

Christianity and Hot Button Issues

Biblical and Cultural Challenges Christians Must Face

#5 – DID JESUS RISE FROM THE DEAD?

Some of the greatest skeptics of the resurrection of Christ who have subsequently been converted to Christianity due to the indisputable evidence of its truth have now become some of the most ardent defenders of it (e.g., Josh McDowell, Lee Strobel, J. Warner Wallace, Craig Keener).

The early church was adamant, that without the resurrection, the whole Christian faith crumbles (1 Corinthians 15). No other religions have made such unique historical claims, namely, that Jesus is the first person in history to die, rise again, and never die again. The Bible claims others were resuscitated (like Lazarus) but they died again. Resurrection entails the eradication of death itself. N. T. Wright indicates that even ancient myths did not allow for someone who died to return to life even though they allowed for all sorts of other supernatural events. The notion of resurrection was rare in mythological literature. Christianity is the first and only religion where it has been central.

I. Two Issues Facing the Credibility of the Resurrection:

- 1) **Is the Resurrection Possible?** Philosophical/ scientific question.
- 2) **Is there Credibility to the Historical Accounts?** Historical question.

The philosophical/ scientific challenge goes back to David Hume's argument:

- a) ***We've only observed laws of nature in the past therefore we will only observe them in the future.*** It is impossible to say you've *only* observed laws of nature in the past (no exhaustive way to determine) and will *only* observe them in the future. Science takes the uniformity of nature as a given but has no way to justify it. The best we can say is: since we usually observe laws of nature, then under normal circumstances we can expect them to operate.
- b) ***Subsequently, laws of nature are ironclad laws that can never be violated.*** No way to know this for certain. Incorrect definition. Better to say, laws of nature are normal patterns that describe how the world *usually* behaves and therefore, how we expect it to behave.
- c) ***We don't observe miracles because they are a violation of laws of nature.*** Better to say miracles are an *exception* to the normal pattern of the laws of nature, making them supernatural and therefore, not subject to natural/ scientific explanations. They are also very rare and unrepeatable; therefore, most people never observe them and shouldn't expect to. Thus, when they do occur, especially when they are extraordinary even among miracle claims themselves, then they generate an extraordinary response such as the otherwise improbable rise of Christianity.
- d) ***Therefore, miracles never occur.*** Miracles are not explainable by naturalistic means (i.e., the normal operation of the laws of nature). Therefore, they must have a supernatural explanation. This does not mean scientific (naturalistic) explanations are wrong or invalid, rather it shows they have limited value and scope. For example, there is not a scientific (natural or materialistic/ empirical) method for determining that the laws of logic are true. Not even the laws of logic can be used to prove the laws of logic are true without violating one of its fundamental laws (i.e., the law of circularity or begging the question). Their truthfulness (validity) must be justified by a higher/ transcendent (more ultimate) source.

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Some claim for a miracle to be credible then it must be repeatable, but that criteria defies what a miracle is: rare, unexpected, and not repeatable. Laws of nature are common, expected, and repeatable. Such critics are applying scientific (naturalistic) criteria to something that cannot be explained as a natural occurrence. Critics say that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. There is some truth to this, but, in the nature of the case, sufficient and credible evidence is more reasonable precisely because miracles are exceptional, rare, unexpected, and unrepeatable. Thomas (no naturalistic materialist) doubted the resurrection because miracles rare and unexpected (John 20:24-25)

II. Two Issues Facing the Historical Credibility of the Resurrection:

- 1) Did Jesus really die? Very few scholars dispute this fact.
- 2) Was Jesus seen alive? This is where the primary dispute lies.

THERE ARE NO WITNESSES TO THE RESURRECTION!!

There are only witnesses to (1) the empty tomb and (2) post-resurrection appearances.

Preliminary Considerations about Historical Witnesses

Eyewitness testimony used in both legal cases and historical investigations:

- a) Are there **firsthand** eyewitnesses? Firsthand witnesses are given more weight than second-hand witnesses.
- b) Are there **multiple** witnesses? More witnesses increase credibility.
- c) Are the witnesses **independent** of one another? No collusion is detected.
- d) Are the witnesses **reliable**? These are people not prone to make wild claims and have a reputation for honesty. They don't have something to gain or lose.
- e) Are the witnesses **closer** to the event in question? The earlier the accounts the better. 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 represents testimony within 3 to 7 years. Mark represents testimony within 25 to 30 years. However, see below on remembering significant events.
- f) Are the witnesses **hostile**? Hostile witnesses do not sympathize with the message or implications of the event in question and therefore if they agree it happened then we give their testimony more credibility. Unfriendly sources are regarded as more reliable than friendly ones. People don't make up stories that defeat their own position. Likewise, they fight vigorously against a position that goes against their views or that they know for certain did not happen. For example, Paul embraced the resurrection even though he was an enemy. There is no known outcry of opposition to the facts of the resurrection by the Jewish authorities who knew the claims and yet suppressed the early Christians.
- g) Does admission of evidence **embarrass** the witness? For example, Thomas, Peter, and James the brother of Jesus all risked embarrassment about their admissions because they initially disbelieved. People don't make up stories that make them look bad.
- h) Is there **corroborating evidence**? Circumstantial evidence (see below).
- i) Are there compelling alternative **naturalistic explanations**? This is important when the claims are extraordinary (i.e., miraculous/ supernatural).

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1) Evidence for Jesus' Death

1. **Severe Flogging.** Pilate was not initially willing to crucify Jesus so to placate the Jews he had Jesus flogged within an inch of his life (John 19:1-7). This partly explains why he died so soon, before the two thieves did.
2. **Hematidrosis.** Bloody sweat that occurred in garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:44). Due to high stress capillaries burst into sweat glands.
3. **Hypovolemic Shock.** Flogging caused massive bruising, lacerations and blood loss leading to hypovolemic shock: low blood in body causing shock and leads to death. The heart races to replace blood, blood pressure drops causing unconsciousness (explains staggering with cross), kidneys fail, increases massive thirst (explains Jesus' thirst), body craves fluids to replace blood.
4. **Crucifixion.** Nails in wrist pierce median nerve causing pain like funny bone (ulna nerve). Shoulders stretched out until likely dislocated (Ps. 22:14). Slow death by asphyxiation. Stresses are put on diaphragm in the chest during the inhaling (relaxed) position. One must lift up to exhale, but it is extremely painful and exhausting (breaking leg bones hastens death; cf. John 19:32-33, 36). Eventually one runs out of energy or willpower. Breathing slows and carbon dioxide builds up in the blood causing irregular heartbeat, then erratic heartbeat, and eventually a heart attack. Furthermore, the hypovolemic shock would cause fluid to build up around heart called pericardial effusion (water and blood came out- John 19:34). Spear thrust likely would have killed him if he was not already dead.
5. **Corroborating Evidence:**
 - Jesus showed disciples the wounds in his hands and side (John 20:20, 25, 27). Thomas would never forget this moment.
 - Crucifixion was public. Many witnesses to his death.
 - Five contemporary sources outside Bible confirm Jesus died by crucifixion: Josephus (Jewish historian), Tacitus (Roman historian), Mara bar Serapion (Syrian philosopher), Lucian (Syrian author), and the Talmud (record of early rabbinic traditions).
 - No known record of anyone surviving Roman crucifixion.

2) Evidence for Jesus' Resurrection

Gary Habermas reviewed hundreds of articles and books between 1975 and 2002 and calculated that 75% of all scholars agree that the tomb of Jesus was empty.

Alternate Theories (i.e., Naturalistic Explanations):

- a) **Wrong tomb.** No evidence body was ever produced. Doesn't account for fact that multiple witnesses claim to have seen resurrected Jesus.
- b) **Legend** developed later. All scholars agree on early date of Mark, early creed of 1 Cor. 15.
- c) **Fraud.** Disciples outright lied. People are not willing to die for what they know is lie. For example, somebody stole the body, which is unlikely given the initial timidity of the disciples and the strong Roman guard placed at the tomb. Paul had every reason to disprove the resurrection. Given the authority he had to arrest Christians he could have used that authority to investigate fraud.

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- d) **Hallucination, delusion, visions.** No known incident in which there is more than one person hallucinating the same thing at the same time.
- e) **Spiritual Appearance.** Some claim that the disciples did not see an actual body but a ghost or vision of Christ. John 20:24-28; 1 Corinthians 15; 1 John 1:1-3 refutes this notion. The concept of a non-bodily resurrection was unheard of in ancient cultures.

J. Warner Wallace on conspiracy theories:

“For a conspiracy to succeed, you need the smallest number of coconspirators; holding the lie for the shortest period of time; with excellent communication between them so they can make sure their stories line up; with close familial relationships, if possible: and with little or no pressure applied to those who are telling the lie. Those criteria don’t fit the resurrection witnesses.”

Main Lines of Evidence:

1. **Jesus’ Predictions.** Jesus predicted his death and resurrection on numerous occasions (Matt. 12:39-40; 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:19; 26:32; Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34; 14:28; Luke 9:22; 18:33; John 2:18-22). Yet, none of the disciples understood these predictions until after the fact. This dispels the notion that the predictions were later additions to the gospels.
2. **Jesus’ Burial.** Jesus’ body was given to two prominent members of the Sanhedrin, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, the ruling body that condemned him. Given the distrust of early Christians toward the Sanhedrin, it is unlikely they’d invent a story about two men that dissented from their decision if it was not true.
3. **The Guards.** Roman soldiers guarded the tomb, risking their lives if the body was stolen. Why attribute the rumor the Sanhedrin tried to start that the body was stolen (Matt. 28:13) unless this story was true? Note that nobody claimed the tomb was not empty.
4. **Witness of Women.** Critics argue that given the first witnesses (women) were friends of Jesus then we must discount their testimony. Quite to the contrary, women were very low on the totem pole of credibility in both Jewish and Roman culture. Women were not allowed to testify in court as witnesses. A rabbinic saying in first century: “Let the words of the Law be burned rather than delivered to women.”
5. **Testimony of Disciples.** The incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus was the central proclamation and belief of those closest to Jesus for 3 years. See Acts 4:20 (Apostles willing to be arrested for things they seen and heard). See also Acts 2:32; 3:15; 10:38-41; 13:31; 1 John 1:1-3; John 19:35; 2 Pet. 1:16-18. Note general testimony of reliable history by Luke in Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:3.
6. **Simplicity of Earliest Account (Mark).** Most scholars agree Mark is dated to within 30 years of the resurrection. It records the events in a matter-of-fact manner which is surprising given the monumental nature of the event. Later apocryphal accounts embellish the resurrection with wild stories that lack credibility. According to crime scene investigator J. Warner Wallace, when a person recalls a unique, significant, or important event then the tendency to remember the details is remarkable even decades after the fact.
7. **1 Corinthians 15:3-7.** An early church creed Paul quotes dating within a few years after the resurrection making it the earliest testimony to the resurrection. No credible scholar denies Paul wrote 1 Corinthians (about 20-25 years after the resurrection) nor the date of this creedal

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statement, yet Paul claims to have seen the resurrected Christ in 15:8 and 9:1. “Delivered” and “received” (vs. 3) are technical rabbinic terms regarding tradition (i.e., or creedal tradition). Four poetic-like lines indicate credal language. Note Paul invites scrutiny regarding the 500 when he says some are still alive (meaning they could be consulted about their testimonies).

3) Circumstantial Evidence for Resurrection

1. **Disciples Died for their Beliefs.** The disciples acted cowardly after Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion. They were discouraged, dismayed, and confused after Jesus’ death. Then suddenly they had a boldness unprecedented in history. People are willing to die for things (generally ideas) they believe are true (whether they are or not), but they are not willing to die for things they know for a fact are not true. This is especially true when it comes to historical events that are witnessed firsthand.
2. **The Conversion of Skeptics.** Consider James the brother of Jesus and Saul the persecutor of Christians. James initially rejected his brother (Mark 3:21, 31; 6:3-4; John 7:5). Josephus mentions “the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ [messiah], whose name was James.” Josephus and the early church Fathers affirm that James was martyred for his belief in Jesus. Note James Ossuary discovered in 2002 (epigraphical evidence dates it to 1st c. Jerusalem):



“James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus”

3. **Changes to Key Social Structures.** Jewish people are the most persecuted, abused people in history, yet, have been tenacious in their beliefs and identity such that they have retained this identity for 4000 years. Most of the cultures that surrounded and badgered or oppressed the Jews no longer exist (Philistines, Moabites, Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, etc.). They are the only people in history to be dispossessed of their land and nationhood to reestablish it 1900 years later. How do we explain this? They held tenaciously (radically entrenched) to 5 important social intuitions and beliefs that secured their strong identity. These things were not easily relinquished. Nonetheless, within the first few months of the resurrection 10,000+ Jews converted to Christ and willingly abandoned these 5 things: a) Animals sacrifices at temple; b) Adherence to the Mosaic Law; c) Keeping the sabbath (changed to Sunday b/c of resurrection); d) Unitarian monotheism (now the Trinity, affirming deity of Jesus—which is why he was killed); e) Conquering Jesus who would destroy political enemies (now crucified Messiah). They were willing to risk the damnation of their souls and complete ostracizing from their communities. They did not abandon these things because they hated their traditions and wanted out. No, they saw that something else was absolutely, compellingly *better*! Question: Given Jesus was among 30,000 other Jewish men crucified in the first century what made him stand out?

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4. **Communion and Baptism.** Why celebrate the brutal slaughter of your cherished leader? ILL. What if people loved John Kennedy so much that they were willing to celebrate his murder and say it was a good thing Lee Harvey Oswald did this? The only reason this makes sense in the case of Jesus is because he rose from dead. Baptism celebrates death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Both date to earliest times.
5. **The Emergence of the Church.** What is most likely explanation for explosion of the early church? Scholarship has shown that belief in 3 things stood out: (1) Jesus as God incarnate; (2) Jesus was crucified for sins; and (3) Jesus rose again. However, the resurrection is most important because it vindicates the two other beliefs. It seems improbable that the church would have survived the first generation of believers given that it originated in the most hostile environment imaginable in Jerusalem. The Jewish authorities had the power to squash a fledgling group of radicals. They couldn't stop the wildfire spread of Christianity, nor could the even more powerful Roman Empire who hated Christians as much as the Jews did.
6. **Most Influential Transformative Religion in History.** The three beliefs [i.e., (1) Jesus as God incarnate; (2) Jesus was crucified for sins; and (3) Jesus rose again] that transformed the early Christians are the same three beliefs that have made Christianity the most unique, influential, and transformative religion in history.
7. **Site of the Tomb.** Early Christians knew site of tomb (site of Church of Holy Sepulcher today). It would be impossible to maintain this testimony if the rest of the hostile audience in Jerusalem could easily refute it.