

## The Resurrection of Jesus

“And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.” — 1 Corinthians 15:17

Unlike many religions throughout history, the Christian faith is one that claims to be grounded in real, historical events. Christian faith is a faith grounded in history. Without the literal, bodily, historical resurrection of Jesus from the grave, there is no Christianity. The statement above from the apostle Paul makes this clear.

Just prior to making this statement, however, Paul declared that Christ *has been raised* and that this fact is central to the gospel-message of Christianity.

Now I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, the gospel I preached to you, which you received, on which you have taken your stand and by which you are being saved, if you hold to the message I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. Then he appeared to over five hundred brothers and sisters at one time; most of them are still alive, but some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one born at the wrong time, he also appeared to me. — 1 Corinthians 15:1–8

Scholars are almost unanimous in dating the writing of 1 Corinthians to between 53–55 AD, which means that within about twenty years of Jesus’ ministry, the apostle Paul was declaring the historical resurrection of Jesus from the grave. Moreover, Paul was declaring that Jesus “appeared” to numerous people, even “over five hundred brothers and sisters at one time.”

These are very interesting claims, but the question we want to ask here is: *are they true?* Is there any *historical* reason to believe that Jesus did in fact live, die, *and* rise again? Is there any historical evidence for the notion that Jesus may have appeared to people after he died? All of this would in fact be miraculous evidence of supernatural activity in history, but could this be where the evidence leads?

In this article, we’re going to explore some of the common reasons why people reject the claim that Jesus rose from the dead and then consider a positive case for believing that Jesus rose from the dead.

### Was Jesus a Copycat?

One common reason for objecting to the historical resurrection of Jesus is the claim that Jesus is just a copycat savior. The argument goes like this: long before Christianity was around, there were various pagan religions who worshiped some kind of dying and rising savior. The New Testament writers simply borrowed these stories to describe Jesus and establish a new religion.

For example, take a look at this impressive list of attributes ascribed to one of the ancient Persian mystery religions:

- Born of a Virgin
- Born in a cave
- Traveling teacher
- Had 12 disciples
- Sacrificed himself
- Rose from the grave

At first glance, any normal person would say these descriptions match well with the historical description of Jesus. But in fact, this is the description of the ancient Persian god, Mithras who lived around 1200 B.C. Mithras is just one example of several that could be mentioned who all shared almost identical features to the story we know as the historical gospel message of Jesus and Christianity.

Proponents of this argument advocate that the writers of the New Testament copied and pasted these descriptions to Jesus, creating their own version of a legendary myth-religion. The end result is a Jesus that is not unique, not authentic, and not the Lord of our lives. In his book, *The Pagan Christ*, Tom Harpur makes this point very clear when he says:

There is nothing the Jesus of the Gospels either said or did... that cannot be shown to have originated thousands of years before, in Egyptian Mystery rites and other sacred liturgies...Not one single doctrine, rite, tenet, or usage in Christianity was in reality a fresh contribution to the world...The Church converted a whole mass of romantic legends or myths into so-called history, a multiplication of "fictitious stories." What emerged was in many ways a cult of ignorance.<sup>1</sup>

If Harpur is correct, then Christians may as well stop gathering on Sunday to worship Jesus. Instead, we ought to turn our attention to other matters, find someone else to worship, and be on our way. As the apostle Paul said, "If the dead are not raised, then 'let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'" (1 Corinthians 15:32).

But before we jump to conclusions, let's just ask any honest question: is this even true? Is it even true that these ancient mystery religions hold any parallel to the Jesus of Christianity? Contrary to Harpur and many bloggers on the Internet, virtually no serious scholar takes this position seriously. For Harpur and others, it would be important for us to ask: *where did you get this information?*

When this question is asked, it becomes very clear that the emperor has no clothes. The truth of the matter is that every description popularly ascribed to these ancient mystery gods has *zero* historical evidence to support it. These arguments are often based on *assertion*, not *evidence*.

For example, when you look at the actual evidence we have for Mithras, what you discover is the descriptions aren't so similar. For example, what was really said about Mithras is that he:

- Was born out of a rock (*not a virgin*).
- He didn't have 12 disciples.
- He didn't sacrifice himself, but he may have sacrificed a bull.
- We don't know anything about his death (*there was no resurrection*).<sup>2</sup>

As you can see, the historical evidence doesn't demonstrate anything close to a parallel between Mithras and Jesus. Why then is this thesis so popular? Philosopher Ronald Nash helps us understand:

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ* (New York: Walker and Company 2004), 10.

<sup>2</sup> J. Warner Wallace, "Is Jesus Simply A Retelling of Mithras Mythology?" *Cold Case Christianity Website*, May 5, 2014, accessed October 15, 2016 <http://coldcasechristianity.com/2014/is-jesus-simply-a-retelling-of-the-mithras-mythology/>

During a period of time running roughly from about 1890 to 1940, scholars often alleged that primitive Christianity had been heavily influenced by...pagan mystery religions...[However], largely as a result of a series of scholarly books and articles written in rebuttal, allegations of early Christianity's dependence on its Hellenistic environment began to appear much less frequently in the publications of [various scholars]. Today most Bible scholars regard the question as a dead issue.<sup>3</sup>

One reason why we're seeing this argument circulating in popular internet blogs, videos, etc. is because it gained some traction at one time in academia, but has made its way into popular culture. Even though this argument was dealt with long ago in the hallways of scholarship, the refutations have taken a long time to become main steam in our culture. This is not too surprising, given that it often takes a few decades for matters of academic dispute to reach its way to popular circles.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, it is sad that those who promote this argument don't take the time to investigate the credible responses made to it. In his book, *The Gospel and Greeks*, Nash looks at each potential parallel with ancient pagan religions to see if they truly compare to the Jesus of Christianity. The end result is that these mystery religions aren't even in the same category as New Testament Christianity.

Nash's book is only one example of books written to demonstrate the historical Jesus<sup>5</sup>, but the point is simple: there is simply no historical evidence that connects Jesus and pagan mystery religions with each other. Even the atheist New Testament scholar, Bart Ehrman acknowledges this when he says, "...the claim that Jesus was simply made up falters on every ground. The alleged parallels between Jesus and the "pagan" savior-gods in most instances reside in the modern imagination."<sup>6</sup>

### **A Resurrection? Really?**

With that issue aside, we still must answer the question: is there any *positive* evidence for the resurrection of Jesus? To answer that question, we must further ask: what can we know about the events surrounding the rise of the early church?

In search of an answer, many scholars have utilized what they call a "minimal facts" argument.<sup>7</sup> The essence of this argument is that we can know with a high degree of certainty a *bare minimum* of facts surrounding the rise of the early church. These facts are agreed upon by both skeptical and believing New Testament scholars, as well as many ancient historians. While the skeptical scholars don't believe a resurrection happened, they still believe in these facts.

This argument is helpful because it establishes a common ground that both believers and non-believers can agree on. The question now becomes: what's the best explanation of the facts? Since we're all looking at the same information, what's the best conclusion we can draw? Here are four of those facts:

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<sup>3</sup> Ronald Nash, *The Gospel and the Greeks* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2003), 1.

<sup>4</sup> William Lane Craig, "In Intellectual Neutral," in William Lane Craig and Paul Copan, ed., *Passionate Conviction* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman and Holman, 2007) 2–16 accessed online on October 14, 2016 <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/apologetics-ministry-advice-to-christian-apologists>

<sup>5</sup> See Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007) and Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1996)

<sup>6</sup> Bart Ehrman, "Did Jesus Exist?" *The Huffington Post*, March 20, 2012, accessed October 17, 2016 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bart-d-ehrman/did-jesus-exist\\_b\\_1349544.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bart-d-ehrman/did-jesus-exist_b_1349544.html)

<sup>7</sup> See for example, Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004), 43–77 and William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 361–370.

1. After his crucifixion, Jesus' empty tomb was discovered by a group of his women followers.
2. After his crucifixion, various people reported appearances of Jesus.
3. The earliest followers of Jesus (a.k.a. the disciples) sincerely came to believe that God raised Jesus from the dead.
4. Saul of Tarsus converted to Christianity and became the apostle Paul.

Again, these facts are just four of the minimal facts (there's about 12 in total) that many scholars—believing and non-believing—say we can conclude with a high degree of historical certainty. The question is, what is the best explanation of these facts?

Over the years, much has been written to explain these facts apart from appealing to supernatural intervention of any kind. We'll examine two of them.

#### Counter Claim #1: The Disciples Lied About the Resurrection

Let's consider this scenario for moment: the disciples have just witnessed their leader crucified at the hands of the Romans. They run away and hide in fear, afraid that the Jews or the Romans might come for them next (see Matthew 26:56; Mark 14:15; John 20:19). But then one of the disciples—probably Peter—gets the bright idea to do something stupid and confront these people with the very same message that got Jesus killed.

Not only that, but they decide to announce that the physical resurrection of Jesus is clear evidence that God was endorsing Jesus as His unique messenger. By extension, God endorses the very message Jesus proclaimed, which means everyone—Jews and Romans—need to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus' sacrificial death otherwise they fall under the judgment of God (Acts 2:32–41).

In other words, to believe the disciples lied about the resurrection requires us to believe that they fabricated a story for no benefit whatsoever. The disciples knew they had nothing to gain for making up a story—no political power, no financial reward, and no social advantage. Quite the contrary, history shows us that the disciples in fact proclaimed the resurrected Jesus to their deaths. They all died alone, poor, and unpopular.<sup>8</sup>

Fact #3 declares the disciples sincerely came to believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, because historically speaking, scholars agree that *liars make terrible martyrs*. You may go to your death for what you *believe* to be true, but you don't go to your death for what you *know* is a lie. In order to believe the disciples lied about the resurrection, you'd have to believe they went to their deaths for a known lie and that no-one cracked under the pressure of persecution.<sup>9</sup>

This fact alone rules out the possibility that the disciples stole the body in an attempt to fabricate a conspiracy in their favor. William Lane Craig notes:

Critics...have universally recognized, one cannot plausibly deny that the earliest disciples at least sincerely believed that Jesus was risen from the dead, a conviction on which they sated their very lives...The transformation in the lives of the disciples is not credibly explained by the hypothesis of a conspiracy. This shortcoming alone has been enough in the minds of most scholars to sink the old Conspiracy Hypothesis.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Josh and Sean McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017), 360–367.

<sup>9</sup> For additional study on this claim, see Sean McDowell, "Were the Apostles of Jesus Misguided?" *SeanMcDowell.org*, December 8, 2015, accessed April 28 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith* 372.

Moreover, if the disciples were lying about this, then how do you explain the fact that numerous people reported experiences of Jesus after his crucifixion (Fact #2)? Agnostic New Testament Scholar, Gurd Ludeman even notes that:

It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ."<sup>11</sup> Norman Perin, who was a New Testament scholar at the University of Chicago, once noted, "The more we study the tradition with regard to the appearances, the firmer the rock begins to appear upon which they are based."<sup>12</sup>

If the disciples stole the body, then it is hard to explain why people sincerely believed they experienced a walking, talking, resurrected Jesus. For all these reasons, it seems like we should put to rest any notion that the disciples lied about the Resurrection. As Fact #3 declares, the better explanation is that they sincerely came to believe that God raised Jesus from the dead.

#### Counter Claim #2: The Disciples Experienced Grief-Hallucinations of Jesus

This is often labeled *the hallucination theory* and is one of the more prominent counter-theories in existence today. The problems with this theory are many, but let's observe just two:

First, while this theory might explain the motivation of the *disciples* to die for their belief, it would not explain the rise of early Christianity in the city in which Jesus was killed. William Lane Craig drives home the point when he says:

The Gospels were written in such temporal and geographic proximity to the events they record that it would have been almost impossible to fabricate events. Anyone who cared to could have checked out the accuracy of what they reported. The fact that the disciples were able to proclaim the resurrection in Jerusalem in the face of their enemies a few weeks after the crucifixion shows that what they proclaimed was true, for they could never have proclaimed the resurrection under such circumstances had it not occurred.<sup>13</sup>

Think about it: if the disciples experienced a hallucination of Jesus, *then his body would still be in the tomb*. If the Roman or Jewish leaders wanted to prevent the disciples from gaining a following, all they had to do was point to the occupied tomb or parade Jesus' body around the city to demonstrate the lunacy of the disciples' message.

But they didn't. In fact, they acknowledged the tomb was empty by trying to tell people that the disciples stole the body (Matt. 28:11–15). The point is simple: if you have hallucinating disciples, then you have an entombed Jesus. If you have an entombed Jesus, then you don't get thousands of converts in the city he was killed.

Secondly, there is the general problem of hallucinations altogether. Psychologists have noted that hallucinations rarely (if ever) occur among groups of people and when they do, these groups of people never experience the *exact same* hallucination. Dr. Gary Collins, the former president for the National Association of American Psychologists has noted:

Hallucinations are individual occurrences. By their very nature only one person can see any given hallucination at a time. They certainly are not something which can be seen by a group of people. Neither is it possible that one person could somehow induce a

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<sup>11</sup> Gerd Ludemann, *What Really Happened to Jesus?*, trans. John Bowden (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 8.

<sup>12</sup> Norman Perin, *The Resurrection according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 80.

<sup>13</sup> William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 341

hallucination in somebody else. Since hallucinations exist only in the subjective personal sense, it is obvious that others cannot witness it.<sup>14</sup>

In order to believe the disciples and the townspeople in Jerusalem experienced the same hallucination, you'd have to make a blind leap in the dark that goes against the experiential and clinical evidence of hallucinations. In other words, it would take more blind faith to believe the disciples hallucinated a resurrected Jesus than to believe in an *actual* resurrected Jesus. With that in mind, we now turn to our last possible explanation:

### **Maybe they were Right?**

For all these reasons, it seems that counter-theories simply fall short of explaining the four facts listed above. When you examine these alternative explanations, the impression you get is that there are more problems to believing them than there are with believing the historical confession that God raised Jesus from the dead.

Moreover, the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead genuinely explains all four of these facts in the following ways:

- Explanatory Power: the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead better explains each of the four facts individually.
- Explanatory Scope: the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead better explains all of the facts and the surrounding details involved in them.
- Explanatory Simplicity: the claim that God raised Jesus from the dead is not contrived or overly-complex, but explains these four facts without having to conjure up far-fetched scenarios.

In the end, it seems that there is good evidence to believe that Christ has indeed been raised from the dead—as the apostle Paul declared in 1 Corinthians 15. For all this reason, we can have hope that our faith is not grounded in wishful thinking, but in the historical events God brought about in time. Moreover, this gives us confidence to take Jesus at His word when he said:

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me, even if he dies, will live. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” — John 11:25–26

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<sup>14</sup> Gary Collins, quoted in J.P. Moreland and Gary Habermas, *Beyond Death: Exploring the Evidence for Immortality* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 119–120.

## Appendix: Answering the Miracle Objection

What then is the primary reason why scholars today reject the resurrection of Jesus as a valid explanation for the events and after his death?

To put it simply: the resurrection is a miracle and in the eyes of many, this simply cannot be what happened, because we live in an age that only accepts *naturally* provable explanations. The Atheist New Testament scholar, Bart Ehrman articulates this view quite well when he says:

The resurrection claims are claims that not only that Jesus' body came back alive; it came back alive never to die again. That's a violation of what naturally happens, every day, time after time, millions of times a year. What are the chances of that happening? Well, it'd be a miracle...and by definition, a miracle is the least probable occurrence.<sup>15</sup>

While Ehrman is right to point out that by definition a miracle is something that is rare, that doesn't mean that it's not a plausible explanation. Just because something is rare doesn't mean it didn't happen. On this logic, we'd have to rule out a number of events from ever happening—the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, the creation of Avengers: Infinity War, and even the individual birth of a person!

You cannot rule out an explanation simply because its rare. Moreover, when you have a strong body of evidence that testifies to a miraculous event, the most intellectually responsible thing you can do is believe that it occurred without capitulating to your prior biases. As one philosopher has observed:

The likelihood of... a miracle occurring is generally quite low. Yet, if we (1) have good evidence for the existence of a supernatural God who could work a miracle and (2) have a constellation of evidence supporting a miracle claim (as we do with Jesus' resurrection), the likelihood increases considerably.<sup>16</sup>

So, while it is true that many reject the evidence for the Jesus' resurrection, they often do so because of an anti-supernatural bias that leads them to rule out the possibility of miracles from the beginning. It should come as no surprise then that many New Testament scholars rule out the resurrection when they employ this method of research. Their anti-supernatural framework simply will not allow for a miracle.

Yet, the problem remains for them to devise a plausible explanation for the events that occurred after Jesus' crucifixion. Why did the disciples die for their faith? Why were thousands of people converted to belief in a resurrected Christ in the very city he was crucified in? Why did so many people have experiences of the risen Jesus when such experiences defy the boundaries of hallucination?

As we've seen, the best explanation of all the evidence is simply that God raised Jesus from the dead. No other theory accurately explains either the scope or the depth of the facts as the miracle of the resurrection does. Anyone is welcome to reject this conclusion and hold out for the possibility of natural explanation one day, but this would have to be done *in spite* of the evidence we have, not *because* of it.

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<sup>15</sup> Quoting from Barth Ehrman's debate with William Lane Craig, "Is There Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus?" College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts, United States – March 2006, accessed online on October 17, 2016 <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/is-there-historical-evidence-for-the-resurrection-of-jesus-the-craig-ehrman>

<sup>16</sup> Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Nottingham, England: IVP, 2011), 535.

**Additional Resources:**

- *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel
- *Cold Case Christianity* by J. Warner Wallace