

opportunity but the gruesome reality the Bible calls sin. And the strange claim of Jesus's resurrection offers us hope that evil will not ultimately triumph, and that anyone who gives up his or her life to follow Christ will find it. This belief, when drunk of deeply, motivates action. It motivated Christians in the fourth century to create places where the sick and poor could be cared for—places we now call hospitals. It motivated Martin Luther King to believe that non-violent resistance could overcome violent oppression. And it motivates Christians today to sacrifice themselves across the world in the service of others. In a *New York Times* op-ed entitled “Evangelicals without the Blowhards,” Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and human rights activist Nicholas Kristof writes: “Go to the front lines, at home or abroad, in the battles against hunger, malaria, prison rape, obstetric fistula, human trafficking or genocide, and some of the bravest people you meet are evangelical Christians (or conservative Catholics, similar in many ways) who truly live their faith.”⁴⁸

Does religion cause violence? It certainly can. But millions of people are driven by their faith to love and serve others. And Christianity, in particular, has served as a fertilizer for democracy, a motivation for justice, and a mandate for healing. If we think the world would be less violent without it, we may need to check our facts.

48. Nicholas Kristof, “Evangelicals without Blowhards,” *New York Times*, June 31, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/31/opinion/sunday/kristof-evangelicals-without-blowhards.html>.

How Can You Take the Bible Literally?

Have you ever had your heart broken? I have. I could tell you what happened. But instead I'm going to tell you what didn't happen. No one called an ambulance. No one checked my blood pressure. No one attempted CPR.

If you have ever been broken-hearted, you know that the pain can feel as real as a cardiac arrest. But what if I had a heart attack, my husband dialed 911, and the operator said: “I'm so sorry to hear about your wife's heart; don't try to do anything; just hold her, listen to her, and let her know you love her”?

Our lives can depend on distinguishing literal truth from metaphor. If a friend told you she was going to murder her husband, you would probably infer that she was annoyed with him and planning to express that in strong language! If your brother told you he literally died of embarrassment when the girl he liked read his Valentine's Day card, you would not marvel at his resurrection. But if he told you he was contemplating suicide because he was so heartbroken at her rejection, you would do well to take him literally. Both literal and figurative language can describe reality. We can tell lies with literal words and speak the truth through metaphor. Indeed, when it comes to the Bible, some of the deepest truths are metaphorically expressed.

In this chapter, we will explore the misconception that it is inconsistent to read some biblical passages literally and others not, the assumption that not always “taking the Bible literally” licenses us to dodge its miraculous claims, the question of contradictions in the Gospels, and the idea that the New Testament is not a trustworthy source regarding the first-century Jew known as Jesus of Nazareth.

Is It Inconsistent to Read Some Texts Literally and Others Not?

Our lives are littered with metaphors. We bust our gut working. We love with our whole heart. Recent research in communication studies has verified what poets have known for millennia: we humans find metaphors memorable, persuasive, and moving. Our brains are wired for word pictures that liken one thing or experience to another. They ignite our imagination and connect us to their author, drawn together by the shared experience that makes the metaphor work. Like a private joke or a common language, metaphors build relationship. It's why lovers write poetry.

We somehow forget this when it comes to the Bible. In a 2014 survey, US pastors were asked which of the following most accurately reflected their view of the Bible.

- “The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word” (28 percent).
- “The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally” (47 percent).
- “The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man” (21 percent).¹

Instinctively, we expect that these statements categorize pastors in descending order of how seriously they take the Bible. But if you read the words of Jesus himself, you will soon realize that to “take the Bible literally, word for word” is often to miss the point.

When Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd,” he is not claiming to be a farmer. He is inhabiting the metaphor of God as shepherd: “The LORD is my shepherd,” declared the Old Testament shepherd-turned-

1. Lydia Saad, “Three in Four in U.S. Still See the Bible as Word of God,” Gallup, June 4, 2014, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/170834/three-four-bible-word-god.aspx>.

king David (Ps. 23:1). When Jesus says, “I am the true vine” (John 15:1), he is not claiming planthood. Rather, he is inviting us to recall the Old Testament metaphor of Israel as God's vine. Indeed, people often misunderstood Jesus because they took him literally.

In John's Gospel, Jesus chases money changers out of the temple and challenges the shocked bystanders, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple,” they respond, “and will you raise it up in three days?” But John explains that Jesus is talking about his body—the true temple, where God meets with his people and the real sacrifice is made (John 2:19–21). Later, a Jewish leader named Nicodemus visits Jesus at night. Jesus says he should be born again. “How can a man be born when he is old?” asks Nicodemus. “Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” (John 3:4). Later still, Jesus breaks racial, religious, and gender barriers by asking a Samaritan woman for a drink, before claiming he can provide living water (John 4:10). Again, she takes him literally and misses his point.

The truths expressed metaphorically in these and other Scriptures are startlingly real. Indeed, if the message of the Bible is true, the literal realities of our own lives are embodied metaphors to point us to the transcendent God.

We make metaphors by noticing connections: love is a sickness; life is a marathon; parents are like helicopters. But God did not notice fatherly love and decide to call himself our Father. God created fatherhood, so that the best human fathers could give us a glimpse of his paternal care. God did not notice the intimacy of sex and marriage and decide to call Jesus the Bridegroom and the church his bride.² Rather, God created sex and marriage so that marriage at its best might give us a taste of his passionate, sacrificial, unconditional love. John's Gospel starts with a metaphor: “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1). This conjures up the Bible's opening lines, when God creates by speaking. John identifies that Word as Jesus himself and floods our understanding with metaphors: Jesus is the Light of the World, the Lamb of God, the temple, the true Vine, the Good Shepherd, the living water, the way, and the door.

2. See chap. 8 for an extended discussion of this metaphor.

Metaphors and Miracles

Does this mean the Bible is *not* intended to be taken literally, or that we can navigate around any challenging text by calling it metaphorical? Not at all. As with any conversation, some parts are intended literally, others not. Usually it is easy to tell. For example, the New Testament writers emphasize that Jesus was literally raised from the dead—bones, wounds, and all. Attending to the powerful metaphors that circulate throughout the Scriptures does not for a moment reduce the radical claims that the Bible makes: claims of miracles, everlasting truth, and a life-and-death decision we must make. Indeed, some of Jesus's hardest teachings are expressed metaphorically. "Enter by the narrow gate," he warns. "For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many" (Matt. 7:13). The use of metaphor here is obvious. But there are times when people who take the Bible seriously disagree on whether a statement is literal or metaphorical, history or parable.

Much blood was spilled during the Protestant Reformation over how we should understand Jesus when he says to his disciples, "This is my body," as he breaks bread, and, "This is my blood," as he pours out wine. Are these metaphors? Or is Jesus miraculously turning himself into the bread and wine that Christians eat and drink when they remember his death? Catholics and Protestants disagree. Moreover, Jesus's miracles often double as metaphors. By forgiving a paralytic before healing his legs, Jesus invites us to see parallels between the physical and spiritual healings. When he calls his first fisherman-disciples to follow him, he directs a miraculous catch and then tells them to leave their nets to become "fishers of men" (Luke 5:1–11).

But when Jesus's miracles are invested with metaphorical meaning, this does not mean they did not literally happen. Jesus's ability to do what only God can do points to who he is. "What sort of man is this," his terrified disciples wonder, "that even winds and sea obey him?" (Matt. 8:27).

Parables and Poetry

The true-while-nonliteral complexity is further exposed by Jesus's parables. To take one example, the famous parable of the good Samaritan is not prefaced by, "Then Jesus told a parable." And the events he describes are realistic. Jesus tells of a man who is robbed, assaulted, and left for

dead while walking from Jerusalem to Jericho—a notoriously dangerous route. Jesus describes two religious men walking past the victim and giving him a wide berth—again, quite plausible for men who would be made ceremonially unclean by touching a dead body. The most surprising element of the story is its hero: the person who finally takes pity on the injured man is a Samaritan. Yet there is no obvious clue within the text that Jesus is not recounting actual events. But if we are familiar with his teaching style, we understand instinctively that this is not a crime scene report, but a parable told for its meaning. Once again, we must be careful to distinguish between true and literal, and we must be attentive to the genre of any biblical text in order to grasp its meaning.

If parables are one example, poetry—a major literary feature, particularly in the Old Testament—is another. We find a whole book of biblical poetry in the Psalms, which functioned as the songbook of the Israelites. We also find substantial poetic tracts in the writings of the Old Testament prophets, and we find poetic features in the first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch. Poetic writing is not an embarrassment to the Bible but part of its power. And yet we must recognize its character and read it on its own terms. At times, failing to recognize the figurative features with the biblical text is like taking a love poem to the grocery store and wondering why you can't find all the items on its shelves.

Isn't the Bible Full of Contradictions?

After a talk on Christianity and rationality, math professor Satyan Devadoss was challenged about the seeming problem of contradictions. His response was disarming. Rather than immediately denying that the Bible is "full of contradictions," as we might expect from someone who believes that it is the Word of God, Devadoss gave the audience an example—in case they didn't have one in mind—citing the different orders of creation in Genesis 1 and 2. He then explained that these seemingly contradictory accounts were theologically rather than chronologically ordered, and that they are juxtaposed to give us bifocal vision. We tend to assume that we are the first generation to notice such differences. But we are not. In fact, the accounts were clearly placed side by side for theological reasons.

An analogy with Jesus's teaching may be helpful. Jesus called himself "the good shepherd" (John 10:11). But he is also called "the Lamb of God" (John 1:29). How can you be both a shepherd and a lamb? Well, Jesus is both the Shepherd-King and the Passover-lamb sacrifice. He is the Priest and the sacrifice, the Prophet and the Word, the Alpha and the Omega. You can dismiss these as contradictions, or you can experience them as paradoxes describing a man who transcends our understanding. Indeed, as New Testament scholar Peter Williams points out, Jesus frequently *taught* through paradoxes. "The presence of such deliberate formal contradictions," he argues, "does not mean that the contradictory statements are not both true in some way at a deeper level."³

The sophistication of biblical writing is evident in the early chapters of Genesis. For instance, in Genesis 2, God forbids Adam to eat fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, warning "in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17). Adam eats the fruit. But he lives on to father three sons. There are three possible ways to interpret this warning in its context. First, God was speaking not of a physical death but of a spiritual one. This aligns with the New Testament, where the apostle Paul routinely uses life and death as spiritual categories.⁴ Indeed, just like Jesus's decision to forgive a paralyzed man before healing him, it highlights the primary importance of our spiritual condition. The second possibility is that God did not mean a literal same day but was warning that once Adam ate of the forbidden fruit, his physical death would become inevitable. This aligns with a God-sized perspective on time. "Do not overlook this one fact," writes Peter, "that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Pet. 3:8). A final though biblically untenable approach to Genesis 2:17 is to say that God meant both *day* and *die* literally, but that he lied or changed his mind.

Christians take a range of views on the exact genre of the early chapters of Genesis, but the language of Genesis 2:17 reminds us that (scientific questions aside) those who take a purely literal approach to Genesis 1–3 are still left with puzzles within the text: puzzles that would have been evident to the first readers and must therefore be

3. Peter J. Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 127.

4. See, e.g., Col. 2:13: "You, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with [Christ]."

intentional. Indeed, the fact that Genesis 2 and 3 force us to consider whether God is talking about physical death or spiritual death, and wonder if even the devastation of physical death might be less disastrous than alienation from God, is part of its persuasive power. We are inclined to assume that we are more sophisticated than a text written thousands of years ago. But the more we read the Bible, the more we will find we are not. MIT professor Rosalind Picard discovered this when she was a teenager and a "proud atheist." She thought the Bible would be "full of fantastical crazy stuff," but she was surprised: "I started reading the Bible," she recalls, "and it started to change me."⁵

But what about seeming contradictions in the accounts of Jesus's life? I argued in chapter 3 that Christianity stands or falls on the literal, historical reality of Jesus's death and resurrection. Does the presence of apparent contradictions in the Gospels not undermine this case?

What about Contradictions in the Gospels?

The four Gospels speak with one voice about Jesus's identity, mission, and message, but there are many differences between them in terms of ordering and detail. New Testament professor Bart Ehrman has written extensively about these differences and concluded that the Bible is irreconcilably contradictory. Some of his examples, however, betray observer bias and lead him to draw unnecessary conclusions. For instance, Ehrman notes that in Matthew's Gospel Jesus declares, "Whoever is not with me is against me" (Matt. 12:30), while in Mark he says, "The one who is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40). Ehrman asks: "Did he say both things? Could he mean both things? How can both be true at once? Or is it possible that one of the Gospel writers got things switched around?"⁶ But you have only to watch a football game to understand: when there are two sides, you cannot be on both. And as we noted earlier, Jesus frequently taught through paradox. That is not so strange. Peter Williams cites the opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities* ("It was the best of times, it was the worst of times")

5. Rosalind Picard, in response to an interview question from *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat about her path from atheism to faith, The Veritas Forum (video), January 12, 2016, [thehttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ScEV1HbLSA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ScEV1HbLSA).

6. Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (And Why We Don't Know about Them)* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 41.

as a familiar literary example to help us understand.⁷ Nonetheless, apparent contradictions in the Gospels take a variety of forms and warrant careful study.

Some puzzles arise from the assumption that Jesus did things only once. When we see him saying or doing similar things in different places or at different times, we might conclude that the Gospel writers got mixed up. But like itinerant preachers, politicians, and activists today, first-century rabbis routinely repeated their teachings to spread their message. Sometimes even miracles are repeated for a reason. For example, Matthew's Gospel records Jesus feeding five thousand men (plus women and children) with five loaves and two fish (Matt. 14:13–21). In the next chapter, he feeds over four thousand with seven loaves and a few small fish (Matt. 15:32–39). Jesus has similar conversations with his disciples in both episodes. At first, it seems extraordinary that the disciples could have forgotten the first miracle so quickly. We wonder if this is just a retelling of the same event, with some of the details (location, number of loaves, and so on) mixed up. But in the following chapter, Jesus recalls these two events. He warns his disciples to beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees, and they think he is complaining that they have forgotten to bring bread. "Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered?" Jesus replies, "Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread?" (Matt. 16:9–11).

When we notice the locations of the two miracles, we spot their significance: the second feeding occurs in an area with a high proportion of Gentiles. If Jesus's first miracle recalls the provision of bread from heaven via Moses for the starving Israelites, the second extends this provision to non-Jews. Jesus may have fed large crowds dozens of times during his ministry. As John says, if everything Jesus said or did were written down, "the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25). But Matthew records these two miracles back-to-back to make a theological point.

Some apparent differences between the Gospels arise from our modern sense of time and the norms of a historical account. Ehrman

gives an example: Luke's Gospel records Jesus's ascension into heaven directly after the account of Jesus's first resurrection appearances to his disciples (Luke 24). Acts (also believed to be written by Luke) tells us that Jesus's post-resurrection appearances lasted forty days before his ascension. Is this a contradiction? No. The Gospels frequently telescope events together in a seemingly hectic rush ("and then . . . and then . . . and then"), when in fact there were significant periods between. Again, there are modern parallels. If a friend told me her boss had changed his mind, she might say, "One minute he's telling me to do this, and the next minute he's telling me to do that instead." The two conversations could be a week apart, but the "one minute" formulation makes a point.

Our modern sensibilities make us less inclined to change the order in which events took place. But the genre of historical writing was different in the first century than it is today. Particularly in John's Gospel, events are often recorded in an order that emphasizes theology over chronology. The best modern analogy here is perhaps in film. We are used to experiencing parts of the story in a nonchronological order. For example, right after a character meets a grown woman, we may see a flashback to their childhood relationship. My husband's impeccable engineer's brain often struggles to spot these transitions. When I explain that we just jumped back twenty years to show the characters' backstory, he says, "How did you know?" Often I can't explain: I just know! We expect this from films that narrate actual historical events as much as from fiction. Sometimes, the Gospel writers take a similar approach.

Our sense of location can also be more rigid than that of our forebears. The Gospel writers are not always as precise with their settings as we would be, though they are often *more* precise, and puzzles can arise from our ignorance. For example, Luke's Gospel situates Jesus's ascension at Bethany (Luke 24:50), while Acts has the disciples returning "from the Mount of Olives" (Acts 1:12). This appears contradictory, until you realize that Bethany is traditionally associated with the West Bank city of al-Elzariya, which lies on the southeast slope of the Mount of Olives.

Even today, we sometimes use technically contradictory labels for the same place. For example, I live in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

7. Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospelst*, 127.

Boston is on the other side of the Charles River and is an entirely separate city, with a different government, school system, and identity. But I routinely tell people that I live in Boston, because Cambridge is in the greater Boston area. It's also less confusing for my British friends than saying Cambridge and having to explain which one I mean!

What about the Other Gospels?

Dan Brown's historical novel *The Da Vinci Code* popularized the idea that the four Gospels included in the Bible were selected at the expense of other accounts that painted a more authentic picture of Jesus. But, critical as he is of the Bible, Bart Ehrman acknowledges that the New Testament Gospels are "the oldest and best sources we have for knowing about the life of Jesus," observing that this is "the view of all serious historians of antiquity of every kind, from committed evangelical Christians to hardcore atheists."⁸

Some suggest that the excluded "gospels" represent a more feminist version of Christianity that was squeezed out by the early church.⁹ For example, some Gnostic texts gave a primary role to Mary among Jesus's disciples. But if you read the actual texts, you will discover that they are far from consistently feminist. The so-called Gospel of Thomas ends like this: "Simon Peter said to him, 'Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life.' Jesus said, 'I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.'"¹⁰

This misogynistic perspective would have jibed with much ancient philosophy. But the contrast between this statement and Jesus's high view of women in the canonical Gospels is stark. Regardless of their theological content, however, is it true that the "gospels" that did not make it into our Bibles were excluded for political reasons and have as much right to be included as those that did?

8. Bart D. Ehrman, *Truth and Fiction in The Da Vinci Code* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 102.

9. For a concise treatment of the noncanonical gospels and the views popularized by Dan Brown, see Garry Williams, *The Da Vinci Code: From Dan Brown's Fiction to Mary Magdalene's Faith* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2006).

10. The Gospel of Thomas, saying 114, *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James M. Robinson (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 138.

While other writings about Jesus were circulating in the early centuries of the church, there is good evidence that the four New Testament Gospels were closer to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, in terms of both date of composition and connection to the apostles who witnessed these events. From extant manuscripts, it seems that the New Testament Gospels were far more widely read than the other writings, even before the formal establishment of the canon, and that they were being bound together as a collection as early as the late second century.¹¹ In many instances, the other "gospels" are also different in genre. The Gospel of Thomas, for instance, is a collection of sayings, rather than a record of events and teachings.¹² But how confident can we be that the Gospels included in our Bibles today are close enough to the events of Jesus's life to be reliable sources?

Jesus and the Eyewitnesses

Ehrman stands in a long line of academics who have argued that the Gospels are internally inconsistent and poorly aligned with known history, because they are products of extended oral traditions that were theologically manipulated by later generations. For some time, this view prevailed in the academy. In recent decades, however, multiple scholars have risen to great academic heights presenting fresh arguments for the historicity of the Gospels. For an excellent, accessible summary of the various kinds of evidence we can examine to evaluate the authenticity of the Gospels, I commend Peter Williams's recent book *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, which makes the case that, were it not for the extraordinary claims of the Gospels that lead many to presuppose their falsity—they would pass historical tests with flying colors. Far from wondering whether a barely historical figure may or may not have existed, we have far more manuscript evidence for the life of Jesus from copies of the Gospels than we do for the lives of some other important historical figures of his time, even including Tiberius, the Roman emperor who ruled during Jesus's public ministry.¹³ We

11. Charles E. Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

12. For evidence of the dependence of the Gospel of Thomas on New Testament writings, see S. J. Gathercole, *The Composition of the Gospel of Thomas: Original Language and Influences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

13. Williams, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, 39–41.

also have the witness of multiple hostile, non-Christian sources, attesting to the basic facts of Jesus's life, death, and claimed resurrection. Here, I will pick up just one intriguing evidential thread.

In his ground-breaking work *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, British scholar Richard Bauckham argues that Mark's Gospel was written "well within the lifetime of many of the eyewitnesses," while the other New Testament Gospels were written when living eyewitnesses were becoming scarce—just when their testimony would die out were it not put into writing.¹⁴ Bauckham demonstrates that the frequency of names in the Gospels mirrors their frequency in other sources from first-century Palestine. (If you have ever wondered why there are so many Marys and Simons in the Gospels, those were very common names in the region at the time!) Bauckham then uses his knowledge of contemporary norms for citing eyewitnesses to illuminate name-dropping in the Gospels, arguing that many of those named were eyewitnesses who told their stories "as authoritative guarantors of their traditions."¹⁵ This accounts for strange cameo appearances. For example, in Mark's crucifixion account, the soldiers press-gang a passerby to carry the cross when Jesus collapses. This man is identified by his place of origin as "Simon of Cyrene," but also described as "the father of Alexander and Rufus" (Mark 15:21). Bauckham argues that Simon's sons are mentioned because they were known within the early Christian community and could corroborate the account.¹⁶

The Resurrection

The discrepancies between the lists of named witnesses of the resurrection in different Gospels are often cited as evidence against their authenticity. But Bauckham argues that the differences actually demonstrate the "scrupulous care with which the Gospels present the women as witnesses."¹⁷ He suggests that the writers named the eyewitnesses who were known to them personally. This is particularly significant in Matthew. Under Jewish law, three witnesses for any event were preferred,

14. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 7.

15. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 39.

16. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 51–52.

17. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 49.

but rather than bolstering his list, Matthew is "content with the only two women well known to him as witnesses."¹⁸

With our modern sensibilities, it is easy to miss the significance of women being the first witnesses to the resurrection at all. In contemporary Jewish culture, the testimony of women was not deemed credible. There is no way the Gospel writers would have chosen women as key witnesses in a fabricated story.¹⁹ That would be like resting a vital legal claim today on the testimony of a few kids. We see this cultural bias against women in the reaction of the male disciples: "Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (Luke 24:10).

The authenticity of the Gospels is further attested by just how embarrassing they are to the first church leaders. All of Jesus's male disciples deserted him. Peter, one of his closest friends and a key leader in the early church, three times denied even knowing Jesus. On this and many other counts, the Gospels are extremely bad PR for the apostles. These details would surely have been airbrushed out if the Gospel writers were not keen to record what actually happened. Such particulars would certainly not have been made up! Who wants to be known for perpetuity as "doubting Thomas," or as the disciple who swore he would follow Jesus to death and a few hours later was swearing he did not know him?

N. T. Wright, another leading New Testament scholar and ancient historian, has shed significant light on the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. Carefully examining historical and cultural contexts—including the embarrassment of female witnesses—Wright upends many of the arguments typically used to discredit the resurrection. Some suggest, for example, that Jesus fainted on the cross but did not actually die. But Roman soldiers knew how to kill.²⁰ Crucifixion (the standard punishment for leaders of messiah movements) was one of their favored tools. Moreover, Wright observes that when contemporaneous

18. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 50.

19. N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 607–8.

20. Wright, *Resurrection of the Son*, 709.

messiah movements ended in crucifixion, the followers either gave up and went home or found themselves a new messiah. The mantle was typically passed to a close relative or associate of the former leader. James, the brother of Jesus, would have been the obvious choice. But, while James was a leader in the early church, there was no attempt to claim his messiahship.²¹ Rather, the disciples proclaimed that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Many died for this belief, which they would hardly have done for an elaborate lie.

In light of the Jewish context, Wright also dismisses the idea that Jesus was not physically raised, but that he simply lived on in the hearts of his disciples. Resurrection in Jewish terms always meant newly embodied life after a period of being dead. Many first-century Jews believed in the resurrection of all God's people on the last day. But the idea that one person should have been raised to a transformed, resurrection body in the middle of time was quite new and unexpected.

Today, we find bodily resurrection implausible. But as Wright explains, our first-century forebears also knew that people who died stayed dead. Even though Jesus warned his disciples he was going to die and be raised, none of them believed it until they saw it with their own eyes. In another embarrassing episode, Jesus's disciple Thomas refused to believe, even on the eyewitness testimony of all the other disciples, until he saw Jesus himself (John 20:24–29).

The resurrection seems as incredible to us as it did to Thomas. But if there is a God who created the universe, we cannot exclude the possibility of miracles. The One who made the laws of nature in the first place can surely intervene when he chooses. The One who brought life in the first place can surely bring life to the dead. In 2018, MIT professor Ian Hutchinson published a book called *Can a Scientist Believe in Miracles?*²² He was not raised Christian but came to Christ when he was an undergraduate at Cambridge University. Now, years later, after decades of scientific work at the highest level, his answer to the question *Can a scientist believe in the resurrection?* is emphatically yes.

21. Wright, *Resurrection of the Son*, 700.

22. Ian Hutchinson, *Can a Scientist Believe in Miracles? An MIT Professor Answers Questions on God and Science* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018).

Hasn't Science Disproved Christianity?

In the opening pages of *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*, philosopher Alex Rosenberg declares: "There's so much more to atheism than its knockdown arguments that there is no God. There is the whole rest of the worldview that comes along with atheism. It's a demanding, rigorous, breathtaking grip on reality, one that has been vindicated beyond reasonable doubt. It's called science."¹ Other atheists pile on. Steven Pinker states the negative case: "The findings of science imply that the belief systems of all the world's traditional religions and cultures . . . are factually mistaken."² Richard Dawkins sees a universe that "has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference."³

Listening to New Atheists waxing lyrical, one might think that the case for theism is closed. But there are other voices. MIT professor Daniel Hastings began following Jesus as a teenager in the United Kingdom: "I start by saying that there is a God who created the universe," Hastings states, "and he is not an impersonal God."⁴ MIT professor Jing

1. Alex Rosenberg, *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without the Illusions* (New York: Norton, 2011), viii.

2. Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 394.

3. Richard Dawkins, *River out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 133.

4. Daniel Hastings, "Exploring True Life," The Veritas Forum (video), June 28, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGmNPWsR7_I.