

New evidences for the factuality of the New Testament: A fascinating work

Searching for Jesus

Robert J. Hutchinson

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Author Robert J. Hutchinson earned a graduate degree in New Testament from Fuller Theological Seminary, and is currently a writer and author. Raised Roman Catholic (p. 278), Hutchinson professes to be a Christian, but is clearly not an orthodox one. For instance, he considers the factuality of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ as something that cannot be determined. (p. 246). However, as this book makes so vividly clear, his unorthodox stance makes his frequent evidentiary-based support of Christian orthodoxy all the more interesting.

In fact, throughout this book, Hutchinson professes to follow a middle course between the Orthodox Christian and the secular skeptic (p. xxvii). Even so, he makes it clear that the evidence is much more favourable to the conservative view of the NT than to the liberal one.

My own background is in science (geology and biology), not New Testament or theology. For this reason, I review this book as an outside observer. However, I have some informal background in apologetics, going decades back to my days as a college student and fan of Josh

McDowell. This book is easy to follow for the non-specialist, as it is non-technical, and the author has a lucid style of expression. It is a somewhat frustrating item to review, as there is much more worthwhile information in it than can be discussed in a book review.

A cautionary note

Although Hutchinson presents a wealth of interesting information, not all of his reasoning is sound. Consider one example. The author notes that Mark 5:25 states the inability of physicians to heal the woman with a blood flow, while the parallel account in Luke 8:43–44 mentions no physicians. He asserts that this was because Luke was himself a physician, and therefore did not want to present physicians in an unfavourable light. Clearly, this is conjecture on his part. Here are some possible alternatives: what if Mark mentioned the physicians because he wanted to go out of his way to dramatise the medical hopelessness of the situation? Pointedly, what was Luke to be ashamed of? Would not Luke, of all people, be aware of the fact that there are diseases that no earthly physician could possibly heal, and only the Great Physician could heal? (Of course, this is true of modern medicine, even though it is orders of magnitude more effective than ancient medicine. For instance, some forms of cancer (e.g. pancreatic) are still virtually-certain death sentences.)



Bible contradictions?

The author realises that most alleged contradictions in the Gospels are not contradictions at all. They are simply variant accounts, based on viewpoint-based inclusion or omission of facts by the writers. He also realises the fact that, were there no discrepancies, it would only be a blow against authenticity, as it would mean that the authors of the Gospels had been in collusion—in agreeing to a predetermined story.

However, Hutchinson is not a proponent of biblical inerrancy, and he contends that some discrepancies are genuine contradictions, in that both accounts cannot simultaneously be correct, and so one of them must be wrong. As an example, he cites the women finding the empty tomb of Jesus, “they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8), which is supposed to be inescapably contradicted by Matthew 28:8, “They left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples” (p. 17).

Unfortunately, the author does not analyse this further. Without consulting any apologetics works, I

can, using common sense, suggest some answers. Could the passages actually be saying that the women were filled with fear and joy, and decided to tell no-one *except* authoritative people—namely the disciples? Alternatively, if the “said nothing to anyone” means *absolutely* no-one, could there have been some change of attitude in the women? In other words, could it be that the women were, at first, too frightened to be willing to tell anyone (perhaps supposing that no-one would believe a group of women), but then, having belatedly realised that the disciples could check it for themselves, changed their minds and decided to run and tell the disciples?

Jesus never existed?

A few extremists argue that He was an entirely mythical figure (which is perhaps ironic, because even the arch-atheist Communists admitted His existence—as a historical figure, sometimes ludicrously twisted into a proto-socialist). Hutchinson repeats the fact that there is much more manuscript evidence for Jesus than for Plato, and the time-gap between Jesus and the manuscripts about Him is far smaller than that for Plato and the manuscripts about him (pp. 81–82). Yet few, if any, historians suggest that what Plato said cannot be known, much less that Plato is a mythical figure.

As for the ‘issue’ that there is very little non-Christian testimony about Jesus, this means nothing.

“That’s because, as the agnostic New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman points out, we don’t have archeological or textual evidence for the existence of *most* people in the ancient world—even most famous people [italics in original]” (p. 9).

The ‘historical Jesus’: Ongoing anti-supernaturalist preconceptions

Mainstream biblical scholars have long laboured under the assumption that miracles have no credibility in our modern scientific age. Hutchinson comments,

“The first quest [for the historical Jesus] was a product of a largely discredited and obsolete nineteenth-century rationalism, yet its assumptions, methods, and conclusions are still widely seen today Many of the ‘shocking’ and ‘new’ discoveries you read about in weekly news magazines every Easter season are products of the first quest—and thus are 150 years old. The basic assumption of the first quest was: 1. Miracles cannot and do not happen” (p. 47).

In the 20th century, neo-Orthodoxy, the second quest for the ‘historical Jesus’, became popular among mainline denominations. It rejected the 19th-century optimism about the inevitability of human progress, but retained its rationalism. So have more recent quests. For instance, Mark Roberts, a Harvard-trained New Testament scholar, revealingly says that “If there were no miracles in the New Testament Gospels, then many scholars today as well as many ordinary folk would be much more likely to acknowledge the Gospels’ historical reliability” (p. 14).

The ‘historical Jesus’: Be skeptical of the skeptics

Hutchinson touches on the various ideas of liberal theologians about who Jesus “actually” was. Modernists variously make Him out to be a deluded apocalyptic prophet, a violent revolutionary, a wisdom sage (effectively a Jewish Socrates), a social reformer and/or community organizer.

The author points out that the liberals’ ideas are mutually incompatible,

“What is clear, however, is that all these models cannot be correct. It is implausible that Jesus was both a nonviolent advocate for social renewal in Galilee and, at the same time, a revolutionary plotting the overthrow of the Roman government in Palestine. That, alone, is reason to be skeptical of skeptical scholars; their pronouncements can sometimes seem mutually contradictory. Scholars such as Bart Ehrman and James Tabor insist Jesus was an ‘apocalyptic prophet’ who expected the world to end at any moment, while other historical Jesus experts—such as N.T. Wright, John Dominic Crossan, Richard Horsley, Luke Timothy Johnson, and Marcus Borg—insist that simply isn’t true” (pp. 67–68).

Having read this, I could not help but recall Napoleon. He reputedly said, “Man will believe anything, as long as it’s not in the Bible.”

Reliability of pre-NT oral and written tradition

The standard skeptics’ line goes like this: the disciples made up a whole bunch of tales about the actions and teachings of Jesus. These tales circulated around, were freely changed according to the whims of those who promulgated these tales, and then eventually compiled, by redactors, into the Gospels. These were written decades, even centuries, after the events, and retroactively attributed to the Apostles. The most extreme exponent of this view was Rudolf Bultmann, who would have had us think that the NT is so saturated with *kerygma* (church teaching) that virtually nothing can be known about what Jesus said and did.

Hutchinson brilliantly demolishes every single link of the skeptics' chain of reasoning!

To begin with, the transmission of oral tradition, in both Jewish and Hellenistic cultures, was done very carefully and with great attention to fidelity. It was not something in which its practitioners 'made things up' or 'changed things'. None other than Paul describes the scrupulous transmission of information. He uses the Greek word *paradidomi* for 'handing on' a tradition and *paralambono* for 'receiving a tradition', and moreover maintaining it precisely (1 Corinthians 11:2). New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham testified about the fidelity of oral tradition embedded in the NT, as exemplified by the thoroughly Petrine perspective found in the Gospel of Mark (p. 36).

Nor is it true, at least necessarily, that the first recollections of Jesus' teachings and actions were solely dependent upon oral tradition. Hutchinson presents evidence that, contrary to common intuition, the geographic area in which Jesus lived was relatively advanced in terms of literacy. It is more than likely that much of what Jesus said and did was written down while He was still alive, or shortly thereafter (p. 33, 165).

The Pauline epistles, which were written in the 40s and 50s AD, are instructive in terms of the significance and reliability of oral tradition. Many scholars find, embedded within the epistles, early sources (hymns and sayings of Jesus) that go back to His lifetime, or shortly thereafter. Both conservative and liberal scholars generally agree that Paul wrote at least the following books: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon (p. 11).

Early dates for the Gospels

Hutchinson points out that, owing to the stability and careful

transmission or oral and written tradition about Jesus, the Gospels are not diminished in authenticity even if they were written relatively late. Having said this, the author overturns the arguments for late dates for the Gospels.

According to fairly standard thinking, the Gospels were written several decades after the facts. These late dates are indicated by the prediction of the temple being destroyed, which means that it had already happened when the Gospels were written, and the Gospel authors imaginatively had made a prophecy out of an already-transpired event.

Hutchinson challenges this customary reasoning, but does not accept the alternative idea—that the destruction of the temple had been supernaturally revealed before it happened. Rather, he suggests that the Gospel writers, using human reason alone, correctly deduced, decades in advance, that the Romans would eventually destroy Israel and the Temple. It's also incongruous that Matthew, who often appealed to fulfilled prophesy, would *not* have mentioned the temple's destruction as a fulfilment *if* he had written after the event. He also offers the novel suggestion that the 'abomination of desolation' refers not to the destruction of the temple, but to the attempt by the Emperor Caligula, in about AD 39–40, to erect a statue of himself in the temple (p. 30).

The author adheres to the usual view that Mark was the first-written synoptic Gospel, and that the other synoptics were partly copied from it. It is therefore especially significant that, according to British New Testament scholar James Crossley, Mark may actually have been written within five or ten years of Jesus' time on Earth, and not decades after Jesus (p. 29).

The Gospel according to John is customarily regarded as the last written, the most theology-laden,

and the least likely to transmit factual information about the life and teachings of Jesus. Contrary to this, scholar Richard Bauckham supports earlier scholars, such as F.F. Bruce, who stress the intimate details of Palestinian geography in the Johannine Gospel. Clearly, the author of John was an eyewitness to the events, and was no imagination-driven 'theologian-storyteller'. He was very much aware of, and very much solicitous about, presenting accurate information (pp. 5, 37). That John was an eyewitness is also supported by Israeli archeologist Rami Arav and non-conservative Jesus-Seminar fellow John Rousseau (p. 5).

However, the foregoing does not necessarily mean that Hutchinson supports the traditional authorship of the Gospels. For instance, he speculates that the Gospel according to John may not have been penned by John himself, but by a later author who had incorporated John's teachings (p. 32).

The suffering and divine Saviour

According to standard modernist thinking, the Jews at the time of Christ expected a military messiah, and had no concept of a suffering messiah. The early followers of Jesus, unable to deal with the reality that their leader had met His end, moreover in a shameful and horrible death by crucifixion, retroactively invented the idea, and later doctrine, that His death was salvific, that He rose from the dead, and that He was divine.

None other than some Jewish scholars, cited by Hutchinson, soundly demolish the foregoing modernist line of thinking. Israel Knohl and Daniel Boyarin show that some Jews in Jesus' time *did* expect a suffering messiah (p. 120). In addition, the belief that Isaiah 53 referred to such a messiah was already then part of Jewish thinking, and not a later, contrived 'Christian

interpretation' retroactively applied to Jesus (pp. 131, 134).

According to standard notions of millennia-old Jewish thinking, the concept of a God-Man is utterly foreign to Judaism, and God can be only one Person. Thus the contrary belief, that Jesus is God, was invented by the Church long after the time of Jesus, and moreover was taken from paganism. This is manifestly

incorrect. Daniel Boyarin shows that the Jews of around Jesus' time were experimenting with 'binitarianism', wherein the Godhead consisted of two divine powers of equal substance and power (p. 133). The most famous was probably Philo Judaeus, who had a concept of the *logos* (cf. John 1:1–14) that he called 'a second God' while affirming monotheism. In fact, Boyarin, and Peter Schaefer, a secular

scholar, affirm that Jewish concepts of the nature of God, in the Second Temple period, could well have accommodated views of Jesus being semi-divine or even divine (p. 259).

For the longest time, modernists taught us that Jesus was a more-or-less ordinary religious teacher, and that the belief in the Deity of Christ was a gradual and much later invention of Christians. Scholarly attempts to unravel different successive 'strata', in the evolution of theological thinking in the NT, have demonstrated the exact opposite! Hutchinson quips,

"But as they pored over these very early traditions, creeds, hymns, sayings, and stories, scholars made an astonishing, even unsettling discovery: It was the very *earliest* stages of the Jesus tradition, not the latest, that spoke of Jesus in grandiose terms as a kind of Jewish God-man. Contrary to everything that they had been taught and believed, it looked as though it had been the Jewish followers of Jesus who proclaimed him 'son (*sic*) of God' and 'standing at the right hand of God', not the pagan Gentile followers who joined the movement in the final decades of the first century [*italics and sic in original*]" (p. 256).

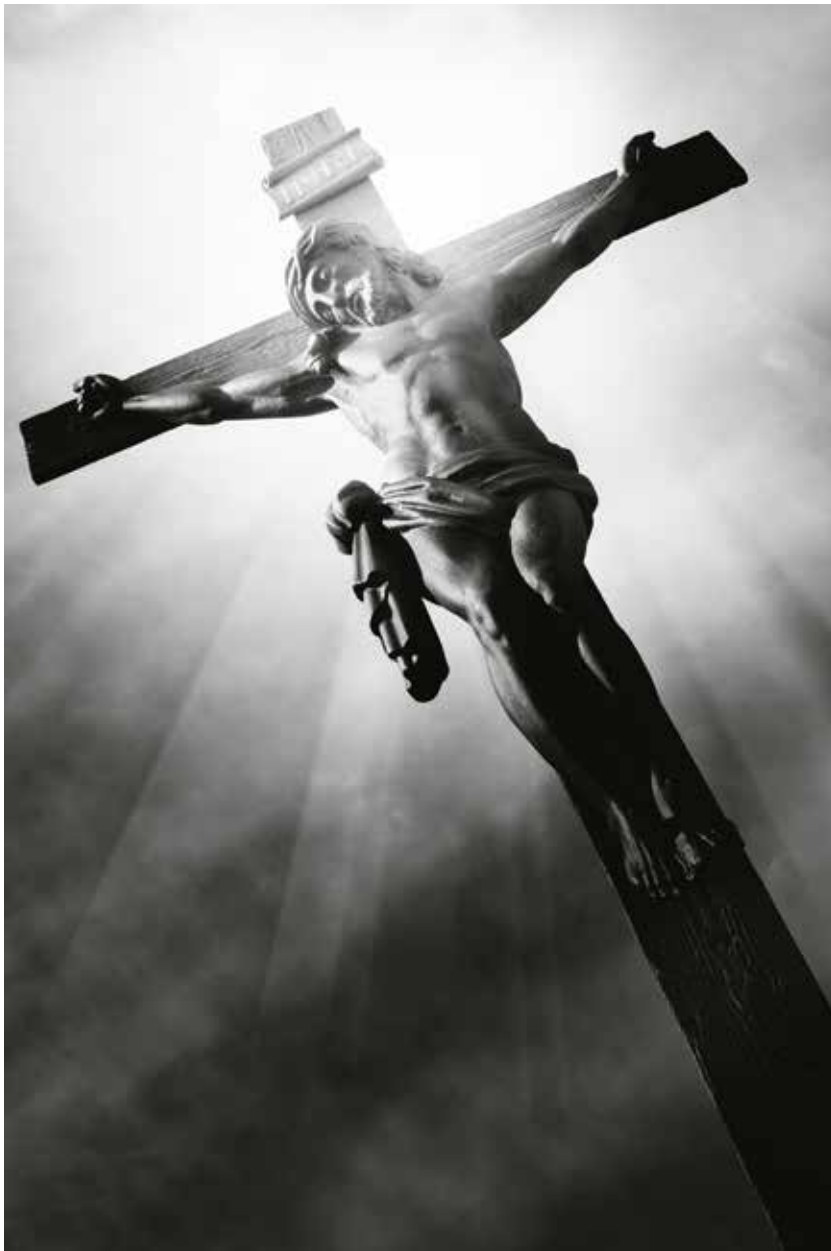


Figure 1. The claims of Jesus Christ, including the Resurrection, were very much susceptible to public scrutiny, and would hardly have been promoted had they been untrue.

Jesus argues with the Pharisees

Liberal theologians would have us believe that the conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees, elaborated in the Gospels, were made up by the early Christians and retroactively applied to Jesus. These Jesus–Pharisee conflicts were purportedly invented in order to heighten the distinction between Christianity and Judaism, and to serve as an anti-Semitic weapon against Jews and Judaism.

Rabbi Shmuley Boteach did a careful analysis of the argumentation used by Jesus in the Gospels. It shows that, far from being an uneducated peasant, Jesus had a very sophisticated

understanding of rabbinic reasoning (p. 144). This sophistication also argues against claims that Jesus' arguments with the Pharisees were some kind of retroactive church-invented polemic against Judaism. It is therefore yet another line of evidence for the factuality of the Gospels.

Lost Christianities?

The notion has gotten some popularity wherein there were many different early forms of Christianity, and the Christianity usually understood today was the one that happened to win out and suppress all the others. The author thinks that suppression is possible, but cannot be demonstrated. His reasoning is unclear. Since Christians did not have the political power to even potentially outlaw other religions until at least the time of Constantine, three centuries after Christ, how could they possibly have suppressed the so-called alternative Christianities?

Hutchinson unambiguously supports the fact that 'alternative Christianities' were late developments—in the second, third, and fourth centuries (p. 43). In no sense were they serious alternatives to conventionally understood Christianity. The author takes this further,

"The consensus seems to be that the Gnostic texts merely restate sayings by Jesus already found in the much earlier canonical Gospels and modify them to fit their own philosophical speculations. This means that study of the Gnostic texts teaches us a lot about Gnosticism but very little new about Jesus or his message. ... After three centuries of relentless scholarly digging, more and more scholars are concluding that our best resource for learning about Jesus and his message is still, by far, the canonical books of the New Testament" (pp. 174–175).

The 'alternative Christianities' construct, though not mentioned by Hutchinson, boils down to semantics—the very definition of Christianity. Liberals have deliberately made the term so vague that virtually any sect whose teachings overlap with mainstream Christianity, even superficially, is, in their imagination, a 'lost Christianity' or 'alternative Christianity'. (Of course, this also applies to the present. Is Mormonism a modern form of 'alternative Christianity', or is it better understood as a different religion?)

The first Easter

The author goes over many of the arguments for and against a bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. He cites the dissident Catholic theologian Hans Küng, who objected to what he saw as both the pat answers of orthodoxy and the equally pat answers of twentieth-century rationalists (p. 248).

Hutchinson dwells on what he supposes is the biblically ambiguous nature of the Resurrection itself. Was it spiritual or physical? In support of this ambiguity, he cites the difficulties that Christ's followers had in physically recognising Him, the repeated and ongoing doubts about the reality of His appearances, etc. Hutchinson's reasoning is fuzzy here. To begin with, a bodily resurrection could only be an unusual and overwhelming experience for those who experienced its consequences. Why, then, would it be surprising that His disciples did not know how to deal with it, experienced conflicting feelings, and cyclically struggled with denial and doubt? On the other hand, if Christ's 'resurrection' was non-physical, what would there have been to struggle about?

If the 'resurrected Christ' were actually a vision, it would not have been an unusual, much less earth-shaking, experience. In addition, this would not adequately explain the

many different reports of Jesus being seen alive, much less the observations of His physical body and the empty tomb (pp. 250–251).

Unfortunately, Hutchinson seems to miss the essential point about 'spiritual resurrection'. Any 'resurrection' that does not involve a physical body is really no resurrection at all. Belief in a 'spiritual resurrection' is essentially the same as belief in life after death. That belief was almost universally held to be true of everyone, and therefore unremarkable. In no sense would it specifically be applicable to Jesus Christ.

In the end, Hutchinson acknowledges the complete inadequacy of all explanations apart from the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ,

"Is it historically credible that Jesus' followers would proclaim that Jesus is alive and risen after death—if the followers themselves and the people to whom they were announcing this shocking news all knew that Jesus' bones lay buried in a tomb in south Jerusalem?" (p. 250).

Conclusions

This is one of the most interesting books that I have read in a long time. Having read and reviewed numerous books, I do not say this lightly. There is much that the reader can learn from it.

More and more evidence is now showing the NT to be factual. What's more, an increasing number of liberal and atheist scholars are coming around to this position.