

## Easter On Trial - Script

*CAST: Judge, Prosecution Lawyer, Defense Lawyer, Doctor, Disciple, MC.*

**MC:** Welcome. We're from Power to Change, which is a Christian group on campus. We think that, if we want you to believe the claims of Christianity, then its only fair that we should establish its credibility. Too often there's an impression that, to become a religious believer, you have to leave your intelligence at the door and believe what you're told to believe, even if it sounds preposterous. However, we believe that Christianity is based upon some solid historical and factual evidence going for it, and today we're going to put that evidence to the test - to see how it would stand up in a court of law.

The facts to be considered are these. A Jewish preacher, Jesus of Nazareth, believed by his followers to be the Messiah that God promised to Israel, was tried and sentenced to death by crucifixion. Even non-Christian historians agree on these facts. But what followed next is one of the great controversies of history - whether, as his followers claimed, Jesus rose from the dead and returned to life, three days after he was crucified.

Of course, that was almost two thousand years in the past, and that might seem to cloud our clear vision of what actually happened. Moreover, we know, of course, that the people of the time were "superstitious", and were quick to believe fanciful tales from our enlightened modern perspective would quickly appear false. Why, then, should we accept such assertions at face value - when we can explore them more thoroughly and scientifically in the impartial forum of a modern-day court? Let us, through the wonders of modern technology., bring the principal characters in the story before one of our courts as witnesses.

**Voice Off-Stage:** Hear ye! Hear ye! The Fraud Division of the Supreme Court of North Judea is now in session. All stand for His Honour Mr. Justice Rumpole. God save this honourable Court!

**Judge:** Yes, yes, you can all sit down now. So what is the charge in this case?

**Prosecution** *[enters]:* A rather unusual case of religious fraud, Your Honour. The charge is one of conspiring to deceive the public by falsifying one (1) alleged resurrection.

**Judge:** Interesting. Faking a resurrection? ... *Not* one of the everyday cases that come before this Court.

**Prosecution:** Your Honour, on numerous occasions it has been put about in

public that the late preacher, Jesus of Nazareth, did, on or about the third day following his death by crucifixion, allegedly, I quote, "Rise again from the dead."

**Judge** *[to the Defense Lawyer]*: And do you deny the substance of this statement?

**Defense Lawyer**: No, your Honour, my clients will not retreat from what they have testified. **Judge**: Well then. It seems that we are in for quite a debate. Prosecution, please state your case.

**Prosecution**: Your Honour, we submit in the first instance that this story is simply untrue. These statements *[picks up a Bible]* about the alleged resurrection, rely on testimony given by persons who were eyewitnesses to the alleged reappearance of the said Jesus of Nazareth after his death. These documents, we submit, are unreliable. They have been deliberately falsified or innocently mistaken, either when they were written or over the centuries since.

**Judge**: If the Defense proposes to rely upon these documents as evidence, then the onus lies upon the Defense to satisfy us that they are indeed admissible. *[To Defense lawyer]* Can you do so?

**Defense**: Yes, Your Honour. We propose to establish, firstly, that the current copies of this testimony are highly accurate copies of the original manuscripts' contents, which in turn are accurate accounts of the events described in their pages. For this purpose, we would like to produce three pieces of evidence.

**Judge**: Proceed.

**Defense**: Our first piece of evidence is Exhibit "A". This table shows that the consensus of modern orthodox scholars is that my clients' accounts were first put in writing no later than forty years, and possibly as soon as twenty-five years, after the events that they describe took place. We submit, therefore, that this would support their reliability.

**Prosecution**: Objection, Your Honour. Twenty-five to forty years is really quite a long time. Before the story is fixed in writing, memories may fade, incidents may become exaggerated through the chain of rumour...

**Defense:** It is hard to exaggerate a resurrection. Granted, wishful thinking or a failing memory might conceivably magnify "five persons." into ".fifty, and eventually into "five hundred", as a story is passed on by word of mouth. But a resurrection is a claim of an entirely different character. Its very improbability makes it harder to sneak it in through the back door. A story so radically unbelievable could hardly have accumulated through years of gradual embellishment. Whether true or false., it could only have sprung into existence, fully-formed, from the very beginning.

**Prosecution:** But if the original story was a complete fake, ""cut out of whole cloth" as they say, then the passing of a couple of decades would give the perpetrators more time to cover their tracks. Contrary eyewitnesses would die off, contrary evidence would fade away. with time.

**Defense:** Maybe. But there were many eyewitnesses to Jesus' return who were still alive when the first accounts of the resurrection were written. There was ample opportunity then, for these people to dispute what was claimed.

**Judge:** Very well. Point taken. Please proceed to your next piece of evidence.

**Defense:** Could I please direct your attention to Exhibit ""B. This is a table drawing a comparison between my clients' accounts and other historical documents, showing the time that elapsed between the writing of the original account and the making of the first known manuscript copies.

**Judge** [*perusing*]: Hmm. Interesting.

**Defense:** As can be seen, my clients` accounts compare very favourably with other ancient historical documents -many of which are quite commonly accepted as true and reliable accounts.

**Prosecution:** Maybe. But perhaps that is because those other documents do not contain such wild and implausible stories. If an ancient manuscript tells us that so-and-so reigned as king, or that such-and-such battle was fought, then we can accept it at face value until it is disproved. But an unbelievable event like a resurrection does not acquire a shred more believability merely because the documents attesting it were copied relatively soon after their making. A falsehood - if this resurrection were a falsehood - does not become truth merely because it is promptly repeated in publication.

**Defense:** Your point is valid, but we will address it in due course, when we deal with the substance of the accounts. All we need to do at present is to establish that their form, they're recording in writing, is not the source of any error in them. If the resurrection be a falsehood. Then it must have been a falsehood from the beginning. It could not have `crept in later'.

**Prosecution:** But even so, forty years before the first manuscripts, and 250 years before the second, is quite a long time. I am not sure that my own memory would last the first period, and I'm certain that it wouldn't last the second.

**Defense:** We must remember, however, that my clients were versed in the Jewish tradition, which placed great emphasis both on committing Scripture to memory, and to copying it with scrupulous accuracy. If they believed that what they were recording was the Word of God, then it would have been unthinkable for them to distort the story, or even to make careless errors. Moreover, there are a large number of early copies available - almost fifteen thousand complete or partial copies survive today, and these agree with each other in virtually every detail. This is our third point of evidence -the accuracy of the manuscripts recording our clients' accounts. No other ancient document can rival this. The next closest is *The Iliad*, by Homer, which can claim only 643 manuscript copies - a very distant second.

**Prosecution:** But could these be merely fifteen thousand repetitions of the same falsehood, perhaps?

**Judge:** Thank you. Clearly both parties have raised valid arguments. This question could still go either way. For expediency, at this stage I propose that we accept these documents as admissible evidence. However, I would remind the Prosecution that they have a right to appeal against this later. It is therefore the truth of that original story which we must now inquire into.

**Prosecutor:** Very well. Your Honour, to say that a man was first dead and then later alive goes against the accepted experiences of every ordinary right-thinking person. It runs counter to the natural everyday order of things, and therefore bears the onus of being proved. This onus is not met if either of its two legs should collapse under it; if it be proved that, either, the man did not die, or that, secondly, even if he did, he stayed dead and did not rise up again.

**Judge:** Accepted. So you dispute, then, in the first instance, whether the alleged Jesus of Nazareth did in fact die?

**Prosecution:** If he was later seen alive, Your Honour, then that is indeed the simplest and most natural explanation, and therefore the one that should be preferred.

**Judge:** And how do you propose to establish this? Do you deny that the Roman Governor sentenced him to crucifixion?

**Prosecution:** No, that is not in doubt. There are ample official records of the case, from Roman historians of the time.

**Judge:** What then are you alleging?

**Prosecution:** We submit, Your Honour, that Jesus didn't die after all. He merely fainted. The soldiers didn't realise this when they took him down, carried him to the tomb, and laid him there. He revived while in the tomb.

**Judge:** And what evidence do you propose to call for this?

**Prosecution:** Your Honour, the Prosecution calls Dr James Kildare as our expert medical witness.

*[Doctor enters]*

**Prosecution:** Dr Kildare, is it possible that a man in Jesus' position could merely have swooned or fainted, given his exhaustion at the time? After all crucifixion is not an all-or-nothing mode of execution. Unlike, say, beheading or burning at the stake, it takes time to work its dire effects. It is admitted by the Defense that Jesus hung on the cross for only a few hours before being taken down and buried. Wouldn't crucifixion take longer to produce death? Isn't it possible that the process was interrupted before Jesus had time to die, and that his three days in the tomb restored him?

**Doctor:** Well, the crucifixion procedure causes death in four ways: suffocation, dehydration, exposure, and heart failure. Any one of these could reach the victim first.

**Prosecution:** But did they, in Jesus' case? After all, each of these takes some time to work.

**Doctor:** It was known for victims to survive for several days. That could have happened in this case.

**Prosecution:** And is it possible that one of these four causes of death could have produced a deep fainting or coma, very similar to death, before he actually died?

**Doctor:** Yes, that is a strong possibility.

**Prosecution:** And he could have been revived later in the coolness of the tomb, or by the ministrations of his disciples?

**Doctor:** Certainly ... Recovery is more likely in a warm place with fresh air, of course, but I suppose it's *possible* he could have recovered in the tomb...

**Prosecution:** Thank you. It is recorded, furthermore, that Jesus' legs were not broken. Would this mean that he could later have walked away, if his flesh wounds had healed sufficiently?

**Doctor:** That could have occurred, yes.

**Prosecution:** The Prosecution rests.

**Judge:** Defense, do you wish to cross-examine the witness?

**Defense:** Yes, Your Honour. Doctor - Are you aware of the particular circumstances of Jesus' case?

**Doctor:** A rather harsh case, yes.

**Defense:** It was quite a sadistic elaboration on the standard procedure for a Roman crucifixion. Jesus was not merely hung upon a cross for a few hours. He was also whipped savagely, crowned with thorns, made to carry his cross for some miles, nailed to it, and pierced with a spear. Under those circumstances, I would find it hard to believe that he lasted long.

**Doctor:** That would indeed drastically reduce his likelihood of survival.

**Defense:** Moreover, are you aware that the Roman soldiers would not have taken down the bodies unless and until they were clearly dead? Taking down a still living victim would defeat the whole purpose of the process.

**Doctor:** Yes - you may have a point.

**Defense:** Also, it is attested that when the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, blood mixed with water

flowed from the wound. Would this indicate death had occurred?

**Doctor:** Yes, it would. The flow of blood would indicate rupturing of the heart, or some other major artery; while the flow of water would suggest that the spear had pierced Jesus' lungs. Either or both of these would be a death-blow to someone already weakened by crucifixion and torture.

**Defense:** Thank you. - Moreover, it is recorded that the soldiers did not bother to break Jesus' legs. This was standard procedure to make doubly sure that the victim had died or would die. The fact that this was not done would indicate that he seemed quite dead, would it not?

**Doctor:** Yes, I suppose it would.

**Defense:** So which, then, seems the more probable? That Jesus did die? Or that, three days after being savagely tortured, recovering after his nice little rest, and being refreshed by his lack of food and water, Jesus woke up, pushed away the stone himself, escaped from the guards, walked to Jerusalem, and fooled many people into thinking that he had been restored to life by supernatural power?

**Doctor:** Well, the former does sound more likely, I suppose.

**Defense:** Thank you, that is all. *[To Judge, as Doctor exits]:* Your Honour, we submit that it is clearly established that Jesus did, in fact, die.

**Judge:** Thank you. Prosecution, how do you respond?

**Prosecution:** Very well. In the alternative that Jesus did die, we continue to prefer the more natural explanation -which is, in this case, that he stayed dead. His body was stolen; or, his followers were mistaken. Either they went to the wrong tomb and found it empty, or they were deceived by an hallucination or an impostor that looked like Jesus come back to life. Any one of these would still discredit their whole story.

**Judge:** And how does the Defense propose to answer these imputations?

**Defense:** We propose to call as a witness one of Jesus' disciples. *[Disciple enters].*

**Defense:** You saw that Jesus' tomb was empty?

**Disciple:** Yes. As soon as the women came back to tell us, we went to see for ourselves. The stone was rolled back and the body was gone.

**Defense:** Is it possible that you, or they, went to the wrong tomb?

**Disciple:** Joseph of Arimathea, the original owner, is quite a well-known citizen. And this tomb had a broken Imperial seal set on its stone. No, it was too politically notorious for us not to know it.

**Defense:** But what if the body was simply stolen?

**Disciple:** By whom, though?

**Defense:** Well - by the authorities? The Roman governor, or the Jewish High Priest? After all, the soldiers who carried out Jesus' crucifixion, and then guarded his tomb, were under their command. People could well believe that either had ample opportunity to "spirit away" the body.

**Disciple:** Opportunity, maybe... But what motive? Would they have deliberately done anything to encourage rumours of a resurrection to spread? And if they knew where the body had been taken, wouldn't they have produced it at the earliest opportunity? That would have stopped the Resurrection story from ever starting, wouldn't it?

**Defense:** Well, we can cross the Roman or Jewish authorities off our list of suspects, then. It seems they had "opportunity" to steal the body, but no "motive". But wouldn't people say that leaves another group of suspects who had a very strong motive? I refer to you yourselves, the disciples.

**Disciple:** Even if we had a motive, we had no opportunity. The tomb was guarded by a dozen or more trained, professional soldiers.

**Defense:** One could assume that you took them by surprise.

**Disciple:** I don't think so. They were expecting some kind of incursion, and watching out for it. Otherwise they wouldn't have been posted there in the first place.

**Defense:** Or maybe they fell asleep while you stole the body?

**Disciple:** All of them? At the same time? I don't think so. Sleeping on duty is an offence punishable by death under Roman military rules. And how did we move a two-ton stone without waking them up?

**Defense:** Thank you. *[To Judge and audience]* Have we established, then, that the body was not stolen? That of itself does not prove resurrection; but it helps to confirm the next piece of evidence, which does. *[Back to Disciple]* And after you found the tomb empty, did you see Jesus again?

**Disciple:** Yes. Alive. We saw him at Peter's house, three days after the crucifixion. And over the next forty days following. He stood before us in a flesh and blood body - not a ghost.

**Defense:** And not a hallucination?

**Disciple:** No. There were five hundred different people who saw him, at different times, over those forty days. You can't tell me they all had the same hallucination at the same time.

**Defense:** He was not an impostor? Someone in disguise?

**Disciple:** If it was, then he did a pretty good job. He fooled Jesus' closest friends and relatives, plus many others who'd seen Jesus preach over the last three years. And he even showed us his wounds from the crucifixion.

**Defense:** Thank you. I think, Your Honour, we have successfully refuted all attempts so far to pick holes in the Defence's case. Our testimony holds together. Further, eyewitness evidence and the circumstantial evidence of the disappearance of Jesus' body, together establish that Jesus was alive at a date after the crucifixion. Combined with that plain evidence that Jesus died upon the cross, the only conclusion we can come too is that Jesus was resurrected.

**Judge:** Thank you. *[To Prosecution]* And what is the third point of your case?

**Prosecution:** Your Honour; Even if the Defense's testimony is internally consistent, we submit in the final alternative that this proves no more than that they are skillful storytellers, who have been careful to leave no glaring holes in their carefully-woven myth. We submit that they have simply invented the whole tale. *[To Disciple]* Is that not the simplest explanation? Your story is a complete fabrication?

**Disciple:** Why would we do that? What benefit would that have gained us?

**Prosecution:** Well... To gain disciples. To lure gullible and credulous people to your pernicious creed. To amass money and power for your organisation.

**Disciple:** Maybe our successors in later centuries amassed money and power, but we certainly didn't get any of it! All we got was losing our jobs., losing our families, being tortured, even thrown to the lions, if we didn't renounce our faith. Do you think we'd go through all that for something we knew to be a lie?

**Prosecution:** Well... perhaps not... But to some religious fanatics, the end justifies any means. Even deceiving the general public.

**Disciple:** If we wanted to catch fish, even gullible ones, a resurrection story is a rather hard bait to swallow.

**Prosecution:** Yes, but people are rather gullible about believing such "So-and-so is alive" rumours, aren't they? Elvis, JFK... now Jesus? People seem to believe whatever they want to believe.

**Disciple:** Only when there's some evidence, however frail. In this case there was no suspicion that Jesus' death had been covered up or faked. His death was public, by public crucifixion. No one could hold any last lingering hope of him surviving, once they saw what had happened to him. Even we, his friends and disciples, never expected him to come back.

**Prosecution:** People can be pretty gullible.

**Disciple:** Perhaps; but when you could go to jail for believing something, you tend to be that bit more skeptical before you accept it.

**Judge:** Thank you. If you both have no further arguments or evidence to give, you may now proceed to summing up your cases.

**Prosecution:** Your Honour, Ladies and gentlemen of the jury; The Prosecution has put forward three principal arguments to disprove the alleged resurrection of Jesus Christ. Firstly, we contend that Jesus did not in fact die prior to the time of the purported resurrection. Secondly, even if he did die, we submit that he - as in the normal course of events - remained dead. The fact of the empty tomb can be satisfactorily explained by the fact that his body was stolen. And his alleged re-appearance can be put down to hallucination or a clever impostor. Thirdly, in the final alternative we contend that the entire resurrection story is an elaborate hoax.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Defense is asking you to suspend your reason and believe in an event unprecedented (in fact, unrepeated) in human experience. The Defense's story has an undeniable appeal; we would all like to believe in life after death, and in simple answers to the hard questions of life on this earth. But we cannot allow that to cloud our reason. After all, we must decide on the facts, and use our common sense.

The Defense's main testimony is contained in accounts whose authority is, to say the least, doubtful. Both their age, and their self-serving nature in backing up their authors' myths, make them highly suspect. In short, the trustworthiness of the Defense's case has not been established. *[Sits down]*.

**Judge:** Thank you. And, now, the Defense?

**Defense:** Your Honour, ladies and gentlemen of the jury; The witnesses' evidence makes it clear that Jesus did in fact die, that he was buried, and that three days later the tomb was empty and that Jesus was alive. We contend that he was raised from the dead by what this Court might call an "Act of God".

Far from being unreliable, as the Prosecution has argued, the eyewitness and circumstantial evidence has in fact been shown to meet the strict standards required for evidence in a court of law. Indeed, we have better historical evidence today for the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ than we have for the death of Julius Caesar.

The witnesses' testimony is not tainted by fraud or self-interest; on the contrary, they were prepared to face death for their belief in it. And the manuscripts containing that testimony are not weakened merely because of their age; rather, they have been scrupulously preserved inviolate by those who regarded them as the Word of God.

The Prosecution has appealed to our common sense. But, ladies and gentlemen, our common sense must never be merely a smokescreen for our common prejudice. Nor should we ever reject clear evidence merely because it does not fit our prejudice. A man cannot rise from the dead, educated opinion tells us; but at the same time., educated opinion also tells us that, aerodynamically, bumblebees cannot fly! The lesson for us is that we should not close our minds to strong evidence, merely because it is outside our everyday experience. Ladies and gentlemen., bumblebees can fly; and Jesus *did* rise from the dead. Often the evidence confounds our neat and tidy theories. Thank you. *[Sits down]*.

**Judge:** *[To the audience]* You have heard the arguments, and now you, as the jury, must decide for yourselves. Remember that we do not require absolute mathematical certainty; instead, in our own everyday lives, we often must be content with a high enough standard of probability. You must weigh the evidence and decide which side it better supports. The decision is now yours.

**MC:** Thank you. Well, now you've seen "Easter on Trial"; we hope you found it challenging. So now you might be asking; "Even if the Resurrection did occur, what's the significance of that for me?". Well. it seems pretty significant., because Jesus claimed to be more than the average person. In fact, He claimed to be God. And if he did in fact rise from the dead, that would seem to substantiate this claim. An interesting question, eh? Well, thank you all for coming; please have a happy and, we hope, very holy Easter. Good day.

# EVIDENCE IN DEFENSE OF THE BIBLE'S RELIABILITY

## EXHIBIT "A"

Earliest and latest estimates of when the New Testament's books were written:

<i>Book</i>	<i>Earliest estimate (by):</i>	<i>Latest Estimate (by):</i>
Paul's letters	50-66 AD (D. Hiebert)	50-100 AD (C. Kilmmel)
Matthew	70-80 AD (E. Harrison)	80-100 AD (C. Kilmmel)
Mark	50-60 AD (E. Harnack)	70 AD (C. Kilmmel)
Luke	early 60's (E. Harrison)	70-90 AD (C. Kilmmel)
John	80-100 AD (E. Harrison)	170 AD (F.C. Baur)

## EXHIBIT "B"

### Comparison of the New Testament with copies of other ancient writings;

<i>Author</i>	<i>When Written</i>	<i>Earliest Copy</i>	<i>Years Between</i>	<i>No. of copies</i>
Caesar	100-44 BC	900 AD	1000	10
Livy	59 BC-17 AD			20
Plato	427-347 BC	900 AD	1200	7
Tacitus	100 AD	1100 AD	1000	20
Pliny the Younger	61-113 AD	850 AD	750	7
Thucydides	460-400 BC	900 AD	1300	8
Suetonius	75-160 AD	950 AD	800	8
Herodotus	480-425 BC	900 AD	1300	
Horace		1000 AD	900	
Sophocles	496-406 BC		1400	193
Lucretius	Died 55 or 53 BC	1550 AD	1100	2
Catullus	54 BC		1600	3
Euripides	480-406 BC	1100 AD	1500	9
Demosthenes	383-322 BC	1100 AD	1300	200
Aristotle	384-322 BC	1100 AD	1400	49
Aristophanes	450-385 BC	900 AD	1200	10

There are 24,633 surviving manuscripts of the New Testament - far more than of any other ancient document of that time. The next highest number of manuscripts is a mere 643, for Homer's *The Iliad*.

[Source; *Evidence that Demands a Verdict: Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith*, by Josh McDowell (1979); Vol. 1, pages 62,421.