

# WRITINGS OF DAN BARKER

by Dan Barker

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*A collection of theological writings, sermons, and essays by Dan Barker, compiled for study and devotional reading.*

3 Chapters

## Table of Contents

1. 000 - Barker, Dan - Library
2. S. Leave No Stone Unturned: An Easter Challenge For Christians
3. S. Why Jesus?

## **000 - Barker, Dan - Library**

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Barker, Dan - Library

S. Barker, Dan - Leave No Stone Unturned

S. Barker, Dan - Why Jesus

## S. Leave No Stone Unturned: An Easter Challenge For Christians

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Leave No Stone Unturned: An Easter Challenge For Christians By Dan Barker

I HAVE AN EASTER challenge for Christians. My challenge is simply this: tell me what happened on Easter. I am not asking for proof. My straightforward request is merely that Christians tell me exactly what happened on the day that their most important doctrine was born.

Believers should eagerly take up this challenge, since without the resurrection, there is no Christianity. Paul wrote, "And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not." (1 Corinthians 15:14-15) The conditions of the challenge are simple and reasonable. In each of the four Gospels, begin at Easter morning and read to the end of the book: Matthew 28:1-20, Mark 16:1-28, Luke 24:1-53, and John 20:1-31, John 21:1-25. Also read Acts 1:3-12 and Paul's tiny version of the story in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. These 165 verses can be read in a few moments. Then, without omitting a single detail from these separate accounts, write a simple, chronological narrative of the events between the resurrection and the ascension: what happened first, second, and so on; who said what, when; and where these things happened.

Since the gospels do not always give precise times of day, it is permissible to make educated guesses. The narrative does not have to pretend to present a perfect picture--it only needs to give at least one plausible account of all of the facts. Additional explanation of the narrative may be set apart in parentheses. The important condition to the challenge, however, is that not one single biblical detail be omitted. Fair enough?

I have tried this challenge myself. I failed. An Assembly of God minister whom I was debating a couple of years ago on a Florida radio show loudly proclaimed over the air that he would send me the narrative in a few days. I am still waiting. After my debate at the University of Wisconsin, "Jesus of Nazareth: Messiah or Myth," a Lutheran graduate student told me he accepted the challenge and would be contacting me in about a week. I have never heard from him. Both of these people, and others, agreed that the request was reasonable and crucial. Maybe they are slow readers.

Many bible stories are given only once or twice, and are therefore hard to confirm. The author of Matthew, for example, was the only one to mention that at the crucifixion dead people emerged from the graves of Jerusalem, walking around showing themselves to everyone--an amazing event that could hardly escape the notice of the other Gospel writers, or any other historians of the period. But though the silence of others might weaken the likelihood of a story, it does not disprove it. Disconfirmation comes with contradictions.

Thomas Paine tackled this matter two hundred years ago in *The Age of Reason*, stumbling across dozens of New Testament discrepancies:

"I lay it down as a position which cannot be controverted," he wrote, "first, that the agreement of all the parts of a story does not prove that story to be true, because the parts may agree and the whole may be false; secondly, that the disagreement of the parts of a story proves the whole cannot be true."

Since Easter is told by five different writers, it gives one of the best chances to confirm or disconfirm the account. Christians should welcome the opportunity.

One of the first problems I found is in Matthew 28:2, after two women arrived at the tomb: "And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it." (Let's ignore the fact that no other writer mentioned this "great earthquake.") This story says that the stone was rolled away after the women arrived, in their presence.

Yet Mark's Gospel says it happened before the women arrived: "And they said among themselves, Who shall roll away the stone from the door of the sepulchre? And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great."

Luke writes: "And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre." John agrees. No earthquake, no rolling stone. It is a three-to-one vote: Matthew loses. (Or else the other three are wrong.) The event cannot have happened both before and after they arrived.

Some bible defenders assert that Matthew 28:2 was intended to be understood in the past perfect, showing what had happened before the women arrived. But the entire passage is in the aorist (past) tense, and it reads, in context, like a simple chronological account. Matthew 28:2 begins, "And, behold," not "For, behold." If this verse can be so easily shuffled around, then what is to keep us from putting the flood before the ark, or the crucifixion before the nativity?

Another glaring problem is the fact that in Matthew the first post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to the disciples happened on a mountain in Galilee (not in Jerusalem, as most Christians believe), as predicted by the angel sitting on the newly moved rock: "And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him." This must have been of supreme importance, since this was the message of God via the angel(s) at the tomb. Jesus had even predicted this himself sixty hours earlier, during the Last Supper (Matthew 26:32).

After receiving this angelic message, "Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them. And when they saw him, they worshipped him: but some doubted." (Matthew 28:16-17) Reading this at face value, and in context, it is clear that Matthew intends this to have been the first appearance. Otherwise, if Jesus had been seen before this time, why did some doubt?

Mark agrees with Matthew's account of the angel's Galilee message, but gives a different story about the first appearance. Luke and John give different angel messages and then radically contradict Matthew. Luke shows the first appearance on the road to Emmaus and then in a room in Jerusalem. John says it happened later than evening in a room, minus Thomas. These angel messages, locations, and travels during the day are impossible to reconcile.

Believers sometimes use the analogy of the five blind men examining an elephant, all coming away with a different definition: tree trunk (leg), rope (tail), hose (trunk), wall (side), and fabric (ear). People who use this argument forget that each of the blind men was wrong: an elephant is not a rope or a tree. You can put the five parts together to arrive at a noncontradictory aggregate of the entire animal. This hasn't been done with the resurrection.

Another analogy sometimes used by apologists is comparing the resurrection contradictions to differing accounts given by witnesses of an auto accident. If one witness said the vehicle was green and the other said it was blue, that could be accounted for by different angles, lighting, perception, or definitions of words. The important thing, they claim, is that they do agree on the basic story--there was an accident, there was a resurrection.

I am not a fundamentalist inerrantist. I'm not demanding that the evangelists must have been expert, infallible witnesses. (None of them claims to have been at the tomb itself, anyway.) But what if one person said the auto accident happened in Chicago and the other said it happened in Milwaukee? At least one of these witnesses has serious problems with the truth.

Luke says the post-resurrection appearance happened in Jerusalem, but Matthew says it happened in Galilee, sixty to one hundred miles away! Could they all have traveled 150 miles that day, by foot, trudging up to Galilee for the first appearance, then back to Jerusalem for the evening meal? There is no mention of any horses, but twelve well-conditioned thoroughbreds racing at breakneck speed, as the crow flies, would need about five hours for the trip, without a rest. And during this madcap scenario, could Jesus have found time for a leisurely stroll to Emmaus, accepting, "toward evening," an invitation to dinner? Something is very wrong here. This is just the tip of the iceberg. Of course, none of these contradictions prove that the resurrection did not happen, but they do throw considerable doubt on the reliability of the supposed witnesses. Some of them were wrong. Maybe they were all wrong. This challenge could be harder. I could ask why reports of supernatural beings, vanishing and materializing out of thin air, long-dead corpses coming back to life, and people levitating should be given serious consideration at all. Thomas Paine was one of the first to point out that outrageous claims require outrageous proof.

Protestants and Catholics seem to have no trouble applying healthy skepticism to the miracles of Islam, or to the "historical" visit between Joseph Smith and the angel Moroni. Why should Christians treat their own outrageous claims any differently? Why should someone who was not there be any more eager to believe than doubting Thomas, who lived during that time, or the other disciples who said that the women's news from the tomb "seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not" (Luke 24:11)?

Paine also points out that everything in the bible is hearsay. For example, the message at the tomb (if it happened at all) took this path, at minimum, before it got to our eyes: God, angel(s), Mary, disciples, Gospel writers, copyists, translators. (The Gospels are all anonymous and we have no original versions.) But first things first: Christians, either tell me exactly what happened on Easter Sunday, or let's leave the Jesus myth buried next to Eastre (Ishtar, Astarte), the pagan Goddess of Spring after whom your holiday was named.

Here are some of the discrepancies among the resurrection accounts:

What time did the women visit the tomb?

Matthew: "as it began to dawn" (Matthew 28:1)

Mark: "very early in the morning . . . at the rising of the sun" (Mark 16:2, KJV); "when the sun had risen" (NRSV); "just after sunrise" (NIV)

Luke: "very early in the morning" (Luke 24:1, KJV) "at early dawn" (NRSV)

John: "when it was yet dark" (John 20:1)

Who were the women?

Matthew: Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (Matthew 28:1)

Mark: Mary Magdalene, the mother of James, and Salome (Mark 16:1)

Luke: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women (Luke 24:10)

John: Mary Magdalene (John 20:1)

What was their purpose?

Matthew: to see the tomb (Matthew 28:1)

Mark: had already seen the tomb (Mark 15:47), brought spices (Mark 16:1)

Luke: had already seen the tomb (Luke 23:55), brought spices (Luke 24:1)

John: the body had already been spiced before they arrived (John 19:39-40)

Was the tomb open when they arrived?

Matthew: No (Matthew 28:2)

Mark: Yes (Mark 16:4)

Luke: Yes (Luke 24:2)

John: Yes (John 20:1)

Who was at the tomb when they arrived?

Matthew: One angel (Matthew 28:2-7)

Mark: One young man (Mark 16:5)

Luke: Two men (Luke 24:4)

John: Two angels (John 20:12)

Where were these messengers situated?

Matthew: Angel sitting on the stone (Matthew 28:2)

Mark: Young man sitting inside, on the right (Mark 16:5)

Luke: Two men standing inside (Luke 24:4)

John: Two angels sitting on each end of the bed (John 20:12)

What did the messenger(s) say?

Matthew: "Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead: and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you." (Matthew 28:5-7)

Mark: "Be not afrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him. But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you." (Mark 16:6-7)

Luke: "Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee, Saying, The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again." (Luke 24:5-7)

John: "Woman, why weepest thou?" (John 20:13)

Did the women tell what happened?

Matthew: Yes (Matthew 28:8)

Mark: No. "Neither said they any thing to any man." (Mark 16:8)

Luke: Yes. "And they returned from the tomb and told all these things to the eleven, and to all the rest." (Luke 24:9, Luke 24:22-24)

John: Yes (John 20:18)

When Mary returned from the tomb, did she know Jesus had been resurrected?

Matthew: Yes (Matthew 28:7-8)

Mark: Yes (Mark 16:10-11)

Luke: Yes (Luke 24:6-9, Luke 24:23)

John: No (John 20:2)

When did Mary first see Jesus?

Matthew: Before she returned to the disciples (Matthew 28:9)

Mark: Before she returned to the disciples (Mark 16:9-10)

John: After she returned to the disciples (John 20:2, John 20:14)

Could Jesus be touched after the resurrection?

Matthew: Yes (Matthew 28:9)

John: No (John 20:17), Yes (John 20:27)

After the women, to whom did Jesus first appear?

Matthew: Eleven disciples (Matthew 28:16)

Mark: Two disciples in the country, later to eleven (Mark 16:12, Mark 16:14)

Luke: Two disciples in Emmaus, later to eleven (Luke 24:13, Luke 24:36)

John: Ten disciples (Judas and Thomas were absent) (John 20:19, John 20:24)

Paul: First to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve. (Twelve? Judas was dead). (1 Corinthians 15:5)

Where did Jesus first appear to the disciples?

Matthew: On a mountain in Galilee (60-100 miles away) (Matthew 28:16-17)

Mark: To two in the country, to eleven "as they sat at meat" (Mark 16:12, Mark 16:14)

Luke: In Emmaus (about seven miles away) at evening, to the rest in a room in Jerusalem later that night. (Luke 24:31, Luke 24:36)

John: In a room, at evening (John 20:19)

Did the disciples believe the two men?

Mark: No (Mark 16:13)

Luke: Yes (Luke 24:34 --it is the group speaking here, not the two)

What happened at the appearance?

Matthew: Disciples worshipped, some doubted, "Go preach." (Matthew 28:17-20)

Mark: Jesus reprimanded them, said "Go preach" (Mark 16:14-19)

Luke: Christ incognito, vanishing act, materialized out of thin air, reprimand, supper (Luke 24:13-51)

John: Passed through solid door, disciples happy, Jesus blesses them, no reprimand (John 21:19-23)

Did Jesus stay on earth for a while?

Mark: No (Mark 16:19) Compare Mark 16:14 with John 20:19 to show that this was all done on Sunday

Luke: No (Luke 24:50-52) It all happened on Sunday

John: Yes, at least eight days (John 20:26, John 21:1-22)

Acts: Yes, at least forty days (Acts 1:3)

Where did the ascension take place?

Matthew: No ascension. Book ends on mountain in Galilee

Mark: In or near Jerusalem, after supper (Mark 16:19)

Luke: In Bethany, very close to Jerusalem, after supper (Luke 24:50-51)

John: No ascension

Paul: No ascension

Acts: Ascended from Mount of Olives (Acts 1:9-12)

## S. Why Jesus?

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### Why Jesus?

Jesus has been held in high regard by Christians and non-Christians alike. Regardless of whether he existed in history, or whether he was divine, many have asserted that the New Testament Christ character was the highest example of moral living. Many believe that his teachings, if truly understood and followed, would make this a better world. Is this true? Does Jesus merit the widespread adoration he has received? Let's look at what he said and did. Was Jesus Peaceable And Compassionate? The birth of Jesus was heralded with "Peace on Earth," yet Jesus said, "Think not that I am come to send peace: I came not to send peace but a sword." (Matthew 10:34) "He that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one." (Luke 22:36) "But those mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before me." (Luke 19:27. In a parable, but spoken of favorably.) The burning of unbelievers during the Inquisition was based on the words of Jesus: "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned." (John 15:6)

Jesus looked at his critics "with anger" (Mark 3:5), and attacked merchants with a whip (John 2:15). He showed his respect for life by drowning innocent animals (Matthew 8:32). He refused to heal a sick child until he was pressured by the mother (Matthew 15:22-28). The most revealing aspect of his character was his promotion of eternal torment. "The Son of man [Jesus himself] shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 13:41-42) "And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched." (Mark 9:43) Is this nice? Is it exemplary to make your point with threats of violence? Is hell a kind, peaceful idea? Did Jesus Promote "Family Values"?

"If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26)

"I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household." (Matthew 10:35-36) When one of his disciples requested time off for his father's funeral, Jesus rebuked him: "Let the dead bury their dead." (Matthew 8:22)

Jesus never used the word "family." He never married or fathered children. To his own mother, he said, "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" (John 2:4) What Were His Views On Equality And Social Justice?

Jesus encouraged the beating of slaves: "And that servant [slave], which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes." (Luke 12:47) He never denounced servitude, incorporating the master-slave relationship into many of his

parables.

He did nothing to alleviate poverty. Rather than sell some expensive ointment to help the poor, Jesus wasted it on himself, saying, "Ye have the poor with you always." (Mark 14:3-7) No women were chosen as disciples or invited to the Last Supper.

What Moral Advice Did Jesus Give?

"There be eunuchs which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it." (Matthew 19:12) Some believers, including church father Origen, took this verse literally and castrated themselves. Even metaphorically, this advice is in poor taste.

If you do something wrong with your eye or hand, cut/pluck it off (Matthew 5:29-30, in a sexual context).

Marrying a divorced woman is adultery. (Matthew 5:32)

Don't plan for the future. (Matthew 6:34)

Don't save money. (Matthew 6:19-20)

Don't become wealthy. (Mark 10:21-25)

Sell everything and give it to the poor. (Luke 12:33)

Don't work to obtain food. (John 6:27)

Don't have sexual urges. (Matthew 5:28)

Make people want to persecute you. (Matthew 5:11)

Let everyone know you are better than the rest. (Matthew 5:13-16)

Take money from those who have no savings and give it to rich investors. (Luke 19:23-26)

If someone steals from you, don't try to get it back. (Luke 6:30)

If someone hits you, invite them to do it again. (Matthew 5:39)

If you lose a lawsuit, give more than the judgment. (Matthew 5:40)

If someone forces you to walk a mile, walk two miles. (Matthew 5:41)

If anyone asks you for anything, give it to them without question. (Matthew 5:42)

Is this wise? Is this what you would teach your children? Was Jesus Reliable?

Jesus told his disciples that they would not die before his second coming: "There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom" (Matthew 16:28). "Behold, I come quickly." (Revelation 3:11) It's been 2,000 years, and believers are still waiting for his "quick" return.

He mistakenly claimed that the mustard seed is "the least of all seeds" (Matthew 13:32), and that salt could "lose its savour" (Matthew 5:13).

Jesus said that whoever calls somebody a "fool" shall be in danger of hell fire (Matthew 5:22), yet he called people "fools" himself (Matthew 23:17).

Regarding his own truthfulness, Jesus gave two conflicting opinions: "If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true" (John 5:31), and "Though I bear record of myself, yet my record is true" (John 8:14). Was Jesus A Good Example?

He irrationally cursed a fig tree for being fruitless out of season (Matthew 21:18-19, and Mark 11:13-14). He broke the law by stealing corn on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23), and he encouraged his disciples to take a horse without asking permission (Matthew 21:1-7). The "humble" Jesus said that he was "greater than the temple" (Matthew 12:6), "greater than Jonah" (Matthew 12:41), and "greater than Solomon" (Matthew 12:42). He appeared to suffer from a dictator's "paranoia" when he said, "He that is not with me is against me" (Matthew 12:30).

Why Jesus?

Although other verses can be cited that portray Jesus in a different light, they do not erase the disturbing side of his character. The conflicting passages, however, prove that the New Testament is contradictory. The "Golden Rule" had been said many times by earlier religious leaders. (Confucius: "Do not unto others that you would not have them do unto you.") "Turn the other cheek" encourages victims to invite further violence. "Love thy neighbor" applied only to fellow believers. (Neither the Jews nor Jesus showed much love to foreign religions). A few of the Beatitudes ("Blessed are the peacemakers") are acceptable, but they are all conditions of future reward, not based on respect for human life or values. On the whole, Jesus said little that was worthwhile. He introduced nothing new to ethics (except hell). He instituted no social programs. Being "omniscient," he could have shared some useful science or medicine, but he appeared ignorant of such things (as if his character were merely the invention of writers stuck in the first century).

Many scholars are doubtful of the historical existence of Jesus. Albert Schweitzer said, "The historical Jesus will be to our time a stranger and an enigma." No first-century writer confirms the Jesus story. The New Testament is internally contradictory and contains historical errors. The story is filled with miracles and other outrageous claims. Consisting mostly of material borrowed from pagan religions, the Jesus story appears to be cut from the same fabric as all other myths and fables.

Why is Jesus so special? It would be more reasonable and productive to emulate real, flesh-and-blood human beings who have contributed to humanity--mothers who have given birth, scientists who have alleviated suffering, social reformers who have fought injustice--than to worship a character of such dubious qualities as Jesus.

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