

Are the Resurrection Accounts Historically Reliable?

**Craig A. Evan vs. Bart D. Ehrman
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Left to Right: Prof. Bart D. Ehrman, MBTS Pres. R. Phil Roberts, Prof. Craig A. Evans¹

INTRODUCTION

On April 1, 2010, the second annual Hastings Institute of the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Early Christianity Conference at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary commenced with a debate between two well known New Testament scholars: Bart D. Ehrman (James A. Gray Distinguished Professor at the University of North Carolina) and Craig A. Evans (Payzant Distinguished Professor of New Testament at Acadia Divinity College in Nova Scotia, Canada).

¹ Unless otherwise noted, photos in this article by R. Huggins.

OPENING STATEMENTS

Prof. Ehrman:

I would like to thank Dr. Roberts and the organizers of this debate for inviting me. I would like to thank all of you for coming. How many of you were there last night at First Family Church? Good, I can repeat my jokes. How many of you here consider the Gospel accounts of the resurrection to be reliable? Right. How many of you are here to see me get creamed? Right.

Are the biblical accounts of the resurrection reliable? When I was an evangelical Bible-believing Christian, I saw this as one of the most important questions that humans can deal with. Can we trust the New Testament accounts of Jesus' resurrection? Are they historically reliable or are they filled with legendary details and stories that did not actually happen? I've changed my mind on this question over the years, but I want you to know at the outset that I did not change my mind quickly or



Bart D. Ehrman

thoughtlessly. I've put a lot of thought into it, and research and prayer and soul searching. My one goal in this entire process was to seek out the truth and to go wherever the truth led me. I hope you, too, have a commitment to the truth and are not afraid to accept the truth even if it is not what you start out thinking it will be.

I need to begin by putting the question in a broader context. Are the Gospels generally reliable when they describe the death and resurrection of Jesus? To put this into a broader context, I want to consider for a moment what it is historians look for in historical accounts when they are reconstructing the past. What would be a historian's wish list of documents in trying to know what happened? Well, historians would look for several accounts of a past event, several accounts from eyewitnesses. Historians love to have eyewitness accounts that are witnessed near the time of the events themselves, accounts that are not biased in any way. They would like these several accounts by eyewitnesses that are not biased to corroborate one another. In other words, they basically agree in what they have to say yet without

collaboration, so that one author did not get his ideas from another author, but independently they come to basically the same account. Historians prefer corroboration without collaboration. What is it that we have with the gospels? With the gospels we have none of the above. None of the gospels are eyewitness accounts. All of the gospels are written 30-60 years later by people who were not there to see these things happen. They were written to convince readers of the truth of the account. They were not written by impartial observers. Matthew and Luke certainly use Mark's account, so there was collaboration. These accounts have numerous contradictions between themselves, and they are not corroborated by outside sources.

In order to see the discrepancies among the gospels it is important to read the gospels in what I call a *horizontal* way. The way one normally reads the gospels, of course, is to read through Matthew. It is about the life, death, resurrection of Jesus. Then you read Mark; it is about the life, death, resurrection of Jesus, and it sounds a lot like Matthew. Then you read Luke from the very beginning: life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It sounds a lot like Matthew and Mark. Read John and it is a little bit different, but it is basically the same: life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That is what I call a *vertical* reading of a gospel—when you start at the beginning and you read until the end. Then you start with the next one and you read to the end *vertically*.

In order to see discrepancies among the gospels, you should not read them *vertically*; you should read them *horizontally*. That is to say, you read one story in one gospel, then read the same story in another gospel, and compare the two stories. So you are reading them *horizontally*. When you do that, you will find numerous discrepancies throughout the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, his death, and the events leading up to and including his resurrection. Many of these discrepancies may seem minor. Some of them are major. Did Jesus and his disciples, before his death, eat a Passover meal or not? Mark says yes, John says no. Was the trial of Jesus conducted in front of the Jewish authorities or not? Mark says yes, John says no. Did Jesus give extensive speeches to Pilate during his trial or not? Mark says no, John says yes. Was Jesus crucified on the afternoon before the Passover meal was eaten or in the morning after it was eaten? John says it was before, Mark says it was after, and they are both explicit. These discrepancies continue into the resurrection narratives. Who went to the tomb on the third day? Was it Mary Magdalene and another Mary? Was it the two Marys and Salome? Was it Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and another Mary? Was it Mary Magdalene by herself? It depends which Gospel you read. Was the stone already rolled away by the time they got there or did it roll away when they arrived? It depends which Gospel you read. Whom did they meet there to tell them

that Jesus was raised? Did they meet an angel? Did they meet two men? Did they meet one man? Or did they meet Jesus himself? It depends which Gospel you read. Do the women assume that Jesus has been raised, as in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, because that is what they are told? Or do they assume he has been buried in some other place (i.e., the Gospel of John, since his body is not in the tomb). Who first comes to realize that Jesus has been raised? Is it the women as in Matthew, Mark, and Luke? Or is it Simon Peter and the beloved disciple as in John? Are the women told anything upon first finding the tomb empty? It depends which Gospel you read. What are they told? Are they told to tell the disciples to go to Galilee to meet Jesus there or are they told that Jesus told them while he was still in Galilee that he would rise? It depends which Gospel you read. Did the women tell the disciples? Mark explicitly says no. Matthew and Luke explicitly say yes.



You will find dozens of discrepancies in the details about Jesus' resurrection in the gospels. Let me stress, it is not good enough to say that these are all simply minor details, that they all basically have the same big picture. The big picture is made up of lots and lots of details. If you change all of the details, you change the big picture. If you want to say that the gospel accounts are reliable, which one? They all differ from one another. One typical response to this is that each gospel maybe gives a partial view

and you need to combine the four to get the complete view. There are two problems with that perspective. First, these gospels do not give partial views, they give different views. And the differences are not merely differences, they are discrepancies. Secondly, when you take all four Gospels and combine them into one big mega-account, you have written your own account instead of paying attention to each author's account. You have written your own gospel.

The second typical response to the discrepancies in the gospels is to try and take comfort in the fact that eyewitness reports are often at odds with one another, so that we shouldn't be put off by the fact that the Gospels are at odds with one another because eyewitnesses often have discrepancies in their reports. But this response is precisely the problem.

In any case in a court of law, attorneys will call as many eyewitnesses as they can find. They have to call numerous eyewitnesses because they cannot trust one eyewitness. If you could trust any eyewitness, you wouldn't need trials. You could just ask somebody what happened. If three people see a car accident and see it differently, you have to find out what happened. This is a very common occurrence in our experience. But if the eyewitnesses disagree with one another, it means that no one of them is accurate; so too with the gospels. No one of them can be accurate.

You may be tempted to say, "Well, yes, they disagree with the details, but all the eyewitnesses agree: there *was* a car accident." Two comments about that: First, if that is what you want to say, that the details may be at odds, but the big picture is what matters (not the details) then in effect, you need to admit that what you are saying is that the Bible has discrepancies, contradictions, and errors in one book or in another or in all of the books. So what now is your view of Scripture? A book filled with errors? If it has some errors, how do you know that it does not have a lot of errors, and if the details are in error, why not the big picture? The second comment I have is that eyewitnesses may all agree that there was a car accident but with the gospels, as I repeat, we are not dealing with eyewitnesses. We are dealing with stories that were written decades later by people who were not eyewitnesses. Jesus probably died sometime around 30 AD. Our first account of Jesus' death and resurrection is the gospel of Mark, written around the year 65 or 70 AD, 35 to 40 years later by somebody who was not from Israel the way Jesus was, who spoke a different language from Jesus (he spoke Greek rather than Aramaic), who does not claim to be an eyewitness and in fact was not an eyewitness. Matthew and Luke were written 10 or 15 years later. John was written about 10 years later than that. These are accounts written somewhere between 40 and 60 or 70 years after the events they narrated. Well, how did the gospel writers get their accounts then, if they were not eyewitnesses? Scholars are agreed on this, that Jesus lived and died and his followers who believed in him started telling stories about him. And they started converting people to believe in him. The movement started out in Jerusalem with a small group of Jesus' followers who became convinced that he was raised from the dead and then convinced other people who convinced other people who convinced other people. The movement spread from Jerusalem into the rest of Judea up into Galilee, into Syria, into Asia Minor (what we think of today as Turkey), into Greece, over to Rome, possibly as far as Spain, probably in North Africa, almost certainly in Alexandria. By the time the gospel writers are writing (40, 50, 60 years later), Christianity has spread throughout the Roman Empire to the major urban areas. And who is

telling the stories about Jesus as they are circulating? It is people who were not there to see these things happen. These stories are converting people, hundreds of people, maybe thousands of people. But the people telling the stories are not the people back in Jerusalem. It is people in Ephesus who heard the story from their wife, who heard it from their next door neighbor, who heard it from their husband, who heard it from a visitor in town, who heard it from a business associate in another town, who heard it from another person, and you don't get back to an eyewitness until you are about the twelfth or fourteenth removed from eyewitnesses. The people who are telling the stories are not the people who witnessed them, and when they write them down in the gospels they do not do it until 40, 50, 60 years later.

What happens to stories when they are told and retold? The stories change. The gospel writers have heard different stories and have written down the accounts leading to discrepancies. That is why there are these discrepancies in these accounts. Some of them are in minor details and some in major issues.

Let me give you one big issue to show you how it works. The question I'll deal with is: *What is it that the women tell the disciples, and where do the disciples go to see Jesus after the resurrection?* As I pointed out, in Mark's Gospel, we are told explicitly that the women did not tell anyone anything because they were afraid (Mark 16:8), period, end of gospel. They didn't tell anyone. In Matthew, the women do tell the disciples. They tell them that they are to go to Galilee, and the disciples go to Galilee. In Luke, we have a different story. The disciples do not go to Galilee. Explicitly, they go to Jerusalem. This is how it works in Luke's Gospel: three women go to the tomb on Sunday morning according to Luke. The women see two men there—in Luke not in the other two gospels—who tell them not to go to Galilee but that Jesus told them that he would be raised when he himself was in Galilee. That is when he told them this. The women then go tell the eleven disciples (which, again, is not what happens in Mark, they do not tell anyone in Mark). That day, according to Luke, two followers of Jesus see Jesus on the road to Emmaus. They see Jesus on the road to Emmaus the same day the women see the empty tomb. The two men who talked to Jesus on the road to Emmaus go back to Jerusalem that hour and tell the eleven. As they are telling the eleven this, Jesus appears to them. So, this is all on the day that the women saw the empty tomb. Jesus appears to them and tells them not to leave Jerusalem. In Matthew, they leave Jerusalem and see Jesus in Galilee. In Luke they do not leave Jerusalem, ever. According to Acts 1, they stay in Jerusalem for 40 and that is where they see Jesus. They never do go to Galilee. That contradicts Matthew. Well, why does it matter where they went? It matters because each

Gospel is trying to say something very specific about what it believes is significant of the resurrection. For Luke, the whole point is that salvation comes to the holy city Jerusalem but it is rejected by the Jews who lived there. Salvation then goes out from the city of Jerusalem eventually to the non-Jews. Geography is important theologically to Luke. Salvation comes to the Jews and then proceeds from the Jews to the Gentiles. You miss that point if you pretend that Matthew and Luke are saying the same thing. They are not saying the same thing. They have different stories that have contradictions between them because they are each trying to emphasize something different.

My conclusion: many agnostics would argue that the Gospel accounts are not reliable because the resurrection never happened. And if it never happened, then the reports that it did happen cannot be reliable. That is not my argument here. I want to be crystal clear what I am arguing. I, as a historian, am interested in the credibility of our surviving historical sources. In the New Testament we have four accounts of Jesus' resurrection, not counting the apostle Paul who contradicts all four on several key points. My question is, are these four sources the kind of sources that historians would normally trust when describing historical events? Are they independent accounts? No. Two of them, possibly three, use another. They are dependant accounts. Are they by eyewitnesses? No. They are by later authors who have heard stories that are in circulation year and year after year, decade after decade, that were changed in the process of retelling. Were these stories written in the process of the events that they describe happening? No. They were written 40, 50, 60 years later by people who were not there to see these things happen, living in a different country, speaking a different language than Jesus himself. Are they unbiased, objective accounts? No. They are written by Christian believers who want to convince others of the truth of the Christian belief. Are they consistent with one another? No. They contradict one another all over the map in both small details and major points. The conclusion, I think, is inevitable. The gospel reports of the resurrection of Jesus simply cannot be taken as historically accurate. Does that mean that Jesus was not raised from the dead? No. It means that if you think he was, you should think so not on the basis of some kind of infallible revelation from God in the Bible, because the Bible does not contain an infallible revelation. It contains very human reports that have been altered, changed, modified and even made up by the Christian authors who narrate them, and even more by the Christian story-tellers who passed along these accounts in the years and decades before the gospel writers heard them. In short, the question of Jesus' resurrection is the single biggest question that Christians have to ask, but they should not answer it on the basis of the reliable accounts found in

the Gospels because these accounts are not reliable. Thank you very much.

Prof. Evans:

Thank you very much. Was Jesus of Nazareth raised from the dead? The central tenet of Christianity is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. However this central tenet has been denied from time to time in one way or another, even by various Christians. Of course, non-Christians usually deny it, too. Almost always, rejection or radical reinterpretation of the resurrection is prompted by skepticism, sometimes supported by evidence, but sometimes not supported even by counter-evidence.



Craig A. Evans

Let me begin with the testimony of Paul the convert. Historic, biblical, Christian faith has always affirmed the resurrection. No one affirmed it more vigorously than the apostle Paul as an eyewitness. He sums up the essence of the good news in these familiar words found in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: 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 Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

These words are important because they were written by an eyewitness. This is not a second hand account written by someone who heard Paul or heard someone else who had heard Paul. This is the objection that can be raised against apostolic testimony we find in the book of Acts. There, Peter and other followers of Jesus boldly proclaim the resurrection, but Peter did not write the book of Acts. We think Luke the physician did, but we do not know a great deal about him, and we do not know much about his sources—whether written, oral, or first hand.

So are Peter's words, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses" (Acts 2:32), really Peter's words or are they the words of someone else? In my view these words do fairly sum up the preaching of Peter. However, the skeptic may insist on first hand testimony, not hearsay. So I return to Paul. This uncertainty does not apply to the letter we call First Corinthians. Almost no qualified scholar disputes its authorship. Paul wrote it. Moreover, no qualified textual critic doubts that what we read in chapter 15 represents what Paul actually wrote. We may dispute a word or two here or there, but there is no justification for wondering if the passage has been changed to say something that Paul did not say. And finally, no serious and fair-minded critic doubts that Paul is telling the truth (at least as he understands it). In short, Paul believes that God raised Jesus from the dead and that this amazing event provided hope for all of humanity.

Is it really necessary to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead? Cannot one be a Christian perhaps in the sense of admiring Jesus and following his teaching but not in terms of holding to the resurrection? Instead of Christian faith, why not Christian philosophy, ethics, and/or lifestyle? Many moderns think so, as evidently some among the Christians at Corinth also thought so as well. But for Paul, the eyewitness of the resurrection, this is not an option. Without the resurrection of Jesus there is not Christianity, no hope, and simply no point. Let us consider some of his comments and assertions. He says in verses 1 and 2:

Now I would remind you, brothers, in what terms I have preached to you the gospel, which you have received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold fast, unless you believed in vain.

Or he says in verses 12, 13, and 14 and 15:

Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection from the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then 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 of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised.

The opening verse, with its references to gospel and being saved makes clear in what follows that at the heart of the gospel, or the "good news," is the resurrection, and that receiving and believing this gospel results in salvation. If however, the central datum of the gospel, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is false, then one's faith is indeed in vain. What is hinted at in verse 1 is spelled out emphatically later in the chapter as seen

especially in verse 14: “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.” Paul has more to say in verses 16 through 19: “For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep [i.e., died] in Christ”—well they—“have perished.” For “If in this life only we have hoped in Christ we are of all men most to be pitied.”

The problem of the Corinthians has to do with the hope of the resurrection of believers, and herein lies the skepticism which is not hard to understand. Apart from Pharisees, there were not too many in the world of late Antiquity who believed the dead would ever be raised up. If there were any sort of life beyond our physical lives, it would be spiritual or ethereal, not corporeal. In any case, Paul argued that rejection of the resurrection of believers also meant rejection of the resurrection of Jesus himself, and that if Jesus has not been raised then the faith of all believers, not just those who live in Corinth, is futile. All who have died in Christ have perished. “But in fact,” Paul declares in verse 20, “Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep [i.e., died].” From these categorical statements in 1 Corinthians 15, it is clear that Paul not only believed in the resurrection of Jesus, something he had experienced firsthand, he believed that the resurrection of Jesus was essential for faith and salvation: no resurrection, no hope. But exactly how did Paul understand the resurrection of Jesus? Why did Jesus’ followers speak of resurrection at all?



So now I will speak to the resurrection of Jesus and its early interpretation. There are aspects of the resurrection of Jesus that place it in a category of its own. Although in some ways it is coherent with several texts from the intertestamental period (i.e., the period between the Old and New Testaments), such as the expression of faith in the resurrection uttered by the seven martyred brothers in 2 Maccabees 7,² there are features of the resurrection of Jesus that are distinctive and quite unexpected in light of Jewish beliefs expressed in late Antiquity.

² [An apocryphal book written during the intertestamental period that can be readily consulted in Roman Catholic Bibles. ED.]

First, those who held to bodily resurrection thought of it in terms of a general resurrection. All of the Jewish texts that speak of resurrection envision the judgment of humankind as a whole, with rewards for the righteous and punishment for the wicked. This is why Paul speaks of Jesus' resurrection as the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep and the Matthean evangelist or scribe feels compelled to narrate the strange story of the saints who exited their tombs the first Easter (Matthew 27).

Second, in all of the texts that speak of resurrection and vision, it is an eschatological event. Resurrection was understood to take place at the end of normal human history, not at some midpoint. This likely explains why many early Christians believed that the end times were at hand as you see hinted at in 2 Thessalonians 2 and Philippians 4.

Third, although there were some traditions, notably Isaiah 53, that may have been understood as hinting at messianic suffering, there is no text or tradition known to us that envisioned the crucifixion of the Messiah whether subsequently resurrected or not. This is precisely why Trypho, the Jew of the second century, could not be persuaded that Jesus was the Messiah. And you can see it in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* 89 and 90.³ Therefore, since although it is not wrong to see lines of continuity between the resurrection of Jesus and some antecedent eschatological texts and speculations, the actual event of Easter itself can hardly be explained as fulfillment of these texts and speculations.

The resurrection of Jesus was both unexpected and difficult to explain. In view of these issues why did Jesus' followers interpret his appearances in terms of bodily resurrection? Appearances of Jesus would not in themselves necessarily lead to conclusions that a resurrection had taken place. After all, Jewish speculation also entertained the possibility of post-mortem survival of the soul or spirit, quite apart from the question of bodily resurrection. Moreover, Jewish tradition also included belief in ghostly apparitions. Even the disciples on one occasion thought they had seen a spirit or ghost (Mark 6:49). Others later imagined that Peter, thought to be in prison or perhaps dead, but now found standing at the door, was actually Peter's angel (Acts 12).

So why did Jesus' followers feel they needed to speak of the resurrection of Jesus, instead of simply, say, a vision of Jesus, or Jesus' angel, or Jesus' spirit? The conclusion Jesus was resurrected assumed a heavy burden of proof. Jewish beliefs about resurrection envisioned a "standing up," which is the meaning of both the Hebrew and Greek words that are usually translated "resurrection." Resurrection was thought to be corporal; therefore passages sometimes refer to the

³ [Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* presents itself as a dialogue that takes place in the 130s AD in Ephesus between its author, Justin, and a young Jewish student of Greek philosophy named Trypho. ED]

“resurrection of the flesh.” Resurrection also implied exiting the tomb or place of burial. Resurrection was in effect the reversal of burial. Unless these things could be said of Jesus, his post-mortem appearance would have been more naturally explained in terms other than resurrection. What persuaded Jesus’ followers to speak of resurrection was their knowledge that Jesus had died, had been buried in a known place, and had exited that place. These facts, which were open to verification, in combination with the appearances, convinced his followers that Jesus was indeed resurrected. It is therefore essential to understand the circumstances of Jesus’ death and burial if the resurrection claims of his followers are to be properly assessed.

Much of the critical discussion of the gospel resurrection narratives suffer from a lack of adequate acquaintance with Jewish traditions of death and burial, especially with respect to the burial of executed persons or persons who in some way died dishonorable deaths. It sometimes suffers, too, from wrong inferences from archeological evidence and historical records. In a controversial book published fifteen years ago, a scholar suggested that Jesus’ body (in keeping with general Roman practice) probably was not taken down from the cross and given customary Jewish burial. It was further suggested that Jesus’ corpse was left hanging on the cross or, at best, was cast into a ditch and covered with lime—in either case, that his body was left exposed to birds and animals; Jesus was not properly buried. Therefore, this scholar argued, the story of the empty tomb was no more than theology and apologetic legend.

In contradiction of such a theory, it needs to be emphasized that in the Jewish world, burial was absolutely necessary. Burial of all persons, including executed criminals, was to take place on the day of death. No corpse was to be left unburied overnight. This was in part due to compassion, but it was primarily due to the wish to avoid defilement on the land as is expressly commanded in Scripture in Deuteronomy 21. This understanding of Scripture was still current in the time of Jesus as we see in an interesting expansion of it in a Qumran Scroll:

If a man is a traitor against his people and gives them up to a foreign nation, so doing evil to his people, *you are to hang him on a tree until dead*. On the testimony of two or three witnesses he will be put to death, and they themselves shall hang him on the tree. If a man is convicted of a capital crime and flees to the nations, cursing his people and the children of Israel, *you are to hang him, also, upon a tree until dead*. But you must not let their bodies remain on the tree overnight; you shall most certainly bury them that very day. Indeed, anyone hung on a tree is

accursed of God and men, but you are not to defile the land that I am about to give you as an inheritance [Deut 21:22–23]” (11QT 64:7–13a = 4Q524 frag. 14, lines 2–4; with emphasis added).

Whereas Deuteronomy 21:22–23 speaks of one put to death and then hanged, 11QTemple speaks of one hanged “until dead.” Most think crucifixion is in view in this latter instance (as also in 4QpNah frags. 3–4, col. i, lines 6–8, and perhaps also in 4Q282i, which refers to the hanging up [probably crucifixion] of those who lead the people astray).

The tradition is attested also in the Mishnah, a collection of older Jewish oral tradition written down at the beginning of the third century. In the section of the Mishnah where rules pertaining to execution are discussed, the sages stress that one hanged must not be left overnight lest the command of Deuteronomy be violated. The discussion continues by noting that the executed person was not to be buried in the burying place of his fathers, but in one of the places reserved for the burial of criminals (*m. Sanhedrin* 6:5; minor tractate *Semahot* 13.7). Finally, the discussion concludes by recalling that after the flesh of the executed criminal had decomposed, his bones could then be gathered and taken to the family burial place, but that no public lamentation was permitted (*m. Sanhedrin* 6:6).

Josephus, the first century Jewish apologist and historian, remarks: “Jews are so careful about funeral rights that even malefactors who have been sentenced to crucifixion are taken down and buried before sunset” (Jewish War 4.3.17). Roman authorities were expected to comply with Jewish customs (sometimes outside of the land of Israel), as, for example, the first century Jewish writer Philo, who lived in Egypt, attests. Philo gives very eloquent expression to Jewish sensitivities on this question in his imaginative recounting of Jacob’s grief over the report that his son Joseph had been killed and devoured by wild animals. The patriarch laments:

Child, it is not your death that grieves me, but the manner of it. If you had been buried [*etaphes*] in your own land, I should have been comforted and watched and nursed your sick-bed, exchanged the last farewells as you died, closed your eyes, wept over your body as it lay there, given it a costly funeral and left none of the customary rites undone” (*De Iosepho* 22–23).

The imaginative dirge goes on to speak of the importance of proper burial:

And, indeed, if you had to die by violence or through premeditation, it would have been a lighter ill to me, slain as you would have been by human beings, who would have pitied their dead victim, gathered some dust and covered the corpse. And then if they had been the cruelest of men, what more could they have done but cast it out unburied and go their way, and then perhaps some passer-by would have stayed his steps, and, as he looked, felt pity for our common nature and deemed the custom of burial to be its due (*De Iosepho* 25).

This was the practice during the time of Jesus in Palestine as well, as the skeletal remains of some fellow named Yehohanan attests. This man was crucified in the late twenties during the administration of Pontius Pilate and was buried according to Jewish customs. One year after death his bones were gathered and placed in an ossuary or bone box. We know that Yehohanan was crucified because his right heel bone was still transfixated by an iron spike that the executioners evidently had been unable to extract. The properly buried remains of one or two other persons who probably had been executed have also been discovered in Jerusalem. Only during the time of insurrection and war were Jewish burial practices and sensitivities not respected by the Roman authorities. For example, during the siege of Jerusalem in 69 and 70, the Roman General Titus crucified Jewish captives and fugitives opposite the walls of the city and left their bodies to rot in the sun to demoralize the rebels still within the city. Titus did not permit burial because he knew how important it was to the Jewish people.

In view of the evidence presented, it is virtually a certainty that arrangements would have been made to bury Jesus and the other men crucified with him. Joseph of Arimathea either volunteered or was assigned the task of seeing to the prompt and unceremonious burial of Jesus and probably the other two men as well. Jesus was not buried honorably. No executed criminal was. But he was buried properly. Jewish law required it, and in peacetime Roman authorities permitted it.

It is also highly probable that the story of the empty tomb is historical. This is so because the gospels tell us that it is the women who make the discovery. Surely a fictional account would have Peter and other disciples discover the empty tomb, not relatively unknown women. Indeed the apocryphal Gospel of Peter glosses the apologetic to the point where it is hostile witnesses who see the resurrection itself, but not so the New Testament Gospels. The women went to the tomb to mourn privately as Jewish law and custom allowed, and even more importantly to note the precise location of Jesus' tomb, so that the later gathering of his remains for reburial in his family tomb would be possible. Although

the details in the gospel accounts—the burial of Jesus and the subsequent discovery of the empty tomb—are in keeping with Jewish burial customs, the unexpected discovery of the empty tomb proved to be a major factor in the interpretation of the appearances of Jesus in terms of resurrection, even though it was not in step with current ideas.

To conclude I return to Paul. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the testimony of Paul. Not only is his testimony first hand—that is, he wrote the letter himself and several letters in which he testifies to his experience of the resurrection—it is a testimony of a man who had opposed the Christian faith. Paul was zealous for the Jewish Law. He viewed the Christian movement as a lawbreaking heresy that had to be opposed, even violently. He did not believe that Jesus was Israel's Messiah, and he certainly did not believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Paul was committed to crushing the new movement for the sake of Israel. Paul traveled to Damascus with every intention of destroying the Way, as it was called in those early days. His encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus changed everything. Paul tells us he saw and heard the risen Jesus. The persecutor of the Church was now proclaiming the faith of the Church. How do we explain Paul's experience? The testimony of Paul is important and it is convincing. He opposed the Christian movement. He did not believe Jesus was resurrected and certainly did not expect to meet him on the Damascus road or anywhere else. After encountering Jesus and joining the movement he once violently opposed, Paul eventually met Peter and John, originally disciples of Jesus, as well as James, the brother of Jesus. He shared with them his understanding of the gospel which surely was centered on the resurrection, and the pillars of the church extended to Paul the right hand of fellowship, the common experience of these men, whose attitudes toward Jesus before Easter Sunday were quite diverse, supporting him, indifferent to him, or opposed to him. This diversity of testimony is important in support of the resurrection. In Peter and John we have two men who believed in Jesus before his death and resurrection. In James his brother we have indifference before the resurrection. And in Paul we have unbelief and opposition. But after Easter, these men saw the risen Jesus and came together in common faith and mission. Evidence for the truth of the resurrection is seen in the ongoing transformative power of the gospel and the lives that have been dramatically changed for the better and in the altruistic impulse to pursue righteousness and to serve humankind. Thank you.

FIRST RESPONSES**Prof. Ehrman:**

Well thank you Craig for the very interesting talk. I'm not sure I'm going to need ten minutes. The question that we are dealing with is: "Are the biblical accounts of the resurrection reliable?" And I tried to address that in my talk by talking about how in fact there are major discrepancies among the accounts. Craig has not yet dealt with these discrepancies, so it is a little bit hard for me to respond. Let me talk about a couple of things that he did talk about and sketch out a different point of view. I will focus on Paul as a potential eyewitness, but I think I will deal with that second rather than first.

The first thing I want to deal with is the question about whether there are details of the accounts of Jesus' burial and resurrection that are open to verification. You will recall that Craig made a big deal of this in the final third of his speech, that there are details that are open to verification. What exactly is open to verification of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection? We have no other accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection outside of Christian sources. We have no verification from any Jewish source other than a Jewish historian, Josephus, writing 63 years later who has apparently heard the account from Christians. We have no verification from Roman sources of any kind from the first century. Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection is not mentioned in any Roman account of any kind from the first century. Jesus name itself is not mentioned at all by any Roman source, so there is no verification there. Do we have verification that Jesus was taken off the cross and buried? Our only verification comes from the Gospels themselves. These accounts have discrepancies between them. Can we trust this kind of evidence? The idea that Jesus was buried, is that in theory something that can be verified? Craig says that the answer is yes because Jews always took their crucified people off the cross and gave them a decent burial. His evidence for that are two writings by Josephus and Philo from the first century. I would like to know the material evidence for that. Here is the reality that we are facing: there were thousands of people crucified in the first century. When Titus overthrew



the city of Jerusalem in the year 70, he crucified so many of the opposition that he ran out of lumber. If we have thousands and thousands of people who were crucified in the first century and they were all given decent burial, why is it that among all of the burial remains that we have today there is one person buried who is crucified? Out of the thousands? If they were all given decent burials why haven't we found them? Where is the evidence? This is what I would like to know about verification of being taken off the cross and being buried.

Can we verify that there was an empty tomb? Well, there is no other source that mentions it except for the Gospels themselves. You will notice that the apostle Paul does not mention an empty tomb, that the women went to the tomb, that they found it empty, that they talked to somebody there, either a man or two men or two angels depending which account you read. Paul does not say any such thing. Where is the verification that there is an empty tomb? Well everybody knows that the women went to the tomb on the third day and that they found it empty. Yeah, that is according to the Gospels, but what verification is there? Well they could have gone to the tomb to check for themselves. Who could have gone to the tomb? When did this account of the empty tomb originate? "Well," you might say, "it originated the third day." How do you now that? The first record of this was written 30 years later, 40 years later, 50 years later. How do you know that 3 days later this story started? What verification do you have for there being an empty tomb?

I want to talk about Paul as an eyewitness. Craig bases a good deal of his case on Paul being an eyewitness to the resurrection. But to what exactly is Paul an eyewitness? Is He an eyewitness to the trial of Jesus before Pontus Pilate? No. He does not talk about it and he certainly was not there. Is he an eyewitness to the crucifixion of Jesus? No. He was not there. Is he an eyewitness to the burial of Jesus? No. He was not there. Is he an eyewitness to the empty tomb? No. He does not mention it. Is he an eyewitness to the appearances of Jesus to the women? No. He does not mention it. To what is Paul an eyewitness? He is an eyewitness to a vision that he had. It was a vision that he had. When did he have that vision? Was it on the third day? No. The fourth day? No. Fifth day? Was it the next week? No. The next month? No. When did Paul have this vision? Well, it is very difficult to establish Pauline chronology, but usually people think Paul converted maybe a couple of years after the death of Jesus. Paul had a vision two years later. To what is he an eyewitness? He is an eyewitness to a vision that he had. Do we have any eyewitness accounts of Jesus coming out of the tomb? Do we have any eyewitness accounts of the resurrection narrative as found in the Gospels? No.

It is also worth noting that Paul, when he describes the witnesses to the resurrection, is at odds with what the Gospels themselves say. Paul says that the first person to whom Jesus appears is Cephas, as Craig pointed out. What do the Gospels say? Not Cephas. The women. Paul also indicated that Jesus appeared to people that are not mentioned in the Gospels: the five hundred brethren at one time, James the brother of Jesus. Why is it that Paul has different stories than the Gospel stories? Well obviously because Paul was writing before the Gospels and hadn't read the gospels, but also because Paul had heard different stories. This is the point in my opening speech, and I want to reemphasize it. Paul had heard about the resurrection of Jesus before he believed in the resurrection of Jesus. He had heard about the death of Jesus before he believed in the death of Jesus. He had heard stories, and who was telling the stories? He didn't hear these stories from eyewitnesses. He was living in a different country from the eyewitnesses, speaking a different language from the eyewitnesses. Jesus' followers spoke Aramaic and lived in Palestine. Paul spoke Greek and lived outside of Palestine. People started telling stories about Jesus that were in circulation year after year after year. And they converted other people who told the stories who told the stories to their neighbors, to their spouses, to their business associates. People are telling the stories about Jesus' death and resurrection, and later people like Paul hear those stories. What happens when stories circulate by word of mouth, not for just a day or two, but for years? Well, your kids probably played the telephone game when they were little at a birthday party. One child tells a story to the next child, who tells it to the next child, who tells it to the next child and you go around the circle, and by the time it comes back to the first child it is a different story. If it weren't a different story it would be a very dumb game to play on your birthday. Stories change when they circulate. What happens if you don't simply tell the story in the same living room with all kids in the socioeconomic group, who speak the same language, who are telling the story within three minutes of each other? What happens if you tell the story across the Roman Empire and you translate it into different languages and people tell the story for purposes of their own? What happens to the stories? The stories change. How do you know that the stories change? Because we have written records of people who heard the stories and wrote them down and you can compare the stories. And when you compare the stories, there are massive discrepancies. In my first talk I listed ten discrepancies among the Gospels about the resurrection of Jesus. Several of them were minor. A couple of them were major. And I want to hear how Craig explains them. Especially, how is it that Luke explicitly says that they stayed in Jerusalem and they saw Jesus there, whereas Matthew explicitly says that they did not stay in

Jerusalem but they went to Galilee and saw Jesus there? And the other nine discrepancies that I listed. Thank you very much.

Prof. Evans:

First I would say there *is* independent material in the gospels. It isn't so simple: Mark is written, and then Matthew and Luke use Mark, and then that is all there is to it. The synoptic materials are far more diverse and complicated than that. I would also insist there is eyewitness tradition in the Gospels, even if the Gospels that we have were written down decades later: eyewitness tradition, named and unnamed people, the women who go the tomb, Peter who also visits the tomb, who sees the risen Jesus, and other disciples. Paul gives us a list probably motivated apologetically and argumentatively in the context of 1 Corinthians 15 and for this reason leaves the women out. I think this is a very simplistic and reductionistic approach to say, "Oh dear, we don't have exactly the same details in this source, and not the same details in that source. These are discrepancies and I have no idea how these could possibly fit together." Sure we have discrepancies in the details that we cannot figure out and we cannot always resolve. Forty days, perhaps a biblical number rounded off. Who knows? But that is what Luke tells us in Acts, 40 days of appearances. We have only fragments, anecdotes, selected admittedly to make theological and strategic points. We do not have the whole story. We have pieces of it that have been told. And this telephone example—so-and-so tells so-and-so and so-and-so—this is *not* how the books in the New Testament came to be written. The books in the New Testament are centered in people who are connected to the original events: eyewitnesses, apostolic authorities. In some cases we do not know, but in many cases there is a strong reasons for believing this is so. To flat out deny it or to say this not possible is nothing more than bald dogmatic assertion.



Mark 16:8 ends with the women telling no one. But we have no idea if that is the way Mark originally ended. It may well have been an ongoing story. We do not know the whole of it: Jesus appearing to the disciples in Galilee, Jesus appearing to the disciples in Jerusalem. To

insist that because we are in no position to explain fully all these items and exactly how they fit together that none of it is true and none of it can be accepted is a form of reverse fundamentalism.

Thousands were crucified in 69-70. I know that. However, I had specified that in peacetime, when Jesus was crucified, Jewish burial practices would have been observed. There is no reason at all to think that the statements of Josephus or of Philo were false. It would have been inflammatory for Pilate not to permit the bodies of Jesus and the other two men to be taken down and buried properly right outside the walls of Jerusalem on the eve of Passover. To repeat my point: according to the Mishnaic laws and traditions, if the Sanhedrin condemned someone to death, it fell to them to bury that person—not with honor, not in a special place—and the bones would not be recovered for another year.

Interesting aside point: “Oh we have only found one crucified person.” John Dominic Crossan argues that. Professor Ehrman repeated it this evening. But that just reflects a lack of knowledge of the archeology, the burial practices, and also some very interesting sociological realities. The least likely to be crucified were the upper classes. So of course we do not find crucified persons, except for one that we know of. Crucifixion often times involved the binding of bodies to the crosses not just their nailing. So what would be the evidence in terms of skeletal materials and the bones that survive? The least likely after 2,000 years are these little bones in the feet and the hands, the very bones that would give us some evidence of trauma like crucifixion. The most likely to be crucified, lower classes, have the poorest forms of burial and their skeletons are least likely to survive.

This kind of evidence needs to be taken into account. And so I think you go with the sources, and if you say, “I am not prepared to go with the sources, and I do not care what several independent sources say, and I have no interest in trying to discover whether there might be eyewitness tradition embedded in the Gospels, but rather I simply assert dogmatically that there is no eyewitness tradition there, and it does not matter to me what the evidence says, even Josephus or even Philo, or anyone else, and I will not look at the archeological evidence we have,” well, then, that is fine. That is how skepticism can work: “The evidence will never convince me. I can always explain it all away. I can always just say, ‘It fails to reach my standards.’ ” So we have disparate evidence, a selection of evidence that admittedly cannot at times easily be put together, easily harmonized. But it is an interesting diversity. We also have the experience of the individuals who are converted, we have a history of the church itself, the transformative power of the good news of what God had done in Christ including the resurrection. And then you have the fruit of it as the church grows in the face of opposition and

severe persecution and the lives that have been changed down through the years.

What is the evidence, in summary, to add it all up? What is the evidence for the resurrection? Well there is some historical evidence, some textual evidence, some circumstantial evidence, and some experiential evidence. That is the way we humans are. We think with our brains and so we look for evidence and we reason, but we are also creatures of the heart and the soul and there is that subjective element, and the two go together. I find the Christian faith convincing on a variety of levels: Apologetics in the traditional sense of intellect and evidence and reasoning and arguing and so forth, but also on a more spiritual and personal level that is a lot harder to describe and quantify and to objectify. These are the things that come together. And so when we consider the message of the gospel and the proclamation of the resurrection, there are many elements that go together and at the end of the day, we never will be in a position that we can answer every kind of question or connect every dot or explain every detail. The issue is, do we have enough details?

And I'll stop with just one little interesting incident that occurred in October of 1946 relating to two brilliant Austrian thinkers named Ludwig Wittgenstein and Karl Popper. Wittgenstein, Popper, Bertrand Russell, all of these very intelligent men, and a few others had gathered in rooms at King's College, Cambridge, for a meeting of the Cambridge Moral Science Club. Wittgenstein and Popper got into an argument. Popper was the guest of honor and there was a sharp disagreement. Wittgenstein picked up the fireplace poker and began to wave it around. He gave an impassioned speech and flung it down into the hearth and stomped out of the room, slamming the door behind him. Quite a story. Everybody heard about it the next day and the days following. So these men, intelligent, brilliant, skeptical men, eyewitnesses to this very event, were asked about it. They couldn't get the details quite sorted out. Wait a minute. At what point did Wittgenstein pick up the poker? When did he throw it down? When did he make the speech? When did he stomp out of the room? It was interesting the discrepancies. There was no doubt at all that the impassioned speech had been given or that the fireplace poker had been waved and thrown down.

I think it is rather ironic, that little story. These skeptics themselves, so critical of these witnesses to the resurrection, the Gospels that convey these stories—"can't you get the details hammered out so that we can figure out the exact flow, the sequence? Who arrived at the tomb first?" And in this case they couldn't even a day or two later get the details straight on an incident to which they themselves with their lofty intelligence were eyewitnesses. Thank you very much.



QUESTION AND ANSWER

Pres. Roberts:

Well thank you gentleman for your contributions. We want to take a few minutes for questions, debating, and discussion of this sort. The first question I have for you, and both of you have referred to this: how would you describe how Christianity began?—Because one of the great apologetic arguments for the resurrection has always been related to how the fact and the historical reality of it changed the apostles. Did the resurrection play a direct, clear, explicit role in the rise of Christianity in the first century? Who wants to begin?

Prof. Ehrman:

I'm happy to go first. I have an assignment that I give my students at Chapel Hill which is to deal with the question, "When did Christianity begin?" Did Christianity begin with the teachings of Jesus, for example? Well, not exactly, because Christianity is much more than the teachings of Jesus. Christianity is not the religion that Jesus was propounding. It is the religion about Jesus. It is the religion about Jesus' death and resurrection. So, did Christianity begin with the death and resurrection of Jesus? Well, it didn't begin with the death of Jesus,



because if Jesus was thought to have stayed dead, then nobody would have believed in him. He would have been a prophet who was crucified like so many other prophets. So did it begin with the resurrection? Well, actually, not exactly, because Christianity is the belief *in* the resurrection. If Jesus had been raised from the dead and nobody believed it, there would be no Christianity. So, my view is you can trace the beginning of Christianity to the *belief* that Jesus was raised from the dead. That is different from saying that Christianity began with Jesus actually physically being raised from the dead. No, it began with people believing that he had been raised from the dead, and I think there is absolutely no doubt historically that there were followers of Jesus who believed that he was raised from the dead. I do not think there is good historical evidence for knowing what made them think that. Of course believers say, “Well we thought that because he was raised from the dead and they saw him.” I do not think there is good historical evidence for what they saw or when they saw it. I do not think there is good evidence that all eleven disciples converted to be believers in Jesus’ resurrection. And it is absolutely false to say, as is commonly said in Christian apologetics, that the followers of Jesus (the eleven disciples) must have believed in the resurrection because they all died for it. We do not have any evidence of that—that all of the disciples died for belief in the resurrection. In fact, there is not a scintilla of evidence for it, even though it is commonly stated by Christian apologists. The deaths of the apostles are a mystery to us. We do not know how many of them grew old and simply died. Our earliest accounts of the deaths of most of these apostles are much later, centuries later, and are found in legendary acts of the apostles, not in anything in the New Testament or in any reliable source. So my short answer to the question is that some people came to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. That changed everything and that is what started Christianity.

Prof. Evans:

I’ll build on that answer. Yes, some people believed that Jesus was resurrected. So I would ask the question, well, why did they believe that? There were plenty of revered teachers who died. There were visions, too, by the way. We actually have some stories from our sources in antiquity about a revered teacher who is seen in a vision. Nobody went around saying, “He has been resurrected.” So why was it that some believed Jesus was resurrected? And I think we should give Paul the



benefit of the doubt. I do not think he is a liar or a fool or guilty of passing along false information. He talks about 500 at one time who saw Jesus, many of whom were still living, implying that you could go talk to them if you wanted. So, what convinced them that we are speaking of resurrection? Why not just talk of a vision of some kind? A ghost story? Why do we have Easter instead of Halloween? And I think it is because we have experiences that were not just the usual dream or vision, like "I saw my late uncle So-and-So, or my dear beloved Rabbi Somebody Else." These experiences were distinctive. They were different. There was more to it than that. There was a tactile, touchable quality, and combined with the empty tomb, I do not think for a moment that the resurrection story would have gained traction if Jesus' corpse was in the ground awaiting bone collection, according to the Jewish custom. And the assertion that Jesus was not buried is just that, a groundless dogmatic assertion, a claim made without evidence, a claim that is contrary to everything we know about the practice during peacetimes in the 30's. I'm not talking about the horrible war when Jerusalem was besieged in 69 and 70. So it is the combination of visions or appearances of Jesus that were qualitatively different from mere visions, combined with a corpse that disappeared, and not because it was eaten by dogs or just pitched into a hole so that we have no idea whose body was whose. That is a condescension on our part toward people in antiquity to suggest they did not know how to keep track of their own dead. They did.

Pres. Roberts:

Another question: we have heard a lot about discrepancies and verification. How do you know when something is a discrepancy? Don't you have to know what all the facts are about any event in order to say "that is a discrepancy"? For instance, let me give you an illustration: Today somebody wrote a book about my life (highly unlikely), and they said, "On 1 April, 2010, Dr. Roberts was in Parkville, Missouri, where he lives." Someone else wrote a book and says, "On April the first, 2010, Dr. Roberts was at Midwest Baptist Seminary in Kansas City." Two people read that and they say, "Ah, a discrepancy. One says he was in Parkville; one says he was at Midwestern." The fact is, I was in both places. And if you know all of the facts in a case, isn't that the only time that you can say there is an actual discrepancy?

Prof. Ehrman:

Well I have been the one talking about discrepancies, so I see that I am debating two people.

Pres. Roberts:

I am asking a question.

Prof. Ehrman:

Right, OK. Good. Good question. I think that there are two kinds of discrepancies. One kind of discrepancy is when you have a statement that is contrary to historical reality. That would be a discrepancy. It would be a falsehood because it is at odds with historical reality. The kind of discrepancy I am talking about is when you have two accounts of an event that are talking about precisely the same thing and are at odds with one another, not with somebody in the same place on the same day, two different places on the same day. That is obviously possible. It is quite easy. That is not a discrepancy. That just means that at different times of the day he was in two different places. But if it was stated that in fact he was in Kansas City for the entire day and there was a second account that said in fact, he was in Hong Kong on that day for the entire day, that would be a discrepancy. The discrepancies I am talking about from the Gospels are that kind of discrepancy—where they are actually talking about the same thing and giving different answers to them.

Prof. Evans:

All right, let us suppose just for the sake of argument that we sift through all of the discrepancies, and we are reasonable and fair-minded about it. We are not going to be fundamentalists either on the right or on the left. We are going to be reasonable people and we are going to look as historians have to do especially when they are lucky and have multiple witnesses. It is kind of interesting here. I suppose a lot of this would not be a problem if we only had one gospel. But we are lucky. We have four. So we go through the details and we look at discrepancies. And by the way, *discrepancy* is not a bad word. It is used all of the time even in a believing context. “Discrepancy, I’m not sure how does this fit?” It leaves me with the question, “I have some doubts here, but I do not know how the lines connect.” And so let us suppose that at the end of the day (just go with the major one, the worst one that Professor Ehrman has mentioned)—we go “you know, I just don’t know. On that day were the disciples in Galilee? Or on that day did they remain in Jerusalem?” And we just don’t know. Can it be resolved? Maybe it cannot. Maybe one of the gospel writers simply got it wrong, and he was supposed to say the truth was, next week they were in Galilee. And so they were still in

Jerusalem following the Passover, following Easter, and it was later that they were in Galilee. And so they just plain got it wrong. Does this collapse everything historically speaking? Or, are we going to fall into that old “show me one mistake and the whole thing falls to pieces?” I’ve heard that from students over the years. Oh boy; I hear that story. Somebody will say, “Well a Sunday school teacher told me that.” Yikes. That scares me. We have multiple witnesses filled with stories, samples, anecdotes, pieces, fragments of a much larger picture, and no, we do not know how all of the dots can be connected in every case. And that is something we do not like to live with. We like to connect the dots. We do not like loose ends. We want to explain everything, and in a few cases, there they are; we do not know the answer. And, to play the devil’s advocate for a moment, let’s say, “You know what, maybe somebody made a mistake.” Maybe that is it. That is the big boogeyman. But does that mean then that all the witnesses, all the people who saw Jesus, all of the evidence, just goes “poof” because two of the stories cannot be reconciled? I see that as a brand of reverse fundamentalism, and I say beware of that kind of reasoning.

Pres. Roberts:

First century society: Was it a literate society? How important were written documents? What percentage of the people read? And how important was it that these Gospels were eventually written down?

Prof. Ehrman:

The most important study of literacy in the ancient world was written by William Harris in 1989, who did a thorough investigation of literacy in antiquity.⁴ He showed that in the best of times in antiquity ten percent of the population could read and write, which meant ninety percent of the population could not read and write. That was in the best of times. That was like in fourth century BC Athens when Plato and Socrates were around. There, maybe ten percent. In most times and places far fewer people would read, especially outside of major urban areas. The only people who learned how to read and write were people who could afford the education. They came from rich families. So the upper crust elite could read and write. So, literacy was very low by our standards, but that does not mean that texts were unimportant, because in the ancient world, to read a book usually meant to hear somebody else read the book out loud. Reading was a process that was done out loud and orally, so that

⁴ William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

when the gospels were written, they would have been written by very educated upper crust Christians, people who were highly educated and trained in Greek rhetorical skills. They would have had some form of advanced education which, by the way, does not apply to any of the disciples who were lower class fishermen, day workers, etc. They didn't have a high education and their language was Aramaic. These gospel writers are highly educated, Greek speaking people, trained rhetorically. They were not the disciples and do not claim to be the disciples actually. But, when they wrote their books, the way their books were communicated was not by people individually reading them. There weren't very many books available. They were read out loud in church communities. And so even though it was a written form of the religion in a sense, it was passed on orally, so people read and heard things done out loud.

Prof. Evans:

I like what professor Ehrman has said. I can elaborate on it a little bit I suppose. You know, there is an old Texan saying that "where there is smoke there is fire." And I think the smoke in this case is the early Christian movement within a generation really having all of the signs of a literate movement: writing books, and collecting books. Why? It probably originated with Jesus himself and a core of disciples. Jesus is seen debating points of Scripture. I strongly disagree with the Jesus Seminar on this point that argues that Jesus is illiterate because we do not really have any fire to go with that smoke. And so, Jesus counters with: "Is this not why you are mistaken, you do not know the Scriptures and you do not know the power of God?"—odd argument to make by an illiterate peasant. The literacy levels were probably a bit higher among Jewish men; first-born sons may have had some privilege. And of course when you get down to it, Jesus is not part of the average. He is an extraordinary individual. And then we have a movement that grew from his teaching that produces and collects books. So anyway, that is not a hard and fast proof or evidence. It is circumstantial and I think it is a reasonable inference that Jesus himself probably was literate, not in a scribal sense where he is a professional scribe. I do not mean that, but he knows the contexts of Scriptures, can argue the Scriptures, teaches his disciples. Not all twelve would have been scribes either but a few, perhaps Matthew, would have been able to write. And this is the core and the nucleus, a very important part of the movement that results in the smoke that I referred to of collecting books, writing books, and so on, and is, you know, right to the present day.

Pres. Roberts:

The telephone game; that's been mentioned. Were the gospels written to correct the telephone game? Did some people get the story wrong, and then the gospels were written to document the core of Jesus' life?

Prof. Ehrman:

My view of this is that the stories are circulating, and there are different forms of the story circulating, and that the gospel writers have a particular perspective that they want to share with their communities. So they think that their version of the story is right and the other versions that they have seen or heard are wrong. And so they do write to correct various versions. And so they themselves are participating in the telephone game. They are not only trying to correct the telephone game. It is interesting that Luke's Gospel begins in 1:1-4 with a preface in which Luke indicates that there are many people who tried to write an account of the things Jesus said and did but he is going to write an orderly account as opposed to these others. And one of the things that is interesting is because scholarship is unified in that one of his predecessors was the gospel of Mark, is Luke trying to correct Mark? If Luke is not trying to correct Mark, why, when he copied Mark in his own Gospel, did he change Mark? This is an established view among scholars, that Mark was one of Luke's sources and Luke extensively changed it. If he liked Mark the way it was, why didn't he leave it the way it was? I think it shows that Luke in fact is participating in the telephone game and trying to get the story straight.

Prof. Evans:

Luke edits Mark. No question of it. Matthew edits Mark too, not as extensively. For both Matthew and Luke, I believe, there is this common core of material we call "Q" that Matthew and Luke also made use of and no doubt did edit in a variety of ways, not just edited the wording but also the placement, the grouping, and selection. But I do not see this as declaring that somebody is wrong. There are lots of explanations. In fact it is fun. I have written a commentary on Luke and a commentary on half of Mark and I am working my way through Matthew and it is interesting to see the scribes at work. Sometimes it is "No, no, no, let's get the grammar a little smoother." Or, "This could be misunderstood. Let's clarify. Wait a minute, why didn't you mention this other thing?" I mean, there are a lot of things going on in the editing of the texts and presenting

it. What I think is so interesting is that the church, in the second century and certainly beyond, acted very wisely and kept all four. Instead of just saying, “Oh, let’s choose between the four and find out the one that is the best and so let’s just keep Luke or let’s just keep Matthew,” the church was very wise in saying, “You know what, we have these four interesting texts; there is a lot of overlap, a lot of difference too, and I think all four of them together are very, very edifying and it is early material and the church is enriched by it.” That was a smart decision. I didn’t see that rigid, brittle, fundamentalism in the first and second centuries.

Pres. Roberts:

All right, now for a couple of more personal questions for each of you. Dr. Evans, you are a scholar of first rank. You believe that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead. I want you to comment on that and your own personal convictions and how and why you hold to that position.

Prof. Evans:

Yes, I am a believer, and I agree with Paul’s discussion of it. You know you mention that Jesus was raised bodily and that is an interesting question right there. Paul wrestles with that in 1 Corinthians 15, and not in a strictly scientific way. It is somewhat anecdotal, based on his own experience. Probably based, too, on what he has learned from other Christians. And so, Jesus has been raised up. Do not ask me about the science of that. What did his molecules look like? Did his DNA change? Who knows? That is not what we are talking about. Jesus who was crucified and buried was raised up by God, was alive...*is alive*. There is no corpse in the ground, none left behind. No bones to gather a year later and place in an ossuary. And so, I do believe that but it is more than just some mental act where I can sit down with a formula or sit down with math and work out something or conduct an experiment, look into a test tube, or through a microscope, and say, “Ah ha, that is it!” No. There is evidence. There is reason. There is the intellectual dimension to be sure, but there is also the heart. There is also the Spirit of God that brings conviction and brings with it a sense of wholeness in the Hebrew sense of Shalom—peace, wholeness, things are right, peace with God. And so, that was my response in faith. That has been the assurance, conviction (that is how Paul speaks at times). That is what I have experienced. It does not mean that every day is a high day. It does not mean that everything is wonderful. There are peaks and there are valleys but there is that conviction and that assurance and the peace that even though I cannot explain everything that happens in the world. I do not even, as a

Scripture scholar, know everything going on in the Bible. I look at the Scriptures. They make sense. I see the truth there. I hear the voice of God speaking and if somebody else comes along and says, “Well, I don’t” or “It doesn’t resonate for me,” okay. That is a spiritual issue. You know, I believe as a Christian that it is the Spirit of God that brings conviction. But I would have to say that for somebody to say, “I don’t believe. I’m not interested because I read Dan Brown or Michael Baigent,” or “I cannot respond in faith until all of the discrepancies are put to rest.” That is the kind of thing I am seeing and trying to warn against today.

Pres. Roberts:

Dr. Ehrman, you studied with Bruce Metzger, who was sort of the crown prince of textual criticism at Princeton, very well known. You studied the same texts, did the same research, but Metzger believed in Jesus. I never met him or talked to him personally, but he believed in the resurrection of Christ. You do not. Why not?

Prof. Ehrman:

Yes, when I studied with Bruce Metzger, I, too, believed in the resurrection. I started out as a conservative, evangelical Christian. After high school I went to the Moody Bible Institute. I majored in Bible Theology. After that I went to Wheaton College and learned Greek, a good, strong evangelical college, and went from there to study with Bruce Metzger, because I was interested in the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. Bruce Metzger of course is not the only professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. He was my mentor and I loved him dearly, and I think I probably became closer to him than any of his students that he ever had in his entire distinguished career. I was his final PhD student. We had a very close relationship, but I started understanding theology and the Bible differently the more I did my research. I started seeing that in fact, the Gospels of the New Testament have a number of contradictions between them, and they say things that are historically not true—things that are dis-verified by other Roman sources. I think that I came to see that in fact the Gospels are not reliable witnesses to what they attest historically. This did not make me a non-believer. It is frequently misstated (including in one of Craig’s books—we had a little back and forth over the phone one time about this) that I became an unbeliever because I realized that there were variations in the manuscripts of the New Testament. That is absolutely false. I knew there were variations in the manuscripts of the New Testament when I was a hardcore fundamentalist. That did not shake me at all. I remained a

believer for many years. For a while I held Craig's position—that there are discrepancies but we cannot understand really why. But then I started seeing that in fact there are lots of discrepancies and not just in the minor details, in major things, that in fact, John's view of Jesus is really different from Matthew's view of Jesus. And Paul's understanding of Christ is very different from Luke's understanding of Christ, and so forth and so on. I ended up becoming a liberal Christian and I was a liberal Christian for many years. What ended up making me a non-believer is unrelated to my biblical scholarship. My understanding of the Bible is not what led me to become a Non-Christian. What led me to become an agnostic was in fact the problem with suffering in the world. I knew for years what Christians had said about why there can be so much pain and misery in the world if there is a good and all-powerful God who is in control of it. I knew what the answers were and I started studying the answers as I started teaching at Rutgers University. I read what biblical scholars said about why there can be suffering, why there can be disasters, why there are earthquakes and famines and tsunamis and hurricanes, why there is starvation, why there is war, why this world is such a mess. I read what biblical scholars said about it. I read what theologians said about it. I read what philosophers said about it. I read what popular preachers said about it, and I came to think that in fact, nobody had a good answer. I came to think that in fact, it is very hard to believe that there is a God who is active in this world, who intervenes in this world, who answers prayer, given the state of things. If everybody on the planet had my life, I would have no trouble believing in God. My life is fantastic. But the reality is, this world is a cesspool for misery for so many people that I simply came to a point that I could no longer believe in God. This was about twelve, thirteen years ago and at that point I became an agnostic and I have been a nonbeliever ever since.

Prof. Evans:

May I say something?

Pres. Roberts:

Yes, Craig, you have a comment?

Prof. Evans:

Yes, the world is a mess. That is not disputed. There used to be a "pie-in-the-sky" view, a secular view that somehow everything was getting better. And it was a denial of biblical revelation about the nature

of human beings, and not just the fallenness of human beings but the fallenness of nature itself. But I have to ask, too, if you are going to ask why all of the misery, why all of the suffering and so on . . . well, why is there beauty? Why is there grace? Why is there love? Why is there mercy? Why is there goodness? All of these things are unnecessary for survival. Why are we not just like the animals in the jungle and the survival of the fittest? There is this redundancy, this unnecessary surplus of the good and the beautiful that is within the human heart that is capable of transforming the darkness into the light. Where does that come from? And that is why I would argue, take the full biblical picture that God's love and his truth are shining in the darkness and I believe you can open up your eyes and see it and you can let that light shine into your heart and it can change and transform. And it has happened for hundreds of millions of people now around the world. Or we can just say, "No I don't see it. I see the misery and the horror and therefore I cannot see God." And I think that is very sad.

CLOSING REMARKS

Prof. Ehrman:

I would like to challenge Craig to a debate on the problem of suffering. I have written a book about it called *God's Problem* and I will be happy to discuss it with him publically as I have with other people.⁵ But for now, we are talking about the reliability of the biblical accounts of the resurrection. I have several points I want to make about some of the things that Craig has said, and then I will wrap it up. One of my major points is that these accounts that we have of the gospels have numerous discrepancies in them. I have listed ten of them, some of them major, some of them minor, and I hoped that Craig would respond to explain away these discrepancies and he has not. At one point in his ten minute response he admitted that yes, we do have discrepancies that we cannot explain. I agree with that. I have only given you ten, there are a lot more. In the back-and-forth Craig admitted that in fact, maybe one of the authors got it wrong. Not just one of the authors, possibly all of the authors, got it wrong. I object though when Craig says that this is reverse fundamentalism. This is not fundamentalism. This is historical research. This is how historians go about their business. They look at the sources and see whether we can trust them or not. We are not talking about one or two minor details that are different. We are talking about enormous

⁵ Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem* (New York: HarperOne. 2008).

differences, both minor and major, and the major really matter. These sources that we have for the resurrection of Jesus are at odds with one another up and down the line. They are not reliable sources and that is what we are supposed to be debating. One reason that they are unreliable is because of my telephone game. Crag responds to the telephone game by saying, “Well, the gospel writers were not playing the telephone game, they had authority and they were eyewitnesses.” I think that is a direct quote of what he said. I would like to know some evidence that in fact the situation is different from the way I laid it out—that one person told the story to another person who told it to another person. They are telling stories about Jesus to convert people and it goes on for year after year, decade after decade before the gospel writers wrote it down. I would like some evidence that it did not work that way and some evidence that the stories were not changed. I can give you tons of evidence that the stories were changed because we have the stories and you can compare them with one another. You do not have to take my word for it. Go home and do it yourself. You will find discrepancies up and down the map.

And the idea that they in fact are based on eyewitness testimony as Craig . . . maybe he simply misspoke, but if he is saying that, I want to know what evidence there is of that. I do not know of any evidence of that and I have studied it for thirty years.



Third point. Craig ended with a very interesting illustration involving Wittgenstein and the semi-attack, and he pointed out that these people, even the next day, cannot get the details straight. Yes! Exactly. That is with intelligent people two days later. What about people living forty or fifty years later who are telling the stories in different languages, living in a different country, in a different context, who are telling the stories? They are different. The fact is, you do not get the story straight. The Gospels are trying to tell the story, but they are telling them in such a way that they are not straight.

So let me give my final wrap up. The ultimate question we are dealing with is whether the gospels are reliable or not, in particular, their accounts of the resurrection. My view that I am trying to state as forcefully as I can is that the gospels, throughout the gospels, but

especially in the resurrection accounts, have mistakes, discrepancies, contradictions, factual errors in them. This is not simply a unique point of view that I happen to share. This is the widely shared point of view among critical scholars who study the Bible in North America and Europe. If you do not believe me let me give you the facts. I think Craig will agree with these facts. I do not think that he will deny this. This view of the gospels as having mistakes, errors, contradictions, discrepancies is the view that is shared by New Testament scholars who teach at all the major universities in our country. It is the view of New Testament professors at all of the Ivy League schools: Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Brown, Colombia, Cornell, the University of Pennsylvania. It is the view of professors of New Testament of all the major state universities in the country whether in the east where I live—the University of Florida, Florida State, University of Georgia, all fourteen universities of my state, North Carolina, the University of Virginia, University of Maryland, Rutgers University. It is the view of the major state universities in the Midwest where you live—the University of Texas, University of Oklahoma, University of Kansas, University of Nebraska, University of Iowa. It is the view of professors in New Testament at every major divinity school connected with a great university in the country—Harvard, Yale, Duke, Vanderbilt, Emory, University of Chicago, as well as the mainline seminaries not connected with the universities in the country—Princeton Theological Seminary, Claremont, The Graduate Theological Union, and on and on.

This is the view that the Gospels have errors, discrepancies, and contradictions that is taught at virtually every institution of higher learning in the entire world that is not either fundamentalist or extremely conservative evangelical. Most of the people teaching this view are themselves Christian but they do not have an evangelical assumption that the Bible is without mistakes or that the accounts are completely reliable. The only ones who say otherwise are fundamentalists or conservative evangelical Christians. How can that be? Is everyone else apart from evangelicals not as intelligent? Are they blind? Are they demon inspired? Everyone else? How is it that the only ones who think differently, the only ones who think that the Bible is completely reliable are people who have a particular theological point of view that affirms that the Bible does not have any mistakes in it? This is a theological view, not a historical view, and people are welcome to have it. But the people who have it should admit that when they say the Bible is reliable they are not saying so on historical grounds for historical reasons. They are saying so because their theological views require them to say so. If they did not have these theological views, they would agree with everyone else, Christian and non-Christian alike, that the Bible does not provide a

reliable account of the historical Jesus and of the history of the early Christian church, including the accounts of the resurrection of Jesus.

Let me tell you why this matters. There are many good Bible-believing Christians who think that the Bible provides a blueprint for belief and ethics that answers all of our important moral questions. For example, questions about abortion, or gun control, or gay rights. But the point is that the Bible is not a single book. The Bible is lots of books with lots of points of view. So you should not be dogmatic in saying that the Bible teaches this in order to come down on a particular ethical issue. The Bible in fact has lots of points of view and maybe we should allow for more points of view ourselves. I once thought that the Gospels were completely reliable. Now that I am a serious scholar, I no longer think so. It is not that I decided to jump on the scholarly bandwagon and abandon my evangelical faith, as I have said. I looked long and hard at the evidence. I studied it for years. I grappled with it. I prayed over it. I talked it over with friends and loved ones and eventually I came to see the truth: the Bible does not provide a reliable account of the things Jesus said and did or about his resurrection. I know most of you will never change your mind, but I hope you realize that people like me come to this question honestly and openly, not trying to destroy the faith of others, but simply searching for the truth. I hope you, too, will be honest and open and will not be afraid to go wherever the truth seems to lead. Thank you very much.

Prof. Evans:

Well we could list universities and seminaries and go on and on. I agree with the fact that scholars recognize the discrepancies, and editorial changes and so on as we compare Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I do not deny that. The observation of the actual phenomena that are right in front of us, you can see them synoptically, different wording and so forth—I do not dispute that. What I do dispute are the inferences that the professor has made in some of his publications and some of



his comments tonight. I believe the gospels are re-liable, they do get the facts straight even though we are unable in every case to say, "I know exactly how this fits together." We cannot always sort it out. Perhaps it boils down to a semantic debate over what does reliability mean? I can quote the following from Professor Ehrman and agree with it. He said, "We need to face the fact that the gospels are not what we think they are." It was a good comment. They are not what we wish they were. I agree with that. I wish they did give us more information and I wish there were not any discrepancies. I wish everything was resolved. I wish we had more details. I wish we had actually a transcription, a tape recording of Jesus' words. Wouldn't that be nice? I wish we knew every time when he said something, where he was when he said it. That would be just great and we wouldn't need two or three or four gospels. Why not just one real detailed, videotaped account? The question is, are the gospels *sufficient*? And that is what I have in mind when I ask about reliability. Do they tell us what we *need* to know? They may not tell us everything we want to know and wish to know, whether it is the layman who would like to know what Jesus' favorite color was or these kinds of trivial questions for a scholar who wants to know more precisely where Jesus was when he said a particular thing or what exactly in Aramaic were his words. Now that kind of exactitude is elusive in most cases. I do not dispute that. And so I would be in agreement with most of the lustrous scholars that have been mentioned, and the membership of the Institute for Biblical Research (the IBR) has a membership of about five hundred scholars. They are evangelical scholars. They would agree with variations here and there, but they would agree that the Gospels have the facts straight so far as what is important and what is needful. Are the Gospels sufficient in communicating the teaching of Jesus? Yes. Are the Gospels sufficient in communicating and conveying the stories of what he did? Of course they are. Is the gospel witness sufficient with respect to the resurrection? Yes, even though there are loose ends and even though not every single detail can be harmonized and put together. So, I wish they were a little different and gave us more information, but it does not come down to what I wish or what you wish. It comes down to the question, are they sufficient for what we need to know? And I believe that they are and I think that there would be a host of New Testament scholars as well as the late Professor Metzger who would agree with me on that point.