

## Inerrancy and the Resurrection

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by William Lane Craig • 19 min read • [original](#)

Can you get straight answers to your questions? You betcha! Read on.

First, to set the context, you put it rather tendentiously when you say that I “merely sidestepped” the question of biblical inerrancy in my debate with Bart Ehrman over whether there is historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. A more sympathetic and, I think, more accurate way of putting it would be to say, “Craig refused to let Ehrman derail the debate into a discussion of biblical inerrancy but kept the debate on track.” Or an even more accurate reading of the situation would be: “Ehrman tried to goad Craig into an affirmation of biblical inerrancy so that he could impugn Craig’s objectivity and, hence, integrity as a historian; but Craig, knowing that his case for Jesus’ resurrection didn’t presuppose biblical inerrancy, refused to take the bait.”

As I explain in my Question of the Week on “What Price Biblical Errancy?” Ehrman, when he was a Christian, had a flawed theological system in which inerrancy lay at the very center of his web of beliefs, so that once he became convinced of a single error in Scripture the whole web collapsed. As a result, the doctrine of inerrancy looms abnormally large in his thinking. But the case for Jesus’ resurrection which I presented doesn’t in any way presuppose the inerrancy of the documents, so that the doctrine becomes irrelevant so far as belief in the resurrection goes.

Now to your questions:

1. *What sources outside of the canon are there that support Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection in bodily form, and ascension into heaven?*

Actually, there are lots of extra-canonical sources that support Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, sources which I suspect you've never thought of. You're thinking of *later* extra-canonical sources like Josephus and Tacitus. But the really interesting extra-canonical sources are the *earlier* ones, that is to say, the sources used by the New Testament writers themselves. Now before you cry foul, you need to reflect that these sources are not themselves in the canon but go back even closer to the events than the canonical books. These are, therefore, the center of historical Jesus study today, not the later extra-canonical sources. Honestly, if you're focused on what later extra-canonical sources there are for Jesus, you're really missing the boat.

What are some of these sources? The Passion story used by Mark, the formula cited by Paul in I Cor. 15.3-5, Matthew's special source called M, Luke's special source called L, and so forth. Some of these are incredibly early sources (which helps to answer your second question). The pre-Markan passion story probably dates from the 30s and is based on eyewitness testimony, and the pre-Pauline formula in I Cor. 15.3-5 has been dated within a couple of years or *even months* of Jesus' death. I think you can see why these are the really interesting sources, not some later report by Josephus.

Now these sources provide abundant, independent testimony to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Later references to Jesus by the Roman historian Tacitus, the Jewish historian Josephus, the Syrian writer Mara bar Serapion, rabbinical writings, and extra-biblical Christian authors confirm what the New Testament documents tell us about Jesus but don't really give us anything new. You can find such sources cited and discussed in R. T. France's very fine book *The Evidence for Jesus* (1986) or in Robert Van

Voorst's definitive *Jesus outside the New Testament* (2000). What is key for the historian, however, will be, not these later sources, but the New Testament documents themselves and their sources.

Which leads to my question to you: why are you interested in extra-canonical sources rather than the primary source documents themselves? Doesn't your very question betray the prejudice that the New Testament documents are historically unreliable? But if there are sources outside the New Testament that speak of Jesus, ah, that's *real* evidence!

You need to keep in mind that originally there wasn't any such book called "The New Testament." There were just these separate documents handed down from the first century, things like the Gospel of Luke, the Gospel of John, the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, Greece, and so on. It wasn't until a couple centuries later that the church officially collected all these documents under one cover, which came to be known as the New Testament. The church only included the earliest sources which were closest to Jesus and the original disciples and left out the later, secondary accounts like the forged apocryphal gospels, which everyone knew were fakes. So from the very nature of the case, the best historical sources were included in the New Testament. People who insist on evidence taken only from writings outside the New Testament don't understand what they're asking for. They're demanding that we ignore the earliest, primary sources about Jesus in favor of sources which are later, secondary, and less reliable, which is just nuts as historical methodology.

The real question is, how reliable are the documents for the life of Jesus that came to be incorporated into the book we now call the New Testament? That leads to your second question.

*2. The message of Jesus was spread by word of mouth until the gospels were written. How do we know legend wasn't developed? Such as Jesus being buried by Joseph of Arimathea.*

In my article “[Who was Jesus?](#)” on this site I discuss five reasons why we can have confidence in the general reliability of the Gospels:

1. There was insufficient time for legendary influences to expunge the hard core of historical facts.
2. The Gospels are not analogous to folk tales or contemporary “urban legends.”
3. The Jewish transmission of sacred traditions was highly developed and reliable.
4. There were significant restraints on the embellishment of traditions about Jesus, such as the presence of eyewitnesses and the apostles’ supervision.
5. The Gospel writers have a proven track record of historical reliability.

I won't repeat here what I say there.

In addition to these general considerations, scholars have enunciated certain “criteria of authenticity” to help detect historically reliable information about Jesus even in a document which may not be generally reliable. What the criteria really amount to are statements about the effect of certain types of evidence upon the probability of various sayings or events narrated in the sources. For some saying or event S, evidence of a certain type E, and our background information B, the criteria would state that, all things being equal,  $\Pr(S|E\&B) > \Pr(S|B)$ . In other words, all else being equal, the probability of some event or saying is greater given, for example, its early, independent attestation than it would have been without it.

What are some of the factors that might serve the role of E in increasing the probability of some saying or event S? The following are some of the most important:

1. *Historical congruence*: S fits in with known historical facts concerning the context in which S is said to have occurred.
2. *Independent, early attestation*: S appears in multiple sources which are near to the time at which S is alleged to have occurred and which depend neither upon each other nor upon a common source.
3. *Embarrassment*: S is awkward or counter-productive for the persons who serve as the source of information for S.
4. *Dissimilarity*: S is unlike antecedent Jewish thought-forms and/or unlike subsequent Christian thought-forms.
5. *Semitisms*: traces in the narrative of Aramaic or Hebraic linguistic forms.
6. *Coherence*: S is consistent with already established facts about Jesus.

Notice that these criteria do not presuppose the general reliability of the Gospels. Rather they focus on a particular saying or event and give evidence for thinking that specific element of Jesus' life to be historical, regardless of the general reliability of the document in which the particular saying or event is reported. These same criteria are thus applicable to reports of Jesus found in the apocryphal Gospels, or rabbinical writings, or even the Qur'an. Of course, if the Gospels can be shown to be generally reliable documents, so much the better! But the criteria do not depend on any such presupposition. They serve to help spot historical kernels even in the midst of historical chaff. Thus we need not concern ourselves with defending the Gospels' general reliability or every claim attributed to Jesus in the Gospels (much less their inerrancy!).

Now specifically with respect to Jesus' burial by Joseph of Arimathea, this is one of the best-established facts about Jesus. Space doesn't permit me to go into all the details of the evidence for the burial. But let me just mention a couple points:

First, *Jesus' burial is multiply attested in extremely early, independent sources*. The account of Jesus' burial in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea is part of Mark's source material for the Passion story. Moreover, the formula

cited by Paul in I Cor. 15.3-5 refers to Jesus' burial:

. . . that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,  
and that he was buried,  
and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,  
and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve.

But, we might wonder, was the burial mentioned by the formula the same event as the burial by Joseph of Arimathea? The answer to that question is made clear by a comparison of the four-line formula with the Gospel narratives on the one hand and the sermons in the Acts of the Apostles on the other:

I Cor. 15.3-5 Christ died . . .	Acts 13.28-31 Though they could charge him with nothing deserving death, yet they asked Pilate to have him killed.	Mk. 15.37-16.7 And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last.
he was buried . . .	they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb	And he [Joseph] bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb.
he was raised . . .	But God raised him from the dead . . .	"He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him."
he appeared . . .	. . . and for many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people.	"But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him."

This remarkable correspondence of independent traditions is convincing proof that the four-line formula is a summary in outline form of the basic events of Jesus' passion and resurrection, including his burial in the tomb. We thus have evidence from two of the earliest, independent sources of the New Testament for the burial of Jesus in the tomb.

But that's not all! For further independent testimony to Jesus' burial by Joseph is also found in the sources behind Matthew and Luke and the Gospel of John, not to mention the extra-biblical Gospel of Peter. The differences between Mark's account and those of Matthew and Luke suggest that the latter had sources other than Mark alone. These differences are not plausibly explained as Matthew and Luke's editorial changes of Mark because of their sporadic and uneven nature, the inexplicable omission of events like Pilate's interrogation of the centurion, and the agreements in wording between Mathew and Luke in contrast to Mark. Moreover, we have another independent source for the burial in John's Gospel. Finally we have the early apostolic sermons in the book of Acts, which are probably not wholly Luke's creation but preserve the early preaching of the apostles. These also make mention of Jesus' interment in a tomb. Thus, we have the remarkable number of at least four and perhaps more independent sources for Jesus' burial, some of which are extraordinarily early.

Second, *as a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea is unlikely to be a Christian creation.* Joseph is described as a rich man, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a sort of Jewish high court made up of seventy of the leading men of Judaism, which presided in Jerusalem. There was an understandable hostility in the early church toward the Jewish Sanhedrists. In Christian eyes, they had engineered a judicial murder of Jesus. The sermons in Acts, for example, go so far as to say that the Jewish leaders crucified Jesus (Acts 2.23, 36; 4.10)! Given his status as a Sanhedrist—all of whom, Mark reports, voted to condemn Jesus—, Joseph is the last person one would expect to care properly for Jesus. Thus, in the words of the late New Testament scholar Raymond Brown, Jesus’ burial by Joseph is “very probable,” since it is “almost inexplicable” why Christians would make up a story about a Jewish Sanhedrist who does what is right by Jesus.

For these and other reasons, the wide majority New Testament critics concur that Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea in a tomb. Since even Ehrman affirms this, along with most scholars, why don’t you?

*3. What about other pagan miracle workers such as Honi the Circle-Drawer, Hanina be Dosa, and Apollonius of Tyana? Doesn’t the fact that these pagan people doing miracles similar to Jesus discredit Jesus as a miracle worker?*

First of all, these aren’t pagan miracle workers. Honi and Hanina ben Dosa were Jewish holy men who also were reputed as miracle workers. Far from undermining the historicity of the Gospel accounts, the existence of such figures supports the credibility of the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry as a miracle worker, since it shows that such activity was at home in first century Judaism and was not ascribed to Jesus as a result of the influence of so-called “divine men” of pagan mythology.



The stories of Jesus' miracles are so widely represented in all strata of the Gospel traditions that it would be fanciful to regard them as not rooted in the life of Jesus. Thus, the consensus of New Testament scholarship is that Jesus did carry out a ministry of "miracle" working—however one might want to interpret or explain these. At the end of his long and detailed study of Jesus' miracles John Meier concludes,

The overall attestation of the figure of Jesus as healer of physical infirmities and illnesses is thus even stronger than the attestation of his activity as an exorcist. . . . In sum, the statement that Jesus acted as and was viewed as an exorcist and healer during his public ministry *has as much historical corroboration as almost any other statement we can make about the Jesus of history* (Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2: 969-70, my emphasis).

The miracles of Jesus, like his exorcisms, were taken to be signs of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. As such, they functioned fundamentally differently from the wonders performed by Hellenistic magicians or Jewish holy men. Moreover, Jesus' miracles differed from those of Honi and Hanina in that Jesus never prays for a miracle to be done; he may first express thanks to the Father, but then he effects it himself. And he does so in his own name, not God's. Moreover, neither Honi nor Hanina carried out a prophetic ministry, made messianic claims, or brought any new teaching in conjunction with their miracles. Thus, Jesus is more than just another charismatic Jewish holy man.

As for Apollonius of Tyana, this is a figure constructed in large part by Philostratus centuries later as a deliberate counterpoint to Christianity. The church had grown quite large and influential by that time, so Philostratus constructed Apollonius as a pagan alternative to Jesus. How does this in any way undermine the historical credibility of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' miracles?

#### 4. *What about the seeming contradictions in the different gospel accounts?*

Here's your straight answer, Grant: *they don't matter*. I could accept that all of these apparent discrepancies are irresolvable, and it wouldn't affect my historical argument one wit. Don't believe me? Then let's let Bart Ehrman speak for himself. Does he think that the seeming contradictions he lists undermine the historical credibility of the facts upon which my argument is based? No! He says,

The resurrection of Jesus lies at the heart of Christian faith. Unfortunately, it also is a tradition about Jesus that historians have difficulty dealing with. As I said, there are a couple of things that we can say for certain about Jesus after his death. We can say with relative certainty, for example, that he was buried. . . .

Some scholars have argued that it's more plausible that in fact Jesus was placed in a common burial plot, which sometimes happened, or was, as many other crucified people, simply left to be eaten by scavenging animals (which also happened commonly for crucified persons in the Roman Empire). But the accounts are fairly unanimous in saying (the earliest accounts we have are unanimous in saying) that Jesus was in fact buried by this fellow, Joseph of Arimathea, and so it's relatively reliable that that's what happened.

We also have solid traditions to indicate that women found this tomb empty three days later. This is attested in all of our gospel sources, early and late, and so it appears to be a historical datum. As so I think we can say that after Jesus' death, with some (probably with some) certainty, that he was buried, possibly by this fellow, Joseph of Arimathea, and that three days later he appeared not to have been in his tomb ("From Jesus to Constantine: A History of Early Christianity," Lecture 4: "Oral and Written Traditions about Jesus" [The Teaching Company, 2003]).

The same goes double—well, many times more than double—for Jesus’ crucifixion. This event is widely recognized as the most solidly established fact about the historical Jesus, denied only by kooks and Muslim true believers. Yet Ehrman’s first five discrepancies are all connected, not with the burial and empty tomb narratives, but with the crucifixion accounts! So are you going to deny that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified under Roman authority at the time of the Jewish Passover feast in AD 30 because of these differences in the narratives? If so, Grant, then you will have not only intellectually marginalized yourself but also shown that you are not a sincere seeker after truth.

Do you see now, Grant, why I refused to be drawn into a dispute about how many angels there were at the tomb? Insofar as the historicity of the empty tomb is concerned, it just doesn’t matter.

You say those who go to a university committed to biblical inerrancy should be able to explain these discrepancies. That’s silly, Grant. Why think that Coach Holmquist should be able to explain these discrepancies? Why think that even someone in the New Testament department should be able to explain these? Maybe there just isn’t the historical information available to resolve every discrepancy. It seems to me that you must think that the belief in biblical inerrancy is arrived at inductively, in which case you really should, indeed, read my Question of the Week “What Price Biblical Errancy?”

I think what you really want to say is that those affiliated with such a university ought to be interested in explaining these discrepancies and therefore should not “side step” them, as you accuse me of doing. Yes, I’d agree with you that we inerrantists ought to be interested in explaining such discrepancies. But there’s a time and place for everything. A debate on the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, where time is limited and

the central facts of the case are agreed upon by the majority of scholars in the field is not the time for being diverted into such a discussion. That discussion can be profitably pursued and is being pursued elsewhere.

So let's take them one at a time:

*Date and time of the crucifixion:* All the sources agree that Jesus was crucified on Friday. What is in dispute is whether Passover was on Thursday or Friday. The Synoptics seem to suggest that Jesus' Last Supper with the disciples on Thursday night was a Passover meal. John agrees that Jesus did share a Last Supper with his disciples on Thursday night in the upper room prior to his betrayal and arrest. But John says that the Jewish leaders wanted to eliminate Jesus *before* the Passover meal began Friday night. So was Passover on Thursday or Friday? That's the whole dispute! (I hope this puts the issue in perspective for you.)

One possibility is that John has moved the Passover to Friday to make Jesus' death coincide with the slaughter of the Passover lambs in the Temple. But maybe not: since there were competing calendars in use in first century Palestine, the sacrifices may have been made on more than one day. The Pharisees and people from Galilee reckoned days as beginning at sunrise and ending at the following sunrise. But Sadducees and people from Judea reckoned days as beginning at sunset and ending with the next sunset. In our modern age, we adopt what I think is the rather weird convention that the day begins in the middle of the night at midnight and goes until the next midnight. Well, this difference in reckoning days completely throws off the dating of certain events, as you can see on the following chart.



Passover lambs were offered on the 14th of the month of Nisan. According to the Galilean reckoning, the 14th of Nisan begins about 6:00 a.m. on the day we call Thursday. But for the Judean, 14 Nisan doesn't begin until 12 hours

later, about 6:00 p.m. on our Thursday. So when the Galilean, following Jewish regulations, slays the Passover lamb on the afternoon of 14 Nisan, what day does he do it on? Thursday. But when the Judean offers his lamb in sacrifice on the afternoon of the 14th of Nisan, what day is that? Friday! When night falls, he then feasts on the lamb, by his reckoning, on 15 Nisan. Thus, in order to meet the demands of both Galilean-Pharisaical sensibilities and of Judean-Sadducean sensibilities, the Temple priesthood would have to have made Passover sacrifices on both Thursday and Friday. Jesus, as a Galilean and knowing of his impending arrest, chose to celebrate the Passover Thursday night, whereas the chief priests and scribes responsible for Jesus' arrest went by the Judean calendar, as John says. Although we have no evidence that Passover sacrifices were made on both days, such a solution is very plausible. The population of Jerusalem swelled to around 125,000 people during the Passover festival. It would be logistically impossible for the Temple priesthood to sacrifice enough lambs for that many people between 3:00 o'clock and 6:00 o'clock on one afternoon. They must have sacrificed on more than one day, which makes it entirely possible for Jesus and his disciples to celebrate the Passover Thursday night prior to his arrest.

Similarly for the time of Jesus' crucifixion: Mark says the crucifixion was at the third hour, that is, 9:00 a.m., but John says Jesus was condemned "about the sixth hour," that is, around noon. Again, maybe John has moved the time until later. But maybe not: in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts the *only* times of day ever referred to (with one exception) are the third, sixth, and ninth hours. Obviously in an age without modern time-keeping devices round numbers or quarters of the day are being used. The third hour could refer to any time between 9:00 a.m. and noon.

*Did Jesus carry his cross the entire way?* No, Simon of Cyrene was probably a historical person, whose role in the narrative John simply chooses to omit. Simon was probably impressed into service by the soldiers when Jesus proved too weak to carry the crossbeam all the way to Golgotha.

*Did the robbers rail against Jesus?* Mark says merely that those who were crucified with Jesus reviled him. No details are given. But Luke tells of how one of the criminals expressed faith in Jesus. You could just write off Luke's story as a pious development of the crucifixion narrative. But how do we know that Luke is not working with an independent source here which remembers this man's repentance, whereas Mark passes over it? I don't have any confidence that we have a real contradiction here.

*When did the veil of the Temple tear?* This alleged discrepancy is purely imaginary, since Mark and Luke mention the rending of the Temple curtain but don't pretend to specify its timing. Luke would have been amazed had some modern reader accused him of contradicting Mark when he groups together the supernatural signs occurring at Christ's death.

*Who went to the tomb?* A group of women, including Mary Magdalene who is always named. John focuses on her for dramatic effect, but he knows of other women, as is evident in Mary's words, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and *we* do not know where they have laid him" (Jn 20. 2; cf. 20. 13). We don't know all the names of the other women, but they included another Mary, who was the mother of James and Joses, and Salome. The fact that women, rather than men, appear in the narrative as the discoverers of Jesus' empty tomb is, by the way, one of the most convincing factors leading most scholars to accept the historicity of the narrative.

*Was the stone rolled away before they got there and what did they see?* Yes, it was; there's no discrepancy here. They saw one or two angels. Mark's "young man" is clearly an angelic figure, as evident from his white robe, his revelatory message, and the women's response of fear and trembling. Moreover, Mark's earliest interpreters (Matthew and Luke) understood the young man to be an angel.

*What were they told?* They were told to go to Galilee, where they would see Jesus. Since Luke doesn't plan on narrating any Galilean appearances, he alters Mark's wording of the angel's message for literary purposes. The tradition of appearances in Galilee is very old and virtually universally accepted.

*Did the women tell anyone?* Of course, they did! When Mark says that they said nothing to anyone, he obviously means *as they fled back to the disciples*. Mark foreshadows the appearances in Galilee, so obviously he didn't mean that the women failed to give the angel's message to the disciples. This discrepancy is purely imaginary.

*Did the disciples leave Jerusalem for Galilee?* Of course, as indicated above. Luke just chooses not to narrate any Galilean appearances because he wants to show how the Gospel became established in the holiest city of the Jews, Jerusalem.

So some of these alleged discrepancies are easy to answer and are what we should expect from independent accounts of the same event. Others are more difficult but are in the end not of great consequence. Historians expect to find inconsistencies like these even in the most reliable sources. No historian simply throws out a source because it has inconsistencies. Moreover, the inconsistencies Ehrman is talking about aren't within a single source; they're between *independent* sources. But obviously, it doesn't follow from an inconsistency between two independent sources that *both* sources are wrong. At worst, one is wrong if they can't be harmonized.

The problem with focusing on discrepancies is that we tend to lose the forest for the trees. The overriding fact is that the Gospels are remarkably harmonious in what they relate. The discrepancies between them are in the secondary details. *All* four Gospels agree:

Jesus of Nazareth was crucified in Jerusalem by Roman authority during the Passover Feast, having been arrested and convicted on charges of blasphemy by the Jewish Sanhedrin and then slandered before the governor Pilate on charges of treason. He died within several hours and was buried Friday afternoon by Joseph of Arimathea in a tomb, which was sealed with a stone. Certain women followers of Jesus, including Mary Magdalene, having observed his interment, visited His tomb early on Sunday morning, only to find it empty. Thereafter, Jesus appeared alive from the dead to the disciples, including Peter, who then became proclaimers of the message of His resurrection.

All four Gospels attest to these facts. Many more details can be supplied by adding facts which are attested by three out of four. So don't be misled by the minor discrepancies. Otherwise you're going to have to be sceptical about all secular historical narratives which also contain such inconsistencies, which is quite unreasonable.

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