yet on the road to Damascus, he encountered Jesus as a bright light and had a direct audible dialogue about the truth of the resurrected Jesus and Paul’s role in proclaiming the truth and implications of that. That testimony of Luke, as a recorded trial, is admissible hearsay!

Of course, all the statements of the non-eyewitnesses would be hearsay as statements against interests. At that point in history, everyone who was proclaiming Jesus as a resurrected Lord was doing so under threat of imprisonment or death. The stoning of Stephen bears that out.

So for hearsay, it is not even an issue for most of the testimony about Jesus’ resurrection, and where it is, it fits into exceptions that push the testimony into a realm of reliability.

### ***Expert Witnesses – Junk Science***

There are no hired experts, or anyone who is testifying to the resurrection for pay. Still this is a very important area to consider, for some will say, “Yes, ordinarily there is more than sufficient evidence to believe in a resurrected Jesus, however, we know that scientifically it is effectively impossible, so there must be another explanation.”

We begin this discussion by readily admitting that absent God intervening in the laws of physics, it is not rational to believe in a resurrection, anymore than we should believe two plus two is ten. The same principle that two plus two is four, however, sets the resurrection onto firm logical ground that does not fly into the face of science at all. Science says no resurrection by the rules of this universe. A resurrection could occur if and only if there is someone or something that can operate outside of the laws of this universe. That is a core essence of God. God is not some molecular entity bound up in the matter of nature. God is not so small! God is beyond the universe, and is able to alter things in the universe. That is the only way science can allow for the resurrection. Science dictates the necessity of God’s involvement, unless all these witnesses were massively deceived and wrong.

### ***Bias, Sympathy, and Prejudice***

Who gets to be a juror on the resurrection? Of course, everyone does. Everyone must confront the issue of whether or not they see the hand of God in the life,



death, and resurrection of Christ. Even though everyone gets to be a juror, we should still address the issue of bias, sympathy or prejudice. Because some might get disqualified from sitting on an actual jury if this were a real case in court!

Consider two different groups that would not likely be allowed on a jury. First, there might be a group that says, “I believe! I don’t care what the evidence it!!! I have a prejudice and bias that Jesus was resurrected! I was born into it; it is genetic! It must be the truth and I could never even examine it genuinely!” This person has a bias that would preclude their jury service! That is not to say that the person is wrong. Many a person can be right in their opinions, but not allowed to sit on a jury!

The second group is that which says, “I cannot set aside my prejudice about the laws of nature! A resurrection is a functional impossibility and it doesn’t matter if 50,000 people saw it, those 50,000 must be deceived!” This person has no open mind, even to the idea that God can do what is impossible for man and molecules. These people still have to make a decision, but they are fooling themselves if they think they are making a rational one based on the evidence. They are making it

#### The Adversary System

Fundamental to American Courts is the adversary system. All sides in a dispute are entitled to present their evidence through a lawyer – jurors hear both sides of the coin. Here, we have presented the evidence through the perspective of only one lawyer. Opponents of faith certainly raise concerns that must be addressed. Many are dealt with in this chapter, but others are worthy of more attention. For example, many scholars will not agree with the early church opinion that Matthew was written by Matthew. These arguments are readily responded to. Continuing to use Matthew as an example, who actually recorded the words, and precisely when the words were recorded might be disputed, but we are still left with the words of Matthew, even if recorded by an anonymous scribe later. Those who wish to disprove the centuries of history supporting the words of the witnesses should have a monumental “burden of proof” to do so.

based on their bias and prejudice. The evidence becomes irrelevant and not worth listening to or examining.

#### ***Burden of Proof***

We end with this, the burden of proof. As noted in the legal section, no one can be 100 percent convinced in this life about any finding of fact in history, especially so far back in time. The question then becomes what standard of proof would one need before trusting in a conclusion that Jesus indeed suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, was buried, descended to the dead and on the third day rose again? Is it what is more likely than not like a

civil case? Is it beyond a reasonable doubt like a death penalty case?

Under either burden, the evidence for a resurrected Jesus is immensely compelling. We have looked at that evidence from eyewitnesses and secondary witnesses, but we have left out some of the greatest arguments. The death and resurrection of Jesus are the missing piece of the puzzle in this book. We have taken time to consider the breath and majesty of God, we have focused on God's concern of things much smaller than humans, and his particular interest in humanity. We have considered man as the image bearer of God, as beings that God has chosen to love and relate to. God has reached out in language, the way that humans speak. God has shown his character in both revelation of words and revelation from the world. In the midst of this, we see God as a moral, unchanging God of purity. God is also a cause-and-effect God. As a morally pure God who is consistent in his cause and effect, impurity sets one outside of God and his fellowship. In Biblical terms, we say there is a "law of sin and death." It is the death of Christ that allows a just God to set aside the immorality and impurity of humanity and accord humanity a resurrection into perfection, just as Christ was resurrected.

This is the beauty of the finished work of Christ. His last words, "It is finished," reflect the atoning work that the laws of God require. It is in this that we see, not only the records and testimony of the witnesses to the resurrected Christ, but we see the logic and meaning behind it. It was not some hair brain idea concocted by a few fishermen, a tax collector, and budding rabbi, that somehow caught fire amidst the most dreadful and documented persecution, finally arriving 300 years later as a legal religion. It was the facts – no more and no less. It was prophesied for centuries in Scripture, and it was fulfilled in history.

**Was the missing body of Jesus and the following testimony one big conspiracy?**

Charles Colson, convicted in the Watergate scandal assistant to President Richard Nixon, writes:

Watergate involved a conspiracy perpetuated by the closest aides to the president of the United States—the most powerful men in America, who were intensely loyal to their president. But one of them, John Dean, turned state's evidence, that is, testified against Nixon, as he put it, "to save his own skin"—and he did so only two weeks after informing the president about what was really going on—two weeks! The cover-up, the lie, could only be held together for two weeks, and then everybody else jumped ship in order to save themselves. Now, the fact is that all those around the president were facing was embarrassment, maybe prison. Nobody's life was at stake.

But what about the disciples? Twelve powerless men, peasants really, were facing not just embarrassment or political disgrace, but beatings, stonings, execution. Every single one of the disciples insisted, to their dying breaths, that they had physically seen Jesus bodily raised from the dead. Don't you think that one of those apostles would have cracked before being beheaded or stoned? That one of them would have made a deal with the authorities? None did. Men will give their lives for something they believe to be true; they will never give their lives for something they know to be false.

The Watergate cover-up reveals the true nature of humanity. Even political zealots at the pinnacle of power will, in the crunch, save their own necks, even at the expense of the ones they profess to serve so loyally. But the apostles could not deny Jesus, because they had seen him face to face, and they knew he had risen from the dead.

Charles Colson, *BreakPoint Online Commentaries* (4-29-02)

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Chesterton, Gilbert Keith, *Tremendous Trifles*, (Dufour 1968), at 55.

<sup>2</sup> These observations of jury behavior come from both the rules and laws that govern jury trials as well as from the experience and practice of the author, a well-experienced trial lawyer.

<sup>3</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 18, Chapter 3, verse 3.

<sup>4</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, book 15, Ch. 44.

<sup>5</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Epistles*, X.96.

## POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. 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. 15:14-19).

Do not skim over Paul’s words set out above. Read each one. Think about them. Paul was not a delusional nut case. Paul knew what he believed; he knew why he believed it. He was rightly one of history’s most influential people. If Jesus is not resurrected, ***we are of all people most to be pitied!*** But if he was, then what a pity for the many who refuse to accept it! The very direct question that all must then address is, “What difference will this make in my life?”

2. *“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself”* (Jn 14:3).

As Jesus spoke of going to prepare a place for us, he was not referencing celestial carpentry! He was speaking of Calvary. It was on the cross that he prepared a place for us. He secured eternity for otherwise impure people destined for death. Of course, he would come again. In resurrection on this earth he came, and in promise of a second coming at the end of days. Amen!

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3. “...in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15).

Eyewitness Peter urged those he taught to be prepared to “make a defense” for what we believe. Let us spend time doing so; it is not only good for others, but it is good for us!