

Jesus and the Pink Little Bunny

“As the centuries pass, the evidence is accumulating that, measured by His effect on history, Jesus is the most influential life ever lived on this planet.”

-Kenneth Scott Latourette

I can think of only one time that I have ever lost my cool with someone when I was sharing my faith.

We had taken a team of college students to London, England, for a short-term missions trip and were out on the streets one evening talking with people about Jesus when we met two men in their early thirties who were quite hateful. The reason I was upset is that one of them had gotten in my wife's face, said some derogatory things that were unrelated to anything spiritual, and upset her quite a bit. They had pointed their fingers in her face and yelled at her. I think the two never suspected that I was upset – I only lost my cool inwardly – but I remember thinking that I needed to keep my mouth shut and listen for awhile to avoid any major confrontation.

One of the two men went on and on about his imaginary “pink little bunny.” He pretended he was cradling his imaginary bunny in his arms and would mime as if he were petting its fur. My friend Bill couldn't get a word in edgewise. Anytime he tried to make a point about Jesus or even bring the conversation around to Jesus, the man would turn it around and apply the same point to his pink little bunny. For example, if Bill expressed the need to put our trust in Jesus for salvation, the man would say that he had placed his trust in the pink little bunny. He put his face right up in Bill's face and yelled, saying he couldn't believe that Bill wouldn't accept his pink little bunny into his heart. He kept yelling, *“Why won't you put your trust in my pink little bunny?! Huh? Ask him into your heart!”* He would act as if he were trying to place his bunny into Bill's arms. Essentially, he was trying to get his point across that he saw as much evidence for Jesus as he did for an imaginary pink little bunny. He considered Christians fools and believed we were narrow-minded idiots for believing what we believe.

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So, the question is this: *Is* there any difference between Jesus Christ and this man's imaginary pink little bunny? Is the Gospel a fairy tale that someone concocted a couple thousand years ago that happened to catch on and spread around the world? Is there a difference between Jesus and Santa Claus or Jesus and the Tooth Fairy, or is Jesus just another myth that people believe in to comfort themselves? These are very important questions that need to be addressed.

Christianity is not a blind faith. It is a faith based on evidence. It is not a philosophy or a self-help religion. If the basic facts that Christianity is founded on – namely, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus – are not true, the whole thing falls apart. If the events are not historically accurate, the religion itself is a sham, a myth, and a lie. It is important that we are able to articulate why we believe what we believe.

Concerning the resurrection of Jesus, the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 15:14, “*And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.*” In other words, if the actual event of the resurrection didn't take place in history, you can forget Christianity altogether; the whole religion is worthless.

Is there a difference between Jesus and Santa Claus or Jesus and the Tooth Fairy?

The remainder of this chapter will be dedicated to arguments that show that Jesus was not a myth. For the sake of our purposes here, they will be broken down into manageable chunks that can be readily absorbed and remembered. Of course, entire encyclopedias could be written on this topic. In this book, however, we will focus on ideas and arguments that can be understood easily and that are practical in terms of our witness on a daily basis. For a more detailed examination, see “*additional reading*” at the end of the next chapter.

Remember, though, that there will be some people who are not interested in the evidence or who, for whatever reason, are predisposed to believe something else. The evidence presented in this chapter does, in my

opinion, logically eliminate the possibility that Jesus was a mere myth. However, some people will believe what they choose *in spite of* the evidence. There are many people today who believe that Elvis is still alive. As mentioned in the last chapter, just because the facts say otherwise doesn't mean that people will stop believing what they want to believe.

The Minimal Facts: In *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, authors Gary Habermas and Mike Licona present evidence using what they call a “*minimal facts*” approach. I will let them describe this approach in their own words: “*This approach considers only those data that are so strongly attested historically that they are granted by nearly every scholar who studies the subject, even the rather skeptical ones.*” (1)

Dr. Habermas' research included more than 1400 modern-day sources (from 1975 to the present) in three different languages (English, German, and French). The following facts were part of what he concluded were the minimal facts, or the facts on which nearly every scholar in the field would agree.

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1. Jesus died due to crucifixion.

2. Jesus' disciples sincerely believed Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to them.

3. The church persecutor Paul was changed suddenly.

4. The skeptic James, brother of Jesus, was changed suddenly.

(The evidence for these minimal facts can be examined, not only as recorded in the Gospels and the Epistles, but also in the non-biblical works of Josephus, Tacitus, Lucian of Samosata, Mara Bar-Serapion, Clement, Polycarp, Ignatius, Tertullian, Origen, The Talmud, and more. Again, it is unfortunate that a discussion of each of these is inappropriate in the scope of this text. I urge each reader to continue further reading as detailed in the following chapter.)

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These four facts, on which nearly every scholar would agree, imply much more than they themselves state. Specifically, these four facts indicate the clear truth that Jesus was a real and historical individual.

To have died by crucifixion, for others to believe He was resurrected, and even to have a brother at all, indicate that His existence as a historical being is not even under question by nearly all scholars who study the field.

Of course, the consensus of these facts does not prove the historicity of Jesus with absolute certainty. In fact, in terms of history, scholars can never use phrases like “absolute certainty” or “100% sure.” Because the events occurred in the past, we must rely on evidence which supports “strength of probability” instead. In other words, we cannot be 100%

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certain about any facts in history, but we can study the evidence and determine with great certainty whether an event or events actually transpired. This is the case with Jesus. Based on the information that we have today, the evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of the facts described above. Is it possible to believe that Jesus never existed? Yes, but to believe so puts a person at odds with facts that nearly every scholar who has studied the issue finds to be true. Is it possible that all of the scholars who believe these facts are incorrect? Of course it's

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possible, but we must admit that it is unlikely. In other words, given the evidence, it takes more faith to believe in Jesus as a fairy tale than it does to believe in Him as a real, historical entity.

Compare this to my English friend's pink little bunny. Obviously, there is no comparison at all. History leans strongly in favor of Jesus as a real historical figure who drew a following of believers and began a religion that changed the world. There is no evidence whatsoever for the pink little bunny. Trusting in his bunny would be blind faith. Trusting in Jesus is not.

Did the Myth Arise from the Minimal Facts? The basic facts of Jesus as a historical being can be shown with relative certainty, but this doesn't establish the truth of Christianity as a whole. To do so requires still further investigation of the facts.

Some skeptics argue that Jesus was a real, historical entity but that *Christianity* arose from myth. In essence, they might say that the traditions of Christianity were passed on for quite some time through word-of-mouth testimony and stories told to children. Eventually, they were written down, but by that time they had been blown greatly out of proportion and exaggerated. These traditions are sometimes compared to the telephone game played by children, in which a message is whispered in the ear of a child and then passed around the room from child to child until, at the end, the message has been distorted greatly.

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Is this fair? Is it possible that the stories we have now pertaining to Jesus are highly exaggerated stories that have no basis in reality? Is it possible that Jesus never said many of the things that are attributed to Him?

Is it possible that He never meant to be worshiped as God? These, too, are important questions that demand answers. The following points will help.

There was very little time for myth to arise: Somewhere in your home you more than likely have copies of three letters that were written very close to the middle of the first century A.D. You may not have recognized them as such, but chances are good that you own them. They are called 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, and 1 Corinthians.

For the sake of our discussion here, it is not important that we treat these books as the inspired Word of God (although I firmly believe they

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are). Instead, we will treat them as what virtually every skeptic must admit that they are: letters that were passed back and forth among real individuals, and real churches, sometime in or around the middle of the first century. By the vast majority of scholars, these books are dated AD 49-52 (1 Thessalonians), AD 48-57 (Galatians), and AD 54-58 (1 Corinthians). (2)

Why are these dates important? They are important because these letters tell us a great deal about what people believed concerning Jesus at these times.

The content of 1 Thessalonians makes it clear that as early as AD 49-52, a church had already been established in Thessalonica, which in turn had already (at that time) influenced other congregations of believers in Macedonia and Achaia (1:7). It shows that they believed Jesus had been raised from the dead and was returning (1:10,3:13, & 4:13-18), that they were imitating churches that had already been established in Judea (2:14), that there were Christians throughout Macedonia (4:10), and that they believed salvation was received through Jesus (5:9-10). All of this was within the time frame of approximately sixteen to twenty-two years following the crucifixion.

The writing in Galatians also shows that by the time it was written, there was already an established church in the area. It clearly had been there for some time because Paul had had enough time to go away after helping found the church, and corrupting influences had begun to

infiltrate (1:6-9). It also shows that this established early church believed that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead (1:1). It documents Paul's travels throughout the land and his interaction with Peter, James, Titus, and Barnabas (1:13 – 2:14). It, too, shows the church's belief that salvation comes through Jesus Christ (3:10-14). It establishes that Paul had been teaching the Gospel for about seventeen years prior to this writing (1:18 & 2:1). These things were written between seventeen and twenty-seven years after the crucifixion (keeping in mind that most scholars place the crucifixion around AD 30 – 33).

And finally, 1 Corinthians is invaluable to us for the same reasons and even more. Namely, the earliest known Christian creed is found in Chapter 15:3-7, which says, *“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”*

This creed makes it clear that the church at that time believed in the literal death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It claims that this creed was passed on to Paul at an early date (some scholars argue within three to seven years of the crucifixion). At the very latest, these things were clearly believed and embraced by many within about twenty-five years of the events as they happened.

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Perhaps the most compelling evidence as far as this point is concerned is found in the writings of the ancient historian Cornelius Tacitus, who has been referred to as the greatest historian of ancient Rome. Writing in approximately AD 109, Tacitus, a non-Christian, says the following concerning the burning of Rome in AD 64:

*“Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, **an immense multitude was convicted**, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.” (3)*

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In this non-Biblical passage we have ample proof that there was not enough time for myth to arise. This non-Christian historian, who is known as a man who wrote with accuracy and integrity, affirms that by the year AD 64 there was an “*immense multitude*” (*multitudo ingens*) of Christians who were convicted and sentenced to torture and death. This

immense multitude only accounts for the Christians who were sentenced to die. It says nothing of the others who went on to propagate the Christian faith.

In conclusion, we have documented evidence in the form of letters and even a non-Christian, well-recognized ancient historian that makes it very clear that, at a minimum, within a couple of decades of

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the events themselves, people were worshiping Jesus as God. They believed that He had died and risen again, they believed that He was returning soon, and they were establishing churches throughout the land to reach people with the message of the Gospel. Within approximately thirty years, there were enough Christians in just the area of Rome that an “*immense multitude*” could be found. They were willing to die for their faith. And this does not account for the Christians spread throughout other parts of the world or Christians in the area of Rome who were not captured and put to death. Clearly, it seems, there was not enough time for myth to arise.

The New Testament was written by people who claimed to have firsthand knowledge: As mentioned before, Luke 1:1-4 says, “*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*”

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Essentially, what we have here is the introduction of a letter written from one man (Luke) to another man (Theophilus). It is no different than my beginning a letter by writing, “*Hey John, H.L. here. I’ve got some more information for you that I collected from the people who saw what went down.*” These were real people in real human history.

The author of this letter claimed to have collected the information firsthand by talking with the people involved. Either he had or he hadn't. It is either the truth or a lie. Someone at some point wrote this letter. Suggesting that this arose from highly exaggerated word-of-mouth testimony is simply foolishness. The possibility that time destroyed the reality of the evidence does not exist. Either the author really did interview the people involved or he didn't. If he didn't, who did? When? Why did they lie – not exaggerate, but blatantly lie? What was their motive? How did they convince people it was true? Why would someone blatantly lie to create a document that has done so much to propagate honesty? The idea creates far more complications and questions than it answers. It makes a great deal of sense to accept the authorship at face value. This was written by the person who signed the document.

1 John 1 is chock full of references declaring that the author was involved personally with the people and events about which he wrote: “*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And*

*our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. **This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you.***”

Again, for this and many other references in the New Testament, the arguments are the same. These documents were written by those who claimed personal involvement. It comes down to a matter not of myth or non-myth, but rather of truth or non-truth. Someone at some point sat down and wrote the words of Luke 1:1-4, which claims he had carefully investigated the matters personally. Either the author was telling the truth or he was lying. Someone at some point wrote the words, “*This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down.*” (John 21:24) It is either the truth or a lie. Either it was actually the disciple who saw these events with his own eyes, or it was an impostor and a liar. If these are lies, who wrote them? When did they write them? Why? How did they convince people of their truth? There is no room for myth or exaggeration here. Instead, the skeptic is faced with two choices, and neither seems very appealing. Either these people were eyewitnesses when they wrote these things, or they were liars. If they were liars, they were part of a group of liars who more than likely must have come together at some point to coordinate their lies with one another. They would have had to have done so quite some time before the middle of the first century AD (which, by the way, destroys forever the possibilities presented in the *fictional* work *The Da Vinci Code*.) These letters were written at different times throughout the years in very different geographic locations, far separated from the other authors. If the basics

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of Christianity are not true, there must have been a conspiracy among people to deceive others into believing – a conspiracy of geniuses who executed their plan so perfectly that after two thousand years, billions of people follow the religion they concocted. After two thousand years of emperors trying to squash it and some of the most brilliant minds in history trying to discredit it, the New Testament message is still going strong. If these men were liars, they were liars with an intellect and a plan that also could be considered even supernaturally brilliant. And, of course, we must also ask the question: Why did they lie? If the letters are based on lies, what caused these men to lie in such a way? What was their motive? The skeptic has a great many questions to answer in order to substantiate arguments that the Gospel arose from myth.

They don't sound like myth: The Gospels and Epistles do not use language like, “*A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away.*” Instead, they name actual dates, times, and places.

Have you ever been reading along in the New Testament and found yourself skimming, or skipping entirely, passages that say something along the lines of, “*In the region of such-and-such, during the reign of so-and-so, there was a man named (choose a name). This was during the festival of (choose a festival)*”?

We skim these passages because they come across as boring or impractical. But have you ever considered why all of these passages are in the Bible? It is because these were real events that happened in real history in real places and at real times. In the Gospel of Luke alone,

Luke mentions thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities, and nine islands without a single error. (4) And we must remember that Luke had no Internet to refer to or even libraries with vast numbers of maps and books that he could skim. In such circumstances, the author of Luke must be considered startlingly accurate. This was a man who had done his homework.

Another way the New Testament comes across as non-myth is in its inclusion of material that is distinctly “*non-spiritual*.” For example, in 1 Corinthians 9 we find Paul arguing that, in spite of the fact that he has chosen not to do so, he and Barnabas have the same right to take a believing wife along with them as the other apostles do. He says, basically, “*Barnabas and I are the same as everyone else where this is concerned. If we wanted to take a wife along with us we could, we just choose not to do so.*”

If this book came about by myth and exaggerated word-of-mouth testimony, why is this passage and many more along the same lines included? (See 1 Timothy 5:23, Colossians 4:7-18, and 1 Peter 5:12-14 for other examples.) If one is honest in reading this, it simply sounds like a letter that one real person wrote to another real person (or persons). It doesn't sound like a fairy tale; rather, it comes across as strikingly genuine.

An even bigger miracle happened: In 1928, Phillip Schaff, in his seven-volume set titled *History of the Christian Church*, estimated that by AD 100, the total number of Christians living in the world was approximately 500,000. (5) More recently, however, research by the Center for the

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Study of Global Christianity, which is now at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, indicates that this number is closer to 800,000. (6) If the rise of Christianity can be attributed to myth alone, how can these numbers be possible?

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This creates a very difficult situation for the skeptic of Christianity because the stories were fabricated either early on in the first century or much later (as most skeptics would have us believe).

If the stories were created early on, how were people convinced that events were happening right there among them – among their friends, neighbors, parents, and grandparents – if these events never happened at all? They not only were convinced, but they were convinced to the point that an “*immense multitude*” was willing to die for what they believed? What accounts for this?

If the stories were created much later, what accounts for our earlier report from Tacitus? If the stories were created much later, how were thousands and even hundreds of thousands of people convinced in such a brief period that they were genuine?

We are faced with a paradox if the stories are simply stories with no factual basis. Either the basic truths of Christianity were invented early on, which runs contrary to the way myths develop – no skeptic would

want to admit this as a possibility – or they were invented and greatly embellished at a much later date, in which case we must ask how it is possible to convince “*multitudes*” that they are true. Which is easier: to convince a few hundred people something happened in their midst that never really happened, or to convince multitudes of people to convert to a new and radical religion that did not exist before and do so in a very short period of time? Both are exceedingly improbable possibilities. The more probable possibility is that the events actually did happen in the lives of these people and that the religion began to grow from there.

This can be summed up best by Thomas Aquinas, who said, *“If the incarnation didn’t happen, a bigger miracle happened: the conversion of the world by the world’s biggest lie, and moral transformation of lives by mere myth.”*

Considering the facts discussed above, it is still possible to believe that Jesus never actually existed. It is possible to think that perhaps He did exist but that His story was highly embellished and exaggerated. However,

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to do so, as we mentioned before, requires more faith than it does scholarship. Rest assured, if you choose to believe the basic truths of Christianity, you have good grounds to do so. You can also feel confident that, after studying this material, you can share your faith effectively with all but the most hardened skeptics. I challenge you, study this material until it becomes second nature to you. Keep this information at your disposal and draw on it when the situation warrants.

Discussion Questions:

- Is it important to share the facts with a person who believes Jesus was just a fairy tale? Why or why not?
- Consider the quote from Tacitus that was cited in this chapter (p.250). What does this quote say about the rise of the early church?
- What are some fairy tales or legends that you have read? How do they compare with the New Testament?
- In what ways does Jesus stand out as a perfect role model?

1. Habermas, G. & Licona, M. (2004). *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications
2. For a current list (at time of publication) of New Testament dates by various authors and scholars, both conservative and liberal, see: http://www.errantskeptics.org/Dating_the_NT.htm
3. Tacitus, *Annals*. 15.44
4. Geisler, N. (1999). *Baker Encyclopedia of Apologetics*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books
5. Schaff, P. (1928). *History of the Christian Church* (7 vols.). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, Vol 1
6. Barrett, D. & Johnson, T. (2001). *World Christian Trends AD 30 - AD 2200: Interpreting the Annual Christian Megacensus*. Pasadena: William Carey Library. p 934