

Four major reasons to take Jesus seriously

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Introduction

In this article I will first look at some significant scientific evidence relating to the Bible documents. This is necessary since a discussion of Jesus Christ relies in large measure upon these written accounts.

I then present four major reasons why the person of Jesus Christ should be taken seriously. These are:

1. Because he made very specific predictions about future events that came to pass in great detail after his death.
2. Because so many details of his life were fulfilments of Old Testament Bible predictions relating to the long expected Jewish Messiah.
3. Because he performed spectacular miracles like no one before him.
4. Because his resurrection demonstrated that he really was who he claimed to be.

As a scientist, I like to approach these questions, as if investigating a series of scientific theories. A scientist makes one or more observations, then formulates a theory to try to explain these observations and then collects evidence that can substantiate or discredit the statements.

So, let's start from basics and build up evidence in support of each of the four statements listed above.

Reliability of the Bible accounts

A fundamental question that relates to all four questions is: How reliable are the Bible accounts? This is an important question because much of our evidence relies on this one document that we call the Bible. Therefore the first theory to investigate can be stated as follows:

I propose that the documents included in our Bible have come down to us essentially unchanged in main content since they were written and that prophetic sections were written before the events described and that descriptions of events were from eye witnesses to these events.

2.

Investigation of this theory relies on scientific studies of the documents by accredited academics of literary style and content and by Carbon 14 dating of ancient manuscripts. We are able to compare our most recent copies of documents with very ancient copies of these same documents.

With reference to the Old Testament section of our Bible, all of which was written long before the historical dates relating to the life of Jesus Christ, discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has shown that major parts of the Old Testament, such as the book that was largely written by the Prophet Isaiah, **have hardly changed over the intervening centuries.** This is remarkable because Isaiah began his prophetic ministry in 740 BC. Various documents in the Dead Sea Scrolls have been scientifically dated by Carbon 14 analysis to between 80 and 335 BC.

Before discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest nearly complete copies of the Greek translation of the whole Bible were the Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus of the 4th century AD and the Codex Alexandrinus of the 5th century. The oldest surviving nearly complete manuscripts of the Old Testament in Hebrew date to around 1000 AD.

Comparison of the Dead Sea Scroll texts with the Hebrew text dated around 1000 AD shows few differences and where these do occur they do not impact on any point of theological significance. This observed accuracy of much later copies is explained by the meticulous rules that Jewish scholars had to follow when copying 'sacred writings'.

This same accuracy of copying is also a feature of New Testament Bible books. From its inception Christianity has been a missionary orientated faith. As a result all of the New Testament documents were translated into other languages within a few years of first being written. We now have more than 5,300 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, over 10,000 Latin and at least 9,300 other early versions. **No other document in antiquity even begins to approach such numbers and attestations.** When we compare these ancient translations with the Bible as we have it today, we find that there are no major differences.

The greater significance of the various language editions is that the first translations into Syriac, Latin and Coptic were all made by about 150 AD. **Once these translations had been made, they were repeatedly copied down through the centuries by each language group.** After the elapse of centuries we can now compare the more recent copies of different language manuscripts with the much earlier manuscripts and find that they are **remarkably alike in text, even after numerous copies were made within each language.**

Sir Frederic Kenyon, former director and principal librarian of the British Museum stated, *'The interval then between the dates of the original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established'* (McDowell 1979).

3.

Regarding the dates when the New Testament documents were first written, the majority of scientifically based literature studies place all of the **four Gospel accounts as probably being written before 70 AD. This was within the lifetime of those who had been with Jesus and within about 27 years of his death.**

An additional reason why the Gospel accounts almost certainly date to earlier than 70 AD is that the events of 70 AD shook the whole Jewish world. The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple were so devastating for Jews that it is most unlikely that they would escape mention in any of the four gospel accounts if these had been written after 70 AD.

Having established the overall reliability of the Bible documents, in so far as their similarity to the originals is concerned, the next question to ask is whether the accounts of events in the life of Jesus are accurate.

When we compare the four Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and the book of Acts that was also written by Luke, we find interesting similarities but also equally interesting differences. Although there is literary evidence that each of the gospel writers may have incorporated some portions from the other authors, there is also clear evidence that these four writers did not sit down and compare each other's writings in detail. This is evident from the fact that **each writer included some events and omitted others.** In addition some details of events differ slightly when recorded in more than one of the accounts. This is very compelling evidence that each writer was recording events from his own first hand memory, or as explained to them by other witnesses to these events.

Differences in detail can be strong evidence of authenticity. We see this in everyday events around us. For instance, there was an automobile accident on a dual carriage highway. A BMW vehicle crashed into the back of another vehicle. There were only three independent witnesses to this accident since both drivers died, and each witness gave a different account as follows:

Witness one: The driver of the front vehicle suddenly changed lane without giving any warning, causing the BMW to crash into its back.

Witness 2: The driver of the BMW was travelling at excessive speed and so crashed into the other vehicle as it was changing lanes.

Witness 3: A big dog ran out of bushes causing the driver of the front vehicle to suddenly change lanes and resulting in the BMW crashing into it.

The detective investigating the crash might initially think that the witnesses were giving poor evidence. However in fact **each was describing accurately what they had seen.** The fact is that each of us tend to notice different things. It is by combining and comparing the testimonies that a much greater truth is revealed.

We need to apply this same principle to events described in the New Testament documents. A close comparison does not reveal any differences affecting fundamental Christian beliefs, but where differences in less important details do occur they can lead us to a better understanding of events.

4.

Once I have accepted that the New Testament documents are trust worth, I propose that the available documentary evidence shows that Jesus Christ has the qualifications to be taken more seriously than anyone else who has ever lived.

I investigate this proposal by looking at the four categories of evidence that were listed at the start of this article, namely:

1. Because he made very specific predictions about future events that came to pass in great detail after his death.
2. Because so many details of his life were fulfilments of Old Testament Bible predictions relating to the long expected Jewish Messiah.
3. Because he performed spectacular miracles like no one before him.
4. Because his resurrection demonstrated that he really was who he claimed to be.

Detailed predictions made by Jesus that have already come to pass

Jesus made **predictions about the coming destruction of the Jewish temple**. We read, *Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. "Do you see all these things?", he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down"*(Matthew 24:1-2, Mark 13:1-2, Luke 21: 5-6).

This prediction was **literally fulfilled in 70 AD** when the Roman armies put down the Jewish revolt in Jerusalem. Historical documents record that the Jewish resistance put up a last stand in the temple and in the process the temple caught fire, in spite of the Roman General having issued specific orders that the temple must not be destroyed by his soldiers. It is thought that the Jewish zealots actually caused the fire themselves.

The fire became so intense that the **gold on the temple dome melted** and ran down the walls into cracks between the stones. Roman soldier regulations stated that they were entitled to take spoils of war for themselves. Therefore, after the fighting had ended the soldiers dismantled the whole temple, stone by stone, in order to retrieve the gold. **Not one stone was left standing on another, just as Jesus had foretold!**

Jesus also said, *"There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by gentiles (non-Jews) until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled"* (Luke 21: 22-24).

The fulfilment of this came in 137 AD when the Jewish revolt burst out again because the new Emperor Hadrian issued an order forbidding what he considered to be the barbarous practices of castration and circumcision. Furthermore, during a journey through Palestine in

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130 AD he visited the site of the ruined Jerusalem and gave orders for the city to be rebuilt as a Roman colony and for a shrine to Jupiter to be erected.

The Jewish revolt became so furious that for a time they even conquered Jerusalem. However, in 137 AD Hadrian again conquered Jerusalem and then systematically destroyed Jews. They were all either killed or expelled from Palestine or sold into slavery. History tells us that nearly a thousand towns and villages were destroyed and over half a million Jews slaughtered and vast numbers sold into slavery. These historical facts come from non-biblical documents, such as Gardener (1981).

The only ones who escaped were Christians who took another warning by Jesus seriously. He said, *“When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city”* (Luke 21:20-22). Most Christians fled to surrounding countries and so largely escaped the destruction meted out by the Romans.

Jerusalem now became a Romanised city, completely resettled by Gentiles and Hadrian erected a statue of himself in the temple to Jupiter, placed on the site of the former Holy of Holies of the destroyed Jewish temple. The practice of the Jewish religion was forbidden and, by imperial decree, the name of Judea was changed to Syria-Palestina.

The words of Jesus also predicted a time would come when *“the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled”* and once again Jews will be re-established in Jerusalem. **This amazing prophecy started to take place in 1948** when the modern state of Israel was established by decree of the United Nations. **Then, in the Six Day War of 1967 the Jews were able to take over the whole of Jerusalem. This fulfilment of the words of Jesus, after an elapse of 2000 years,** also suggests that we are now living in another climax of human history. We are now living at a time when *‘The times of the gentiles are fulfilled’*. This reminds us of other Bible prophecies that speak of the re-establishment of Jerusalem as the centre of world affairs.

Other predictions made by Jesus also came to pass. He said, *“They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you”* (John 16:2-4).

This prediction had several dramatic fulfilments. First, for nearly 300 years there was persecution of Christians by the Jewish religious authorities. However, even worse came under the Roman emperors who proclaimed themselves God and took delight in killing thousands of Christians in the Coliseum in Rome, because they would not worship him as God.

Again, some of the early spread of Islam was by the sword and killing of ‘infidels’ was considered the will of Allah! Then there was the inquisition, with its rounding up and killing of Christians who disagreed with the Roman Catholics. Here again the people who killed

many thousands of Christian men, women and children, thought they were performing a service for God!

Who would have thought that early Christianity, with its emphasis on love, forgiveness and mercy, would become the target of such widespread rage and persecution? Even today we have active persecution of Christians and more have lost their lives for their faith in the last century than throughout all the other centuries since Jesus Christ.

Jesus fulfilled Old Testament predictions

The Bible contains far more prophetic statements relating to future events than any other document. Writers like Nostradamus are by comparison extremely vague in their prophecies.

The Old Testament contains **many passages that Jews have understood referred to the coming Messiah**. Nearly all of these were fulfilled by aspects of the life of Jesus. The few still to be fulfilled refer to events still in our future. I will mention only two of these, namely Isaiah 53 and Isaiah 9. Each of these should be compared with details recorded about Jesus Christ in the New Testament Bible.

A remarkable prophecy about the life and crucifixion of Jesus Christ, is Isaiah 53. This was written before death by crucifixion had been invented by the Romans. It reads in part as follows:

***Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.
Like one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
The punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth;***

....

***He was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
And who can speak of his descendants?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
For the transgression of my people he was stricken.
He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.
Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
And the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.
After the suffering of his soul,
he will see the light of life and he satisfied;
By his knowledge I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.***

When we read a passage like this it must surely remind us of many aspects of the life and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. If you are not familiar with those crucifixion details please do read them in the Gospel accounts, such as Matthew 27:32-50, Mark 15:16-39, Luke 23: 26-49, John 19: 17-37.

With the above prophecy in mind it is not so surprising to read one more from Isaiah chapter 9. It reads:

***For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end,
He will reign on David's throne,
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it,
with justice and righteousness,
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.***

8.

Here a human child will become a ruler, but at the same time will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace! And his kingdom will be everlasting! What better description of the baby born in a stable, crucified as a criminal, raised from death as a demonstration of his Deity and soon to return to rule the world from the throne of David in Jerusalem?

These examples of Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled through the person and life of Jesus Christ, are just two of the many other Old Testament Bible prophecies that have been fulfilled in great detail.

This summarises the sort of evidence we have in support of the statement that Jesus Christ fulfilled Old Testament Messianic prophecies. There are at least 29 specific prophecies, such as where he would be born, that were fulfilled by Jesus. **The statistical probability of all of these being fulfilled in detail in the life of one person is minute.**

In other words, this is our second major reason for taking Jesus seriously.

The spectacular miracles performed by Jesus point to his uniqueness

Since we have noted at the start of this article that the New Testament books were written by people who lived at the same time as Jesus and were first hand witnesses to these events, **we can confidently use these writings to give us examples of the words and actions of Jesus Christ.**

Miracles may be described as events for which we do not at present have logical explanations in terms of the known laws of physics. However, we do know from science that some laws can temporarily prevent other laws from operating. For instance the laws involved in aerodynamics can override the Law of gravity. Furthermore, some events that might previously have been described as miracles are now understood to involve known laws of science.

When we come to the recorded miracles performed by Jesus, these fall into several categories. There are many miracles of healing, including people blind from birth seeing, the deaf hearing, paralytics healed and withered arms made whole. Also miracles over the laws of nature, miracles of timing and raising of the dead.

One of the best examples of miraculous timing is as follows. *Jesus told Peter, "Go to the lake and throw in your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours"* (Matthew 17:27). The fish was real, the coin was real and it is perfectly possible that a coin dropped accidentally could be lodged in a fish mouth. However, the statistical probability of this fish being caught by chance, by one individual at a specific time, is totally remote. It is certainly 'supernatural' by human standards.

Other examples of miracles by Jesus include walking on the water, on one occasion feeding 5000 people by multiplying five small barley loaves and two small fishes, with twelve basket full of scraps left over and doing a similar miracle on another occasion. He changed water into wine and on at least three occasions he raised dead people back to life, one of whom had been in the tomb for four days.

Clearly the recorded life of Jesus is associated with events that cannot be explained by known laws of physics. We therefore classify them as supernatural. However, our generation is busy exposing the existence of many new laws, through the study of quantum mechanics. Scientists are speaking of 'quantum weirdness' where sub-atomic realities can be in more than one place at the same time and changes to one sub-atomic particle can cause instantaneous changes to other particles far away. These realities should help us become far less sceptical of things we cannot at present understand.

When we come to the events recorded around Jesus, it is clear that many of these fall into this category of being unexplained by known laws of physics. **In other words, these events indicate that Jesus had access to laws that can suspend the usual laws of nature.**

Whoever can bring about such events is certainly someone who needs to be taken seriously.

His resurrection demonstrated that he really was who he claimed to be

The following pages are largely taken from my 2007 book 'God by Evolution', that contains all the reference sources. In order to present a case for the resurrection it is necessary to go into some detail. I hope you are motivated to spend the time needed to read the following few pages.

Many have pointed out that **Christianity largely stands or falls, depending on the truth or error of the Resurrection event. If Jesus Christ rose from the dead then that must finally confirm the truth of all the amazing claims he made about himself.**

Because of the vital importance of this event, numerous attempts have been made, down through the centuries, to disprove the resurrection of Jesus. New attempts surface nearly every year. Such attempts to throw doubt in the minds of Christians, will not be the last. After all, **the resurrection of Jesus Christ is by far the most amazing and powerful event in human history. Its implications are so far reaching and are so powerful in the unseen spiritual dimension, that the ferocity of attacks actually adds further weight to its historical reality.**

If God decided to communicate with mankind by becoming a man, what sort of attributes might we expect? He would certainly be an unusual man, untainted by sinfulness, showing his supernatural connection through miracles, speak the greatest words ever spoken, have a

lasting and universal influence, satisfy the spiritual hunger in man and exercise power over death.

His power over death would be the supreme attribute distinguishing him as unique, and confirming the truth of his amazing claims about himself. The whole content of the New Testament books do not say 'Follow this teacher and do your best' but rather, the recurring theme is 'Jesus and his resurrection'. Although many have tried to refute the resurrection, again and again we read that sound analysis of the facts leads to belief in the historicity of this event.

Before we look at some of the evidence, **one of the most compelling arguments relates to the dramatic change shown by the followers of Jesus.** They were changed into courageous evangelists who were prepared to die most horrific deaths rather than deny Jesus and the resurrection message. Clearly they were totally convinced that they had on several occasions seen the risen Jesus, spoken with him, touched him and seen him rise into the sky before a large crowd of his followers on a hillside in full daylight.

The resurrection was so momentous and so real to the early disciples that they seem to have been relatively unconcerned with proving the historicity of the event. Their conviction about the reality of the risen Christ was based on their own eyes having seen him, touched him, eaten meals with him and having spoken with him. **One of the most amazing events was enacted by the lakeside, as recoded by John.**

In John chapter 21 we read, *Afterwards Jesus appeared again to his disciples by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. "I'm going out to fish" Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you". So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realise that it was Jesus. He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No" they answered. He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some". When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.*

Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "it is the Lord", he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught". Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn.

Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast". None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you". Jesus said,

“Feed my lambs.” Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.” The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you”. Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go”. Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him “Follow me”.

Here we have one of the accounts that has a ‘ring of truth’ about it. This is no hyped up atmosphere conducive to hallucinations. It is down to earth realism. And then the discourse with Peter, who had denied the Lord three times when he was arrested. Now Jesus asks him three times if he loves him.

If we reconstruct the events at the tomb, we can combine the different accounts as follows:

Table 1: Main events relating to the Resurrection.

EVENT	Where recorded
Body taken to new tomb in the garden, close to the crucifixion site, by Joseph of Arimathea.	Mathew 27:57 Mark 15:43 Luke 23: 50-51 John 19:38
Joseph accompanied by Nicodemus Wrapped body in linen. (Jewish custom was strips of linen and spices)	John 19:39 Matthew 27:59 Mark 15:46 Luke 23:53 John 19:40
Wrapped body in linen and 75 lbs of spices. Body placed in Joseph’s own cave tomb. Tomb cut out of the rock.	John 19:39 Matthew 27:60 Mark 15:46 Luke 23:53
Joseph and team rolled the large stone over the cave mouth.	Matthew 27:60 Mark 15:46
This whole operation was watched from opposite the tomb by Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. (Luke says others were with them)	Matthew 27:61 Mark 15: 47 Luke 23:55
Women prepared more spices to put on the body after the Sabbath.	Mark 16: 1 Luke 24: 1
A Temple guard was placed at the tomb.	Matthew 27:62-66
Women were first at the tomb after the resurrection, including Mary Magdalene.	Matthew 28:1 Mark 16:1 John 20:1

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Women were first to the empty tomb with spices (no names mentioned).

Luke 24:1

The stone had been rolled away from the cave entrance.

Matthew 28: 2
Mark 16: 4
Luke 24:2

Stone was rolled away by an angel (terrifying in appearance) and there was an earthquake. When the guards recovered they went into Jerusalem. This is implied, because there was no mention of the guards at the tomb by the time the women arrived.

Matthew 28: 2-5

The angel, no longer looking terrifying, remained and spoke to the women when they arrived.

Matthew 28:5

The guards were confused and terrified and reported events to the Jewish authorities.

Matthew 28:3-4
28:11-15

One 'angel' in white appeared to the women and spoke with them. Only one spoke with them but this does not necessarily mean that there was only one angel there.

Matthew 28:5-7
Mark 16:5

Two 'angels' appeared to them.

Luke 24:4-5

Women said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.
(maybe said nothing to anyone on the way to tell the disciples)

Mark 16:8

Angel told women to tell disciples to go to Galilee.

Matthew 28: 7

Jesus met the women and also told them to go to Galilee.

Matthew 28: 9-10

The women went to the disciples and told them the news.

Luke 24:9
John 20: 2

Peter was the first of the 11 closest disciples to arrive at the tomb.

Luke 24: 12

John went with Peter, saw the sunken grave clothes lying there and they were convinced by this, that Jesus had risen.

John 20:3-9

After the disciples left the tomb two angels in white again appeared to Mary Magdalene at the tomb.

John 20: 10-13

After the two angels, Jesus himself appeared to Mary Magdalene.

John 20: 14-17

Mary then went to the disciples and told them that she had actually seen the risen Jesus.

John 20: 18

Jesus appeared to 10 disciples in an upper

Luke 24: 36-49

	13..
room in Jerusalem.	John 20: 19-21
Jesus appeared again to 11 disciples in the upper room one week later. This time including 'doubting Thomas'.	John 20:24-29 1 Corinthians 15:5
Jesus appeared to Simon Peter on his own in Jerusalem.	Luke 24: 34 1 Corinthians 15:5
Jesus appeared to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.	Luke 24: 13-32
Jesus appeared to 7 disciples by the Sea of Tiberius, ate with them, and spoke at length with them.	John 21: 1-23
Disciples saw Jesus on a mountain in Galilee and he spoke with them. He gave them the command to go into all the world and preach the Good news.	Matthew 28: 16-20
Jesus appeared other times over a period of 40 days.	Acts 1: 3-8
Jesus taken up into heaven from the Mount of Olives.	Luke 24:50-51 Acts 1: 3-8
Appeared to over 500 at one time	1 Corinthians 15:6
Appeared to James (brother of Jesus).	1 Corinthians 15:7

The above analysis of the recorded resurrection events shows no real contradictions of substance. We should remember that the four accounts, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, were written some time after the events. We also have the testimony of the Apostle Paul who was converted from an aggressive enemy of Christians to its greatest evangelist, through an encounter with the glorified Jesus.

The 'ring of truth' in these accounts is shown by:

1. If these four writers had conspired together to fabricate events, **they would have ensured that details were the same.** In fact there are differences in detail and some events are mentioned in one and not in others.
2. Because the accounts were written some time after the events, it is not at all surprising that some small details were overlooked. I am convinced that each of the four writers mainly wrote independently from their own recollection of events. Each of the books has a characteristic emphasis and theme. It is not at all surprising that the events remembered by each author sometimes differ. **Although they may differ, they do not contradict in any matter of substance. Many scholars have dated Matthew as early AD 50's, Mark as AD 50-70, Luke as AD 59-63, and John as early 50's or not later than AD 70.** Also the book of Acts was written by Luke, who wrote

the Gospel of Luke. Acts is dated at AD 63 by most scholars. 1 Corinthians was written by Paul about AD 55.

3. If an attempt were made to fabricate these accounts then **it is highly unlikely that women would have been given such prominence in the resurrection events.** At that time women were considered unreliable and their evidence normally considered suspect.
4. The early disciples were consumed by one major reality, namely that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead. This was so firmly established in their own minds that they did not need to prove it by giving a step-by-step detailed account of events. To them it had been established beyond doubt and **they were ready to die for their conviction.** In fact, all but one of the 11 first disciples who had seen him alive did die martyr deaths.
5. The tabulated comparison of recorded events all combine to **give us an acceptable account of what happened.** There are no apparent contradictions that cannot be explained in a reasonable manner.

Wenham (1992) has analysed these resurrection accounts in considerable detail. He presents an entirely plausible reconstruction of the recorded events. Amongst other things, we need to realise that the resurrection, the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Christ, were all overwhelming events to those involved. **Just as witnesses to serious automobile accidents often give varying accounts of the events, in like manner each individual witness to the resurrection will tend to recall aspects not recalled by another witness.**

It should also be noted that belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ did not only depend on the empty tomb, the empty sunken grave cloths and the inability of anyone to find the body. **The main basis for belief by the early disciples was their own contact with the risen Jesus.**

Some of the commonly asked questions can be looked at in greater detail as follows:

Jesus was really dead

After sentence was pronounced on Jesus he was taken and whipped. **The Roman scourging, involved being stripped naked, tied to a post and beaten by a 'flagrum'. This whip had pieces of bone attached to increase injury.** The sufferer's veins were laid bare and the muscles, sinews and bowels of the victims were often exposed. No wonder he was so weakened that he could not carry his own cross to the execution site.

After a sleepless night in which he was given no food, endured the mockery of two trials and had his back lacerated with the cruel Roman cat-o'-nine tails, he was led out to execution by

crucifixion. This was an excruciatingly painful death in which every nerve in the body cried out in anguish.

The mutilation and death of Jesus has been dramatically portrayed by Mel Gibson's film *'The passion of the Christ'*. Crucifixion was a horrific death and, in the case of Jesus, this was made even worse by the beating he received and the crown of thorns pushed into his skull. The Roman executioners were experts at brutality and they certainly knew when their victims were dead.

The Roman governor required evidence of Jesus' death. Four executioners came to examine him and they were experienced in such matters. By the time the soldier pierced his side with a spear he was already dead. The recorded flow of blood and water has been described by medical people as evidence of extreme trauma and death. The writer of the New Testament book of John records this event in detail and the **flow of blood and water was so evident that he recorded it from personal observation**, while standing at the foot of the cross.

Michael Green (1976) writes, ***Very dead.** Roman executions were grimly thorough. As a matter of fact, the officer in charge of the execution was himself liable to the death penalty if his job was not done efficiently. In the case of Jesus, the execution squad saw that he was dead already, and so did not bother to break his legs (a barbaric way of ensuring the crucified wretches did not continue to raise themselves on their crosses and gulp in breath). But just to make doubly sure, they pierced his side with a spear, and **out came 'blood and water'**. This is fascinating detail, all the more remarkable because the writer could have no idea of its medical significance. But any doctor will tell you that the separation of the blood into clot and serum is one of the surest indications of death.*

The recorded flow of blood and water, after the spear thrust into his chest, is a medically known sign of extreme trauma. A famous physiologist, Samuel Houghton, from the University of Dublin, concluded, *There remains, therefore, no supposition possible to explain the recorded phenomenon except the combination of the crucifixion and rupture of the heart* (McDowell 1999).

The body was then obtained by a wealthy secret follower of Jesus and was prepared for burial in a cave carved out of the mountainside. These cave tombs can be seen today and were sealed by rolling a large circular stone in a groove across the entrance. McDowell quotes Professor Chandler who asserts that, *the remarkable circumstance of wrapping up the dead body in spices, by Joseph and Nicodemus, according to the manner of the Jews in burying, is full proof that Jesus was dead, and known to be dead. **Had there indeed been any remains of life in him, when taken down from the cross, the pungent nature of the Myrrh and Aloes, their strong smell, their bitterness, their being wrapped round his body in linens with a roller, and over his head and face with a napkin, as was the custom of the Jews to bury, must have entirely extinguished them.***

We are told that this embalming used 34 kg of spices and it was normal to wrap a body in about 20 meters of linen strips. This was such a tight binding that it was impossible for someone to escape from it, even if very much alive. This is further illustrated by the account of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. We read, *Jesus called out in a loud voice "Lazarus come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them "Take off the grave clothes and let him go"* (John 11:43-44).

In the case of Jesus, we read how Joseph and Nicodemus obtained the body of Jesus after asking Pilate for it. *Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 34 kilograms. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial custom.* (John 19:39-40).

In Luke's account we read, *the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment* (Luke 23:55-56).

Being country women, and no doubt rather awed by the presence of two leading members of the Jewish religious community, they probably followed at a respectful distance and were not aware of exactly what transpired within the cave tomb. Clearly they felt the desire to add even more spice and perfume to the body. The one account actually says, *Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb* (Matthew 27:61).

Some have suggested that there was not enough time, between the death of Jesus and the start of the Jewish Sabbath, in which to embalm the body with 34 kilograms of spices and meters of linen cloth. However, this argument can be refuted by the following possible order of events. We can reasonably assume that Joseph asked for the body soon after his death at 3-00 pm or maybe even before he died. No doubt he would have then instructed his servants to take the embalming spices and linen cloths to the garden tomb, while he and other servants went to the cross to collect the body. At the cross his team of servants wrapped the naked body in a linen sheet to facilitate carrying it. They then walked to the tomb that was, we are told, very close to the crucifixion site.

The crucifixion date has now been fairly conclusively established by scientific analysis, as Friday 3 April 33 AD. This was on the Jewish date of 14 Nisan and his death at 3-00 pm coincided with the time that the Passover lambs were traditionally slain by Jewish custom.

This scientific analysis, backed by astronomical data for lunar eclipses, was reported in the scientific journal *Nature* (Humphreys & Waddington 1983). Thus, **we can reasonably assume that the body would reach the tomb by 4-00 pm or the latest by 5-00 pm.** Joseph and his servants would now work feverishly for at least one and a half hours, until the start of the Jewish Sabbath. The Sabbath starts when the full moon rises and, from scientific analysis of the lunar eclipse on this date, this rising was at 6-20 pm on the 3rd April 33 AD.

Thus, even assuming that Joseph was a law-abiding Jew who would not continue working on the Sabbath, **his team still had adequate time to embalm the body in layers of spice and long strips of linen.** The spices used were aloe and myrrh and it is known that these two were mixed together with some water to form a thick and sticky liquid. The aloe was normally in the form of a dried out extract of aloe juice and the myrrh came from the gum that oozed from cuts in the tree *Commiphora myrrha*. Because of its sticky nature, each applied strip of linen stuck to the next, resulting in a body surrounded by a 'cocoon' of spice-impregnated linen strips.

Therefore, if we make the likely assumption that the servants had brought the spices and linen cloths to the tomb before the body was brought there, then any women who followed the procession could well have remained ignorant of what transpired within the small dark cave. There probably would have been a small crowd inside. We are told about Joseph and Nicodemus. Both of these were prominent men who would have used servants to carry the body of Jesus and servants to bring the large amount of spices and linen to the tomb and servants to roll the heavy stone across the cave entrance. It is very likely that the women had little idea what transpired within that cave. No wonder that, after seeing where Jesus had been taken, full of tears they set off, so as to reach their lodgings before the start of the Sabbath.

Understanding **these details of Jewish burial customs, helps explain the description of the resurrection of Jesus.** We read, *So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed* (John 20:3-8).

What did they see that made them believe? They saw the strips of linen bonded together with the 34 kg of sticky spices, still wrapped around the 'body' of Jesus. However, this cocoon of cloth and spices had simply sunk almost flat. **The body had apparently vaporised or teleported out through the cloth 'cocoon', without unwinding it.** The disciples simply knew that there was no way that the body could have left that cocoon except through supernatural means.

This resurrection drama is briefly portrayed in Mel Gibson's film. It is a pity that the brief sight of the grave cloths was not more realistic. We should have been shown the 'cocoon' of cloths, bound together with sticky spices, just like an Egyptian mummy. This mummy had now sunk because the body was gone, without unwinding the cloths!

If there was a Turin-type shroud of cloth beneath the strips of linen, this would be a surprise to me. True, the records do say that Joseph and Nicodemus placed the body of Jesus in a

linen cloth, but most probably this was only in order to carry his naked body from the crucifixion site to the tomb. To my mind it would be great if the Turin shroud was in fact part of the burial clothing. However, modern carbon 14 dating, and early church records, strongly indicate that this cloth was in fact originating from the Middle Ages.

It is very significant that the author of John's account did not try to explain why the disciples "saw and believed". To them it was obvious. They saw no need to explain further. With their background of burial customs at the time, they assumed the readers would realise that the body was wound round and round with cloths pasted with sticky ointments. They had recently witnessed the raising of Lazarus from the grave. He had managed to shuffle forward on his feet, but could not free himself from the tightly wound grave cloths and sticky spices.

This supernatural ability of the risen Jesus to pass through solid objects was demonstrated again on several occasions, such as when he appeared suddenly in a room where the doors were securely closed.

Clearly, theories suggesting that Jesus did not die but merely swooned, are not worth taking seriously. After a Roman scourging, a crucifixion, a spear through his side and embalming in meters of cloth pasted together with sticky spices, such a suggestion is a desperate attempt to escape the evidence. Furthermore, to suggest such a desperately wounded person could escape from the encircling grave cloths, roll away the stone weighing several tons and appear to his disciples well and very much alive, is beyond comprehension.

The Tomb

Jesus was laid in Joseph's own newly excavated cave tomb carved out of the mountainside, located right next to the crucifixion site. **Such cave tombs can be seen in Israel today.** (Matthew 27:59-60). Each gospel writer noticed a different aspect of the tomb. Matthew relates that it was Joseph's own tomb, John that it was in a garden and in the place where he was crucified. All except Mark noticed the newness of the tomb, but John does not mention that it belonged to Joseph.

We read that the Jewish authorities asked the Roman governor to place a guard at the tomb. Their stated reason was that they feared the disciples might come and steal the body and claim he had risen from the dead. **The recorded details surrounding the burial of Jesus are far more elaborate than for any other character in ancient history.** The 70 pounds of spice used, is a realistic amount. Joseph was a rich man and no doubt wanted to make up for his own cowardice during the lifetime of Jesus by giving him a splendid funeral. The amount, though great, has plenty of parallels. Historical records state that Rabbi Gamaliel, a contemporary of Jesus, was buried with eighty pounds of spices when he died.

The stone that was rolled across the entrance to the cave was very large and heavy. Such stones can be seen today. They weighed several tons and took many men to roll into place.

They were rolled within a groove that extended across the cave mouth floor, at the entrance. We read that a seal was placed on the stone and a guard set to prevent any attempted vandalising of the tomb and to avoid any person removing the body. **It seems that no one, not the Romans nor the Jewish authorities, nor anyone else, doubted that Jesus was dead and really was placed in that tomb.** Furthermore, extraordinary measures were taken to try and avoid removal of the body.

Historical documents confirm that the Roman army had very harsh measures against any soldier sleeping on duty. Eighteen offences of soldiers were punishable by death including 'leaving the night watch'. For this reason I believe **it is most likely that the guard was actually not composed of Roman soldiers, but rather by members of the temple guard.** These were Jewish people, not directly answerable to the Roman authority. Possibly the guard was composed of the same group that arrested Jesus, armed with swords and clubs (Matthew 26:47 & 26: 57-58). We read that Peter followed at a distance and then, *entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome.*

After the death of Jesus, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate to ask for a guard for the tomb. Pilate answered, *"Take a guard. Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how". So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting a guard* (Matthew 27:65-66). Some translations say instead of 'take', *"you have a guard"*, probably implying that they should use their own temple guard.

The guards had plenty of reason to be fearful. The earthquake, the appearance of a dazzling white angel, the broken seal and the stone rolled to one side and the empty tomb. So we read, *There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men... While the women went on their way (to the tomb), some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them. "You are to say. His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep. If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble" So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed* (Matthew 28:2-15).

The fact that this guard reported first to the Jewish authorities further emphasises their Temple guard status. However, these temple guards were also highly organised and disciplined. Descriptions of the tight discipline, in Jewish records, include, *During the night the captain of the Temple made his rounds. On his approach the guards had to rise and salute him in a particular manner. Any guard found asleep when on duty was beaten, or his garments were set on fire.* Similar descriptions are found in the Jewish *Mishnah* (McDowell 1999). Thus, regardless of whether the guard was Roman or Jewish, it was a serious matter that they had somehow allowed the body of Jesus to disappear.

If the guard had been composed of Roman soldiers it is very unlikely that giving money could bring the matter to an end. Their very lives would have been at stake and it is most unlikely that the matter would not have got back to Pilate in some way. However, even as the Jewish temple guard, they were still in danger of running into trouble from the Roman authorities, because they could be accused of themselves tampering with the tomb and this was against Roman law.

The body had gone

Finding the body of Jesus was of utmost importance to the Jewish authorities. Such a find would be the ultimate proof that he had not risen from the dead, as now claimed by his followers. Clearly the Jewish authorities had not stolen the body or else they would have produced it. The great fear of the Jewish authorities was that the disciples might steal the body and pretend that Jesus had risen from the dead. Anyone suggesting this scenario needs to face the following facts:

1. The tomb was guarded and sealed.
2. It would take several strong men to roll away the stone that weighed several tons.
3. How to explain the cocoon of spice laden grave clothes lying there without a body within.
4. People will die for a cause they really believe in but not to uphold what they know is a lie. How do we explain the fact that all but one of the original eleven disciples ultimately died a martyr death rather than deny 'Jesus and his resurrection'. In other words, all those closest followers, who might have had a reason to fake a resurrection, were in fact convinced that such a resurrection did take place. Even John, who was not martyred, landed up in jail on the island of Patmos.
5. The disciples were not particularly heroic. When Jesus was arrested they all abandoned him. After his death they met in fear behind locked doors. The first to witness the empty tomb were women. They had difficulty persuading the disciples to believe it.
6. It was only when Jesus himself appeared to the disciples in various situations, over a period of weeks, that they all finally believed the normally unbelievable. One of the inner circle, Thomas, was not present when Jesus appeared the first time to the disciples, gathered behind locked doors. We read, *now Thomas, one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it". A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe"* Thomas said to him, *"My Lord and my God!"* (John 20:24-28).

7. What event, other than the resurrection, could explain the transformation of this group of doubting and fearful people into dynamic and brave witnesses. What other dynamic could have led, within a few years, to turning the Roman world 'upside down'. This only happened as thousands of convinced followers of the risen Jesus proclaimed the message throughout the empire and beyond. Thousands of these were cruelly killed, because they refused the apparently simple alternative of calling the Roman Caesar God. They would not do it because of the reality of the risen Jesus and their conviction that he was indeed the One true God in human form.
8. When the disciples began to preach the resurrection in Jerusalem and the Jewish religious leaders stood helplessly by, this was a sure sign that they could not locate the body. Furthermore, it was hard to refute the eye witness accounts of literally hundreds of people who had seen, touched and spoken to the risen Jesus, in a variety of places over several weeks.
9. Those who have tried to find alternative explanations for the crucifixion and resurrection events, may come up with theories relating to one or two aspects of these events. However, **no-one can come up with a satisfactory alternative that can come anywhere near explaining away all the many and varied evidence outlined above. The resurrection of Jesus is a fact of history that many great minds have tried to refute, but all have failed.**

The ultimate reality

A fundamental teaching that comes through the pages of the Bible is this: *Without Faith it is impossible to please God.* Faith starts from the basis of what we know, but it involves reaching out beyond what can be seen, touched and proven academically.

So it is with the resurrection. We start by using our God given intellects. We look at the evidence for the reliability of the Bible documents, we look at the evidence for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is all as a basis for our faith. However, we never discover the ultimate reality of the resurrection until we step out by faith and take hold of the offer made to mankind. This offer is that, as we reach out in faith to God, he reaches out to us. But God lays down some simple yet profoundly important guidelines that enable us to discover this reality in our own experience.

The discovery, in our own experience, that the Jesus of Calvary is indeed who he claimed to be, is the ultimate proof to us that the resurrection of Jesus is a reality.

In my 'God by Evolution' book I outlined some personal experiences of God acting supernaturally in my own life situations. These experiences are also available from my webpage www.factandfaith.co.za as a free download called 'Personal journey of discovery'. These experiences, together with my intellectual searches, led me to the point where I had a firm base from which to reach out further by faith. I then took Jesus at his word and decided

to put in place his guidelines on how to know God in personal experience. Now, looking back over some twenty five years, I have no doubt of the reality of God, nor of his revelation to mankind through Jesus his unique Son.

Through Jesus and his resurrection we can echo the words of the fisherman disciple called Peter. This is the same Peter who denied he even knew Jesus when he was arrested. However, this same **Peter was transformed into a very courageous evangelist after his experiences with the risen Jesus and the empowerment that came to all of the first disciples on the Day of Pentecost.** Peter wrote, *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time* (1 Peter: 1:3-5).

CONCLUSIONS

My personal conclusion, based in part on the reasons outlined in this article, is that it is very important to take Jesus Christ seriously. This has the potential to change our lives, our attitudes, our priorities, our hopes and fears. It has the potential to give us a real and enduring purpose to life.

In addition, **it enables us to take seriously what Jesus has said about events that we can expect as we are now entering the 'End of the Age'.** Jesus said, *At that time the sign of the Son of Man (Jesus) will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other* (Matthew 24:30-31)

Why will the nations mourn? Surely because they will see that the one they have ridiculed and neglected and so often used as a swear word and failed to take seriously, is the same one who now returns with great power. **He is the one before whom every knee will bow.**

As Paul wrote: *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:*

Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing,

taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place

and gave him the name that is above every name,

that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11)

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