

Evidence for the Resurrection

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Introduction

During Holy Week, Christians remember and celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, a core issue of the Christian faith. The apostle Paul said that if Jesus was not raised from the dead, then “your faith is futile; you are still in your sins” (I Corinthians 15: 17 ESV). Elsewhere, he wrote that Jesus was “raised for our justification” (Romans 4:25 ESV). Thus, the early church father Paul rested Christians’ salvation, and the legitimacy of the entire faith, on whether or not Jesus actually rose from the dead. Obviously then, this topic is vital to Christianity and a crucial event to defend.

Many have raised objections to the resurrection, citing arguments such as:

1. The resurrection story was a legend developed over time to fit the developing faith of Christianity.
2. That it was simply hallucinations.
3. Science has proven miracles do not occur; therefore, the resurrection did not happen.

This raises the question, is there evidence for the historical occurrence of the resurrection and if so, how strong is it? There are various ways to defend the resurrection, but we will look at a few historical facts that are widely agreed upon by Bible scholars, both conservative and liberal, and that do not depend on a belief in the inspiration of Scripture. That means that one does not have to accept the Bible as being God breathed or without error to accept these facts, so they can be presented to doubters of the Bible and still carry weight. We also look at some answers to the three objections mentioned above.

It is important to understand that no one can prove the resurrection of Jesus with absolute certainty. That kind of certainty is rarely possible for proving anything, especially historical events. That kind of proof is not required, or else very little could be known about history. Rather, history deals with probability of events, and “a [historical] position is demonstrated, when the reasons for accepting it ‘significantly’ outweigh the reasons for not accepting it,” said one scholar.ⁱ It is reasonable to believe that the probability factor weighs more towards the resurrection than against it.

Six Facts

One way to defend the resurrection is to look at six historical facts that are solidly established. When all these facts are taken into account, best explanation for all of them is by far the resurrection of Jesus. Four of these facts are “so strongly attested to historically that they are granted by nearly every scholar who studies the subject, even the rather skeptical ones.”ⁱⁱ Additionally, another of these facts is agreed upon by approximately 75% of scholars who study the subject. We will also consider a cultural fact about 1st century Jews. These six facts are all strongly attested to historically by many non-biblical and sometimes even antichristian writers.ⁱⁱⁱ

First Fact: Cited by Non-Biblical Sources

The first fact is that Jesus died by crucifixion. In addition to all four Gospel accounts, this is also attested to by five ancient non-biblical sources. Jewish historian Josephus wrote that Pilate had Jesus condemned to be crucified.^{iv} Tacitus also said that Christ was given the “extreme penalty” (crucifixion) by Pilate.^v Greek satirist Lucian of Samosata also wrote of his crucifixion.^{vi} Another reference is Mara Bar-Serapion, who in a letter from prison to his son, referenced the death of Jesus.^{vii} Finally the Talmud also reports that Jesus was crucified.^{viii} Medical evidence also strongly supports the death of Jesus by crucifixion. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* published an article in 1986 that described the extremely painful process of Roman crucifixions and the whippings that preceded them. Most physicians conclude that the cruel process caused victims to die by asphyxiation. The article demonstrated that, according to the findings of modern medicine, it was highly unlikely for anyone to survive the beatings and crucifixion.^{ix} Therefore, in addition to the Gospels, secular history and modern medicine both testify that Jesus was crucified and that crucifixion results in the death of the one crucified. Therefore, Jesus died by crucifixion.

Second Fact: The Belief of the Disciples

The second fact that is widely agreed upon by scholars is that the disciples truly believed Jesus appeared to them after rising from the dead. This is demonstrated by two points.

1. They claimed it, and
2. They proved that they believed it by their actions of willingly suffering persecution and martyrdom.

Proof that the disciples claimed a risen Jesus appeared to them can be found in the Oral traditions of the early church that claimed Jesus had appeared alive to certain people after his crucifixion. These had to have existed before the writings of the New Testament for them to be included in them. They contained creeds, like I Corinthians 15:3-8, which many scholars hold to have been circulating in the Christian church inside of three years of Jesus' crucifixion and at least within 20 years. Other oral sayings, like in Acts 2, were sermon summaries. Most scholars agree that there were sermons preached during the earliest times of the church by the apostles that also claimed Jesus appeared to them.^x Some Biblical scholars say there are nine early, eyewitness sources in all that claimed the disciples encountered Jesus after his resurrection.^{xi}

In addition to claiming Jesus had risen, the disciples demonstrated their belief in His resurrection by their willing martyrdoms. Seven independent, early sources record the willing martyrdoms of many of the early disciples. These include Luke, Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Ignatius, Tertullian, Origen, and Dionysius as quoted by Eusebius.^{xii} It is hard to explain why people would die for something that they knew was not true. Some would simply say, "well they were no different from modern day martyrs such as the Muslim terrorists." However, there is actually an enormous difference between them. Modern martyrs die for what they believe about what others told or taught them. The first Christian martyrs though, died for what they believed that they saw with their own eyes. They chose to die based on first hand evidence.

Third Fact: Deep-held Cultural Distinctions Are Overcome

The early church consisted of Jews who grew up being taught strict customs, which separated them from other races and cultures. These included sacrifices, keeping the Mosaic Law, and a firm belief in non-Trinitarian Monotheism. They also believed that the coming Messiah would be political hero and not a crucified man. Crucifixion was actually viewed as a curse by the Jews (Deuteronomy 21:23). The early Jewish Christians, however, very quickly gave up these beliefs and practices, and all because of a Jewish carpenter and teacher. They also practiced sacraments, such as The Eucharist, which was a celebration. But, as one scholar has asked, why would they celebrate the death of a loved one? That would not have made sense. These hasty rejections of traditional Judaism would have made the early Christians outcasts and condemned them to hell in the Jewish mindsets. The best explanation for doing so is that they witnessed and believed in the resurrection of Jesus.^{xiii}

Fourth Fact: The Conversion of Paul

A fourth fact that is widely accepted is the sudden conversion of the church persecutor Paul. Paul, as well as Luke, records his pre-conversion state of intensely persecuting Christians. Paul admits to this persecution, noting in one his own letters that there was a story in circulation among Christians in Galatia of Paul being the church persecutor. After his conversion, there are seven independent sources recording Paul's willingness to suffer for his faith and eventually be martyred for it. These include Paul himself, Luke, Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Tertullian, Dionysius of Corinth (recorded by Eusebius), and Origen (recorded by Eusebius). Paul's dramatic conversion also demonstrates the attestation to Jesus' resurrection by an enemy, a factor that lends greater support to historicity.^{xiv} Also, it is important to understand that Paul, like the disciples, did not die for his belief in what others told him, in contrast to modern day martyrs, but rather for what he believed was a personal appearance of the resurrected Jesus.^{xv}

Fifth Fact: The Conversion of James

In addition to Paul converting, the skeptic James, brother of Jesus, was also suddenly changed. Besides the four Gospels, Josephus also mentions James the brother of Jesus. James was a pious Jew, according to

second century writer Hegesippus. Mark and John report him as being skeptical of his brother Jesus, who challenged traditional Judaism with his teachings and practices. The early church creed in Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church, mentions James as having seen the resurrected Jesus. Later, both Paul and Luke identify James as a leader in the Jerusalem church. Therefore, James' beliefs were obviously changed for him to convert from staunch Judaism to being a leader in Christianity. Later, he also demonstrated that he believed he had witnessed the risen Jesus by being martyred. His martyrdom is attested to not only by Christian sources like Hegesippus and Clement of Alexandria, but also a non-Christian source (Josephus as recorded by Eusebius).^{xvi}

Sixth Fact: The Empty Tomb

Lastly is the fact of the empty tomb. Although this is not as widely accepted among scholars as the previous facts, it is still accepted by about 75% of all scholars on the subject.^{xvii} There are several arguments for the empty tomb, and we will look at three.

One is called the Jerusalem factor. Christianity could not have started in Jerusalem like it did if Jesus' body were still in the tomb. The Jewish authorities would have only had to produce the body and the new movement would have quickly died. There are no recordings of such a thing happening among Jewish, Roman, or any other ancient writings. Some have argued that the reason the Jewish authorities did not produce the body is because by the time the disciples started preaching the resurrection, about fifty days after the crucifixion, the body would not have been recognizable. However, modern medical knowledge reveals that, especially in the dry Jerusalem climate, the body's wounds, scars, hair, and stature would have made it recognizable. Thus, they could have shown it and squelched the young Christian faith. But there was no body to show.^{xviii}

Also, in addition to Christian sources proclaiming an empty tomb, enemy sources attested to it as well. Opponents of Christianity accused the disciples of stealing Jesus' body from the tomb. This is recorded by not only Matthew, but also Justin Martyr and Tertullian. However, this would have been unnecessary if the body were still in the tomb, since they would have only had to produce it in response to the disciples' claims.^{xix}

The last evidence for the empty tomb that we will consider is the testimony of women. Women are recorded in the Gospels as being the first to see Jesus resurrected and to testify of it to others. However, in that time period, Jews and some Romans considered the testimony of women totally unreliable and even on the same level as that of criminals.^{xx} If Christians were making up the stories of Jesus rising from the dead, they surely would not have had women being the first witnesses to it. This is an example of the "embarrassment factor," where someone admits something that would actually be harmful to their case.^{xxi}

These six, widely attested to facts provide strong evidence in favor of the resurrection of Jesus. They all must be answered by critics. Skeptics have offered theories that give a possible answer to one or two of them, but none that explain all six. They might try to string parts of various theories to try to find an explanation other than the resurrection; however the only theory that can adequately answer all the facts is a bodily resurrected Jesus.

Answering Objections

It is also important to answer the objections raised against the resurrection. As mentioned earlier, some critics say that the resurrection is an embellished claim that evolved over time. Atheist Richard Carrier says that the different accounts of the four gospels demonstrate a growing legend among the early church. He cites examples of there being one angel in one account, then two angels in another, then the later details of Peter and John running to the tomb.^{xxii} Atheist Michael Martin agrees that the "accretions of details as the story got older is typical of legend."^{xxiii}

The Legend Theory

However, there are some problems with the legend theory. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is something that was being taught by the original disciples from the beginning (see fact two). If the story had been embellished

over time to where a resurrection was being claimed, then the original story would probably not have had a resurrection.

Also, the conversion of church persecutor Paul resulted from his belief that he had personally witnessed the resurrected Jesus. This is also an early account and a resurrected Jesus is the only way to explain Paul's dramatic conversion from Christian hater to church leader. He would not have done this based on an embellished story by Christian apostles.

This theory also has trouble explaining the martyrdoms of the disciples, who, it must be remembered, willingly died for what they believed they saw, not what was taught them. They would not have died for what they knew was not true. As one scholar said, liars make poor martyrs.

The key question here is, whether or not the legend theory adequately explains the resurrection reports? One could even grant that some of the details in the gospel accounts (different numbers of angels, presence of guards, etc.) were a result of embellishment, but they do not change the central fact of the resurrection being reported every time. This theory does not answer the six facts we have looked at, which should be remembered, are not based on Scriptural inerrancy.^{xxiv}

As Professor William Lane Craig points out, the Gospels, especially the early account of Mark, provided simple, straightforward accounts that included historical details. This is very different from accounts written in the second century, where dramatic, outrageous details are included in the resurrection account, like a cross coming out of the tomb and three men who were as tall as the clouds exiting the tomb. So the early accounts do not look at all like later legendary accounts. Also, the early Christians, who were Jews, would have practiced the Jewish custom of careful transmission of traditions, making legends "irrelevant." Ancient historian A.N. Sherwin-White also says that not enough generations had passed since the crucifixion for legendary development to even be possible.^{xxv}

The Early Church Thought It Was A Spiritual Resurrection

Some atheistic naturalists like Anthony Flew (who is now, ironically, a Theist), say the strongest argument against Jesus' resurrection is that the early church, and Paul especially, did not believe in a physical resurrection, but rather thought it was spiritual only. Therefore, the body of Jesus that was crucified did not rise, but only His spirit did.^{xxvi}

This view however, does not match up with the views of early church writers. Christian scholar, Norman Geisler points out that in their accounts, people saw, heard, and often ate with Jesus, including the account of Jesus himself inviting Thomas to see and touch his scars in John 20. These are activities that could not be done if Jesus were only a Spirit or a vision. Geisler tallies 12 accounts of post resurrection appearances of Jesus, all of which are described as bodily.^{xxvii}

Also, although some naturalists argue that Jesus' appearance to Paul on the road to Damascus in Acts 9:1-9 was a vision, Geisler argues against this. He says that the experience included a physical manifestation of light and a sound, in which Paul heard and saw Jesus. The men with Paul also heard a noise, so the experience was not private to Paul; thus it could not have been a vision. This occurrence is also listed with other physical appearances by Jesus, and these appearances are never called visions. Seeing the resurrected Jesus was also a condition for being an apostle, which Paul was.^{xxviii}

The passage that most critics use to argue that Paul taught Jesus did not rise physically is I Corinthians 15:50, which says that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." Professor Craig responds to this, by saying the verse "is not about substantiality or anatomy, but contrasting the mortality and feebleness of the natural body to God." Most Biblical commentators agree on this.^{xxix}

Additionally, scholars say that all schools of Jewish thought, both prior to and during the time of the New Testament, held to a belief in a physical resurrection of dead bodies (which only happened at the end of time). This meant a connection with the body a person had before death. Since all the disciples and all the New

Testament writers except maybe Luke were Jews, they would have all had this mindset. Thus, the idea of a spiritual resurrection of Jesus would have been foreign to them.^{xxx}

The Hallucination Theory

Another common objection raised is that the disciples all experienced epiphanies such as hallucinations, dreams or visions. Atheist Richard Carrier is one proponent of this theory.^{xxxii} Initially, it seems like a reasonable explanation for the resurrection claims.

However, granting that the disciples all did experience hallucinations, they would not have interpreted them to mean Jesus' resurrection. Jewish thought at that time was based on Old Testament and other older Jewish writings. These writings did contain stories of people being resuscitated or directly taken to heaven (called translations). Resuscitations, however, were not considered resurrections because they happened only to individuals, and because they happened before the end of time. They also only meant that that person would die again. Translations were not bodies being raised but rather direct transportations to heaven. Therefore, neither of these was considered resurrections, to the Jewish mindset.

If the disciples had hallucinated, they would have reasoned that Jesus had been translated, not resurrected. Additionally, the apostle Paul had decades to reflect on his experience of seeing the risen Jesus. It is hard to believe that a hallucination would have been enough to sustain Paul through all his years of beatings and persecutions.^{xxxiii}

Also, it is known today that hallucinations do not occur to groups but are rather private experiences in individual minds. The earliest resurrection appearance accounts were all described by the early church as experienced by groups. They also claimed that Jesus appeared to groups multiple times over a period of forty days, including people of different gender and temperaments (Mary, Peter, etc). To say that these different types of people all experienced the same hallucinations multiple times makes no sense. Also, hallucinations do not account for Paul's conversion, since he was highly educated and an enemy of Christianity. Paul would not have been in a grieving state of mind to experience a hallucination. The hallucinations argument also cannot explain the empty tomb, since the body of Jesus would have still been present and easily produced.^{xxxiiii} Therefore, the hallucination theory does not take into account all the evidences.

Objections of Naturalism

Another common objection to the resurrection is that of atheistic naturalists. They say that only science can prove what is true, and science has proved that miracles and resurrections just do not happen because they violate natural laws in the world.

First of all, this statement is self-refuting (science does not prove naturalism). Additionally, there are good answers to give to this challenge. The scientific method has limitations in its ability to test things, which scientists do admit. It is not immune to gullibility or mistakes.

Even though science may prove that resurrections do not occur by natural means, this is not what Christians argue. They say that a supernatural God who can suspend natural laws raised Jesus. Also, the common "God of the Gaps" objection to Christianity ("we cannot explain it, so God must have done it") in no way weakens current arguments for Christianity any more than discarded scientific theories weaken present confidence in science. Furthermore, it ignores the fact that "certain respected disciplines, like medical science, history, and psychology" are exactly why Jesus' resurrection is such a convincing conclusion. Additionally, numerous near death experiences that have been recorded provide challenges to the naturalistic worldview.^{xxxv} Therefore, naturalist objections to the resurrection are problematic.

Conclusion

There will always be skeptics and critics of the resurrection of Jesus who hold to their position no matter what evidence is presented against them. Christians must realize that these critics all carry presuppositions and past experiences with Christianity that fuel their objections.

Also, no one will be able to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt whether the resurrection really did or did not happen. However, when one weighs the historical, medical, psychological, as well as Biblical evidences, we find they seem to point strongly to the resurrection.

Christians therefore, do not need to worry about the historicity of the event that is the core of their faith. We can say with confidence, "He is risen! He is risen indeed!"

ⁱ Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona. *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, 2004), 31-33.

ⁱⁱ Habermas. *Case for the Resurrection*, 44.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.64. *Josephus in Ten Volumes*, vol. 9, *Jewish Antiquities* quoted in Habermas, *Case for the Resurrection*, 49.

^v Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44 quoted in Habermas, *Case for the Resurrection*, 49.

^{vi} Lucian of Samosata, *The Death of Peregrine*, 11-13 quoted in Habermas, *Case for the Resurrection*, 49.

^{vii} Habermas, *Case for the Resurrection*, 49.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Ibid, 100-102.

^x Ibid, 52-53, 260-261.

^{xi} Ibid, 54-55, 263-270.

^{xii} Ibid, 56-61, 270-274, 278-279.

^{xiii} Moreland. *Scaling the Secular City*, 179-180.

^{xiv} Habermas, *Case for the Resurrection*, 37-38.

^{xv} Ibid, 64-65, 280-283.

^{xvi} Ibid, 67-68.

^{xvii} Ibid, 70.

^{xviii} Ibid, 70-71, 287.

^{xix} Ibid, 71.

^{xx} Ibid, 72-73.

^{xxi} Ibid, 72-73, 289.

^{xxii} Richard Carrier, www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/resurrection/lecture.html, viewed October 14, 2008

^{xxiii} Michael Martin, www.infidels.org/library/modern/michael_martin/davis/resurrection.html, viewed October 14, 2008.

^{xxiv} Habermas, *Case for the Resurrection*, 59, 85-86, 292-293.

^{xxv} William Lane Craig. *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics 2nd Ed.* (Crossway Books: Wheaton, 1994), 275-276, 284-285.

^{xxvi} Terry L. Miethe, ed. *Did Jesus Rise From The Dead? The Resurrection Debate: Gary R. Habermas and Anthony G. N. Flew* (Harper & Row: San Francisco, 1987), 11-12.

^{xxvii} Norman L. Geisler. *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Thomas Nelson: Nashville, 1989), 129-141.

^{xxviii} Ibid, 139-140.

^{xxix} William Lane Craig. *Assessing the New Testament Evidence For the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Edwin-Mellen Press: Lewiston, 1989), 157. Also see Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics.* (Wheaton: Crossway Book, 1994), 286.

^{xxx} J.P. Moreland. *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, 1987), 165-166.

^{xxxi} Richard Carrier, www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/resurrection/lecture.html, viewed October 14, 2008.

^{xxxii} Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 176-177.

^{xxxiii} Habermas, *Case for the Resurrection*, 106-107, 304.

^{xxxiv} Habermas, *Case for the Resurrection*, 134-148.