



The Resurrection of Jesus as Historical Reality

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(Part of an apologetics course designed to give roots to the faith of Christians, assist seekers in their quest for truth, and gently and respectfully challenge those who hold to competing worldviews)

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A Matter of History

Myth ~ “The resurrection of Jesus is a religious matter, and thus not to be understood as true in the sense that the more objective matters of science and history are true.”

This is a category mistake.

The notion that “Jesus rose from the dead” is *by definition* a *historical* matter, since it is making a claim about what happened in real history.

This historical truth claim is either true or false, but either way it is a *historical* truth claim.

So when we consider the claim that Jesus rose from the dead, we are dealing with history!

Significance

Much of our culture says, “Christianity can be helpful and good, but it has its place.”

This is not a logical option!

There are only two possibilities:

- 1) Jesus’ resurrection is historically true, thus Christianity is infinitely important.
- 2) Jesus’ resurrection is historically false, thus Christianity is of no importance (and actually a fraud!).

“Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.”

~ C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*

“If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead.”

~ 1 Cor 15:14-15

How We Do History

- 1) Eyewitness testimony
- 2) Making sense of known events

Massive Eyewitness Testimony

“What I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”
~ 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

How do we know Paul didn't make this up?

When Paul says that most of the eyewitnesses are still living, he is inviting his original audience to go and talk with them.

Historically speaking, it is not reasonable to assume that Paul would have issued such an invitation if indeed these witnesses did not exist.

This is why scholars across the board accept that these witnesses did indeed exist.

The question is, how do we explain what they saw?

Making Sense of the Events

Two events that historians universally recognize:

- 1) Jesus was crucified.
- 2) The immediate and rapid growth of the church.

How could both be true?!

Only with a historically resurrected Jesus...

The effect Jesus' crucifixion "should" have had...

- 1) It was understood in that culture that if you were crucified, you were "cursed by God."
- 2) Your followers would have concluded that they had backed the wrong guy.
- 3) This would have instantly killed your movement.
(actually happened many times in first century)

Historical problem → Rather than the church being stamped out, it actually exploded in growth immediately and rapidly.

Historically speaking, there's simply no way this should have happened... unless Jesus actually did rise from the dead.

Only then would his disciples have realized that they had "backed the right guy" after all.

Alternative Explanations

Swoon Theory – "Jesus did not die on the cross, but merely fainted"

The Romans never failed in carrying out crucifixion to the point of death.

And even if they did, being wrapped in a burial cloth and left in a tomb for three days would certainly have killed him.

And even if it hadn't, he could not have freed himself from the burial cloth, pushed the stone away and gotten past the guards.

And even if he had, he would not have appeared to his disciples as a resurrected Messiah.

This theory is historically unreasonable many times over.

Fraud Theory – "The disciples stole the body and lied about the resurrection"

The Roman guards were charged with guarding the tomb under pain of death.

The disciples would not have been motivated to steal the body of a failed Messiah.

This does not explain how hundreds of people were convinced that they had seen him risen anyway!

This theory is not only historically thin, but doesn't even account for all the data.

The Wrong Tomb Theory – “The disciples went to the wrong tomb and believed Jesus to have risen.”

This view requires that neither the Roman guards nor the disciples knew where the right tomb was.

Even if this were true, the disciples would have to successfully fight off the Roman guards to discover an empty tomb.

This does not explain how hundreds of people were convinced that they had seen him risen anyway.

Again, this theory compounds unreasonableness and doesn't explain all the data anyway.

Hallucination Theory – “The disciples were hallucinating and did not see what they thought they saw”

This defies what we know to be true of hallucinations – they are rare, they are not contagious (remember, we are talking about hundreds of eyewitnesses!), and they are the result of drug use or an extremely high sense of anticipation.

Far from expecting great things, the disciples were crushed and fearful after Jesus' crucifixion, believing they had backed the wrong guy.

But later, they were convinced they had seen – and touched! – the resurrected Jesus.

This does not explain why Jesus' tomb was empty.

So again, we have a theory that, historically speaking, is extremely thin and doesn't even deal with all the essential data.

Almost no scholars today hold to any of these views, because they are so historically unreasonable. One view that you find a bit more commonly among skeptical scholars is...

Spiritual Resurrection Theory – “Jesus rose from the dead spiritually, not physically.”

This does not fit the Jewish understanding of resurrection.
Spiritual resurrection was a Greek idea, but the eyewitnesses were Jewish.

The disciples testified that they encountered a physically risen Jesus.

This does not account for the fact that the body of Jesus was no longer in the tomb.

So this theory is not honest with nature of the eyewitness testimony and, again, doesn't even address all the essential data.

Why do skeptical scholars insist on embracing admittedly thin theories?

It comes down to Naturalistic Bias:

“I don't think Jesus' body actually rose from the dead in a physical sense. That so strains my sense of what is possible.”

~ Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, Vanderbilt University Divinity School

But... “the simple faith of the Christian who believes in the Resurrection is nothing compared to the credulity of the skeptic who will accept the wildest and most improbable romances rather than admit the plain witness of historical certainties. The difficulties of belief may be great; the absurdities of unbelief are greater.”

~ George Hanson, *The Resurrection and the Life*, 24

The worldview implications of a resurrected Jesus are too much to stomach.

- 1) Any worldview that does not account for a resurrected Jesus is a false view of reality.
- 2) A historical resurrection means that Jesus really is who he said he was, the risen Lord and Redeemer to whom every member of the human race owes its allegiance and trust.

Resource Recommendations

Gary Habermas & Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*

N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*