

The Resurrection of Jesus

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“Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him.” Mark 16:6

Introduction

The importance of the Resurrection

And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. . . . if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.

1 Corinthians 15:14-17

How can we reason about this issue?

The resurrection is a historical claim—it is subject to investigation as an event in history.

To argue for a historical claim, we need to do two things:

1. We need to identify the relevant facts, and
2. We need to evaluate competing explanations of those facts.

Background information

Jesus died by crucifixion outside the walls of Jerusalem by the Roman authorities. E. P. Sanders lists this as one of the “almost indisputable facts” about Jesus’ life. (*Jesus and Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 11)

After his death, he was buried in a nearby tomb. Jewish law required burial, even for foreigners and for executed transgressors (Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.211)

A chart of rival explanations:

After Jesus died and was buried . . .	
His immediate followers did not claim he rose again—the Gospels are later <i>myths</i>	Mythic Theory
His followers were <i>deceived</i> into thinking that he rose again	Hallucination Theory; Twin Theory
His followers <i>deceived others</i> into thinking that he rose again	Conspiracy Theory
He rose again	Christianity

Comparing the Explanations

	A	L	I	V	E
Mythic Theory					
Hallucination Theory					
Conspiracy Theory					
Christianity					

Five Key Facts

- A Appearances
- L Low status of women
- I Immediate proclamation
- V Voluntary sufferings
- E Empty tomb

Appearances

The primary evidence that Jesus rose from the dead is that numerous people claimed to have seen him alive after his death.

Our sources for this include three of the Gospels (Matthew 28, Luke 24, John 20-21), Acts 1, and 1 Corinthians 15, as well as numerous sermons in Acts (e.g. Acts 2:32, 3:15, 4:10, 20, 5:30-32, 10:40-41, 13:30-31).

Some conditions for *unreliable* eyewitness testimony:

- The events happen quickly, over a period of seconds or minutes
- The participants are strangers to one another
- There is a weapon present, such as a knife or a gun

Under these conditions, eyewitness testimony is typically unreliable, particularly on details. But none of these conditions applies in the case of the witnesses of the resurrection.

The nature of the appearances

They are public – Jesus appears to multiple people at once (Matthew 28, Luke 24, John 20 and 21, Acts 1, 1 Corinthians 15:6)

They are polymodal – they involve not just sight, but hearing (and conversation), touch, etc.

They are extended across time – this is not just one brief and confusing episode

The date of the claims

If the Gospels and Acts are substantially historical, then claims of eyewitness encounters with the risen Jesus were the ground of Christian belief from the outset.

The early creed in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 is independent evidence for the early claim to eyewitness encounters with Jesus.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, . . . Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

Why do scholars think this creed is early?

Mnemonic structure: this is a brief creed (about 50 words in Greek) designed for memorization
Use of "Cephas": This is a name for Peter that was used little later on
Delivery to Paul: Paul received this creed either in Damascus or in Jerusalem shortly after his conversion

Low status of women

In the patriarchal society of second temple Judaism, women were not regarded highly

Prayer for an unborn child: "O God, let not my offspring be a girl: for very wretched is the life of women."

Morning Prayer: the men blessed God "who has not made me a Gentile, ... a slave, ... a woman."

"Let no one talk with a woman in the street, no not with his own wife."

"Let the words of the Law be burned," says Rabbi Eleazar, "rather than committed to women."

In particular, their testimony was looked down upon by comparison to the testimony of a man

But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex; ... (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 4.8.15).

Any evidence which a woman [gives] is not valid (to offer) ... (Talmud, *Rosh Hashana* 1.8c).

Wherever the Torah accepts the testimony of one witness, it follows the majority of persons, so that two women against one man is identical with two men against one man. But there are some who declare that wherever a competent witness came first, even a hundred women are regarded as equal to one witness ... but when it is a woman who came first, then two women against one man is like half-and-half (Talmud, *b.Mas. Sotah* 31b).

An embarrassing point

In all four Gospels, the first people at the empty tomb are women

"As historians we are obliged to comment that if these stories had been made up five years later, let alone thirty, forty, or fifty years later, they would never had had Mary Magdalene in this role. To put Mary there is, from the point of view of Christian apologists wanting to explain to a skeptical audience that Jesus really did rise from the dead, like shooting themselves in the foot. But to us as historians this kind of thing is gold dust. *The early Christians would never, never have made this up.*" N. T. Wright, in *There is a God* (2007), p. 207

Immediate proclamation in Jerusalem

Every piece of first-century evidence indicates that the resurrection was proclaimed in Jerusalem beginning at Pentecost, just 50 days after Jesus' crucifixion at Passover.

The disciples stayed at Jerusalem (cf. Galatians 2:1, 9) even when the church came under heavy persecution (Acts 12)

The importance of time

The apostles proclaimed the resurrection "at Pentecost, when Jerusalem expected the spread of the report, and endeavoured prevent it; while the eyes of their enemies were yet sparkling with rage and madness, while Calvary was yet dyed with the blood they had spilt there. Do impostors take such measures? Would not they have waited till the fury of the Jews had been appeased, till judges and public officers, had been changed, and till people had been less attentive to their dispositions?" –Jacques Saurin, Sermons

The importance of place

In some places, at some times, the report of a miracle might be allowed to pass without examination – particularly if it was very distant from the place where it is proclaimed.

But in the case of the resurrection, proclaimed boldly upon the spot in Jerusalem, the enemies of Christianity had means, motive, and opportunity to discredit the account if they could.

The results of that proclamation

Barely seven weeks after Jesus' crucifixion, his followers are in the streets at a major Jewish festival proclaiming his resurrection, and *thousands* of people – almost certainly all devout Jews – are converted. "Something *very* big was going on." (J. P. Moreland)

Voluntary sufferings of the first witnesses to the resurrection

Many people, professing to be original witnesses of the risen Jesus, voluntarily passed their lives in labors, dangers, and sufferings on account of their belief.

These consequences were easy to foresee, as they could not reasonably hope for a favorable reception from the majority either of Jews or of Gentiles.

The significance of voluntary suffering

People *will* sometimes brave persecution and risk death for something false.

But they do not generally do so for something they *know* to be false, unless they think they have a reasonable chance at some *earthly reward* that makes it worth the risk.

This is the best recipe for starting a false religion: offer them something tangible here and now.

Christianity promoted personal morality and temperance and minimized the importance of earthly power and wealth.

The earliest preachers of the Gospel lived by these principles, unlike some televangelists today (1 Corinthians 9:6; 2 Thessalonians 3:8)

The meaning of “martyr”

“Martyrs are *Witnesses*, . . . no other Religion was ever propagated by Witnesses, who had seen, and heard, and been every way conversant in what they witnessed concerning the Principles of their Religion; no Religion besides was ever preach’d by Men, who, after an unalterable Constancy under all Kinds of Sufferings, at last died for asserting it, when they must of necessity have known, whether it were true or false, and therefore certainly knew it to be true, or else they would never have suffer’d and died in that Manner for it.” – Robert Jenkin, *Evidence and Certainty of the Christian Religion* (1734)

New Rules of Conduct

What they abandoned:

- The animal sacrifice system
- The binding authority of the Law of Moses
- Belief in a conquering Messiah

What they adopted:

- Sunday (a work day) as a new day of worship
- Baptism as a new sign of a new covenant
- Communion as an act of remembrance of Christ’s death

Scalia on the significance of such testimony

“It is not irrational to accept the testimony of eyewitnesses who had nothing to gain. . . . The [worldly] wise do not believe in the resurrection of the dead. So everything from Easter morning to the Ascension had to be made up by the groveling enthusiasts as part of their plan to get themselves martyred.”

—Antonin Scalia, Address to the Mississippi College School of Law, April 9, 1996.

The Empty Tomb

Most scholars – not just conservative Christian scholars – accept that the tomb was found empty on Sunday morning.

This is partly because the story of the empty tomb is early and multiply attested.

It is also partly because of the criterion of embarrassment and the fact that the tomb was discovered by women.

The “Official Story” – according to the Jewish authorities

Matthew gives us an account of the decision by the Jewish leaders to “spin” the story by saying that the disciples stole the body.

In the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, points out that the Jews are still sending people from city to city spreading that story.

This is a tacit confession that the Jews could not find the body.

The Nazareth Inscription

An imperial proclamation against grave robbing, dated c. AD 41, and prescribing the death penalty for those who rob graves.

This inscription dovetails with Claudius’s trouble with the Jews in Rome, as described by Suetonius.

This talk is the sixth in a series:

1. Who Wrote the Gospels? (January 23)
2. External Evidence for the Truth of the Gospels (February 13)
3. Internal Evidence for the Truth of the Gospels (February 27)
4. Alleged Contradictions in the Gospels
5. Alleged Historical Errors in the Gospels
6. The Resurrection of Jesus (April 9)

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