



Is Jesus' Resurrection a Historical Fact?

by Dr. David Crabtree

This article is adapted from a talk given on Easter Sunday, April 8, 2012, at Reformation Fellowship, a church in Eugene, Oregon.

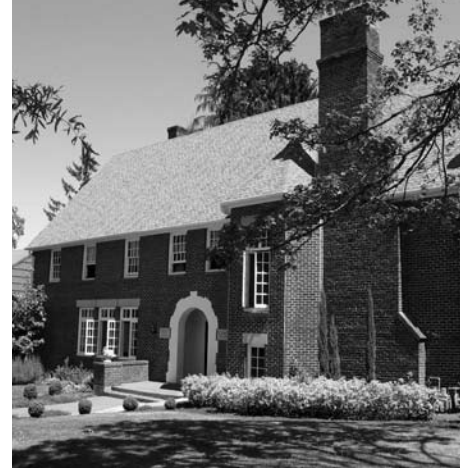
In some respects, the time in which we live is a very fortunate one for us as Christians. We know more about the culture and daily life of Israel in the time of Jesus than has been known for almost two millennia. This is in part due to the development of the science of archaeology. Archaeology in Israel was first practiced about a hundred years ago. Some of the initial finds were significant and dramatic, but archaeologists were looking exclusively for sensational discoveries. It took several decades for archaeologists to realize that archaeology is best suited to recovering the mundane and that the mundane would have to be reconstructed from pieces of broken pottery, lost coins, spilled grain, and discarded toilets.

The amount that has been learned in more recent times is astounding. After the initial period of digging, the political environment around the time of the two world wars made digging much more difficult. But after the Six-Day War in 1967, in which Israel gained possession of Jerusalem and the West Bank, a flurry of archaeological activity greatly expanded our knowledge. Then in the late 1970s and 1980s, there was a bit of a lull, but since the beginning of the 1990s the digs have produced a huge quantity of significant finds. And not only is more being found, but the methods of analyzing the evidence have become extremely sophisticated. I

am in awe of all the kinds of information archaeologists are currently able to wring from each artifact they uncover.

In addition to artifacts, some very important documents have also been found. In 1948, the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. These writings revealed Israel at the time of Jesus to have been a much more religiously diverse culture than was previously thought. Scholars are still pouring over these documents for clues to better understand the culture of Israel in the first century. These documents are, by the way, readily available to everyone via the World Wide Web.

I learned about another development just a few months ago that I find particularly interesting. In the 1960s, three highly respected Jewish scholars decided to study the New Testament as a means of better understanding the social and religious culture of Israel. In Jewish culture, there is generally great animosity toward Christianity, and any Jew who shows interest in the New Testament is taking a great risk. But these scholars, who had already gained great respect in the Jewish academic world, were above reproach. They pursued their studies over the course of a couple of decades. Drawing upon their knowledge of Jewish writings, they were able to bring to life aspects of the New Testament that gentile New Testament scholars were not in a position to appreciate. These Jewish scholars each took apprentices under their wings to train to carry on this work. Those apprentices are now writing books. Interestingly, however, those apprentices are



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all gentiles because such an area of study was too risky for a Jew who did not already have a sterling reputation.

I find all of these developments extremely exciting. Thanks to these developments it is now possible to piece together a picture of Jewish society and culture at the time of Christ that has not been known since the second century. One result of this is that the Gospels and the book of Acts have been largely vindicated as historical records. And if the Gospels are shown to be reliable historical accounts, then the account of Jesus' resurrection from the dead becomes more reliable.

But to say that the Gospels are being seen as reliable historical records comes short of saying that there is proof for the resurrection of Jesus. It seems like Easter is an appropriate time to ask the question: Can we know that it is a historical fact that Jesus rose from the dead?

The Enlightenment, starting in the seventeenth century, was largely a search for logically certain knowledge. In the wake of the religious wars that laid Europe waste, the idea of a knowledge that was so certain that it required no faith was very attractive. But that project failed. It is simply the case that the most important things that we



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know are not merely a matter of logical deduction. The most important things we know are judgments as to what is the most reasonable interpretation of the facts we have to work with. I cannot prove that I exist. I cannot prove that Japan exists. I cannot prove that you are here. I cannot prove that if I let go of a pencil that it will fall. If logical certainty is the measure of knowledge, I know nothing.

Nevertheless, there is much that I know to be true. There is much that my God-given rationality enables me to judge to be true. I know quite a lot, as do each of you. But what we know are judgments rather than proven facts. This is just the nature of knowledge.

This is certainly no less true with respect to historical claims. Since all understandings of history are judgments based on the available evidence, it is possible to doubt any historical claim. This ability to doubt any historical claim has been greatly enhanced by the fact that we live in a skeptical age. Our culture is dubious that anything can be known. We have become accustomed to competing truth claims. We feel like we are constantly being marketed to. In response to this, we have developed an entrenched agnosticism towards all truths and even truth itself. It seems to me that we have become weary of being able to say we know anything.

The skepticism of our culture is an obstacle for biblical faith. The perspective of the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, is deeply rooted in history. Consider for a moment how much of the Bible is historical narrative. This is because there is a very important interplay between history and the biblical perspective.

True Christianity is not just a coping mechanism to help us get through life. It is not just a therapeutic philosophy. It is not just another self-help fad. If it were, it would be best evaluated on the basis of whether or not it makes us happier. Were this the basis of evaluation, Christianity would not fare well. As C. S. Lewis said, on this basis a bottle of wine or some American invention would do better.

Rather, true Christianity should be judged on the basis of whether or not it is true—does

it square with reality? Christians, of all people, should be the ones who fearlessly grab reality by the lapels, stare it in the face, and ask, "What kind of a thing are you?" If Christianity does not match reality, then it has no significant value.

But the understanding of reality that the Bible presents is not intuitively obvious. From the biblical perspective, reality is just the forum in which we deal with our God and he deals with us. We are creatures

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living in a created universe in which God, the Creator, is constantly at work in and through everything around us. But he acts covertly. He acts through gravity. He acts through public opinion. He acts through friends and acquaintances. At least 99.99 percent of what he does can be explained by physics, chemistry, sociology, psychology, economics, political science, etc. Most of God's activity is so heavily draped in the mundane that it is easy to think that he is not there at all.

However, God has chosen to act overtly and obviously a few times in world history such that large numbers of people could see. The prime example of this is the Exodus. God performed several miracles for all of the Jews, all of Egypt, and even other peoples to see. The Old Testament authors frequently refer to this event as evidence that God is intimately involved in the affairs of this world and, more specifically, that he is lovingly engaged with the people of Israel. Rare events like this, when God acts overtly in history, are critical for us because they are reassurance that the biblical description of reality, which is otherwise hard to verify, is indeed true.

The resurrection is another such overt event. In fact, it is the most important such

event. The resurrection not only proves that God is active in the world, it also proves that Jesus was the Messiah who delivered a God-breathed understanding of reality to mankind. The resurrection was proof that Jesus was who he claimed to be. Paul said, "If Christ did not raise from the dead, we are the most to be pitied." In other words, if Jesus was not really the Messiah, we who are believers are living a fantasy.

So there is a lot at stake. Not all facts were created equal. If some facts were not true, their not being true would make little difference. But the question of whether or not Jesus rose from the dead is infinitely important. So as we come back to the question—Can we know that Jesus rose from the dead?—much is riding on the answer.

I think we can know that Jesus rose from the dead. Whole books have been written on this subject, and I will not review the evidence now. But as I reflect on this question, I mainly consider this: Having looked at and thought about the Gospel accounts over a number of years, I have grown to have great confidence in the Gospel writers as individuals. I have come to trust them. And they testified that they witnessed the resurrection of Jesus. Because I have come to trust the Gospel writers as individuals, I judge their testimony to be trustworthy. Therefore, I have every confidence that Jesus Christ of Nazareth died on the cross and rose from the dead on the third day. And because he did, we will too, one day.

In Russian culture, it is the practice at this time of year to greet one another with the following exchange:

One person says, "Христос воскрес! (*Khristos voskryes!*)" which means "Christ has risen!"

The other responds, "Во истину воскрес! (*Vo istinu voskryes!*)" which means "He has risen indeed!"

These are short sentences, but their significance is enormous.

Христос воскрес! (*Khristos voskryes!*)

Dr. David Crabtree is the president and a tutor at Gutenberg College. He has a Ph.D. in history, and he is a co-author of The Language of God: A Commonsense Approach to Understanding and Applying the Bible.



Computer Passion and a Gutenberg Education by James Simas

I've always been fascinated with computers. I can still vividly remember the day when my father brought home our new Windows 95 laptop and turned it on in our kitchen. He showed me how you use it to play music, browse the internet, and (perhaps most important to an eight-year-old) play checkers with cartoon frogs. I was hooked.

From there on out, I invested a significant amount of free time in trying to understand this fascinating object. My interest in and skill with computers grew until, several years later, I saved up money one summer from mowing lawns and bought my own computer in the fall of 2001. I was fourteen.

Over the next couple of years, I decided that I would continue expanding my knowledge and began considering going to college for a computer science degree. In spite of these aspirations, I was persuaded by my loving parents to try out Gutenberg for "just one year." They said that if I did not want to continue there after my trial run, they would help me move to another school in the career of my choice.

With this promise in mind, I began attending Gutenberg in 2004. When my first year was finished, I decided that it would be worth my time and energy to see it through to the end. I graduated from Gutenberg in 2008 and now work for Symantec, a software company, as a technical support engineer.

When I tell people my higher education background, I often receive surprised reactions. An education in philosophy, history, and liberal arts is not often seen as beneficial or relevant to my line of work. While it is true that not everything I learned at Gutenberg is relevant to my career, I believe that Gutenberg was an excellent investment of my time and energy. Gutenberg helped me grow as a human being in a way that technology does not, and, given the choice, I would do it again.

Although my experience at Gutenberg helped and changed me in too many ways to count, the two things I most appreciate are that it caused me to ask (and begin answering) many questions about existence, and it gave me a more mature perspective on technology. Let me explain.

First, while reading through the Great Books, many of my ideas, beliefs, and assumptions about reality were repeatedly challenged by some of the greatest authors of Western civilization. For example, David Hume's proposal that we cannot know the cause of phenomena began in me a long process of fleshing out my own views on epistemology. While I've ultimately concluded that Hume's conclusions are incorrect (I think we can know causes), the process of internal dialogue it took to reach this conclusion has helped me better understand the world, sharpened my intellect, and allowed me to articulate my position (and the reasoning behind it) better than I would have been able to otherwise.

Furthermore, since the authors of the Great Books speak on an amazing array of topics—ranging from ethics and politics to theology (to name a few)—I have been similarly challenged in other areas of my life. This process has deepened my understanding of many important aspects of life and has proved extremely rewarding.

Second, my time at Gutenberg changed my perspective on technology and computers significantly. Prior to Gutenberg, I had allowed these interests to infiltrate every aspect of my life, and I had few interests outside of them. Several of the works I read in my time at Gutenberg (specifically, those by the French philosopher Jacques Ellul) caused me to view computers (and all technological progress) in a different light.

I began to realize that technology, in spite of all the amazing benefits it can bring, says

nothing about the maturity of a society. A technologically advanced society can also be spiritually, morally, and teleologically bankrupt. This realization helped me see that I need to be sure to also invest my time in things which will benefit my soul, even if it means less time spent with my passion.

With this in mind, I've begun focusing more of my time and energies on projects and friendships which nurture and grow me into a more mature human being. While this has not been an easy change to make, I feel it is worthwhile.

In conclusion, Gutenberg has helped me critically examine my fundamental beliefs and, in doing so, helped me relegate computers and technology to a more appropriate place in my life. This experience and Gutenberg's project has benefited me in ways which will last my entire life. My four years at Gutenberg changed me in ways that I will forever appreciate.

James Simas graduated from Gutenberg in 2008. He is now a technical support engineer for Symantec in Springfield, Oregon.

Gutenberg College Commencement June 15 at 7:00 PM

Gutenberg College cordially invites you to the Commencement Ceremony for the class of 2012. The ceremony will take place at Central Lutheran Church (1857 Potter Street in Eugene) at 7:00 PM. Speaking at this year's commencement will be Gutenberg tutor Tim McIntosh.

In addition to teaching writing to Gutenberg freshmen and sophomores, McIntosh is a playwright, screenwriter, and actor. He has also written several plays for student productions at Gutenberg College. He earned his M.A. in theology from Reformed Theological Seminary.



A reception at Gutenberg College will immediately follow the ceremony.

Good Listening from “Acts” to “What We Believe” at www.msc.gutenberg.edu/audio

For over thirty years, the faculty of Gutenberg College have taught both biblical and worldview studies. Much of their teaching has been preserved and made available to the public by Gutenberg’s McKenzie Study Center institute, whose mission is to promote a commitment to what the Bible teaches. More than sixty series and many individual talks are available to download for free in the Audio section of Gutenberg’s website and also on Gutenberg’s site at Apple Inc.’s iTunes University (iTunes U).

Some recent additions include David Crabtree’s talks on the book of Isaiah and talks from Gutenberg’s 2004 Oktoberfuss Conference (“Personal Bible Study: Some Reflections” by Jack Crabtree; “Notes on the Intersection of Art and Belief” by R. Wesley Hurd; “Whole, Parts, and Holy Parts” by David Crabtree; and “Driven by Purpose” by Ron Julian). Other series include “Dealing With Fear and Anxiety,” “Being a Spiritual Person,” “Prayer,” “Church History,” “Environmental Ethics,” “Kierkegaard’s Coffee House,” and studies on twenty-four books of the Bible.

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