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#95 Did it really happen? Questions on the reliability of the Bible

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

How should we approach historical scholarship that undermines the Bible? Was early Christian persecution exaggerated? Did saints really rise from their graves as Matthew 27 claims?

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Transcript

[MUSIC] Ask NT Wright anything podcast.

[MUSIC] >> Hello and welcome to this week's edition of the show, Justin Briley, here once again, to bring you the answers to your questions with NT Wright senior research fellow at Wickliffe-Hall-Oxford. And the show brought to you in partnership as usual with NT Wright Online and SBCK, Tom's UK publisher, and of course, Premier, for whom I'm the theology and apologetics editor.

Today on the show, we're asking, did it really happen? Questions on things like whether historical scholarship undermines the credibility of the Bible were the early Christians, really as persecuted as is claimed, and what about that passage in Matthew 27, a disputed passage about saints rising from their graves? So lots of interesting questions today. And thanks to all those who have been tagging us in the past couple of weeks to say that Ask NT Wright came out top in their Spotify end of year wrap. Good to know that so many people have been listening across the past year.

And by the way, leaving a review and rating us on your podcast provider helps others to discover the show too. People like D.S. Oyster Bay, who led this particular review from the start of the podcast with the catchy guitar chords on through Justin's gentle and

intelligent moderating. Oh, and did I mention that modern day spiritual giant NTY Right, the show is a joy and what is best about thoughtful, undiluted, Christ-centric via media Anglicanism.

Thank you very much for that recommendation. Really helps when people put the word out about the show. If you want more from the show, including regular updates, bonus content and more, do sign up at [askNTY Right.com](http://askNTYRight.com). And now let's get into your questions.

Well, Tom, today on the show, we're sort of returning to familiar territory. Frequently people ask questions around the historicity of the gospels, of the Bible in general. And those are what some of our questions relate to today.

But also questions around the historicity of martyrdom claims after the closure of scripture as well. So we've got a number of different things here. Let's start with Alex in Virginia, who wants to know how should Christians approach evidence from historical biblical scholarship that seems to undercut Christian claims? I'm thinking here of things like evidence that Genesis and Deuteronomy were written after Hosea, Amos and Jonah, or that the Virgin Birth may have been made up to fulfil a mistranslated prophecy in Isaiah 7. Well, I suppose you can only take every example, you know, by itself, Tom, one at a time, and there may be more that Alex is thinking of.

But perhaps you could speak to these specific examples. And then generally the issue of what we do when certain, you know, areas of biblical scholarship seem to cause questions or doubts about aspects of the historicity. At the risk of sounding like a very, very, very old man, I'm not very, very old, mainly very old, I have to say that over the last 50 or more years, I have watched these questions slosh to and fro without actually disturbing too much that's really going on.

When I was younger, I used to read scholars who said, "Oh, this passage in Paul contradicts that passage in Paul." So it's obvious that Paul just had hiccups when he wrote this, or maybe that bit wasn't written by him or it was a later interpolation. And again and again and again in my own major field, Pauline studies first, I have seen, as we have found out more about the world of second-temporal Judaism, et cetera, that what appeared contradictory from a modern Western point of view wasn't so at all. And there are all sorts of convergences which we just didn't see in the 1960s or 1970s.

And likewise in the stories about Jesus and the gospels, again and again people, how do we know what Jesus could have possibly said that or whatever? And as people have probed back and somebody has found some coins with symbols on them or somebody has translated a new scroll which gives us insight into how Jews were reading such and such a scriptural text or whatever, all sorts of things come up which makers say, "Actually, looks as though the gospels reflect pretty accurately the situation in Jerusalem and Galilee in the 20s or 30s of the first century." That doesn't mean that automatically

we have proved historically that everything they say is true in ancient history, almost everything we know in ancient history comes from one source and one source only. Occasionally we have two or even three sources like Tacitus and Suetonius and Valerius Perterculus for the early years of the empire so that we can get a bead on it or we've got sources like Cicero and Livy and so on for times in the period leading up to the death of Julius Caesar and so on. But usually we've only got one source for most of what we know in ancient history and historians say, "Well, if we can make sense of the period by telling the story this way, fair enough." And I want to say we can make sense of the rise of early Christianity by saying that there really was somebody called Jesus of Nazareth who really did announce that this was the time for God to become king on earth as in heaven in Galilee and Jerusalem and went to and fro doing stuff to show what this would mean around that time.

This doesn't mean that I've automatically validated somehow every story in the gospels. That's a different question to do then with what we believe about Scripture, what we believe about why God caused these particular books to be written in the way they were. So that would be a faith claim rather than a history claim though ultimately the two would converge.

So that's where I would start. And people get hung up about this because they've been told the Bible is the word of God and if you question anything then watch out it's a slippery slope. Well, it can be but it needn't be because there is this thing called history and it actually does work and it does put us firmly on the map for the first century.

Well maybe sticking just with, you know, as Christmas is almost upon us in terms of when this show will air, the Virgin Birth. I mean obviously Alex has heard that perhaps this was just invented at some level in order to fulfil that prophecy in Isaiah 7 which many people have claimed was simply a mistranslation. You know, the young woman shall give birth but the Virgin is the way it was translated.

I think in the, I'm trying to remember the version that the Gospels might have been working off for that but how do you handle this one anyway Tom? Well of course one of the funny things is that that line from Isaiah 7 is indeed quoted in Matthew chapter 1 verse 23 and the word is *parthenos* in Greek which would normally be a virgin and the underlying Hebrew is *Alma* and if you look at the concordance, the Hebrew concordance to *Alma* and see where else it's used it isn't necessarily the word that you would use automatically for a virgin but it is a young woman, often a young brackets presumably unmarried woman and you just have to check out the references and see how it occurs. My problem is this twofold. One, there is no evidence for any Jews of the period taking that verse as a prophecy of a Messianic king especially of anyone being born of a virgin so that there's no reason to suppose that the early Christians would have been thinking, oh well if we believe Jesus as Messiah he's got to do this thing because other people reading this text say this is how it must have been.

It's more that something has happened here which the early Christians probably rather horrified by when they think about it because obviously it opens them to all kinds of slurs which have been trumpeted in our own day you know that maybe Mary was raped or maybe it was just she and Joseph before they were wed etc etc and so to avoid slurs like that which you find in John's gospel interestingly when the Judeans say to Jesus we were not born of fornication we have one father even God which looks as though there are rumors about Jesus' birth being a bit strange and people saying oh yeah we know what that was about and so the early Christians may have been embarrassed about this but instead of hushing it up they scratch their heads and say well actually there was that line in Isaiah maybe that's maybe that's what it was about. The other thing to say as well as the fact that it doesn't appear to have been a well-known prophecy at the time is that Luke who has a much fuller account of the angel visiting Mary etc etc doesn't have that quote at all so that if that was why it was being made up you'd have thought that Luke would have said there we are ha ha we've got it so there's a very different and rather strange account in the beginning of Luke so it's more mysterious than we might imagine and certainly it would be too much of an easy cheap shot to say oh the Christians just made that up because and indeed one of the arguments which I think tells in favor of the we should say virginal conception by the way rather than the virgin birth of the virginal conception is that of course at the time there were all sorts of myths and rumors about the Roman emperors like Augustus that he had actually been born of a union of a God with his mother etc etc so that it might look as though this was simply aping what pagans were saying about their kings and I think again that's such an unlikely thing especially for Matthew to do because Jesus is the true king he's not just like one of those silly pagan emperors that I don't think this would have this story would have got about unless there was a good solid basis to it now that doesn't in and of itself prove anything but what a story like this wants us to do I think is to rock back on our heels and say hang on who is God anyway what is this all about who are God's people what what is a Messiah supposed to be and do how does that work and then stories which Mary the mother of Jesus herself would have known and she was obviously a prominent figure in the early church as it says in the early chapters of Acts then things would have been told and mulled over and people been astonished by and then when the gospels were written that this this would be laid out so it is then ultimately a matter of what you believe about God the other thing to say is if you take out of scripture the stories of the virginal conception you lose basically two and a bit chapters a bit of Matthew 1 a bit of Luke 1 and 2 that's it nothing else at all in scripture and in Christian theology hinges on that the resurrection however which often is prepared with that people talk about you know Mary's womb and Jesus tomb as being the two great sort of things to worry about the resurrection take that away and you don't have any early Christianity at all the gospels would not have been written if Jesus has not been raised from the dead so you have to be careful about putting too much weight on the virginal conception I believe it I've explained how I think it comes to be in Matthew and Luke but it doesn't it's not load bearing theologically in the New Testament in the way that many people imagine should

be before we come to the next question about the history of scripture in Matthew 27 just briefly that other issue Alex raises Genesis and Deuteronomy were they written after other books of the Old Testament even though chronologically obviously it's presented as before yeah yes it would be easy to imagine that oh well they are Genesis so obviously Adam and Eve were working on the early chapters of that and then Enoch writes the next bit and somebody writes the next bit but actually I don't think anybody actually believes that some people still do believe that Moses wrote the whole thing that will be very very much a minority position these days most people I think including devout so-called evangelical scholars would be happy to say that from a plethora of early sources scribes in Babylon during the Babylonian exile have got the leisure when they're away from the land to put the whole thing together to take all kinds of disparate sources and to make a fresh straight through treatment of the whole thing I have no problem in saying that something like that happened because this is Genesis is not simply let's tell you how the stuff began Genesis is a wonderfully complex and rich and dense book which is setting out all sorts of things about God and creation God and Israel God and God's purposes for Israel and the world and it makes all sorts of sense to me that people would be collecting much earlier sources some of which might well go back to Moses some of which might have been put in shape by Solomon's court scribes and so on but which had been mulled over and prayed over and worked over not a big deal just like it's not a big deal to me whether the gospels were written in the 40s or 50s within a decade or two of Jesus' death or in the 70s or 80s or 90s a generation later I think they were a bit later than the first and a bit earlier than the second I think they're probably 50s, 60s and possibly 70s but it's not a big deal that's not the sort of books they are as though tomorrow morning's newspaper is the only thing that can tell you the truth about what happened yesterday in politics or something you know a year or two down the track when sources have been mulled over might be a better time to get a perspective on it. Well look let's turn to our next question and this is one I've heard frequently as sort of causing some people you know question marks over the historicity of one particular part of Matthew 27 in the sort of the Passion and Resurrection accounts and three different people actually gone in touch with essentially similar sorts of questions around this Emily and Tyson all in various parts of the United States.

So Emily says when it comes to Matthew 27 and the reference to bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep being raised and appearing to people when Jesus died well what did that look like were those people raised in their new heavenly bodies like Jesus would be where they come back to life to die again later how were the people meant to process people coming back from the dead just got lots of questions around that that brief mention in Matthew 27 and in Iowa similarly curious about that it says every time I read it I get frustrated because I want to hear those stories why isn't developed and explained further what sort of resurrection was this was this the new life resurrection what happened to them did they go back and die again Tyson in in Indiana this extraordinary event he says verse 53 speaks of them going into Jerusalem and appearing to many

people I can picture sitting at the dinner table with my family hearing a knock at the door and there stands King David it would certainly compel me to believe in Jesus what so why doesn't it get more attention later in scriptures obviously it's only in Matthew 27 that this event is recorded and I've heard many skeptics or people who simply maybe take a different perspective on what Matthew's doing at this point in scripture Tom saying we're not necessarily meant to understand this as in this instance as a historical reference that it's something more like a kind of a bit of poetry almost that bubbles up from Matthew at this point to sort of expressing something about the new creation so so where do you fall on on this often contested bit of the you know the passion narrative in Matthew where apparently bodies rise from the dead at the moment that Jesus dies yeah yeah I share the frustration of all the people that you've quoted I have puzzled over Matthew 27 I have written about it I've I've bang my head up up against it for exactly the same reasons and I've also been aware that some of the early fathers I can't now remember exactly who it was have said this said quite matter of fact that these people were in fact still living in Jerusalem because they had since they've been raised from the dead they were now immortal now I find that very difficult to credit because I do think that would have left far more trace if it was known that there were some people who lived on and on for subsequent centuries because having been raised from the dead they weren't going to die again that that would be very very strange my my hunches that Matthew himself if we asked him would say that these would be like Lazarus in John 11 or like the widow's son at Nain that they would be raised from the dead they would appear to many but they would have to die again or you know one can think of almost humorous situations that that like the ghosts in Raddigal when the the moment comes and it's dawn again they have to go back and lie down again as they're well that's enough of that so my question really is what is Matthew trying to do at this point and the danger of course is that if you start saying oh this is just a glorious picture of of a poetic vein we're not meant to take it literally then it's quite a short step certainly in some people's minds to saying well actually that's the same with Jesus resurrection itself and clearly for neither Matthew nor any of the other early Christians would that have been the case Jesus resurrection was a genuine thing leaving an empty tomb behind and with a new sort of body for which there was no precedent we're not told that about these people and indeed it's a very odd I'm always struck by the oddity of what is actually said not just the body of bodies being raised but it says that that many bodies of saints who had slept were raised and they came out of the tombs after his resurrection so this is there they're brought back to life when Jesus is crucified but then they wait for the three days from the Friday through to the Sunday and then after Jesus resurrection they then followed Jesus as it were out and there are other early Christian traditions which seem to be speculating similarly like the so-called gospel of Peter which has a very strange scene about this obviously a late second or third century work but is still mulling over what's actually going on and this relates to something which actually still persists very much in the Greek Orthodox Church well the Greek and Russian Orthodox Church if you go to an icon shop in Greece and ask for an icon of the resurrection you probably won't be given

an icon of Jesus himself rising from the dead you will be given an icon and I've actually got one on the wall in my room here I can't show it from where I'm sitting which is of Jesus raising Adam and Eve from the tomb that that's what really was going on that the Greek Orthodox Church soaked itself in 1 Corinthians 15 as in Adam all die so in Christ shall be made alive so with Jesus resurrection there's a sense that this is the moment when God is giving new life to the whole of humanity in some sense or other with other qualifications down the line no doubt so that Matthew may have had something like that in mind he certainly got Isaiah 26 Daniel 12 Ezekiel 37 in mind some of those mysterious Old Testament prophecies and it's as though I've often said with Colossians 1 when Paul says the gospel was already preached to every creature under heaven I think what that means for Paul is that with Jesus death and resurrection a shockwave went through the whole cosmos so that the whole world now knows in its bones that evil has been defeated and new creation has been launched and then Matthew would be saying yeah and there were these strange rumors that my goodness when Jesus died it was as though the very rocks were rent and yes they talked about people coming out of the tombs because new creation is going on and it's just very mysterious and I think Matthew just leaves it as a mystery we wish he hadn't but that's the way it is so I don't have a good answer but as I walk around it those are the questions which come to my mind and I think it's meant to heighten our sense of the impact of the cross that the cross is the defeat of death itself and that this worked short term close up and personal in ways which were totally unexpected and which we don't know what they're lasting result of sort of sort of cosmic shockwave that isn't quite sort of fully understood but you know I heard that something really straight weird happened things happened just in those few days yes yes yeah well moving from the accounts in in the gospels and and so on to sort of accounts of what happened to Christians after the closure of scripture some have argued says Magnus in Sweden that the early Christian persecutions in the Roman Empire were fabricated by Roman collusion how do you respond to that and I'm thinking of some scholars such as Candida Moss for instance who several years ago wrote a book along these lines saying that martyrdom accounts were exaggerated and I think making sort of reference really to the fact that modern persecution claims can sometimes be overdone as well but but I mean what do you make of this what and to what extent you know do you think we can rely on the testimony of the early Christian church as regards the sorts of trials and persecution they faced there's there's all sorts of evidence for various persecutions I mean I think of the martyrs of Leon in one seven seven a.d. who quite clearly this is this is a valid historical story whether that was a sporadic thing in southern France whether the citizens of Leon were determined always to kill Christians we're not sure our arantias comes and his bishop immediately after that persecution and he writes about it which is basically how we know about it but it looks as though this is something which is sporadic and local and it's not the case that right from the sort of fifties of the first century through until the time of Constantine the Romans are always killing Christians because when Pliny writes to Trajan which is roughly 110 a.d. from what we would call Northern Turkey saying I've got these people who are called Christians

they're clearly antisocial they're in nuisance what should we do about them Trajan says well of course if they're proved to be Christians you have to kill them but let's not have too much sniffing of it out and let's not have people informing about it because that's quite out of keeping with the spirit of our age which is this amazing sort of Roman patronizing thing yeah it's okay to kill them men and women alike but but don't let's have people sneaking on because that's really rather nasty we don't like that and you know so the fact that Pliny has to write to Trajan for advice about what to do with these Christians tells us that there was no kind of absolute mandate you find Christians you kill them that's it and that later on when you get the amazing stories about poly carp the Bishop of Smyrna which were not sure when to date that it's somewhere in the between 130 and 160 somewhere in that area. Poly carp is on trial for being a Christian and the magistrate wants to let him off because he knows he's an old man and he's respected in the community we really don't want to do this to him but he says look if you'll just offer a little pinch of incense on to Caesar then that'll be fine I'll let you off and of course poly carp knows that will mean denying Jesus putting Caesar above Jesus and poly carp has that wonderful remark about Jesus I've served him for 86 years and he's never done me any wrong how can I blaspheme my king my savior and king and savior is seasoned language so he gets executed so this is happening sporadically I don't think it's happening on a regular basis there are times of great terrible persecution both the brief one under Nero when the Christians seem to be the scapegoats for the fire of Rome in 66 possibly under the mission though we're not quite sure about that towards the end of the century but then one or two subsequent ones particularly not long before Constantine becomes emperor so I want to say in all historical situations some people exaggerate sometimes and it is perfectly possible that some of the early Christian writers in their eagerness to show how they were victims etc may have exaggerated you say Bius may well have done that in order to highlight the difference between pre and post Constantine that doesn't mean there wasn't a problem it doesn't mean that Christians were normally accepted because they basically weren't but the non-acceptance wouldn't necessarily mean violent persecution it might mean that they lost jobs it might mean that they had to move out of town in a hurry it might mean that their children were not welcome at certain festivities and whatever it is and so there are levels and levels of persecution of social stigma and so on sometimes bursting out into open violence and sometimes not I think however it's rather a modern thing to say oh these Christians they were always always exaggerating that's rather a way of saying we're not going to take these Christian claims too seriously and maybe I don't know maybe Candida Moss is writing out of a situation where in America some Christian groups are saying look at the persecution of Christians all around the world today therefore it shows that we are the innocent victims etc etc actually there is persecution of Christians going on around the world today thoroughly well documented thoroughly historically reliable that doesn't mean that Christians therefore have the moral high ground in everything that they ever want to do we've got to be wise and careful about how we do that so I would want to situate Candida Moss herself within a modern North American context

where some Christians are overly enthusiastic about telling the story of martyrdoms etc well thank you very much Tom and yes a lesson for all sort of space to be aware that we may be called to make similar sacrifices who knows yeah absolutely I mean we've had it easy in the worst and there are reasons for that that we have colluded with the Enlightenment ideology and so the Enlightenment doesn't bother about it we'll be back again next time thank you very much Tom for being with me thank you

[Music] Thank you for being with us on today's show next time your questions on marriage including some really interesting questions such as does the church make an idol of marriage someone who's come to Christ recently is got in touch but is unmarried to their partner and they have children what should they do they're asking and another interesting one from someone married to a Christian both Christians but where they've gone in very different directions when it comes to their views on faith and politics so some of the questions that will be coming up on marriage next week don't forget that you can find lots of Tom's teaching from this year's unbelievable conference with the links from today's show and SBCK Tom's UK publisher have some special deals on Tom's books for podcast listeners all the links are with the show notes and if you want more from the show ask NT right calm is the place to go if you feel able to support us you can do that from there as well we'll send you the show ebook 12 questions on the Bible life and faith again that's ask NT right calm see you next time you. the day.

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