

The Physical Resurrection of Jesus Christ Is Historical Fact ©

By Randy Singer

The physical resurrection of Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of Christianity. It is not theory or conjecture, it is a historical fact; and like any other historical fact it can be verified.

The resurrection sets Christianity apart from other religions. Only Christianity claims a Messiah that conquered death. The founders of other major world religions are venerated in their final resting place in the earth. There is no shrine at the tomb of Christ because that tomb did not hold Christ. Those of us who worship Christ make a claim that no other religion even attempts to make: we worship a risen Savior.

The resurrection is essential to the integrity of the Christian faith. If Christ did not physically rise from the dead, then Christ himself was a liar, or at least a misinformed and mistaken prophet. When pressed for a sign that He was the Messiah, Christ responded with this ultimate “sign”—His own physical resurrection: “Whereas Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”¹ Matthew 12: 16. On other occasions, Christ was even more explicit, claiming that, “the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.” Luke 9:22.

If Christ did not rise from the dead, it not only destroys the credibility of the Messiah but also dashes any hope of eternal life for Christians following their own promised resurrection. In the words of the apostle Paul: “But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most pitied. But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. Since by man came death, by man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order; Christ the first fruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming.” 1 Corinthians 15: 13-23.

The stakes are high. Christianity rises and falls on the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. Fortunately, the resurrection is a cornerstone that can bear that weight. The proof supporting Christ’s resurrection has convinced even the most hard-nosed skeptics. To the open-minded seeker of truth, the resurrection of Christ is one of the best documented and widely supported historical facts the world has ever known. As Luke asserts in the book of Acts, Jesus Christ presented Himself alive after His suffering by “many infallible proofs.” Acts 1:3. Those infallible proofs will be detailed in the pages that follow.

I. The Bible Authenticates the Resurrection.

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In many respects, the short answer to the question “How do we know Christ arose from the grave?” is the response “Because the Bible says so.” Critics claim that this is circular reasoning and that you cannot prove the accuracy of a source by reference to the source itself. But in the laws of our land, there are documents that are considered “self-authenticating,” and this concept applies with full force when considering the Biblical evidence for a resurrected Christ. When a source proves reliable in every respect in which it can be tested, there is no reason to think that the present situation will not follow course. The physical resurrection of Christ can be supported by “infallible proofs” outside the pages of the New Testament, and those will be detailed in this document. But it is also critical to realize at the outset that Scripture alone contains sufficient evidence of authenticity, reliability and accuracy to verify the physical resurrection of Christ even without reference to any external sources or arguments. This is not circular reasoning, it is reasonable reliance on a source with a track record of truth.

A. Authenticity of the New Testament.

For years liberal New Testament critics, following in the footsteps of the German “higher school of criticism,” insisted that the entire New Testament was an invention of the second century church to justify the growing Christian influence in the Roman Empire. But just when the volume of this criticism reached a crescendo, God used archaeology and the discovery of ancient papyrus manuscripts to reveal new confirmations that the New Testament was written in a relatively short period of time following the resurrection of Christ by those who claimed to be the authors of the New Testament books.

For example, in the hundred years following the ascendancy of these New Testament critics in eighteenth century Germany, they argued strenuously that the fourth gospel was not even composed until the last half of the second century – and certainly not by the Apostle John – and was therefore too distant from the events of the life of Christ to be of much use. But in the early twentieth century important papyrus manuscript fragments were discovered, including a fragment containing five verses of chapter 18 of the gospel of John. Judging from the style of the script, numerous prominent paleographers have confirmed that this fragment originated between A.D. 100 and A.D. 150.² Thus, by a very early date, a fragment of a copy of the Gospel of John could be found in a community along the Nile River in Egypt, far removed from Ephesus in Asia Minor, where the gospel was probably composed.

What the papyrus suggests, the rocks confirm. Respected archeologist William F. Albright, in considering the entire mass of archeological, historical and textual evidence surrounding the authenticity of the New Testament, concluded that: “In my opinion, every book of the New Testament was written by a baptized Jew between the 40s and the 80s of the first century AD...very probably sometime between AD 50 and 75.”³

Albright is not alone in his conclusion. Other prominent archeologists, such as Sir William Ramsey, echo Albright’s assessment even though they initially set out to prove that the German higher criticism school was correct. In the words of Ramsey: “I began with a mind unfavorable (to the book of Acts), for the ingenuity and completeness of the (German critical school of thoughts) had at one time quite convinced me.”⁴ But Ramsey was soon confused by

² Lee Strobel, The Case for Christ, (Zondervan, 1998), p. 80 citing Dr. Bruce Metzger, Dr. C.H. Roberts, Sir Frederick Kenyon, Sir Harold Bell, Adolf Deissmann, W.H.P. Hatch, Ulrich Wilcken, and others.

³ “An Interview with William F. Albright,” Christianity Today, January 18, 1963.

archaeological findings that confirmed Luke's reference to the enrollment of taxpayers which caused Christ to be born in Jerusalem, Luke's reference to Quirinius as Governor of Syria, and Luke's reference to Pontius Pilate. All of these references were claimed to be historically inaccurate by the German Historical school of higher criticism in the mid-nineteenth century, but later confirmed by archaeological finds.⁵

The details of these and other archaeological findings drove Sr. William Ramsey to a different conclusion than he anticipated. The new archaeological finds confirmed the biblical text authored by Luke and contradicted the assumptions of Luke's critics in every particular. One such detail was the writing by Luke, in Acts 14:1-6, which implied that Lystra and Derbe were in the Lyconia province but that Iconium was not. The German critics pointed to Roman historical writers from the second century who contradicted this passage and stated that Iconium was in fact within the province of Lyconia. But in 1910, Ramsey discovered a first century inscription declaring that Iconium was under the authority of Phrygia, not Lyconia. The territorial change referenced by the German critics did not occur until the second century. This small archaeological detail on its own did not change Ramsey's mind, but a slew of similar detailed archaeological findings confirming Luke's account collectively led to Ramsey's transformation. He ultimately concluded that: "Luke's history is unsurpassed in respect of his trustworthiness," and Luke should be "...placed along with the very greatest of historians."⁶ Ramsey's change of heart is typical of those who objectively investigate the historical and archaeological reliability of the New Testament. The critic becomes the converted.

As the digs continue, the affirmation of the historical accuracy of the New Testament gathers steam. Even US News and World Report recently jumped on this bandwagon in a cover story entitled "Is the Bible True?" The article discussed "extraordinary insights from archeology and history" such as recent archeological digs that confirmed events and places only referred to in scripture (the Pool of Bethesda, the Pool of Siloam; the existence of Pontius Pilot, etc). The magazine's conclusion: "In extraordinary ways, modern archeology has affirmed the historical core of the Old and New Testaments – corroborating key portions of the stories of Israel's patriarchs, the Exodus, the Davidic monarchy, and the life and times of Jesus."⁷

B. Preservation of the New Testament.

The undeniable authenticity of the New Testament is matched only by its miraculous preservation. To appreciate the magnitude of this miraculous preservation, think for a moment about the dangers to ancient written materials. Fragile materials such as papyrus and parchment, poor storage conditions, lost documents, and inadvertent or intentional destruction of documents, all contributed to the fact that many historical documents vanished completely. At the time of Christ's resurrection, there was no printing press, no photocopier, and no foolproof way to copy or preserve manuscripts. But unlike other historical documents, thousands of ancient manuscript copies of the New Testament survive to this day.

⁴ Sir William Ramsey, St. Paul: The Travels of a Roman Citizen (Grand Rapids, MI, 1962), p. 36.

⁵ Josh McDowell, A Ready Defense, (Here's Life Publishers, Inc.1990), pp. 108-112.

⁶ Sir William Ramsey, The Bearing of Recent Discoveries on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker 1953), p. 222.

⁷ "Is the Bible True?" US News and World Report, October 25, 1999.

To gain further perspective, compare the Biblical manuscript to the survival of copies of other ancient manuscripts. The New Testament is verified by twenty-four thousand ancient manuscripts with the earliest copy being about fifty years from the original writing of the manuscript. The second most prolific major work of antiquity is Homer's Iliad, which has only 653 copies, with the earliest copy dated some five hundred years after the original manuscript.

The writings of historians who are accepted without question compare very poorly to New Testament preservation. For example, ancient copies of the historical works of Tacitus, who wrote in 100 AD, number only twenty, with the earliest copy being nearly one thousand years after the time of Tacitus. Yet no one questions the historicity of Tacitus.

Ancient history is based in large part on the writings of Herodotus, a Greek scholar who wrote in the Fourth Century before Christ. Nobody doubts that the works of Herodotus were faithfully transcribed and preserved, yet there are only eight ancient copies of his work with the oldest copy being dated almost thirteen hundred years after his death.

In addition to the copies of the New Testament manuscripts themselves, there are over eighty-six thousand quotations of the New Testament found in the writings of the early church fathers.⁸ These voluminous quotations of the New Testament are so thorough that all but eleven verses of the New Testament can be reconstructed from this material, all of which was written less than two hundred years after Christ.⁹

So what? Why make such a big deal about the proliferation of ancient copies of the New Testament? Precisely because the abundance of the early manuscripts, and the closeness in time to the original writings, allow us to verify the accuracy of the copies. Unlike other ancient historical documents, which have few copies that can be cross-referenced, the thousands of copies of the New Testament confirm that the Biblical account has been accurately preserved.

A comparison of the ancient copies finds that the text has no substantial variation between the copies, and what little variation exists pertains primarily to matters of spelling or word order.¹⁰ Not one single variant has any bearing on a doctrine of Christian faith.¹¹

The reasons for this incredible accuracy lie partially in the meticulous transcription requirements for the early scribes. No word or letter could be written from memory without the Scribe having looked at the code text before him; only the master original was used; no copies of copies were made; letters per page were counted and verified; each column had a specified number of letters; each letter of the alphabet was counted for the entire scroll and verified to the master; the middle letter of the scroll was verified to the master; if there was one mistake made, the entire scroll was destroyed.

Every attempt to destroy the Bible has failed miserably. In 64 AD Nero led a massive persecution of Christians in Rome and blamed them for the "great fire." For almost three hundred years Roman rulers persecuted and executed Christians, and Christian writings were indiscriminately destroyed. In 303 AD, Emperor Diocletian declared that anyone discovered with a Bible would be immediately put to death. But no amount of Roman persecution or

⁸ Frank Harber, Reasons for Believing, (New Leaf Press, 1998), p. 67.

⁹ Id., p.67.

¹⁰ Id., p. 67.

¹¹ Ralph O. Muncaster, The Bible: General Analysis, (1996), p.13.

legislation could destroy what God intended to preserve. Copies of the Word of God were not only preserved, but grew exponentially.

Centuries later, the French Enlightenment scholar Voltaire boasted that the Enlightenment School of Thought would make Biblical faith obsolete. Voltaire predicted that within one hundred years the Bible would disappear—implying that his own works would outlive the Bible. But new schools of thought, like prosecution and legislation, are powerless against the inevitable preservation of the life-changing Word of God. Today Voltaire's house and his printing press are being used by the Geneva Bible Society to print thousands of Bibles for distribution throughout the world.¹²

C. The Truth of Scripture.

The New Testament is not only undeniably authentic and miraculously preserved, it is also unfailingly accurate. Nowhere is this accuracy more marvelous than in the prophetic prediction and fulfillment of events which occurred exactly as prophesized by Christ and the writers of the New Testament.

At the time, it must have seemed ludicrous for a carpenter's son to make the prophetic claims that came from the mouth of Christ. This nomad preacher in a time devoid of mass communication confidently stated that, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my Word shall not pass away." Matthew 24:35. If Christ were a mere man, how could He possibly know the miraculous resilience of his own words? On another occasion, He predicted the manner of his death and the magnetic impact it would have on the world: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die." John 12: 32-33. How could a mere man have known that he would be crucified on a cross and that this repulsive manner of death would attract souls down through the centuries? Concerning the Christian Church, that was nonexistent at the time, Christ declared: "Upon this rock I will build my church: and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Matthew 16:18. No mere human would have evaluated the leadership skills of the disciples and predicted an impenetrable church that could withstand the most vicious attacks evil men could muster. Nor would anyone have predicted that those same followers would spread the gospel, "...unto the uttermost part of the earth." Act 1:8. With the technology available as we enter the twenty-first century, Christ's prophetic claim and Great Commission command will soon be reality.

Christ not only prophesized concerning the resiliency of His words, the magnetism of His death and the success of the Christian church, but He also uttered specific prophecies against the major cities of His day. With regard to Jerusalem, He prophesized, "Your enemies will rise up before you, and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation." Luke 20:43-44. This prophecy was fulfilled in 70 AD when the Romans leveled Jerusalem and annihilated the temple down to its very foundation.

Christ predicted destruction for the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. Matthew 11:21-24. As prophesized, these three cities were destroyed by an earthquake in 400 AD.¹³ Attempts to rebuild each of these cities failed, and the cities lie in ruins today.

¹² Ralph O. Muncaster, The Bible: Manuscript Reliability, (Strong Basis to Believe, 1997), p. 23.

¹³ George T.B. Davis, Fulfilled Prophecies that Prove the Bible, (Philadelphia: Million Testaments Campaigns, Inc., 1931), p. 36.

The fulfillment of these prophecies is even more remarkable when it is considered in the context of the four dominant ancient cities, which were beautifully situated near the shores of the Sea of Galilee where Christ ministered. The three cities mentioned above were annihilated and never rebuilt. But the fourth city, Tiberias, also mentioned in the New Testament, was partially destroyed several times but has always been rebuilt.¹⁴ Not coincidentally, nowhere in the New Testament does Christ pronounce judgment against Tiberias.

The prophecies of Christ are only the tip of the iceberg with regard to the verifiably true statements of the New Testament. Whether measured against fulfilled prophecy, inspired teaching, after discovered archaeology, or accurately-described culture of the first century, the New Testament rings true on all counts. Legal cases rise and fall on the credibility of witnesses and documents. A document proven to be true in every verifiable aspect is presumed to be true in others. That is the case with the Bible. Every New Testament writer acknowledges the resurrection of Christ as historical fact. The resurrection is true because the greatest and most accurate historical document ever written says it is true.

II. The Evidence of the Resurrection of Christ Is Overwhelming

There is much corroborative evidence for the Biblical account of the physical resurrection of Christ. This evidence leaves room for no hypothesis or theory other than the physical resurrection of Christ to explain the empty grave and Christ's post-resurrection appearances. Legal scholars such as Lord Darling, former Chief Justice of England, have been astonished for centuries at the mountain of evidence supporting the resurrection. In the words of Darling: "In its favor as a living truth there exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in a verdict that the resurrection story is true."¹⁵

A. Consider the Motive.

An analysis of the motives of the apostles and early Christians leads to the inevitable conclusion that they sincerely believed in the physical bodily resurrection of Christ. Why would the disciples perpetrate some giant fraud on the New Testament world? The early Christians were reviled and persecuted. Peter was crucified on a cross upside down. All but one of the apostles were executed, and that disciple died in exile on the island of Patmos. Most of the disciples and other followers of Christ suffered ridicule and scorn while alive and then died graphic and painful deaths. Yet the disciples of Christ died proclaiming the truth of the resurrection. Why would the early Christians be willing to die for a lie?

Men tell lies to gain profit, to enhance their reputation, to gain political power, or for some other advantage. Men lie to save their own skin. But men do not lie so they can then be tortured and killed for that lie. The notion that the resurrection story could have been a fraud dies alongside the martyrs of the early church. If the resurrection story was a fraud, then the early disciples were co-conspirators. But not one disciple renounced the truth of the resurrection in the face of certain death. Death has a way of revealing truth. That is why even today a court of law will grant an exception to the hearsay objection and allow the last words of a dying man into evidence as part of the "dying declaration" exception. The dying declaration of the disciples proves the truth of the resurrection.

¹⁴ Id., p. 41.

¹⁵ Michael Green, Men Alive. (Downers Grove, IL IntVarsity Press, 1968), p. 54.

B. The Power of the Resurrection to Transform Lives.

Not only did the disciples die clutching to the truth of the resurrection, but they also lived transformed by the power of the resurrection. History and the scriptures record that the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Christ had the power to change lives. The mercurial Apostle Peter became so terrified at the events surrounding the crucifixion of Christ that he denied even knowing Christ when confronted by a servant girl. Mark 14:66-72. Within weeks, the same apostle was boldly standing before Israel's ruling leaders and proudly proclaiming the resurrection of Christ. He sealed his bold proclamation with a martyr's death.

The other followers of Christ experienced similar transformations. The timid and fickle pre-resurrection followers became the lions of the early church who were intimidated by no man. The self-serving disciples James and John, who had previously sought the highest place in a hoped-for political kingdom, became servants of others and humble leaders of the early church.

Something happened. Something that had the power to change lives. It still changes lives today. No legendary myth could have such impact. The millions of lives impacted by this one historical event testify with one voice to the transforming power of the resurrection.

C. The Empty Tomb and the Dog That Did Not Bark

In a Sherlock Holmes mystery novel, the most powerful evidence is sometimes the evidence that did not exist but most certainly would have existed if the crime had occurred as alleged. The most famous example was a dog that did not bark, demonstrating that a grisly crime did not occur at the time and place assumed.

So it is with the resurrection. The empty tomb can be proven by dogs that did not bark. The entire Christian movement would have been stopped cold in its tracks if the tomb of Christ were not empty. Peter's powerful sermon on the day of Pentecost, when the early church was formed and three thousand souls were saved in one day, would certainly have been categorically refuted by the existence of the decaying body of Jesus Christ in His tomb. The tomb of Christ was within walking distance of the city that served as the birthplace of the Christian church. A powerful church movement premised on the resurrection of its founder would never have flourished if the founder was in fact lying in a tomb a short way down the road.

Unlike founders of other religions, Christ's tomb never became a venerated place of worship. Why not? Precisely because there were no remains to worship in the tomb. We certainly could have expected that the early Christians, like disciples of other religious movements, would have made pilgrimages to and worshiped at the tomb of Christ if they believed that He was still there.

The day of worship for the early church became the first day of the week rather than the traditional Sabbath (the last day of the week). The only explanation for this radical change in worship services is the resurrection of Christ and the existence of the empty tomb. We would certainly have expected the continual worship on the Sabbath in keeping with Jewish traditions if Christ had not arisen on the first day of the week.

In a court of law the most powerful evidence is an admission by a party opponent. If someone makes a statement against his or her own interest, it is generally presumed that the statement is true. In this light, it is worth noting that the opponents of Christianity never even tried, for hundreds of years, to suggest that the tomb was not empty. Early theories to disprove the resurrection of Christ, which will be discussed later in this chapter, all assumed at least one

uncontroverted fact as true—the existence of the empty tomb. This implicit admission, by the most strident opponents of Christianity, is entitled to great weight.

D. The Ring of Truth

Those experienced in the investigation of evidence develop a feel for fabricated or fraudulent stories. This is particularly true when more than one person and more than one source attempt to corroborate the same story. The accounts either become artificially cohesive or irreconcilably contradictory. On close inspection, the fabricated account simply fails to have the “ring of truth.”

For hundreds of years scholars have scrutinized Scripture in a way unknown to other historical documents. But this close scrutiny reveals no indicia of fabrication. Instead, the Scripture accounts have the “ring of truth” in every respect.

Would John Mark, writing on behalf of the apostle Peter, paint the disciples as scared and dejected followers of Christ rather than courageous and majestic defenders of the faith if he were simply making it up? The Gospels (one of which was written by the Apostle John) reflected that John and Peter could not even stay awake with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane for prayer on the night before the Crucifixion. When Christ was arrested, the Apostles fled. Scripture records that Peter denied even knowing Christ after Christ was arrested. The Apostles gave up the cause and briefly went back to their occupations following the Lord’s death and before His resurrection. This hardly sounds like a fabricated legend designed to make its authors look good.

The first witnesses to the resurrection, as recorded in the Gospels, were women. But this was a time when women were not even allowed to give testimony in court. If the disciples fabricated the account of the resurrection, would they have concocted a story that preceded their own discovery of the empty tomb by that of women? The experts through the ages who have examined the evidence do not think so.

E. The Experts

Some of the best analytical minds of this century carefully scrutinized the resurrection to determine if it is fact or fiction. Simon Greenleaf, one of the most skilled legal minds of this nation and one of the primary developers of Harvard Law School, paid particular attention to the testimonial evidence of the disciples and the validity of the gospel accounts. He had this to say about the credibility of that evidence:

“It was therefore impossible that (the gospel writers) could have persisted in affirming the truths they had narrated, had not Jesus actually risen from the dead, and had they not known this fact as certainly as they knew any other fact.”¹⁶

As noted previously, Lord Darling, former Chief Justice of England, looked at the totality of the evidence and concluded that no intelligent jury in the world could bring back any other verdict other than a resounding verdict that the resurrection story was true.¹⁷

Even many of those who investigated the resurrection to disprove its factual premise changed their minds and hearts after careful and objective review of the evidence. Frank Morrison, a successful and seasoned lawyer, set out to write a book disproving the resurrection. Instead he wrote the book, Who Moved the Stone? His book focused on, among other things, the question of who moved the two-ton stone that sealed the tomb of Christ up a slope away from the mouth of the massive sepulcher. Morrison focused not only on the issue of who

¹⁶ Henry M. Morris, Many Infallible Proofs, Master Books, Inc. 1998, p. 105.

¹⁷ Frank Harber, Reasons for Believing, NewLeaf Trust 1998, p.111.

moved this massive stone, but also on who overcame the Roman guards who were stationed in front of the grave. His analysis of the entire body of evidence led him to the only conclusion possible: Christ moved the stone through the same power that made the resurrection possible.

F. Three Months of Eyewitnesses

Nothing compares with eyewitness testimony. Even in today's technologically advanced society, lawyers would rather have a reliable eyewitness than all of the "scientific" evidence our modern technology can muster. Juries instinctively rely on eyewitnesses, especially those who have no motive to lie. When two or more eyewitnesses agree on an essential fact, a jury will almost always conclude the fact is true unless other eyewitnesses contradict the testimony. The gospels record more than five hundred eyewitnesses who personally saw Christ after the resurrection. 1 Corinthians 15:6. The eyewitness report of the Gospels was published during the life of those who personally experienced the resurrection. The apostle Paul was acutely aware of this fact and during his sermons would challenge anyone who doubted the resurrection to go and question the eyewitnesses for themselves, since many of them were still alive. 1 Corinthians 15:6.

The sheer number of these eyewitnesses is overwhelming. To put this number in perspective, if each eyewitness were called to testify and cross-examined on this fact for one hour (a very quick pace for modern courtrooms), the eyewitness testimony alone would stretch out for more than three months. Against this massive array of eyewitness testimony, those who reject the resurrection cannot find even one historical notation that mentions one solitary individual who claims to have seen the dead body of Christ after it was laid to rest in the grave.

Standing alone, the eyewitness testimony is overwhelming. But even more compelling is the fact that many of these eyewitnesses became believers and willingly gave up their very lives rather than deny the truth of what they had seen. Seeing is believing. Hundreds saw the risen Christ. Based in part on the testimony of those eyewitnesses, millions have believed.

III. Alternative Theories to the Resurrection Have No Merit

For skeptics of the historical resurrection, it is not enough to say that Christ did not arise. They must at least posit some alternative theory for the events surrounding the resurrection and the rise of Christianity. Many have tried. All have failed. The major theories each raise many more questions than they attempt to answer. Each requires quantum leaps of faith that dwarf the faith of those who take the evidence of the historical resurrection of Jesus Christ at face value.

A. The Legend Theory

For hundreds of years, nobody claimed that the resurrection was merely a legend. However, by the middle of the nineteenth century, the legend theory became the predominant explanation by critics for the events and circumstances surrounding the rise of early Christianity. This theory holds that the stories of the empty tomb and resurrection were merely legends created by early followers of Christ to perpetuate a faith based on a miracle that had no historical basis.

The facts surrounding the resurrection are not the stuff of which legends are made. Recent discoveries concerning the dating of the Gospels show that there was not sufficient time following the death of Christ for this type of legend to develop. The Gospel of Mark is generally considered to be the earliest Gospel. Most scholars date that gospel account at approximately 37 AD, just a few short years after the resurrection. Serious scholars of history do not believe that elaborate legends develop in such a short

period of time. It would have been without historical precedent for a legend of this alleged magnitude to have grown up that quickly and be able to significantly distort the Gospels in such a short span of time.

Other early accounts from the church confirm that the empty tomb and resurrection tradition existed virtually concurrent with the death of Christ. One of the earliest Pauline epistles contains a creed recited by the early Christian church: *“For what I received I passed on to you as first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that He was raised on the third day and according to the Scriptures, He lives.”* 1 Cor. 15:3-7. Paul probably received this tradition no later than his visit to Jerusalem in AD 36 (see Galatians 1:18) or perhaps even earlier in Damascus. In any event, this tradition can be dated to within the first five years after the death of Christ. As with the account from the Gospel of Mark, it is too near in time for significant legendary development. On the contrary, the time span necessary for the development of legendary accounts would take us to the second century AD, the precise time of the writing of the legendary apocryphal books, not the eyewitness accounts of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.¹⁸

Further, the claims surrounding the resurrection do not have a legendary ring to them. Compare Mark’s account to a book entitled The Gospel of Peter, which was, in fact, a forgery written around AD 125. Mark’s account is simplistic and straightforward. It is not flattering to the supposed originators of the legend—the disciples. Moreover, the Gospel account contains details that would not be included in any legendary account. For example, the Gospels recite that Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. But the Sanhedrin was a group of the Mosaic court composed of 70 leading men of Judaism who presided in Jerusalem. Why would early Christians invent a story and give credit for an honorable burial of Christ by a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin that spearheaded the persecution of the early Christians? Why would those same Christians not only give credit to a member of the Sanhedrin but also provide a particular name? The members of the Sanhedrin were well known, which would make it impossible to name a fictitious member of that court or to spread a false story about one of the actual members being responsible for an honorable burial of Christ. Furthermore, as stated previously, why would the early Christians claim that the empty tomb was first discovered by women when they knew that no valid testimony could be given by women according to the laws and traditions of Jewish culture at that time?

Most importantly, how could a mere legend galvanize and transform the disciples and early Christians? If one dismisses the resurrection as merely legend, then he must also dismiss as legend the historical evidence that the disciples and early Christians who claimed to have seen the resurrected Christ died as martyrs for the cause.

By its very nature, a legend develops decades or centuries after a historical event and expands the historical event beyond any resemblance to the actual facts. But in the case of the resurrection, the documentation of the historical fact took place just a few short years after the event itself and at a time when hundreds of persons were living who could attest to the accuracy of the story or in the alternative attack the story as legend. The claim that the resurrection story is a legend did not itself develop for centuries; those living at the time of Christ’s death worked from a common assumption that the tomb was

¹⁸ Interview with William Lane Craig, printed in The Case for Christ, Lee Strobel (Zondervan, 1998).

empty. The legend theory is worse than legend. It is the creation of critics who lived hundreds of years after the resurrection of Christ who are determined to ignore the historical and documentary evidence from the New Testament era.

Thousands of years after the death of Christ, the resurrection still has the power to transform lives just as it did for those earliest disciples and Christian martyrs who walked with, talked with, and touched the “legendary” resurrected Christ.

B. The Conspiracy Theory

Unlike the legend theory, the conspiracy theory is as old as the resurrection itself. Even the Gospels record the beginnings of the conspiracy theory as the Roman soldiers were bribed to claim that the disciples stole the body while the soldiers slept. Matthew 28:11-15. This theory was a favorite of the Deists during the eighteenth century but has today largely fallen out of favor with serious New Testament scholars. And with good reason.

On the one hand, it gives the disciples too much credit and on the other hand it gives them too little. It assumes that this vagabond group of tax collectors, fishers, and ordinary men could perpetuate the greatest fraud and hoax in world history. By what power did these unlearned disciples become so eloquent as to persuade thousands and eventually millions to become fooled by this fraud? By what elaborate scheme and powerful force were they able to overcome the Roman guards who so carefully watched the tomb upon penalty of death? By whose power did they perform the miracles recorded in the book of Acts? The conspiracy theory requires the disciples to be incredibly persuasive and powerful men of deceit, fraud, hypocrisy, cunning and eloquence. Nothing about the history of these men prior to the resurrection of Christ suggests that they had these capabilities.

But the real flaw of the conspiracy theory is that it gives the disciples too little credit for the sincerity, bravery and courage of their actions following the resurrection of Christ. These were men who died gruesome deaths because they would not renounce their faith in a risen Lord. These were men who staked everything they had—including their lives—on the claim that Christ had risen. Persons conspire to protect their lives but not so that they might lose their lives. Each one of the disciples found something worth dying for. That something could not possibly have been a self-perpetuated conspiracy. Evil men conspire. And evil men conspire for evil motives. But noble men die rather than renounce a noble cause. What did the disciples gain by this elaborate conspiracy other than their own noble deaths? The conspiracy theory raises more questions than it answers and requires a view of the disciples as suicidal super-schemers, which is contrary to every known historical fact about them.

C. The Swoon Theory

Like a bad dream, the swoon theory as an alternative for the historical resurrection of Christ defies reality but will not go away. This theory was championed by H. E. G. Paulus as early as 1828 when he argued that the spear thrust into the side of Jesus missed the heart and only pierced a vein. Paulus contended that Christ never really died on the cross but was revived in the empty tomb and then appeared to His disciples. According to Paulus, Christ eventually died from His wounds after forty days and His body was never found. Other skeptics from the nineteenth century, including Karl Bahrdt, and Karl Venturini, likewise argued that the post-crucifixion revival of Christ was not miraculous but merely a fortuitous resuscitation. This theme, or variations on this theme, continue to

crop up in modern literature even as the assumptions underlying the theme are laid bare by the verifiable facts of the resurrection as opposed to the hypothetical facts that appear nowhere except in the writing of swoon theorists.

In 1965, Hugh Schoenfield authored The Passover Plot, in which he theorized that Christ purposefully attempted to fulfill Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah and attempted to falsify His death on the cross. According to Schoenfield, this plot was thwarted when the Roman soldier thrust the spear into the side of Christ. However, Joseph of Arimathea thereafter secreted away the body and created the appearance that the tomb was empty. An unknown man was later mistaken for Christ on several appearances that led the disciples to believe that Christ had indeed been raised from the dead.

A similar theme was advanced by Donovan Joyce in his book The Jesus Scroll and again in 1992 by Barbara Thiering in her book Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The problem with these theorists lies not in the creativity of their fertile minds but in their failure to reconcile the swoon theory with two irrefutable facts of the crucifixion and the post resurrection appearances. Fact number one: Christ died, He did not merely swoon. Fact number two: In His post resurrection appearances, Christ did not act or look like a man who had recently knocked on death's door and barely survived.

1. Christ died, He did not merely swoon.

The swoon theorists accept part of the Gospel accounts but reject the miraculous resurrection of Christ. In doing so, they substitute one miracle for another. While denying the miraculous resurrection, they assume that Christ miraculously survived the most lethal killing mechanism the Roman Empire had to offer.

The Gospels record that Christ suffered 39 lashes with a cat-of-nine-tails. Dr. Alexander Metherell, a distinguished scholar with medical and scientific credentials who has extensively studied the crucifixion, described it this way:

“Roman floggings were known to be terribly brutal. They usually consisted of 39 lashes but frequently were a lot more than that, depending on the mood of the soldier applying the blows.

The soldier would use a whip of braided leather thongs with metal balls woven into them. When the whip would strike the flesh, these balls would cause deeper bruises or contusions, which would break open with further blows. And the whip had pieces of sharp bone as well, which would cut the flesh severely.

The back would be so shredded that part of the spine was sometimes exposed by the deep, deep cuts. The whipping would have gone all the way from the shoulders down to the back, the buttocks, and the back of the legs...

One physician who has studied Roman beatings said, ‘As the flogging continued, the lacerations would tear into the underlying skeletal muscles and produce quivering ribbons of bleeding flesh.’ A third-century historian by the name of Eusebius described a flogging by saying, ‘The sufferer’s veins were laid bare, and the very muscles, sinews, and bowels of the victim were open to exposure.’

Because of the terrible effects of this beating, there is no question that Jesus was already in serious to critical condition even before the nails were driven through His hands and feet.”¹⁹

This brutal treatment was followed by the ultimate Roman punishment: death by crucifixion. Five-to-seven inch spikes were used to nail the victim to the cross through the wrists and through the feet. The spikes going through the wrist would impact the median nerve and cause unbearable pain. Because the pain was indescribable in the language of the day, the Romans invented a new word—excruciating—which literally means “out of the cross.”

As Christ suffered in this excruciating agony, He died a slow death by asphyxiation. Listen again as Dr. Metherell describes the crucifixion process:

“The stresses on the muscles and diaphragm put the chest into the inhaled position; basically, in order to exhale the individual must push up on his feet so the tension on the muscles would be eased for a moment. In doing so, the nail would tear through the foot, eventually locking up against the bones.

After managing to exhale, the person would then be able to relax down and take another breath. Again, he would have to push himself up to exhale, scraping his bloodied back against the coarse wood of the cross. This would go on and on until complete exhaustion would take over, and the person wouldn’t be able to push up and breathe any more....

Even before he died—and this is important, too—the hypovolemic shock would have caused a sustained rapid heart rate that would have contributed to heart failure, resulting in the collection of fluid in the membrane around the heart called a pericardial effusion, as well as around the lungs, which is called a pleural effusion.

When the Roman soldier came around and, being fairly certain that Jesus was dead, confirmed it by thrusting a spear into His right side, the spear apparently went through the right lung and into the heart, so when the spear was pulled out, some fluid—the pericardial effusion and the pleural effusion—came out. This would have the appearance of clear fluid, like water, followed by a large volume of blood, as the eyewitness John described in his gospel.”²⁰

At this point, there is no doubt that Christ was dead. The Romans were gruesomely efficient about the “art” of execution. No man survived the crucifixion.

2. The Post Resurrection Appearances and Actions of Christ Disprove the Swoon Theory.

The swoon theory attempts to remove only the miracle of the resurrection from the Gospel accounts and then reconcile the other historical fact recorded in the Gospels. But this approach leaves the eyewitness accounts of the post resurrection appearances of Christ and exposes the swoon theory for the nonsense that it is.

How could a half-dead Christ, restored by the cool dampness of the tomb, rise up and remove the linen grave cloths (which had been immersed in 70 pounds of spices) from His body? How could He have pushed away the two-ton rock that guarded the entrance to the tomb and overcome the Roman guards, all while in a state of near death?

¹⁹ Lee Strobel, The Case for Christ, (Zondervan: 1998.), p. 195-196.

²⁰ Id., p. 199.

When He appeared to the disciples, how did Christ walk through walls with His earthly body? And to top it all off, how did He recover so quickly and develop such incredible strength that within forty days He could jump into the clouds and fake the ascension?

Until those who dreamed up the swoon theory can answer these questions, they cannot be taken seriously. The Gospel accounts must be accepted in their totality. Any attempt to reconcile these accounts with a Savior who cheated death by swooning rather than beating death by resurrecting must be rejected.

D. The Wrong Tomb Theory

There are those who argue that the mystery of the resurrection can be explained by the simple fact that the women who discovered the empty tomb simply got lost. According to Kirsopp Lake, who first espoused this theory in 1907, the caretaker in the garden told the women that Jesus of Nazareth was not in the tomb because they were looking in the wrong tomb. Lake said that the women then ran away and later took the disciples to the wrong tomb as well.

We must suspend logic, common sense, and all that we know about human nature to believe the wrong tomb theory. The women certainly knew where Christ had been buried. Even if they did not, the authorities did and assigned a Roman guard to protect the tomb. How did Christianity start in Jerusalem and shake the foundations of the civilized world if its founder was in fact buried only a few miles up the road in a tomb location known to the Roman authorities? And what about the post resurrection appearances of Christ as reported by the same Gospels that carried the account of the women visiting the tomb? And perhaps most importantly, like all other alternative theories of the resurrection of Christ, the seminal question remains unanswered: What transformed the lives of the disciples from inconsistent and timid followers who denied their leader at the time of His greatest need to the bold and courageous leaders whose unflinching martyrdom ignited a religious movement that swept the world?

The wrong tomb theory provides a distorted explanation for why a few women found an empty tomb but provides no explanation for why hundreds of eyewitnesses saw a resurrected Christ or why millions of lives have been transformed by a resurrected Savior.

The wrong tomb theory is simply wrong.

III. Conclusion

The physical resurrection of Christ is the cornerstone of Christianity. Because it can be proven as historical fact, it is a cornerstone that can bear that weight. No other religion claims a risen savior, much less backs up such a claim as historical fact.

Any search for religious truth must come to terms with the empty tomb. If Christ conquered death, just as He predicted He would, then there is no reason to doubt His claim that He gives fullness of life to those who believe. If the resurrection is a fraud, then all of Christianity is a cruel hoax. A dead savior has no power to give new life to those who believe.

Because of its importance, the resurrection has been subjected to more scrutiny, analysis and dissection than any other historical event. But at the end of the day, the resurrection not only survives that analysis, but frequently wins over its critics and transforms lives in the process. It is this transformational power, rather than its historical veracity, which testifies most eloquently to the fact and power of the risen Christ. Because the tomb is empty, our lives are not. Because death was defeated, we are not.

Because the tomb could not hold Him, we are free. The resurrection is an important historical fact. More importantly, it is also a life-changing present reality.

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