

Dead Men Tell No Tales

Investigating the Truth of the Resurrection of Jesus

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The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a heavily debated topic within both the academic community and some areas of Christendom. As Nash says, „it has become fashionable to attempt to explain away the miracle of Christ’s resurrection.” The resurrection is the capstone of the Christian faith; as such, the importance for its veracity cannot be overstated in a quest for historical validation. Though there are numerous critics who would argue against this truth, there is ample historical evidence to prove the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Regardless of one’s philosophical considerations, the key to determining the historical veracity of the resurrection lies in the approach to evaluating the Bible. It contains accurate, factual data that can be utilized as legitimate historical record. As Habermas and Licona state, „The point is not that we must avoid using the New Testament when considering Jesus’ resurrection. Rather, we simply must approach the New Testament as we would any other book in antiquity.” Treating the Bible—and New Testament accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, specifically—as historical data, sans an evaluation of inspiration or spiritual origin will allow the historicity of the resurrection to be deemed accurate.

Arguments and Objections

There are a few arguments against the resurrection that bear importance in exploring, as well as addressing, in order to provide proper context.

Horizons

There exists among any researcher, historian, student—human being—preconceived ideas or notions that can skew the explorative process. If one believes that rain simply does not exist, the ensuing research can be as broad and exhaustive as possible, delving into meteoric mysteries of all sorts, attempting to explain the complexities of the hydrologic cycle. There will come a point, however, when the evaporation of water, stored in ominous grey clouds in the sky will fill the horizon, will predicate a storm. At this point, the researcher has two options: 1) continue to deny the obvious, even in the face of overwhelming evidence (the spattering of rain on one's head); 2) accept that there are certain realities that, though the acceptance of seems counterintuitive or borderline foolish, must be explored, evaluated, and possibly embraced.

Michael R. Licona, in his exhaustive text »The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach«, labels these preconceived ideas as „horizons ... reconstructions of the past are inevitably informed by their various existential interests and purposes; hence the multiplicity of their perspectives of the past... They cannot look at the data devoid of biases, hopes or inclinations. No historian is exempt.” The horizon of the historian or researcher will produce biased results, no matter how diligent the attempt to remain objective in a subjective research process. Therefore, it is important to understand that these circumstances do exist, lest the researcher become slanted towards data that is favored, if not necessarily factual.

Naturalism

A proponent for the argument of Naturalism will assert that everything within the world is essentially in a self-contained, self-sustaining box. Nothing exists outside of this box, which can be labeled the „natural order”. Dr. Ronald Nash, in his essay »Miracles and Conceptual Systems«, quotes philosopher William Halverson as saying „In principle ... everything that occurs is ultimately explicable in terms of the properties and relations of the particles of which matter is composed.”

The most obvious question pertaining to this theory can be summarized as follows: If the „natural order” of things is self-contained—and nothing exists outside of this box—then how did the box come to be? This question alone presents myriad difficulties for the would-be naturalist, demanding an answer to the quandary of the „box”.

A further inspection of Halverson's earlier quote reveals another perplexing statement: „The world is ... like a gigantic machine whose parts are so numerous and whose processes are so complex that we have thus far been able to achieve only a very partial and fragmentary understanding of how it works.” A self-contained system that is so vast it cannot be fathomed (let alone properly explained) ought not to be limited to what can or cannot exist outside of its own proposed framework. An ever-expanding universe (by way of discovery) displays the truth of this „gigantic machine” whose limits are, as yet, unable to be

determined; if the outer fringes are continuously expanding as new territory is being discovered, where does the limitation become imposed for the potential of a Creator?

Implausibility

One of the most famous rebuttals against the plausibility of the resurrection is David Hume's »Of Miracles«. In his essay, he argues that „a miracle is a violation against the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.”

Hume deems the existence of the laws of nature and the correlating experience of such laws as an undeniable objection that a miracle should ever occur, lest it violate these natural laws. As is the case with any naturalistic argument, Hume argues that such a violation is so improbable to occur, that it cannot be the case. He will weigh the events in question—such as the claim of a man resurrected from the grave—and proceed with the following logic: „I weigh the one miracle against the other ... and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.” For Hume, the likelihood that such a testimony is false is the greater probability, and so acceptance of such a miracle is rejected.

A Strong Defense

In direct juxtaposition to these objections, the following arguments can be offered as substantive evidence for the historicity of the resurrection.

The Bare Minimal

Renowned Bible scholar Dr. Gary Habermas—considered one of the foremost authorities on the resurrection of Jesus—contends that when approaching the argument of the historicity of the resurrection, there are certain minimal facts that must be observed. These minimal facts are „a number of known historical facts from this time period ... facts that are accepted as historical by virtually all scholars who research this area, regardless of the many differences in thought.”

Habermas lists twelve specific minimal facts, later paring down the list to six (which will be presented here). On the basis of the items, one can construct a logical argument for the historicity of the resurrection of Christ.

Jesus died by Roman crucifixion: Jesus, at the demand of His own people, and by the order of Pontius Pilate, was sentenced to death on the cross. Historical records, such as the account of Justin Martyr in his work »First Apology«, give testament to the reality of this sentence to death.

Jesus's disciples had experiences that they genuinely believed were of the resurrected Jesus: That the disciples of Jesus believed they had encountered Him, after He had died, cannot be argued to the contrary. Additionally, Habermas points out that „such arguments account for the critical recognition of Jesus' death and the disciples' experiences as perhaps the two most widely accepted facts of the New Testament.”

Jesus' disciples experienced a transformation, one so radical as being willing to embrace death for the Gospel: The entirety of the New Testament has one focus: Jesus Christ, and His death, resurrection, and message of eternal salvation. Habermas states that „prior to Jesus's death, they abandoned him and went into hiding. But seeing Jesus again thoroughly modified the rest of their lives, making them willing to die for their message.” The most powerful story an individual can share is their own—a transformed life is not easily explained but by impressive circumstances.

The apostolic proclamation of the resurrection began very early, when the church was in its infancy: Habermas illustrates that early accounts of the resurrection are not only a benefit, but exceedingly rare. „The resurrection was proclaimed at a very early date ... while having two sources even a century after an ancient report is often a luxury, we have independent sources perhaps a mere five years after the crucifixion!”

James, the brother of Jesus, was converted from his skepticism due to an interaction with what he believed to be the resurrected Christ: The conversion of one as close to the Lord who was once a skeptic bears examination. „Given his previous skepticism, the appearance to James is significant.”

Saul of Tarsus, a major enemy of the church, became a Christian due to a believed experience with the resurrected Jesus: Perhaps the most significant testimony of them all is that of the „Jew of Jews”, a declared enemy and murderer of Christians throughout the infancy of the early church. The testimony of Paul—who would spend the remainder of his life (even unto death) proclaiming the truth of the Gospel—is one to be considered with heavy weight.

Dr. Habermas, in explaining the nature of these brief defenses, asserts that „these six historical facts are capable of dismissing each of the naturalistic hypotheses, as well as furnishing the most convincing evidences for Jesus' resurrection.”

Burden of Proof

Another major area of consideration when evaluating the historicity of the resurrection deals with the burden of proof. One question that the historian (or virtually anyone willing to conduct a systematic investigation of truth) must ask deals with the degree of attestation. In other words, one can inquire „if this is true—how can it be verified?” With regards to the resurrection, there certainly are no photographs, video footage, living survivors of the time period, etc. However, it is worth noting that no such pictorial record of anything exists (or none that has been seen to date) prior to 1825. This does not mean, of course, that we have no

way of knowing what occurred—it simply elicits the need for more of a quantitative approach to the evaluation of existing material.

Habermas and Licona put it this way: „Plenty of events occurred in the distant or even recent past for which we have little or no data. Lack of attestation does not mean that the event did not occur, only that we have difficulty verifying it from an objective historical perspective.” Where limited data is available, the focus begins to center on the veracity of what is procurable; establishing a track record of reliability then becomes paramount to the investigation.

Anything beyond living memory—and much of that is entirely subjective as well—must be regarded as that which is unable to be verified completely. In fact, Habermas and Licona point out that „when it comes to history, we can only speak of what is probability, not 100 percent certainty.” The authors illustrate two significant concepts with respect to worldviews:

All worldviews share the same challenge—Whether an atheist, Mormon, Hindu or Christian, not one faith system can be represented with 100 percent or absolute certainty.

Outside of worldviews, nothing else can be verified as 100 percent absolute—the authors pose a challenging question: how can any one person know that the entire human race was not simply created five minutes ago, with alleged memories of the past planted inside their brains? This point is not made to be obstinate dismissive, but rather to establish that there is a large degree of uncertainty in life, which must, ultimately, be taken as it appears to be.

The goal of systematic, responsible historical investigation, therefore, must be to establish that which can have reasonably occurred. „A finding of historicity is essentially a default position, meaning that we have no other reasonable way to account for the presence of a story in the text.” Why is a certain story recorded in the text? On the basis of historical inquiry, it is most likely recorded because no plausible explanation can be found to the contrary. What then of other purported miracles (such as the resurrection) that are found in the annals of other religions? To answer this question, one must turn to the accounts of those who witnessed and recorded these happenings.

Eyewitness Accounts

As mentioned previously with regards to minimal facts evidence, the disciples of Jesus had encounters with what they believed to be the risen Jesus, and their lives were markedly different as a result. This, then, is the key: they were not simply the same men and women, after encountering the resurrected Christ, as they were prior to His death. An excellent case study for this argument can be made for the transformation in the character of Peter, who was one of Jesus’ closest disciples, and something of a failure while Jesus was still living. Peter was referred to as Satan, and a stumbling block, in the Gospel of Matthew (16:23); after three years of close mentorship, he denied knowing Jesus—or even having association with Him—just as Jesus foretold (26:69-75).

In a relatively short amount of time later (less than two months, effectively), Peter is seen preaching to the other believers in the first chapter of the book of

Acts—before the Holy Spirit came upon him at Pentecost. After Pentecost, just one chapter (and a few days) later, Peter preaches with power, passion, and conviction, seeing the salvation of 3,000 in one day (Acts 2:41). Peter, who is considered the first leader of the early Church, penned accounts in the New Testament that bear witness to his transformation, demonstrating a boldness and decisive witness for the Gospel not previously recorded in Scripture.

Do You See What I See?

How can one be sure of the veracity of these eyewitness accounts? How can one be certain the alleged resurrection was not an elaborate hoax of sorts, or perhaps a massive confusion? Some have proposed that the resurrection itself can be explained simply: the alleged interactions with a crucified man were nothing more than hallucinations. Jesus wasn't really there, and those who desperately missed their religious leader—now deposed—suffered from hallucinogenic fantasies. To this end, William Lane Craig offers the following: „not just one person but many saw Christ appear ... they saw him not individually, but together ... not just once, but several times ... the religious enthusiasm hypothesis [hallucinations] fails to explain the nonproduction of the body. It would have been impossible for Jesus' to have believed in their master's resurrection if His corpse still lay in the tomb.” That Jesus' body no longer lay in the tomb into which it was interred after His death presents an issue for this idea.

A Powerful Story

It is often said that the greatest testimony one can give is their own. A changed life, especially noted by those of close association, holds more weight of truth than any academic text. A man or woman changed by what they believe to be true will hold the greatest sway of opinion amongst those they wish to influence. Desilva frames the transformation of individuals such as Peter, Paul, and others in this way: „The eyewitnesses who remembered the events of the history of Jesus were remembering inherently very memorable events ... landmark or life-changing events for them in many cases, and their memories would have been reinforced and stabilized by frequent rehearsal, beginning soon after the event...We may conclude that the memories of eyewitnesses of the history of Jesus score highly by the criteria for likely reliability that have been established by the psychological study of recollective memory.”

Conclusion

The resurrection of Christ holds significant import in the lives of Christian believers, worldwide. It is the chief measurement for the testimony of Jesus, who claimed to be both God and Savior for mankind. His death, burial, and

resurrection were foretold in the Old Testament, and more importantly, by Himself. Historical record shows two very important facts pertaining to the resurrection: first, that Jesus did in fact die. Second, He was also seen again. While historicity does not demand absolute certainty—only probable plausibility—there is ample evidence to show that the resurrection accounts are true. These historical records afford much more than a glimpse into the past; it provides a window into the throne room of Heaven, where those who have ultimately experienced the absolute certainty of Christ's promises await those who are still on the journey.

