

Introduction

Did Jesus rise from the dead? Why is it important? What is the evidence? Even if He did rise from the dead, what difference does it make anyway? These are the questions that I, Harold C. Felder, will be answering in this article on the evidence for the resurrection.

Why is it Important?

The Resurrection is Central to the Christian Doctrine

All of Christianity rest on the historical event of the resurrection. If the resurrection never happened, Christianity is false. End of story! The Apostle Paul summed it up nicely:

For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men (1 Cor. 15:17-19).

Paul makes it very clear here that without the resurrection, our faith is futile. Jesus' resurrection serves to prove that He had authority not only over death, but sin. If Christ had no authority over death, then neither did He have any authority over sin. As a result, we are still in our sins. Without the resurrection to confirm His message, we should reject Jesus' teachings. Furthermore, if Christ did not defeat death, if He did not reverse the death process for Himself, then we have no reason to believe that He could possibly reverse death for us. Thus, as the apostle wrote, we are to be pitied more than all men.

The Character of Jesus

Also at stake is the very character of Jesus Himself since Jesus predicted His resurrection. Mark wrote:

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and *after three days rise again* (Mark 8:31, emphasis mine).

And the Apostle John wrote:

Then the Jews demanded of him, “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” Jesus answered them, “*Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.*” The Jews replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” *But the temple he had spoken of was his body* (John 2:18-20, emphasis mine).

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then He is at best a false prophet. No one should follow a false prophet, in fact Scripture commands us not to follow false prophets (Duet. 18 and Jer. 23). If, however, He did rise from the dead, this would serve as a strong confirmation of His message, since God would not resurrect and confirm the message of a false prophet, liar, or heretic.

What is the Evidence?

The amount of evidence for the resurrection is immense. Rather than wade through all of the evidence, I will take the approach offered by Dr. Gary Habermas in his book *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*.¹ Dr. Habermas surveyed over 1,400 sources on the resurrection from 1975 to 2003 and found points that virtually all critical scholars agree on.² These are the points that I will present here as evidence. I would also like to point out that some of the supporting evidence presented here is biblical. However, I will not appeal to the biblical evidence as inspired. I will only appeal to Scripture as accepted ancient evidence. In fact, no other ancient

¹Gary Habermas and Michal R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregle Publications, 2004).

²For documentation of this research see Gary Habermas, *The Risen Jesus & Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2003).

document is attested to being evenly closely as reliable as the New Testament documents.³ I would like to stress the fact that this writer does consider the New Testament to be the inspired Word of God. However, a full treatment of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper and not necessary for my argument. It would only serve as an unnecessary side issue for those wanting to attack the resurrection by attacking the inspiration of the New Testament.

Jesus Died by Crucifixion

The fact that Jesus was crucified is a historical fact. The evidence for this historical event is found in various historical sources.

The Jewish Historian Josephus (ca. A.D. 37–ca. 100)

Josephus reports the crucifixion of Jesus with the words: “When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified”⁴

Roman Historian Cornelius Tacitus (A.D. 55?–117)

Tacitus, also reported the crucifixion of Jesus as an historical event:

“Nero fastened the guilt [of the burning of Rome] and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus.”⁵

³Norman Geisler, “New Testament Manuscripts” in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

⁴*Antiquities* 18.64

⁵Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44 (ca .A.D. 115)

Mara Bar-Serapion (ca. A.D. 73)

Bar-Serapion wrote a letter to his son from prison. In this letter, he wrote “What advantage did the Jews gain from *executing their wise King* seeing that from that very time their kingdom was taken from them?” This letter is currently housed in the British Museum.

Jewish Talmud

The Talmud represents the Jewish commentary on the Law as well as rabbinic traditions. Probably written during the late 2nd century, this potentially hostile source provides further evidence of the crucifixion of Jesus

On the eve of Passover Yeshua was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, ‘he is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Anyone who can say anything in his favour, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.’ But since nothing was brought forward in his favour he was hanged on the eve of the Passover.’⁶

So, from these source alone we can establish that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius on the eve of Passover. This corresponds to the gospel accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus.

The Disciples Believed that Jesus Rose for the Dead

Another point that virtually all critical scholars agree on is the fact that the disciples clearly believed that Jesus rose bodily from the grave. The Apostle Paul not only taught the bodily resurrection of Jesus, he also stated that what he taught about the resurrection, the other apostles taught as well:

³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to

⁶Sanhedrin 43a.

Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ 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. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. ¹¹ *Whether, then, it was I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed* (1 Cor. 15:3-11, emphasis mine)

Another interesting thing about this passage is that it contains an early creed. Although there are numerous examples of creeds in the New Testament, the creed presented here in verses 3-5, basically contain the entire gospel message in a nutshell. What is so interesting here is that Paul says “what I received I passed on to you.” This is a technical term used by rabbis to indicate the passing of oral tradition. So we have here an oral tradition that predates the New Testament itself. Scholars are virtually unanimous in their belief that Paul wrote this book to the church of the Corinthians in A.D.55. They also agree that this letter is referring to his visit to that church in A.D. 51. And since Jesus was crucified in A.D. 33, this creed can be dated to within twenty five years of the actual crucifixion of Christ. Additionally, if Paul passed this creed on to the church in A.D. 51, then surely it must have existed before then. In fact, a number of scholars believe that this creed can be traced back to just shortly after Paul’s conversion when he visited the apostles in Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18). This would date this oral tradition to as close to three years after the crucifixion.

Furthermore, we must be aware that Paul was not writing this letter to you and I directly. It was originally intended for the church of Corinth, who knew Paul personally. That is very important since the intended audience could have easily verified his story. After all, he mentions a number of witnesses by name and identified 500 witnesses, of whom the majority is still living.

Paul would not have made a claim that could have been so easily proven false, if it were indeed false.

Perhaps the greatest evidence for the disciple's faith is in their willingness to die for their beliefs. The fact is that liars make poor martyrs and there is no record that any of the apostles ever recanted their story. If just one had done so, it would have put the nail in the coffin of Christianity. This is in sharp contrast to the portrait of the disciples in the gospel accounts. They are depicted as scared men who hid behind locked doors during the crucifixion of Christ, later to emerge as bold men who changed the world, all the while proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus unto death. The deaths of these martyrs are recorded in the pages of history.

Clement of Rome (A.D. 30–100)

Clement of Rome was an apostolic father, meaning that he was a contemporary of the apostles themselves, and as such, his teachings can be traced back to the apostles themselves.

Clement records the martyrdom of both the apostles Peter and Paul:

Through envy and jealousy, the greatest and most righteous pillars [of the Church] have been persecuted and put to death. Let us set before our eyes the illustrious apostles. Peter, through unrighteous envy, endured not one or two, but numerous labours and when he had at length suffered martyrdom, departed to the place of glory due to him. Owing to envy, Paul also obtained the reward of patient endurance, after being seven times thrown into captivity, compelled to flee, and stoned. After preaching both in the east and west, he gained the illustrious reputation due to his faith, having taught righteousness to the whole world, and come to the extreme limit of the west, and suffered martyrdom under the prefects. Thus was he removed from the world, and went into the holy place, having proved himself a striking example of patience."⁷

⁷Roberts, Alexander, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol.I : Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*. The apostolic fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus. Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997.

Jewish Historian Josephus (writing ca A.D. 95)

Not a Christian, the testimony of Josephus can hardly be seen as bias for Christianity.

Yet he records the death of the Apostle James at the hands of the Jews:

Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned.⁸

Ignatius Bishop of the Church in Antioch in Syria

Ignatius was another apostolic church father. He is believed to have personally known the apostles. He was martyred himself by being torn to pieces by wild animals in the amphitheater of Rome. Of note, when the Church of Rome sought to intercede on his behalf, he wrote his now famous letter to that church forbidding any interference in his martyrdom.⁹

Around A.D. 110, on his way to be martyred a horrible death, he wrote:

When, for instance, He came to those who were with Peter, He said to them, “Lay hold, handle Me, and see that I am not an incorporeal spirit.” And immediately they touched Him, and believed, being convinced both by His flesh and spirit. For this cause also *they despised death, and were found its conquerors*¹⁰ (emphasis mine).

⁸Josephus, Flavius, and William Whiston. *The Works of Josephus : Complete and Unabridged*. Includes index., Ant 20.200. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996, c1987.

⁹The Epistle of Ignatius to the Romans

¹⁰Roberts, Alexander, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe.

Polycarp Bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor¹¹

Polycarp was yet another apostolic father. He was a personal disciple of the Apostle John and was himself martyred for his beliefs. He was burned at the stake for refusing to renounce his faith.¹² Around A.D. 110, Polycarp recounted the willingness of the apostles to die for their beliefs:

Paul himself and the rest of the apostles. [This do] in the assurance that all these have not run in vain, but in faith and righteousness, and that they are [now] in their due place in the presence of the Lord, with whom also they suffered. For they loved not this present world, but Him who died for us, and for our sakes was raised again by God from the dead.¹³

It should be particular interest to the impartial reader that two of the disciples of the apostles became martyrs themselves. Surely, these men who followed the apostles believed that the apostles believed in the resurrection. If the early apostles were not willing to die for their beliefs, then we should not expect more of their followers.

The Conversion of the Church Persecutor Paul

The Apostle Paul, by his own admission, persecuted the early church, as he himself records:

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, *persecuting the church*; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless (Phil. 3:6-7, emphasis mine).

¹¹W. A. Elwell and P. W. Comfort, *Tyndale Bible dictionary* [electronic ed] (Wheaton: Ill, Tyndale House Publishers, 2001).

¹²Ibid.

¹³Roberts, Alexander, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe.

Paul also records his zeal for persecuting the church in his first book to the Corinthians where he writes “For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, *because I persecuted the church of God*” (1 Cor. 15:9, emphasis mine). In fact, Paul was at the first martyrdom of the church. Acts 8:1 records Paul being present at the stoning of Stephen, giving his approval. Yet this same Paul abandoned the beliefs of 1,500 years of Judaism. He had the equivalent of multiple PhD’s, yet he got off the fast track of the ladder of success within the ranks of the Pharisee. Something happened that transformed this man from the church persecutor to the man who wrote two-thirds of the New Testament. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul recounts his hardships for the cause of Christ:

²³I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches (2 Cor. 11:23-28)

Paul gained nothing but suffering and death for his efforts. So what could possible cause such a transformation in Paul? He says it was seeing the resurrected Christ. Three times in the book of Acts Paul recalls his encounter with the resurrected Jesus. Surely, such an event could explain such a dramatic transformation

After his survey of almost 30 years of German, French, and English scholarship, Dr. Gary Habermas writes “virtually all scholars recognize Paul’s testimony that he had an experience that he believed was an appearance of the risen Jesus.”¹⁴

Conversion of the Skeptic James

The gospel writers portray James as someone who did not believe in Christ up until his crucifixion. Mark writes:

When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for *they said, “He [Jesus] is out of his mind”* (Mark 3:20, emphasis mine).

The Gospel of John records an incident between Jesus and his brothers where they actually mock Him:

Jesus’ brothers said to him, ‘You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world.’ *For even his own brothers did not believe in him* (John 7:3-5, emphasis mine).

Yet this same James not only came to believe, but he even became the church leader in Jerusalem (Acts 15:12-21, Galations 1:9). As cited earlier, the Jewish historian Josephus documents his martyrdom at the hands of the Jews. So what could have transformed an unbelieving James into a believer? Paul recounts in 1 Cor. 15, that James was one of the ones who saw the resurrected Jesus. This surely would explain the dramatic conversion.

¹⁴Habermas, 74.

The Empty Tomb

Belief in the empty tomb is not as widely accepted by critical scholars. However, an overwhelming majority of 75% do accept the empty tomb as a fact.¹⁵ There are three very good reasons to accept the fact of the empty tomb.

First, it would have been impossible for Christianity to get off the ground if the tomb had not been empty. The Jewish leaders and Roman officials would have simply produced the body of Jesus.

Second, the earliest explanation for the empty tomb was the explanation that the disciples stole the body. No one would have suggested that the disciples stole the body if the body was still in the tomb. The tomb must have been empty.

Third, no one making up this story would have used women as the first to see the empty tomb. In both the Jewish and Roman cultures, the testimony of women did not carry any weight. This is why when Paul lists the witnesses to the resurrection in 1 Cor. 15, he conspicuously omits the women.

Alternate Theories

From the time of the resurrection onward, there have been numerous theories offered to explain the evidence for the resurrection. Those with an anti-supernatural bias must postulate a natural explanation for the historical facts. None however, can account for the five facts just provided as evidence. For any alternate theory to work, it must explain all of the data recognized as historical by the experts who study this topic. It would be beyond the scope of this article to address all of the alternate theories, but the best and most notable theories will be examined briefly.

¹⁵Habermas, 70.

Legend

Under this theory, the disciples never claimed that Jesus rose from the dead. The resurrection was a later invention. However, this theory simply cannot account for the evidence.

First, this assertion is simply wrong as is evidenced by early pre New Testament creeds. *Second*, both Paul and James were converted by seeing the resurrected Christ. *Third*, this theory provides absolutely no supporting evidence. Anyone can claim anything, but since I've provided first century evidence for the resurrection, any opposing theory needs to provide first century evidence for their position.

Borrowed Resurrection Stories from Pagan Myths

According to this theory, the early Christians simply borrowed from existing pagan myths about resurrections and incorporated them into their beliefs.

In response, the first account of an even slightly parallel story does not occur until one hundred years after the accounts of Jesus' resurrection. The evidence proves the exact opposite of what this theory proposes. It was the pagans that borrowed from Christianity.¹⁶ The only account that predates Christianity is the account of the ancient Egyptian cult of Osiris's. However, in this account Osiris returned to life as a zombie, not a resurrection person in a glorified body as described by the Apostle Paul. More importantly, even if there were earlier accounts of resurrections in pagan myths, this still does not explain the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. All five points of evidence must still be accounted for by any alternate theory.

¹⁶For an in-depth treatment of this topic see N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) 32-81.

The Disciples Stole the Body

Under this theory, the disciples stole the body and then proclaimed a risen Jesus. There are numerous problems with this theory.

First, the disciples really believed they saw the resurrected Jesus. This is evidenced by the fact that they willingly died for this belief. For this theory to be true, the disciples would have had to know that Jesus did not rise from the dead. Not only that, but they would have also been willing to die for this known lie. Liars make poor martyrs. People simply do not die for what they know is a lie. *Second*, Paul and James were converted based on the appearance of the risen Jesus. A stolen body does not explain a risen glorious Christ.

Someone Else Stole the Body

According to this theory, someone besides the disciples stole the body. Upon seeing the empty tomb, the disciples falsely concluded that Jesus rose from the dead.

At best this theory only explains an empty tomb. It doesn't explain the numerous appearances. It was not the empty tomb that convinced the disciples of the resurrection, it was seeing the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Wrong Tomb

Under this theory, the women simply went to the wrong tomb. They reported this to the disciples who also went to the wrong tomb. In response, there are significant problems with this theory.

First, even if the women and disciples went to the wrong tomb, the Roman and Jewish officials would have simply went to the correct tomb and produced the body of Jesus. End of Christianity! *Second*, the fact that the tomb belonged to Joseph of Aramethea, a member of the

ruling council, would indicate that the location of the tomb was well known. *Third*, as already stated, Paul and James were convinced by the appearances, not an empty tomb.

Apparent Death Theory

This theory is also known as the swoon theory and suggests Jesus only appeared to have died on the cross. Later, while in the tomb, He was revived. He then appeared to his disciples who proclaimed Him as the risen Christ.

In response, *first*, I've already established that Jesus died by crucifixion. The evidence for this has been clearly presented. Death on the cross was death by asphyxiation. In order to breathe, Jesus would have to lift himself up. No lifting, no breathing. Anyone who has not lifted himself up for a couple of minutes surely was dead. *Second*, according to an article in the March 21, 1986 *Journal of the American Medical Association*, survival was highly unlikely. Jesus was whipped mercilessly, beaten by the soldiers with their fists, fell under the weight of His own cross, dehydrated, and suffered for hours on the cross. To survive this treatment stretches the imagination. If this were not enough, the Apostle John unwittingly reports "One of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe" (John 19:34). John probably did not realize the medical condition that he was describing. Now we know that John is describing a condition where the water forms a sack around the heart. This is a clear indication of death. When John saw this, Jesus was surely dead.

Third, the Roman soldiers were experts at execution. They knew when a man was dead and when he was not dead. *Fourth*, in order for this scenario to work, we must believe that after the beating, whipping, and crucifixion, Jesus rolled the stone away, fought off the guards, walked

to the place of the disciples as a bloody mess with holes still in His hands and feet and have them believe that He rose from the dead as their glorious Lord. They would have pitied Him, not worshipped Him.

Group Hallucination

According to this theory the disciples were so distraught over the death of Jesus that they had a mass hallucination. They thought they saw Jesus, but they were seeing a projection of their own minds. There are, however, a number of problems with this theory.

First, there is no such thing as a mass hallucination. Hallucinations are personal, like dreams. And although it may be true that groups of people may be put in a situation where hallucinations are possible, each would have his own hallucination. *Second*, this does not account for the empty tomb. *Third*, the appearances were to numerous people on numerous occasions. We have the women, the disciples, James, Paul, and the five hundred witnesses Paul writes about in 1 Cor. 15. *Fourth*, it does not explain the appearances by James and Paul who were not grief stricken or in any other way mentally affected that would make them susceptible to hallucinations.

Biased Accounts

This theory suggests that we can't trust the testimony of Christians because their testimony is biased. Christians most likely transferred their personal biases and traditions into their writings

In response, *first*, Paul and James were not biased. *Second*, this would eliminate virtually all history. Everyone who writes does it because of an interest and this interest can taint their view. This does not mean however that they can't report the facts objectively. For instance, if this were not the case, then we should never accept a book on African American history written

by either someone who is African American or white, since either way they could be considered bias. *Third*, this doesn't address the evidence. The five points of evidence must still be accounted for.

Discrepancies in the Gospel Accounts

Under this theory, since the Gospel accounts vary in detail and contradict each other, we cannot trust them at all. Since the Gospels are the main source of the resurrection story, the resurrection story itself must be rejected. A number of things can be said in response to this theory.

First, at most this calls into question inerrancy, not the resurrection. The evidence for the resurrection presented in this paper does not hinge on the inspiration of Scripture. *Second*, we would not be able to know any history if this was the standard. Historians often have to sift through varying accounts of historical events. For instance, there are different accounts of the fire of Rome under Nero. There are varying accounts as to when, where, and how the fire started, but we don't conclude that no fire happened. *Third*, the differences actually indicate independent accounts, since it is obvious that the writers did not get together and compare notes in collusion. *Fourth*, the areas that appear to be conflicts do not represent conflicts at all. Most, if not all of the apparent contradictions can be explained.¹⁷

The fact of the matter is that none of the natural explanations explain the facts that are believed by even the most critical of scholars. Only the fact of the resurrection fully explains the evidence. Only the resurrection explains why the disciples believed they saw the resurrected

¹⁷For a treatment of Bible difficulties see Norman L. Geisler and Thomas A. Howe, *When Critics Ask : A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1992).

Christ under the threat of death. They did not fear death because they knew that Christ had conquered death and that He promised that they too would conquer death. Only the resurrection explains the conversion of the church persecutor Paul and the once skeptical James. Only the resurrection explains the empty tomb. Since Jesus rose, we would expect the tomb to be empty. Given the evidence, the resurrection is the only explanation that makes sense.

What Difference does it make?

So what if God raised Jesus bodily from the dead? Why is that important to me? Well, it's very important. It means that all religions that deny the resurrection are wrong. Islam claims that Jesus not only did not rise bodily, but He never even died on the cross. Islam goes against the evidence. Most importantly, by raising Him from the dead, God confirmed Jesus and His message. Jesus foretold His resurrection before the fact. He performed miracles to numerous witnesses. Surely God would not confirm a heretic. If God raised Jesus from the dead, He stamped Him with His seal of approval. But what was the message that Jesus preached and God confirmed? His claims were no less remarkable. Neither Mohammed, Buddha, nor any other leader of a major religion made the types of claims as Christ. Jesus said "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Jesus also said "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies" (John 11:25). Jesus not only claimed the miraculous, He demonstrated it as well.