

# The Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ

## Part I—Can It Persuade Skeptics?

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Among the religions of the world, Christianity is unique in many ways. One area of uniqueness concerns the evidence supporting its basic claims. As lawyer, theologian, and philosopher Dr. John Warwick Montgomery points out, “The historic Christian claim differs qualitatively from the claims of all other world religions at the epistemological point: on the issue of testability.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, only Christianity stakes its claim to truthfulness on historical events open to critical investigation. And only this explains the number of conversions by skeptics throughout history.

Indeed, other religions in the world are believed in *despite* the lack of genuine evidence for their truth claims; only Christianity can claim credibility *because* of such evidence. Regrettably, what is often overlooked in the field of comparative religion today is that no genuinely historical/objective evidence exists for the foundational *religious* claims of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, or any religion other than Christianity.<sup>2</sup> As scientist, Christian apologist and biblical commentator Dr. Henry Morris observes, “As a matter of fact, the entire subject of evidences is almost exclusively the domain of *Christian* evidences. Other religions depend on subjective experience and blind faith, tradition and opinion. Christianity stands or falls upon the objective reality of gigantic supernatural events in history and the evidences therefore. This fact in itself is an evidence of its truth.”<sup>3</sup>

Evidence is defined in the *Oxford American Dictionary* as, “1) anything that establishes a fact or gives reason for believing something, 2) statements made or objects produced in a law court as proof or to support a case.” One of the most interesting evidences for the truth of Christianity and, in particular, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, is the testimony of former skeptics, many of whom attempted to disprove Christian faith. In this article we will supply several examples. We hope this will not only be an encouragement for Christians to take their faith seriously, but that it will also spur non-Christians to earnestly examine the claims of Christ on their own lives.

In the mid-eighteenth century, Lord George Lyttelton (a member of Parliament and Commissioner of the Treasury) and Gilbert West, Esq., went to Oxford. There, they were determined to attack the very basis of Christianity. Lyttelton set out to prove that Saul of Tarsus was never really converted to Christianity, and West intended to demonstrate that Jesus never really rose from the dead. Each had planned to do a painstaking job, taking a year to establish his case. But as they proceeded, they eventually concluded that Christianity was true. Both became Christians.

West eventually wrote *Observations on the History and Evidences of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (1747). George Lyttelton wrote a lengthy text titled *The Conversion of St. Paul* (rpt. 1929). Their correspondence back and forth, showing their surprise at the quality of the evidence, can be found in any university microfilm library. West became totally convinced of the truth of the Resurrection, and Lyttelton of the genuine conversion of Saint Paul on the basis of it. For example, Lyttelton wrote to West in 1761, “Sir, in a late conversation we had together upon the subject of the Christian religion, I told you that besides all

the proofs of it which may be drawn from the prophecies of the Old Testament, from the necessary connection it has with the whole system of the Jewish religion, from the miracles of Christ, and from the evidence given of his reflection by all the other apostles, I thought the conversion and apostleship of Saint Paul alone, duly considered, was of itself a demonstration sufficient to prove Christianity a divine revelation.”<sup>4</sup>

In the 1930s a rationalistic English journalist named Frank Morison attempted to discover the “real” Jesus Christ. He was convinced that Christ’s “history rested upon very insecure foundations”—largely because of the influence of the rationalistic higher criticism so prevalent in his day.<sup>5</sup> Further, he was dogmatically opposed to the miraculous elements in the Gospels. But he was nevertheless fascinated by the person of Jesus, who was to him “an almost legendary figure of purity and noble manhood.”<sup>6</sup>

Morison decided to take the crucial “last phase” in the life of Christ and “to strip it of its overgrowth of primitive beliefs and dogmatic suppositions, and to see this supremely great Person as he really was.... It seemed to me that if I could come at the truth why this man died a cruel death at the hands of the Roman Power, how he himself regarded the matter, and especially how he behaved under the test, I should be very near to the true solution of the problem.”<sup>7</sup>

But the book that Morison ended up writing was not the one he intended. He proceeded to write one of the most able defenses of the Resurrection of Christ in our time, *Who Moved the Stone?*

Giovanni Papini was one of the foremost Italian intellectuals of his period, an atheist and vocal enemy of the Church and self-appointed debunker of religion. But he became converted to faith in Christ and in 1921 penned his *Life of Christ*, stunning most of his friends and admirers.<sup>8</sup>

The Cambridge scholar C. S. Lewis, a former atheist, was converted to Christianity on the basis of the evidence, according to his text *Surprised by Joy*. He recalls, “I thought I had the Christians ‘placed’ and disposed of forever.” But, “A young man who wishes to remain a sound atheist cannot be too careful of his reading. There are traps everywhere—‘Bibles laid open, millions of surprises,’ as Herbert says, ‘Fine nets and stratagems.’ God is, if I may say it, very unscrupulous.”<sup>9</sup>

But C. S. Lewis became a Christian because the evidence was compelling and he could not escape it. Even against his will he was “brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting [my] eyes in every direction for a chance of escape.” The God “whom I so earnestly desired not to meet” became His Lord and Savior.<sup>10</sup> His book on Christian evidences, *Mere Christianity*, is considered a classic and has been responsible for converting thousands to the faith, among them the keen legal mind of former skeptic and Watergate figure Charles Colson, author of *Born Again*.

As a pre-law student, Josh McDowell was also a skeptic of Christianity and believed that every Christian had two minds: one was lost while the other was out looking for it. Eventually challenged to intellectually investigate the Christian truth claims, and thinking this a farce, he accepted the challenge and “as a result, I found historical facts and evidence about Jesus Christ that I never knew existed.”<sup>11</sup> He eventually wrote a number of important texts in defense of Christianity, among them *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, *More Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, *More Than a Carpenter* and *Daniel in the Lion’s Den*.

Dr. Gary Habermas was raised a Christian. But he soon questioned his faith. He con-

cluded that while the Resurrection might be believed, he personally doubted it and was skeptical that any evidence for it was really convincing. But after critical examination, it was the evidence that brought him around and he concluded the Resurrection was an established fact of history.<sup>12</sup> He proceeded to write four important books in defense of the Resurrection: *Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus*; *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Rational Inquiry*; *The Resurrection of Jesus: An Apologetic*; and *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*.

As a brilliant philosophy student at Cornell University, John Warwick Montgomery was a convinced skeptic when it came to Christianity. But he, too, was challenged to investigate the evidence for Christianity. As a result, he became converted. He recalls, "I went to the university as a 'garden-variety' 20th century pagan. And as a result of being *forced*, for intellectual integrity's sake, to check out this evidence, I finally came around."<sup>13</sup> He confessed that had it not been for a committed undergraduate student who continued to challenge him to *really* examine the evidence, he would never have believed: "I thank God that he cared enough to do the reading to become a good apologist because if I hadn't had someone like that I don't know if I would have become a Christian."<sup>14</sup>

Montgomery went on to graduate from Cornell University with distinction in philosophy, Phi Beta Kappa. Then he went on to earn the Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, a second doctorate in theology from the University of Strasbourg, France, plus seven additional graduate degrees in theology, law, library science and other fields. He has written over 125 scholarly journal articles, plus 40 books, many of them defending Christian faith against skeptical views. He has held numerous prestigious appointments, is a founding member of the World Association of Law Professors, a member of the American Society of International Law and is honored in *Who's Who in America*, *Who's Who in American Law*, *The Directory of American Scholars*, *International Scholars' Directory*, *Who's Who in France*, *Who's Who in Europe*, and *Who's Who in the World*. There are many individuals with the kind of background and philosophical premises as Dr. Montgomery. They simply do not believe in Christianity apart from sufficient evidence.

Among great literary writers, few can match the brilliance of famous author Malcolm Muggeridge. He, too, was once a skeptic of Christianity. But near the end of his life he became fully convinced of the truth of the Resurrection of Christ, writing a book acclaimed by critics, *Jesus: The Man Who Lives* (1975). He wrote, "The coming of Jesus into the world is the most stupendous event in human history...." and "What is unique about Jesus is that, on the testimony and in the experience of innumerable people, of all sorts and conditions, of all races and nationalities from the simplest and most primitive to the most sophisticated and cultivated, he remains alive." Muggeridge concludes, "That the Resurrection happened... seems to be indubitably true" and "Either Jesus never was or he still is.... with the utmost certainty, I assert *he still is*."<sup>15</sup>

The famous scholar and archaeologist, Sir William Ramsay, was educated at Oxford and a Professor at both Oxford and Cambridge. He received gold medals from Pope Leo XII, the University of Pennsylvania, the Royal Geographical Society, the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, and was knighted in 1906. He was once a skeptic of Christianity, convinced that the Bible was fraudulent.

He had spent years deliberately preparing himself for the announced task of heading an exploration expedition into Asia Minor and Palestine, the home of the Bible, where he would "dig up the evidence" that the Book was the product of ambitious monks, and not the Book

from heaven it claimed to be. He regarded the weakest spot in the whole New Testament to be the story of Paul's travels. These had never been thoroughly investigated by one on the spot. Equipped as no other man had been, he went to the home of the Bible. Here he spent fifteen years literally "digging for the evidence." Then in 1896 he published a large volume, *Saint Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen*.

The book caused a furor of dismay among the skeptics of the world. Its attitude was utterly unexpected because it was contrary to the announced intention of the author years before.... for twenty years more, book after book from the same author came from the press, each filled with additional evidence of the exact, minute truthfulness of the whole New Testament as tested by the spade on the spot. The evidence was so overwhelming that many infidels announced their repudiation of their former unbelief and accepted Christianity. And these books have stood the test of time, not one having been refuted, nor have I found even any attempt to refute them.<sup>16</sup>

Ramsay's own archaeological findings convinced him of the reliability of the Bible and the truth of what it taught. In his *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* and other books, he shows why he came to conclude that, e.g., "Luke's history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness" and that "Luke is a historian of the first rank.... In short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."<sup>17</sup>

One of the greatest classical scholars of our century, the outstanding authority on Homer, Dr. John A. Scott, Professor of Greek at Northwestern University for some 40 years, at one time president of the American Philosophical Association as well as president of the Classical Association of the Midwest and South, wrote a book at the age of seventy, concluding a lifetime of ripened convictions, *We Would See Jesus*. He, too, was convinced that Luke was an accurate historian: "Luke was not only a doctor and historian, but he was one of the world's greatest men of letters. He wrote the clearest and the best Greek written in that century."<sup>18</sup>

Here we have two of the greatest intellects of recent time (Ramsay and Scott), among many that could be cited, vouching for the historical accuracy and integrity of the Apostle Luke, who wrote not only the Gospel of Luke, but the Book of Acts as well. In the latter book he claimed that the Resurrection of Christ had been established "by many convincing proofs" (Acts 1:3). It is only by means of such *convincing* proofs that skeptics such as the above individuals could have ever been converted in the first place. Indeed, the entire history of Christianity involves the conversion of skeptics to Christian faith.

Unfortunately, however, there are also plenty of scholars who have the evidence laid out clearly before them and still do not believe. For example, Michael Grant, a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, Professor of Humanity at Edinburgh University, and President and Vice Chancellor of the Queens University, Belfast, holds doctorates from Cambridge, Dublin and Belfast and is the author of numerous books, among them *The Twelve Caesars*, and *The Army of the Caesars*. In his book *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels*, he fully admits, "But if we apply the same sort of criteria that we would apply to any other ancient literary sources, then the evidence is firm and plausible enough to necessitate the conclusion that the tomb was indeed found empty."<sup>19</sup>

But he does not believe in the Resurrection: "Who had taken the body? There is no way of knowing.... at all events, it was gone."<sup>20</sup> Yet he proceeds to show how the subsequent events of Christian history astonish the historian, "For by conquering the Roman Empire in the fourth century A.D., Christianity had conquered the entire Western World, for century

after century that lay ahead. In a triumph that has been hailed by its advocates as miraculous, and must be regarded by historians, too, as one of the *most astonishing phenomena in the history of the world*, the despised, reviled Galilean became the Lord of countless millions of people over the course of the 1900 years and more between his age and ours.”<sup>21</sup> As we documented in our book on the *Resurrection*, only the Resurrection of Christ can explain this.<sup>22</sup>

Still, perhaps if Dr. Grant had been both a historian and a lawyer, he might have better understood the reason for, in his words, “the most astonishing phenomena in the history of the world.” (In part two, we will examine what some of the finest legal minds in history and today have concluded concerning the evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus and the truth of Christianity.)

Obviously, if Christianity is true, it makes all the difference in the world whether we personally accept it or not. Indeed, for each of us, it makes all the difference between heaven and hell. As Jesus said, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16) and “For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matt. 16:26).