

AN EXAMINATION OF JESUS CHRIST'S RESURRECTION AS A HISTORICALLY
VERIFIABLE EVENT

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ABSTRACT

History is arguably the most important area of study. It not only contains every other field of inquiry, but it defines and demonstrates what and who people are. In A.D. 30, historians find a single event which alone is able to do just that: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Is an event like the resurrection really historical? Can we honestly and without presumption declare something as impossible as a resurrection from the dead to be a historical event? This paper, through an examination of the historical discussion concerning the issue, the relevant sources, and the main arguments proposed for either side, suggests that Jesus' resurrection is a true event of history. This paper will demonstrate the limits, use, and importance of such a discussion. It will show how the earliest documents support the resurrection as historical fact and suggest the universal meaning this event has for humanity. Finally, it will investigate the arguments which seek either to prove or disprove the resurrection as a historical fact.

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INTRODUCTION

History defines us. It shows us where we have come from and suggests where we are going. It tells us about the mistakes and successes of those from the past so that those from the present can learn how to live their lives. It shows us what it really means to be human and what reality truly is.

But what happens when we read historical documents which describe phenomena that destroy our contemporary understanding of reality? Especially as scientific discovery and knowledge have grown throughout history, what do we do when history records events that modern scientists cannot explain? Most often, we do not take such accounts seriously and label them stories, myths, and legends. They may contain some lesson, but nothing that would threaten our concept of reality.

The Christian Bible recounts one such event: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This event clashes with almost everything science and reason would conclude about reality and yet many still claim that this event actually took place. Though all of medical science tells us that it is impossible for someone who has died to come back to life, many emphatically defend Jesus' resurrection as a "historically verifiable" event.¹

Why should this resurrection be treated any differently from other accounts which are simply deemed as myths and legends? Professor Gerald O'Collins asserts, "The resurrection... seems to be by far the strongest claim for divine intervention within human history made by any of the great religions."² The resurrection, unlike any other event in history, indicates a very different reality than what we naturally experience. Among all religions and philosophies which attempt to explain the origin of the world, Jesus' resurrection holds a unique place. Christian apologist, Josh McDowell explains, "All but four of the major world religions are based on mere philosophical propositions. Of the four that are based on personalities rather than a philosophical system, only Christianity claims an empty tomb for its founder."³ O'Collins suggests that such a

¹ Ted Cabal, "Defending the resurrection of Jesus: yesterday, today and forever," *The Southern Baptist Journal Of Theology* 18, no. 4 (2014), 116.

² Gerald O'Collins, "Believing in the risen Christ," in *Gottes Zukunft – Zukunft der Welt: FS Jürgen Moltmann*, 68-77 (München: Chr Kaiser Verlag, 1986), 76.

³ Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict Volume I: Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith* (San Bernardino, California: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1986), 180.

proposal morally obligates us to investigate the resurrection.⁴ To ignore Jesus' resurrection and its consequences for us would be the ultimate in depravity. McDowell proposes two alternatives: either the resurrection is the "*most wicked, vicious, heartless hoaxes ever foisted upon the minds of men*, or it is the most fantastic fact of history."⁵

Jesus' resurrection, furthermore, carries with it the entire weight of the Christian religion. As McDowell says, "The resurrection of Jesus Christ and Christianity stand or fall together."⁶ If Jesus' resurrection is not true, then none of the teachings of Christianity can be trusted.

O'Collins' proposed moral obligation has very clear consequences. If Jesus' resurrection actually happened, then no one can ignore what he said. If, however, the resurrection did not happen, then Jesus' words deserve no such hearing.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is integral to the message of Christianity. Professor Wilbur M. Smith asserts, "If you lifted out every passage in which a reference is made to the Resurrection, you would have a collection of writings so mutilated that what remained could not be understood."⁷ Christianity does not even make sense if Jesus was not raised from the dead. Smith explains,

All evidence of the New Testament goes to show that the burden of the good news or gospel was not "Follow this Teacher and do your best," but, "Jesus and the Resurrection." You cannot take that away from Christianity without radically altering its character and destroying its very identity.⁸

The resurrection of Jesus Christ, therefore, is unique among supernatural events written about in the past because of its intimate connection to what Jesus taught. If true, it has very real consequences for people today.

This paper will seek to examine what has been proposed as proof that Jesus' resurrection either happened or did not happen with the goal of determining whether or not it is historically verifiable. To this end, this paper will examine 1) the limits, use, and importance of apologetics, 2) what the Bible has to say about Jesus' resurrection, and 3) the main arguments for and against the historical viability of the event in question.

⁴ O'Collins, 76. (Italics in original.)

⁵ McDowell, 179.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Wilbur M. Smith, *Therefore Stand: Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1965), 369-370.

⁸ Ibid.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This topic is no stranger to scholarly study. A quick search on the internet or in a library catalogue quickly will find numerous sources all delving into the proofs and arguments declaring Jesus' resurrection to be either fact or fiction. Each work may contain any number of issues under the topic. Some attempt to lay out the full history of what scholars have argued over the centuries. Some simply lay out a few powerful points which the authors found particularly convincing. Others contain full testimonials regarding the author's personal investigation of the subject.

This paper found Josh McDowell's *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* to be invaluable. In this book, McDowell attempts to thoroughly cover the subject, and does so primarily with quotations from other sources. His work not only gives a framework for much of the relevant scholarly effort, but also contains a bibliography of seventy-three other sources for further study and research. McDowell's book provides an excellent spring-board for anyone looking into the issue for themselves.

Ted Cabal's article for *the Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, entitled "Defending the resurrection of Jesus: yesterday, today and forever," provided an excellent and more recent examination of the topic. It addressed both historical discussions of the issues and modern scholarly work. Cabal further explains practically the use that knowledge of these points can provide for a Christian specifically in the realm of evangelism.

These three sources, Gijsbert van den Brink's article in *Religion without ulterior motive*, entitled, "Christian faith without arguments? The relevance of reasons for belief in God," Wilbur M. Smith's book, *Therefore Stand: Christian Apologetics*, and N. T. Wright's *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, each offered up excellent research and analysis of the data and scholarship under this topic.

At the risk of spending too much time here, we will finish this section with Gerald O'Collins' article, "Believing in the risen Christ," in *Gottes Zukunft - Zukunft der Welt: FS Jürgen Moltmann*. O'Collins expertly organizes the arguments in favor of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection into six checks, which will be discussed later in this paper.

THE RESURRECTION AND APOLOGETICS

Since this topic falls into the realm of Christian apologetics, this paper will first focus on the limits, use, and importance of attempting to verify the historicity of Jesus' resurrection.

The Limits of Apologetics

In apologetics, the goal is not to convert people. Professor Gijsbert van den Brink asserts, "If we are Christians, this is not because... the historical evidence... compelled us to become a Christian... historical evidence as such can never turn one into a Christian."⁹ He even gives the example of Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide who honestly and sincerely believed that Jesus was raised from the dead, but he was still not a Christian.¹⁰ Clearly, historical evidences do not make people Christians and any such endeavor to do so will fail. Instead, van den Brink explains, "the only reason for Christian faith: the Word of God."¹¹ Only God's Word can convert someone into a Christian; no historical evidence or proof is capable of this feat.

Historian Scot McKnight explains:

As a historian I think I can prove that Jesus died and that he thought his death was atoning. I think I can establish that the tomb was empty and that resurrection is the best explanation for the empty tomb. But one thing the historical method cannot prove is that Jesus died for our sins and was raised for our justification... Faith cannot be completely based on what the historian can prove.¹²

The Christian faith, while rooted in historical events, more importantly is a matter of trusting God's promises to us rather than acknowledging a historical record. No amount of historical proof can do anything to convert a single person to faith in Jesus as their Savior.

The Use of Apologetics

That being said, seeking to establish proofs for Jesus' resurrection does have many uses for Christians, both as encouragement for believers and especially as a tool for evangelism. While we can only ascribe faith in Christ to God as his gift to us, in the words of van den Brink, "Nevertheless, historical considerations are significant, because they express the claim to universal validity which is inherent in the Christian Gospel."¹³ For van den Brink, attempting to

⁹ Gijsbert van den Brink, "Christian faith without arguments? The relevance of reasons for belief in God," in *Religion without ulterior motive*, 101-118 (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2006), 113.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 114.

¹² Cabal, 122.

¹³ Brink, "Christian faith without arguments?" 117.

prove that this event is true is not the goal. In fact, he points out that even if all this work proves nothing in the end, it can still *evoke* in the hearer a desire to know more about God's Word.¹⁴

Professor Ted Cabal explains that he finds proofs of Jesus' resurrection invaluable when he is speaking to people about Jesus. In his words, "When someone says 'no' to the gospel, I want to address whatever ideas and opinions they hold between them and Christ (2 Cor 10:5). I want the unbeliever to reconsider."¹⁵ Cabal finds Jesus' resurrection to be a unique issue to bring up with evangelism prospects. He believes it to be a necessary part of such conversations. In his words:

In the case of Jesus and his resurrection, this *must* come up and be discussed if we are having a true gospel conversation. *Unlike any other apologetic issue or strategy, the historical Jesus and his resurrection are non-negotiable issues necessary to be discussed in full-orbed gospel discussions.*¹⁶

By "non-negotiable," Cabal means that Jesus and his resurrection have too much evidence for people to simply ignore. Above, O'Collins explained that Jesus' resurrection seems to be the greatest evidence for God's intervening in human history, which therefore necessitates investigation.¹⁷ Cabal here uses that same line of thought to urge evangelism prospects to consider the message of the gospel.

Van den Brink explains why he believes this appeal to historical proof is so effective. When Christians speak about their faith, they come from the assumption that God exists and that the Bible is truly his Word. Many people will not share these assumptions. Van den Brink explains that if we try to force these assumptions on others, it often will strike them as a "mere assertion... The absoluteness of the assertion is then hard to distinguish from a materially different fanaticism."¹⁸ Leaving people with this impression of Christianity will do little to spread the message of the gospel and can even be harmful toward that end. Van den Brink recommends that this is where the "mediation of *reasoning*" comes in.¹⁹ Coming at the issue from grounds and assumptions on which both sides can agree allows for much more meaningful

¹⁴ Brink, "Christian faith without arguments?" 116.

¹⁵ Cabal, 130.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 131. (Italics in original.)

¹⁷ O'Collins, 76.

¹⁸ Brink, "Christian faith without arguments?" 115.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* (Italics in original.)

conversation. This is why Cabal has found success with this strategy, because he is able to speak from the same shared starting point of historical events, dates, places, and people.

Cabal admits that no two such conversations are the same, but often similar topics come up. For example, in asserting Jesus' authority, Cabal can "point out that Jesus of Nazareth is the only person who ever died and came back to life bodily—never to die again."²⁰ Naturally, such a claim is often questioned. In this case, Cabal says:

When they ask me how I know, I then share some of the basic resurrection scholarship (empty tomb, post-mortem appearances, and changed lives of the disciples). Since these facts are widely accepted by critical scholars today, I ask my friend how they account for these details.²¹

Such a strategy can build interest in hearing what God's Word has to say about Jesus and what he did. In other evangelism opportunities, Cabal explains that he will use what he calls the "experiential approach," which essentially boils down to: "if Christ is really risen from the dead... It means that he is alive today and can be known experientially."²² This line of thought then allows Cabal to speak about his personal experience with his faith, again with the goal of building his hearer's interest in what God's Word says.²³ In spite of the limits of what historical proofs for the resurrection can accomplish, they still have many uses to God's people.

The Importance of Apologetics

More than that, looking for proofs for God's people is important for Christians as well. Van den Brink explains the vital importance of speaking about Jesus' resurrection as a historical event. He writes,

A gospel which cares only for the apostolic proclamation and denies that it either can or should be tested for its historical antecedents, is really only a thinly veiled Gnosticism or Docetism and... will prove ultimately to be no Gospel.²⁴

According to van den Brink, if Christians refuse to look for historical proofs of Christianity, we run the danger of giving the impression that either we are somehow intellectually superior to others or that we do not believe that Jesus truly become a man, i.e., that he only appeared to be a

²⁰ Cabal, 131-132.

²¹ Ibid., 132.

²² Ibid., 128.

²³ Ibid., 129.

²⁴ Gijsbert van den Brink, "How to speak with intellectual and theological decency on the resurrection of Christ: a comparison of Swinburne and Wright," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 4 (2008), 419.

human being. Such beliefs would be disastrous; not only for evangelism, but also for Christianity, as such beliefs run contrary to what God’s Word teaches. Van den Brink’s quote also points to the danger that any false doctrine can lead to: the destruction of the gospel message itself.

Furthermore, evangelism proves impossible in many situations without such examination of the historical proofs. There must be more than simply explaining what our faith is. Van den Brink explains that theologians cannot simply testify to their faith, but they also have to account for it in “more generally accessible ways. If they refuse this task, the discussion with others breaks down as soon as it becomes clear that these others do not feel themselves; touched in the most profound way by the appeal of Jesus.”²⁵ As Cabal mentioned above, there are many times when people will hear God’s Word and will simply not be moved by it. If Christians witness to their faith, but their listeners do not respond, is it enough for us to simply say, “Well, we tried,” and then move on? As Cabal did in his examples, is it not more loving to reach out in other ways; to try to find out what hindrances stand in the way of the gospel, so that we might take them down and our listener might give the gospel another hearing? Such has been the thought of Christians throughout history. In the words of van den Brink:

Christians of all ages have felt that something more should be said and can be said in such a situation. They pointed to some peculiar facts in nature and history, as well as to certain philosophical arguments, though not suggesting that their faith was *based upon* such considerations.²⁶

While Christians for thousands of years have recognized their faith as a gift from God that comes through his Word, they have also seen benefit in reaching out to the world around them through historical, scientific, and philosophical arguments as a way to introduce others to the faith-giving Word of God.

A Brief Look at the History of the Resurrection in Apologetics

Apologetics, therefore, has played a strong role in Christianity throughout its history. In spite of its limits, Christians have long seen the uses and importance of examining the historical proofs of Jesus’ resurrection. Van den Brink points to 1 Peter 3:15 in order to explain that Christians have long seen defending their faith and “giving the reason for the hope they have” as

²⁵ Brink, “Christian faith without arguments?” 115.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 115-116. (Italics in original.)

an integral part of how they glorify God – and doing so with gentleness and respect.²⁷ Van den Brink, therefore, concludes that it is the very nature of the Christian religion to defend the faith using reasons that those who do not believe might understand, such as historical proofs.²⁸ Christians have long found success in this as well. They attempted to get others to consider the Christian faith as something worth serious thought. For example, some might point to the viability of the Christian faith because it “renders an explanation of the universe and of some strange facts in history... which might be more adequate and problem-solving than any alternatives.”²⁹

Christians, in their earliest apologetic efforts, found a unique importance in Jesus’ resurrection.³⁰ Christians found that every generation had to again defend the assertion of the Apostles’ Creed, “The third day he rose again from the dead.” In Cabal’s words, “for Christian orthodoxy this has always meant that the bodily raising of Jesus is a historical fact—because this was the clear witness of the apostles.”³¹ They used various forms of evidences: “the testimony of authoritative witnesses (Luke 1:2; 2 Pet 1:16)... the original eyewitnesses themselves appealed to publicly accessible historical facts to defend and present the truth of the resurrection (Acts 4:20; 1 Cor 15:3-8; 1 John 1:1-3).”³²

A pagan philosopher, Celsus, wrote against Christianity around the seventies of the second century.³³ According to Cabal, Celsus “wrote the first truly comprehensive challenge against Christianity,” which was called *On the True Doctrine*.³⁴ Before this writing, most of the charges against Christians tended to be “gross misconceptions, such as the well-known equating of the Lord’s Supper with cannibalism.”³⁵ Celsus’ particularly effective attack on Christianity came from two points he made. First, he said Christianity was “a corruption of Judaism, not a

²⁷ Brink, “Christian faith without arguments?” 112.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 116.

³⁰ Cabal, 117.

³¹ Ibid., 116.

³² Ibid.

³³ Celsus, and R. Joseph Hoffmann, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse against the Christians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 30.

³⁴ Cabal, 117.

³⁵ Ibid.

completion.”³⁶ Second, he “ridiculed... the resurrection of Jesus.”³⁷ Celsus attacked the resurrection using various “counter-theories, plausible ways to explain away the miracle.”³⁸ Cabal makes a noteworthy insight, “Many of these theories, famously utilized throughout history, continue in use to this day.”³⁹ Cabal’s insight is significant because it shows the framework for much of the debate on this issue throughout history. There have been new ways of proposing the theories and philosophies, but for the most part the debate on Jesus’ resurrection has focused on many of the same arguments, which this paper will examine later. For example, Celsus suggested that the post-mortem appearances of Jesus may have been caused by day-dreaming or perhaps they were simply the hallucinations of desperate people and their “wishful thinking.”⁴⁰ This is still a well-known argument for those who do not believe Jesus’ resurrection to be a historical event.

In response to Celsus’ *On the True Doctrine*, Origen wrote his *Contra Celsum* which, according to Cabal, was a “high water mark” in the defense of the resurrection for the early Christian church throughout the first millennium.⁴¹ Origen addressed many of Celsus’ attacks on Christianity and responded to them using reason and historical evidences. For example, in response to Celsus’ hallucination theories, Origen pointed out that such a theory would have made sense had the appearances happened at night. “But his idea of a vision in the daytime is not convincing when the people were in no way mentally unbalanced and were not suffering from delirium or melancholy.”⁴² Origen also reacts to Celsus’ accusation of mental problems in those to whom Jesus appeared after his death. Origen responds, “There is no evidence of this in the scriptural account which was the source upon which he drew for his criticism.”⁴³ These responses to the hallucination theory are still used today by those who debate the historicity of the resurrection.

³⁶ Cabal, 117.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 118.

³⁹ Ibid., 118-119.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 119.

⁴¹ Ibid., 120.

⁴² Origen, and Henry Chadwick, *Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: University Press, 1953), 113.

⁴³ Ibid.

In more recent history, a significant phenomenon has come to light in these debates in favor of the historicity of the resurrection. Numerous books and testimonies recount the stories of people who have investigated Jesus resurrection either from an impartial starting point or with the express goal of disproving that the resurrection happened at all. Interestingly enough, many of these researchers, after looking at all the evidence, concluded that Jesus' resurrection is a fact.⁴⁴ This evidence speaks powerfully against anyone who would dismiss belief in the resurrection as simple religious fanaticism. For example, Frank Morison, a lawyer and author of *Who Moved the Stone?*, was brought up with a rationalistic background. He believed that the resurrection was nothing more than a fairy tale which ruined the otherwise brilliant story of Jesus. In order to correct this, Morison planned to write his own account of the tragic last days of Jesus, in order to bring into focus the horrific crimes against Jesus as well as his incredible heroism. He had planned to leave out anything that suggested the miraculous and to leave out any mention of the resurrection. But when he studied the facts closely, he ended up changing his mind, and he wrote his book instead to defend the historicity of Jesus' resurrection.⁴⁵ In a similar account, two scholars from Oxford, Gilbert West and Lord Lyttleton determined to destroy the very basis of the Christian faith. Lyttleton set out to prove that Saul of Tarsus never actually converted to Christianity and West sought to show that Jesus never actually rose from the tomb. After extensive independent research, Lyttleton found that Saul of Tarsus *did* become a radically different man when he converted to Christianity, and West found that all the evidence pointed definitely to Jesus having risen from the dead.⁴⁶ Such accounts honestly prove nothing, but they do suggest that there is more to look into as we examine the historical proofs of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

We have now examined the limits, use, and importance of apologetic efforts concerning Jesus' resurrection, as well as a brief look at the history of such work. This paper will now focus on the evidences for and against the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. This section will start with an examination of what the Bible records. Then this paper will look at the various pertinent philosophical, rational, and historical arguments proposed in this debate.

⁴⁴ McDowell, 190.

⁴⁵ Michael Green, *Man Alive* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 54-55.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

THE BIBLE ON THE RESURRECTION

In our examination of the Bible's stand on Jesus' resurrection, we will look at two main areas: 1) events of the biblical record which connect to the resurrection and 2) the significance the Bible connects to the resurrection.

The Events Surrounding Jesus' Resurrection

First off, three of the four Gospels, which record the life of Jesus, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, record fantastical events which occurred early the first Easter morning, each culminating with the words of an angel proclaiming that Jesus had "risen."⁴⁷ However, these events alone do not give us enough information, as we can see the effect they had on the first people who experienced them. The women were filled with fear and joy,⁴⁸ trembling and bewilderment,⁴⁹ and total confusion.⁵⁰ Furthermore, as for the disciples, we find that they either did not believe the women⁵¹ or had no idea what happened.⁵² Only John records that one disciple "saw and believed."⁵³ However, the Bible also records four specific events which form the foundation of most, if not all, claims that Jesus rose from the dead. While different apologists have chosen to focus on some different events, for the most part, the main four are Jesus' death and burial, the empty tomb, Jesus' post-mortem appearances, and the changed lives of the disciples. The logic goes that nothing can explain these four events except Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead.⁵⁴

Jesus' Death

The Bible clearly records that Jesus died. Matthew and John write that on the cross Jesus "gave up his spirit,"⁵⁵ while Mark and Luke have he "breathed his last."⁵⁶ The most natural way to understand either of these phrases would be that Jesus really did physically die. However, the Bible contains still more proof of Jesus' death. In the Gospel of John, the soldiers were going to

⁴⁷ Matthew 28:1-7; Mark 16:1-7; Luke 24:1-7 (All biblical references are from the NIV 2011)

⁴⁸ Matthew 28:8

⁴⁹ Mark 16:8

⁵⁰ John 20:2

⁵¹ Luke 24:11

⁵² Luke 24:12

⁵³ John 20:8

⁵⁴ Cabal, 125.

⁵⁵ Matthew 27:50; John 19:30

⁵⁶ Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46

break Jesus' legs in order to speed his death, but they found that he was already dead. Instead, one soldier thrust a spear into Jesus' side, which brought a "sudden flow of blood and water."⁵⁷ McDowell cites a number of physicians, such as "Professor Day... Samuel Houghton, M.D., the great physiologist from the University of Dublin... [and] Dr. William Stroud" who all point to this information in John's Gospel as proof not only that Jesus died, but that he died of a ruptured heart.⁵⁸ Michael Green explains the significance of the details in John's Gospel:

Had Jesus been alive when the spear pierced His side, strong spouts of blood would have emerged with every heart beat. Instead, the observer noticed semi-solid dark red clot seeping out, distinct and separate from the accompanying watery serum. This is evidence of massive clotting of the blood in the main arteries, and is exceptionally strong medical proof of death. It is all the more impressive because the evangelist could not possibly have realized its significance to a pathologist. The "blood and water" from the spear-thrust is proof positive that Jesus was already dead.⁵⁹

John's Gospel gives certainty to the fact that Jesus died on the cross. In addition to these insights from the Gospel of John, all four Gospels record that Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate to take down Jesus' body.⁶⁰ Mark records that Pilate was surprised that Jesus was dead already and that he checked with the centurion on duty who assured Pilate that Jesus was in fact dead.⁶¹ Perhaps it is not beyond the realm of possibility, but it does seem unlikely that a centurion whose job was overseeing crucifixions would not recognize when someone under his guard had died, nor does it seem likely that such a person would outright lie to an authority over him, like Pilate, about whether Jesus was indeed dead or not, for there most certainly would have been punishments lined up were the centurion to give wrong information to Pilate. By all accounts, the Bible indicates that Jesus died on the cross.

Jesus' Burial

The Bible states that Jesus' body was buried in a special tomb. Van den Brink records that Roman crucifixion customs generally placed the bodies anonymously in common graves, however, the Bible clearly tells that Jesus body was laid in a unique place.⁶² After Jesus' death,

⁵⁷ John 19:31-34

⁵⁸ McDowell, 198-199.

⁵⁹ Green, 33.

⁶⁰ Matthew 27:57-58; Mark 15:43; Luke 23:52; John 19:38

⁶¹ Mark 15:44-45

⁶² Brink, "How to speak with intellectual and theological decency on the resurrection of Christ," 413.

and after Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus down from the cross, Matthew, Mark, and Luke record that Joseph wrapped Jesus' body in linen cloth and laid it in a tomb cut out of rock. Luke and John record that this tomb had never had any one in it before. Matthew and Mark add the detail that Joseph rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb.⁶³ While none of the Gospels give much detail about the stone that was rolled in front of the tomb, Mark notes that it was difficult enough to remove that the women who went to the tomb early Easter morning were worried about how they would get it open.⁶⁴ This would indicate that the tomb was fairly well sealed or at least difficult to open again. In addition to this information, John's Gospel adds that Nicodemus helped Joseph bury Jesus and that he brought about seventy-five pounds of a mixture of myrrh and aloes, which they wrapped with Jesus' body in the linen cloth.⁶⁵ French Bishop Emile Le Camus explains that these details are further proof that Jesus certainly died. He explains that even if Jesus somehow was not dead when he was taken down from the cross, he had to have died in the tomb, either because the contact of his body with the cold stone "would have been enough to bring on a syncope through the congelation of the blood, owing to the fact that the regular circulation was already checked," or because the "strong odour of aromatics in a place hermetically sealed would have killed a sick person whose brain was already seized with the most unyielding swoon."⁶⁶ Clearly, all biblical accounts record that Jesus died and was buried.

The Empty Tomb

The next significant event in the Gospels is the empty tomb. After the fantastic events that the women saw, the Gospels of Luke and John record that the tomb was found to be empty. Luke records that Peter went to investigate the tomb and John adds that another disciple went with Peter. Luke records that Peter "saw the strips of linen lying by themselves."⁶⁷ John agrees with what Luke writes but also adds that "the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head" was also there, and that "the cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen."⁶⁸ The

⁶³ Matthew 27:59-60; Mark 15:46; Luke 23:53; John 19:41

⁶⁴ Mark 16:3

⁶⁵ John 19:39-40

⁶⁶ É. Le Camus, *The Life of Christ*, translated by William A. Hickey, Vol. III (New York: The Cathedral Library Association, 1908), 484.

⁶⁷ Luke 24:12

⁶⁸ John 20:6-7

Gospels do not record the exact time when the disciples discovered the tomb to be empty, but we do get some indication that it was very early on Sunday morning. John states that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb “early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark,” that, after seeing the tomb open, she ran to the disciples, and, after telling the disciples, they, in turn, ran to the tomb.⁶⁹ How long this would have taken is unsure, but the account certainly indicates that Mary and the disciples were rather hurried. In addition, it is unlikely that the women and the disciples went to the wrong tomb. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all note that the same women who went to the tomb Easter morning had seen the place where Jesus’ body was buried.⁷⁰ John adds that the tomb was near the place where Jesus had been crucified, which also would have made it easier to find, and that the tomb was in a garden, which probably would have made it distinct from other graves.⁷¹ While it was early in the morning and still dark, it seems that these details would point to the women having a pretty good idea in which tomb Jesus was buried. The Bible clearly indicates that Jesus’ tomb was found to be empty very early on Sunday morning, even before Jesus’ disciples got there.

Jesus’ Post-Mortem Appearances

After Jesus’ tomb was found empty, the Gospels record that Jesus appeared to a number of different people. Matthew records that Jesus appeared to the women who came to the tomb early in the morning and to the eleven disciples.⁷² Mark says that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, to two people walking in the country, and to the eleven disciples.⁷³ Luke’s account tells about Jesus appearing to Cleopas and another of Jesus’ followers while they were walking on the road to Emmaus, to Simon Peter, and to the disciples.⁷⁴ The Gospel of John recounts Jesus’ appearances to Mary Magdalene, to the eleven disciples except for Thomas, to the eleven disciples with Thomas, and to 7 of the disciples.⁷⁵ 1 Corinthians, though not one of the Gospels, says that Jesus appeared to Cephas, to the Twelve, to more than five hundred of the disciples at

⁶⁹ John 20:1-4

⁷⁰ Matthew 27:61; Mark 15:47; Luke 23:55

⁷¹ John 19:41-42

⁷² Matthew 28:8-9, 16-17

⁷³ Mark 16:9, 12, 14; “The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have verses 9-20” of Mark 16.

⁷⁴ Luke 24:15, 18, 34, 36

⁷⁵ John 20:14, 16, 19, 24, 26; 21:2, 4, 7.

the same time, to James, to all the apostles, and to Paul.⁷⁶ According to Luke, the disciples believed they had seen a ghost. Jesus, however, reassured the disciples that he was not a ghost and he proved it by having the disciples touch him and by eating some fish in front of them.⁷⁷ John's account shows that Thomas refused to believe, even after all of the other 10 disciples said, along with the women, that Jesus was raised to life. Thomas wanted proof for himself. Jesus then appeared to him along with the other disciples, and Thomas then believed.⁷⁸ Even after the resurrection, people doubted that something so impossible could happen, as well they should have perhaps, but they were convinced by the facts. The Bible clearly demonstrates that Jesus appeared to many people after he had died, been buried, and his tomb was found empty.

The Changed Lives of the Disciples

The final significant event recorded in the Bible which connects to Jesus' resurrection is the dramatically changed lives of the apostles. The Gospels do not record the disciples to be great heroic figures. When Jesus is arrested in Gethsemane, Matthew and Mark tell us that all of the disciples deserted Jesus and fled, one of them even fleeing naked when the guards tried to seize him.⁷⁹ The Gospels do say that Peter followed Jesus only to deny even knowing him three times, and this after Peter had sworn that he would rather die than disown Jesus.⁸⁰ John's Gospel is the only one to record any disciples even being present at Jesus' crucifixion and he only mentions that one of them was there.⁸¹ After Jesus' arrest, none of the disciples defended Jesus, none were willing to die with Jesus. After Jesus' death, according to John's Gospel, the disciples were hiding behind locked doors "for fear of the Jewish leaders."⁸² Far from heroic, the disciples cower together and fear for their lives when their leader was arrested and put to death.

The book of Acts, however, paints a much different picture of the apostles. Far from hiding and fearing for their lives, instead Peter boldly proclaims Jesus to be the Messiah and

⁷⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:5-8

⁷⁷ Luke 24:36-43

⁷⁸ John 20:24-29

⁷⁹ Matthew 26:56; Mark 14:50-52

⁸⁰ Matthew 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-27; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-18, 25-27; Matthew 26:35; Mark 14:31; Luke 22:33

⁸¹ John 19:26

⁸² John 20:19

accuses the crowds of crucifying him, while calling them to repentance.⁸³ All of the apostles proclaimed the resurrection of the dead in Jesus in unison.⁸⁴ Peter and John unashamedly proclaim the same message before the Jewish leaders even though just previously they had been hiding in fear of these same people.⁸⁵ The Jewish leaders note Peter and John's courage and realize that they were "unschooled, ordinary men."⁸⁶ In the face of threats from the Jewish leaders, the disciples continued to speak, telling the leaders that they had to obey God rather than men.⁸⁷ They continued to preach even after being arrested and thrown in prison.⁸⁸ The apostles were flogged, but not only did the flogging not keep them quiet, it gave them a reason to *rejoice* and they preached the resurrection all the more!⁸⁹ Acts is filled with such descriptions of the disciples which seem opposite to their description in the Gospels.

Such a change in such people is unheard of. Even Gamaliel, one of the Pharisees, points out that usually when a group grows around a single personality the followers tend to disperse after they lose their leader; not so with the disciples.⁹⁰ But rather than Jesus' teachings coming to nothing, the number of people who followed Jesus dramatically increased after his death.⁹¹ Beyond that, there is the peculiar person of Saul of Tarsus, who persecuted the church but then ended up not only converting to Christianity himself but also spreading Christianity's message!⁹²

This dramatic change in Jesus' disciples and the following growth of the church have been very strong evidences in defense of Jesus' resurrection throughout its apologetic history. Origen writes about this in his *Contra Celsum*, asking, "If they had invented the story that Jesus had risen from the dead, they would not have taught this with such spirit, in addition to the fact that in accordance with this they not only prepared others to despise death but above all despised

⁸³ Acts 2:36; 3:13

⁸⁴ Acts 4:2

⁸⁵ Acts 4:8-12

⁸⁶ Acts 4:13

⁸⁷ Acts 4:18-21; 5:29

⁸⁸ Acts 5:25

⁸⁹ Acts 5:40-42

⁹⁰ Acts 5:36

⁹¹ Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7; 11:21, 24; 14:1, 21; 16:5; 17:4; etc.

⁹² Acts 9:1-6, 20

it themselves.”⁹³ The incredible forces at work against the apostles and their message make it unlikely that they would have made up Jesus rising from the dead.

American lawyer and jurist, Simon Greenleaf, in his *Testimony of the Evangelists*, attempted to lay out the full weight of meaning found in the apostle’s dramatically changed lives.

1) The apostles all taught the same thing. They taught the same thing everywhere they went, even when they faced the greatest discouragements and “most appalling errors that can be presented to the mind of man.”⁹⁴ That many people all teaching the same message concerning Jesus and his resurrection shows that there was some clear event in which all of them believed.

2) Their master had just been put to death, sentenced as a common criminal.⁹⁵ Such a public disgrace and death would break up most upstart groups.

3) Jesus’ “religion sought to overthrow the religions of the whole world.”⁹⁶ This point is especially significant. The disciples’ mission was to replace all other religions with the one that Jesus taught, and this was at a time when most people did not have our more modern concept of a separation between religion and government. This fact would pit the disciples against all other established religions, popular and unpopular, those who had rulers backing them and those which were personally held in people’s own hearts. For this reason, the disciples could only expect opposition of every kind. There were laws against what the disciples taught. “The interests and passions of all the rulers and great men in the world were against them.”⁹⁷ Any attempt of theirs to spread this religion, even if done in the most “inoffensive and peaceful manner,” would only meet with “contempt, opposition, revilings, bitter persecutions, stripes, imprisonments, torments, and cruel deaths.”⁹⁸

4) In spite of the last point, they did spread this religion, enduring all of these miseries and rejoicing over them!⁹⁹ Such hardships would break most men. Even today, many clergy leave the ministry because of burnout, and this in areas where they are not persecuted for their

⁹³ Origen, 111.

⁹⁴ Simon Greenleaf, *The testimony of the evangelists examined by the rules of evidence administered in courts of justice* (New York: J. Cockcroft & company, 1874), 28-29.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

faith. The apostles endured the absolute worst of hardships and they were overjoyed at that fact. Moreover, not one of them ever quit. According to tradition, only one of the disciples died of natural causes, and this while he was exiled on the Island of Patmos. Every other disciple died a martyr's death.¹⁰⁰ But far from discouraging them, these miserable and torturous deaths only served to make those still living even more vigorous and resolute! According to Greenleaf, "the annals of military warfare afford scarcely an example of the like heroic constancy, patience, and unblenching courage."¹⁰¹

5) In light of this kind of persecution, no one could continue in such a life if it were all based on a lie.¹⁰² Because of the serious persecutions that the disciples faced and which anyone who would believe their teaching would also have to endure, the disciples had every reason to carefully reflect on the basis of their faith. They would have had ample opportunity to sit and think on the evidences of the teachings which they asserted as facts and truths. As they prepared to face all the persecutions they did, as they remembered what they had gone through already, the disciples could not have persisted in such behavior which would bring them such suffering if they did not earnestly and honestly believe that what they taught was absolutely the truth; that Jesus truly did rise from the dead! Greenleaf adds,

If it were morally possible for them to have been deceived in this matter, every human motive operated to lead them to discover and avow their error. To have persisted in so gross a falsehood, after it was known to them, was not only to encounter, for life, all the evils which man could inflict, from without, but to endure also the pangs of inward and conscious guilt; with no hope of future peace, no testimony of a good conscience, no expectation of honor or esteem among men, no hope of happiness in this life, or in the world to come.¹⁰³

Remember, the disciples were not some people from another planet who knew nothing of emotions. They were people just like anyone else. They possessed the same constitution as the rest of humanity. They were moved by the same motives, hopes, joys, sorrows, fears, passions, temptations, and infirmities as anyone else.¹⁰⁴ But the disciples demonstrate this incredible reaction to what happened to Jesus after he was buried. Greenleaf sums up, "If then their

¹⁰⁰ Who Were the 12 Disciples? [accessed November 25, 2015] online: <http://www.bibleinfo.com/en/questions/who-were-twelve-disciples>.

¹⁰¹ Greenleaf, 29.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 29-30.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 30.

testimony was not true, there was no possible motive for its fabrication.”¹⁰⁵ Nothing can account for this drastic change in the character of the disciples other than the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Rumors that Someone Stole Jesus’ Body

As we close our look at the events recorded in the Gospels, we also note that the Bible does address and refute one counter-theory: that Jesus’ body was stolen from the tomb. Matthew records that the chief priests and Pharisees knew that Jesus predicted that he would rise from the dead and they believed that his disciples would try to steal Jesus’ body and then tell people that he had come back to life. In order to avoid this, they had Pilate send guards to watch the tomb for the three days that Jesus had predicted.¹⁰⁶ But when the guards instead came back to the chief priests and told them about the fantastic occurrences that had happened at the tomb on Easter morning, the chief priests paid them to spread the rumor that the disciples came during the night and stole Jesus’ body.¹⁰⁷ Matthew’s Gospel even hints that such a failure of the guards would have been punished but the chief priests saw to it that the soldiers did not get in trouble, even though the rumor they spread would indicate that they had not done their jobs.¹⁰⁸ So the Gospel of Matthew too acknowledges and refutes one counter-theory proposed by those who wished to discredit Jesus’ resurrection.

The Importance the Bible Places on the Resurrection

Beyond the events recorded in the Bible, it also heavily connects Jesus’ resurrection to the Bible’s overall message; to the point that everything the Bible says *depends* on Jesus bodily rising from the dead.

The Resurrection According to Jesus

The Gospels record Jesus’ anticipation of his death and resurrection. He made this prediction multiple times to his disciples.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, Jesus had made this prediction enough times that even his enemies knew that Jesus believed he would rise from the dead three days after he died.¹¹⁰ According to these words, even Jesus’ contemporaries expected Jesus to rise

¹⁰⁵ Greenleaf, 30.

¹⁰⁶ Matthew 27:62-66

¹⁰⁷ Matthew 28:2-4, 11-15

¹⁰⁸ Matthew 28:14

¹⁰⁹ Matthew 16:21; 17:9, 23; 20:19; 27:64; Luke 9:22; 13:32; 18:33; 24:7; John 2:19, 22

¹¹⁰ Matthew 27:63

from the dead, even if Jesus' disciples did not seem to understand.¹¹¹ This means that Jesus' resurrection was closely connected with his message. Before the resurrection even happened, people were looking for it to happen. Smith points out the further significance of Jesus' predictions:

If our Lord said, frequently, with great definiteness and detail, that after He went up to Jerusalem He would be put to death, but on the third day He would rise again from the grave, and this prediction came to pass, then it has always seemed to me that everything else that our Lord ever said must also be true.¹¹²

Jesus' predictions and the fulfillment thereof demonstrate Jesus to be not only someone who is unique to history, but also as someone whose word is true. The resurrection, therefore, backs up Jesus' message as truthful.

But Jesus used the resurrection for more than just to prove his knowledge of the future. Jesus also specifically pointed to his resurrection as the *authentication* of his entire ministry. In the Gospel of Matthew, when the Pharisees and teachers of the law ask Jesus for a sign, he says that they will receive no sign except the sign of Jonah, "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."¹¹³ Of all the miracles recorded in the Gospels, Jesus proclaims this miracle to be *the* sign for people. The Gospel of John speaks even more clearly. After Jesus had cleared out the temple of buyers, sellers, and moneychangers, the Jews ask Jesus for a sign to prove his authority. Jesus offers them this: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."¹¹⁴ John's Gospel later explains, "The temple he had spoken of was his body."¹¹⁵ Reverend R. M'Cheyne Edgar elaborates:

Here is a teacher of religion and He calmly professes to stake His entire claims upon His ability, after having been done to death, to rise again from the grave. We may safely assume that there never was, before or since, such a proposal made... To talk of this extraordinary test being *invented* by mystic students of the prophecies, and inserted in the way it has been into the Gospel narratives, is to lay too great a burden on our credulity. He who was ready to stake everything on His

¹¹¹ Matthew 28:17; Mark 16:11, 14; Luke 24:12, 25-26; John 20:9

¹¹² Smith, 419.

¹¹³ Matthew 12:38-40

¹¹⁴ John 2:18-19

¹¹⁵ John 2:21

ability to come back from the tomb, stands before us as the most original of all teachers, one who shines in His own self-evidencing light!¹¹⁶

By pointing to his own resurrection from the dead, during his life, as the authentication of all that he does during his life, Jesus once again puts himself into a unique place in history. Were Jesus to not to rise from the dead, people would be free to simply forget everything he ever said and did. If, however, Jesus did rise from the dead, then his words demand a worldwide audience.

Many have found this to be a logical strategy on God's part. According to their line of thought, given the incarnation, if God wanted to prove that this particular person truly was God, it makes sense that God would "provide a kind of divine signature on this person's life by means of some super-miracle."¹¹⁷ The argument continues that this miracle must then be viewed by the contemporaries of that particular person as "God's authenticating approval of that person's life."¹¹⁸ Either way, the Bible clearly shows that Jesus proclaimed his resurrection to be the authentication of his ministry.

The Resurrection According to Jesus' Disciples

Jesus was not alone in pointing to the resurrection as vitally importance to his work. His disciples also understood Jesus' resurrection as the very basis of their faith and preaching. Smith points to Peter's sermon on Pentecost as a perfect example.¹¹⁹ According to Smith, everything Peter says there is

wholly and entirely founded on the Resurrection. Not merely is the Resurrection its principle theme, but if that doctrine were removed there would be no doctrine left. For the Resurrection is propounded as being (1) the explanation of Jesus' death; (2) prophetically anticipated as the Messianic experience; (3) apostolically witnessed; (4) the cause of the outpouring of the Spirit, and thus accounting for religious phenomena otherwise inexplicable; and (5) certifying the Messianic and Kingly position of Jesus of Nazareth.¹²⁰

According to Jesus' disciples, the resurrection meant everything. Throughout the New Testament, the apostles continually pointed to the resurrection as the foundation for their teaching. Peter points to Jesus' death as being part of God's plan because it led to Jesus'

¹¹⁶ R. M'Cheyne Edgar, *The Gospel of a Risen Saviour* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1892), 32. (Italics in original.)

¹¹⁷ Brink, "How to speak with intellectual and theological decency on the resurrection of Christ," 412.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Acts 2:14-36

¹²⁰ Smith, 230.

resurrection.¹²¹ They asserted that Messianic prophecy pointed to the resurrection.¹²² They demonstrated how the resurrection showed without a doubt that Jesus truly is Lord and Messiah.¹²³ Paul explains how the resurrection worked his miraculous conversion.¹²⁴ The disciples linked the incredible phenomena of the early church recorded in Acts, such as the miracles, to the resurrection.¹²⁵

The apostles linked the resurrection even to the most basic aspects of their faith. The apostle Paul connects faith in the resurrection with faith in God.¹²⁶ He makes faith in the resurrection vital to salvation, even going so far as to say that if Jesus was never raised from the dead, then faith would be useless and we would all still be in our sins.¹²⁷ He proclaims that Jesus' resurrection proves that the rest of us will also rise from the dead.¹²⁸ He further establishes Jesus' resurrection (and our resulting resurrections) as the basis and reason for the repentance and godly life of sanctification which is to follow faith in God.¹²⁹ Without the resurrection, the disciples would have had nothing to say.

Since the disciples found Jesus' resurrection so important to their doctrine and teaching, they strongly defended it. They assured people that they were witnesses of it.¹³⁰ The disciples offered evidences, just as people do today, in order to demonstrate the basis for their faith. Van den Brink explains Paul's apologetic in the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 15:

Clearly, in this passage Paul uses the post-paschal appearances of Jesus in order to convince the Corinthians of the trustworthiness of the resurrection-reports. The historical fact that Jesus met so many people after his death and burial should function as a good argument or reason for believing that Jesus was truly raised from the dead.¹³¹

¹²¹ Acts 2:24

¹²² Acts 2:31; 26:22-23

¹²³ Acts 5:30-31; 13:26-37; 17:31; Ephesians 1:20; 2 Timothy 2:8

¹²⁴ Acts 26:8-21

¹²⁵ Acts 4:10

¹²⁶ Romans 4:23-25; 8:34; 10:9; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, 11, 14, 17; Colossians 2:12-15; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 1 Peter 1:21

¹²⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:14, 17

¹²⁸ Romans 6:8; 8:29; 1 Corinthians 6:14; 15:16,18-23,26; 2 Corinthians 4:14; Ephesians 2:6

¹²⁹ Romans 6:4, 8-11; 7:4; 8:10-11; 1 Corinthians 15:30-32; 2 Corinthians 5:15; Col 3:1

¹³⁰ Acts 2:32; 3:15; 5:30,32; 10:39-41

¹³¹ Brink, "Christian faith without arguments?" 109.

Even the Bible provides attacks against and apologetic proofs for Jesus' resurrection from the dead. However, in the Bible, apologists could point to those who had seen Jesus alive after his death as proofs of the resurrection. Today, we must work with the testimonies of those witnesses as found in the Bible. The Bible, therefore, clearly shows that Jesus did rise bodily from the dead, as shown by the events it records and by the importance it places on it.

ARGUMENTS FOR THE RESURRECTION

This section will examine the arguments for the possibility of verifying Jesus' resurrection historically. The first, and most difficult, question in this section is how do we prove a historical event? How we answer this question can largely determine the answer to this entire paper. For example, McDowell believes that the resurrection is a verifiable historical event, saying, "When an event takes place in history and there are enough people alive who were eyewitnesses of it or had participated in the event, and when the information is published, one is able to verify the validity of an historical event (circumstantial evidences)."¹³² McDowell believes that this is how the Gospels were written, and thus they are acceptable as historical documents. Professor Mark Allen Powell, however, disagrees with McDowell. He explains,

Historical Jesus studies is a science that attempts to determine what can be known of Jesus on the basis of historical research alone, that is through the analysis of data pertaining to Jesus in accord with the same standards that would be employed when analyzing data pertaining to any other figure from antiquity. Such analysis is supposed to be free of religious (or anti-religious) bias, and scholars engaged in the field call each other to task when they suspect that one's conclusions have been influenced by personal predilection.¹³³

Powell puts the main focus on consistency. In attempting to verify Jesus' resurrection, are we applying the same rules as we would use for verifying any other event in history? He also points out that, though this tries to be an exact science, it often leads to difficulties due to biases, either religious or anti-religious. However, Powell finally comes down to say the point is to find not "what might be true of Jesus, but what is *verifiable*."¹³⁴ He therefore denies the possibility of proving the resurrection historically because he does not believe that we can apply the same

¹³² McDowell, 189.

¹³³ Mark Allan Powell, "Historical Jesus Studies Today: An Update," *The Bible and Interpretation*, [accessed February 11, 2016] online: <http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2014/06/pow388006.shtml>.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* (Italics in original.)

principles to Jesus which we apply to other figures of history. Powell sums up, “Thus, if (as a Christian) you want to believe Jesus was born to a virgin, that’s fine, but (as a historian) you must recognize that this is not verifiable—at least, not in accord with any criteria that are normally employed for historical research.”¹³⁵ Rather than settle on a definition of “historically verifiable” at this point, this paper will examine those arguments which have proved convincing for others throughout this debate.

The Sources

In the search for historical proofs, the earliest sources available maintain a spot of unique importance. Significantly, the earliest sources available today are those found in the Gospel accounts. This proves a struggle for many people because of the ascribed religious bias. However, many assert that this poses a powerful argument for the historicity of the resurrection. Cabal claims, “No rejections of Jesus and his resurrection... are based on scientific, historical, archaeological, or manuscript evidence. All rejections are philosophically (e.g., miracles cannot happen) or theologically based (e.g., Jesus cannot be the savior of the world).”¹³⁶ In what field of study would such a method be acceptable? For the most part such strategies would be laughed out of the room. However, Cabal again points out, “It matters little that these attacks are short on solid evidence and long on philosophy and theological speculation, they are nonetheless influential.”¹³⁷ Brooke Foss Westcott, an English scholar who was appointed regius professor at Cambridge in 1870, explains his opinion of why these methods are allowed in this area of study, “Nothing but the antecedent assumption that it must be false could have suggested the idea of deficiency in the proof of it.”¹³⁸ Granted, one could certainly find religious bias in Westcott’s words, but his point still stands. There is no evidence against Jesus’ resurrection.

Even the early literature following the Gospels continues to support Jesus’ resurrection, but it cannot escape the accusation of religious bias. Apologist Bernard Ramm points to the Church Fathers,

Unbelief has to deny all the testimony of the Fathers... It must assume that these men either did not have the motivation or the historical standards to really

¹³⁵ Powell.

¹³⁶ Cabal, 132.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 116.

¹³⁸ Paul E. Little, *Know Why You Believe* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), 30.

investigate the resurrection of Christ. The Fathers, considered by the Eastern Orthodox Catholic Church and by the Roman Catholic Church and Anglican Church as authoritative or highly authoritative, respected by the Reformers, and given due weight by all theologians, *are written off the record by unbelief*. They are deemed trustworthy for data about apostolic or near-apostolic theology, yet in matters of fact they are not granted a shred of evidential testimony. But this must be, or unbelief cannot make its case stick.¹³⁹

Thus all the earliest sources indicate that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead, however, many historians would compare such things to any other fantastical and miraculous myth or legend that can be found in history.

O'Collins' Six Checks

Beyond the sources, historians and apologists have suggested a number of evidences to ascertain the historicity of the resurrection. O'Collins suggests six checks which have summed up the general proofs apologists use in this debate: "partial continuity with Old Testament beliefs, correspondence with facts, coherence of meaning, status of witnesses, practical results throughout history, and personal confirmation in the present."¹⁴⁰ These "six checks" will provide the outline for our look at those proofs for the resurrection which have proved the most well-known in the debate.

The Resurrection and Prior Knowledge of God

In the first place, O'Collins asks, "Did this new truth (»Jesus has been raised from the dead«) stand in *some* continuity with what the Jewish people already knew of God?"¹⁴¹ With this question, O'Collins wants to examine whether there was any reason for people to *expect* that a resurrection should happen. If a miracle like Jesus' resurrection were to occur without any connection to what people at the time had believed about God, the resurrection would have been uncharacteristic, random, and in all other senses out-of-sync with the religion that Jesus proclaimed. O'Collins answers this question by pointing to the Israelites' belief in God's power to raise the dead:

The Israelites pinned their faith to Yahweh as the God of life... In many forms, God gave and restored life to both individuals and the people. Yahweh was also

¹³⁹ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953), 206. (Italics in original.)

¹⁴⁰ O'Collins, 70.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.* (Italics in original.)

believed to have consistently revealed himself to be supremely just, powerful and faithful. These ancient convictions about God... eventually led many Jews to expect a resurrected life after death.¹⁴²

As evidence of O'Collins' words, the Old Testament does contain such phrases as, "dead will live,"¹⁴³ and, "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life..."¹⁴⁴ With words like these in the hands of the Jews, it is by no means out of the question that they would have accepted the idea of someone rising from the dead. According to O'Collins, however, Jesus' resurrection was not exactly what the Jews would have expected, "to assert the resurrection of one individual (Jesus) before the end of the world introduced a new element."¹⁴⁵ O'Collins does not believe that the Jews would have anticipated the specific situation of Jesus' resurrection. Some debate with O'Collins on this subject of whether or not the Jews before Christ were in a position to understand that an *individual*, i.e. the Messiah, would die and be raised to life.¹⁴⁶ However, his point still stands: "Granted the novelty of the claim about Jesus' resurrection, this claim was, nevertheless, not totally and utterly new but stood in some continuity with prior beliefs about God."¹⁴⁷ It makes sense with what the Jews already believed about God that an individual would be raised to life. Therefore, Jesus' resurrection happened in a historical situation where it could not only have happened, but potentially could have even been expected.

The Resurrection and the Facts

The second check asks, does Jesus' resurrection fit with the facts? This check, which we can call the "best explanation," is one of the most popular and powerful proofs of scholars who defend the resurrection as a historical event. It is a powerful argument if one defines history in a way that makes verifying miracles impossible.¹⁴⁸ Cabal explains that this argument is "not trying to prove the resurrection," rather, it simply states that "the resurrection explains the facts

¹⁴² O'Collins, 70.

¹⁴³ Isaiah 26:19

¹⁴⁴ Daniel 12:2-3

¹⁴⁵ O'Collins, 71.

¹⁴⁶ Isaiah 53:11; Job 19:25

¹⁴⁷ O'Collins, 71.

¹⁴⁸ Cabal, 125.

better than the naturalistic alternatives.”¹⁴⁹ Instead of looking at the Bible’s claim about Jesus’ resurrection, it looks at events that people have less of a problem accepting and looks for an explanation of how all of them could occur.

Four historical facts must be explained: Jesus’ burial, his empty tomb, his post-mortem appearances, and the disciples’ resurrection belief... the best explanation for these four facts is Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. It is noteworthy that ever since Origen, different apologists may choose different historical facts which demand explanation. But they all come from the same small pool, with the three main ones being empty tomb, appearances, and changed lives.¹⁵⁰

The argument states that these four facts, significantly more believable than an individual rising from the dead, cannot be explained in any logical way except that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead.

N. T. Wright’s study of the resurrection narratives concludes the historical probability of the empty tomb and appearances being so high as to be virtually certain, comparable to the death of Augustus or the fall of Jerusalem... the debate is not really about these established historical facts but the best explanation for them.¹⁵¹

If these events all did happen, how can they be connected except by the actual bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. O’Collins asserts that “this kind of positive (the appearances) and negative (the empty tomb) evidence was available because the resurrection had happened.”¹⁵²

Wright further notes that no one of these facts would require Jesus’ resurrection as an explanation, but it is rather the combination of them. “The empty tomb alone would be a puzzle and a tragedy. Sightings of an apparently alive Jesus, by themselves, would have been classified as visions or hallucinations, which were well enough known in the ancient world.”¹⁵³ Wright concludes, “All that is required to demonstrate that the tomb-plus-appearances combination is not a necessary condition for the rise of early Christian belief is the possibility that some other circumstance, or combination of circumstances, was equally capable of generating this belief.”¹⁵⁴ There is no theory (misplaced tomb, mistaking someone else for a resurrected Jesus, swoon theory) that can adequately explain how Jesus’ burial, his empty tomb, his post-mortem

¹⁴⁹ Cabal, 128.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 125.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 127.

¹⁵² O’Collins, 72.

¹⁵³ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 686.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 694.

appearances, and the resulting rise of Christianity can be connected.¹⁵⁵ For this reason, many assert that “anything less than a historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus simply cannot account for the evidence.”¹⁵⁶ Wright also points to the early Christian church for the same argument.

Wright wonders how it was possible that the earliest Christians were so confident that Jesus was raised from the dead. He suggests that all details point in one direction here: they must have considered the traditions concerning the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Lord as historically credible. These traditions, in turn, can only be reasonably explained by the actual bodily resurrection of Jesus. Alternative explanations are less convincing, because they have less puzzle-solving capacity (to use the Kuhnian phrase), e.g. when it comes to clarifying the rise of Christianity.¹⁵⁷

Scholars have therefore shown that, while some may not believe Jesus’ resurrection to be historically verifiable, no other explanation can sufficiently explain the connection between the more verifiable and accepted events surrounding Jesus’ resurrection.

The Resurrection and Christian Doctrine

With the third check, O’Collins asks, “Can the various levels and patterns of meaning in the event of Christ’s resurrection be systematically related in ways that are mutually consistent?”¹⁵⁸ This check is similar to the first, but while the first looked at prior meaning of the event, this third check examines the meaning moving forward from the event. Again, the point is to determine whether the occurrence of the resurrection makes sense with the ideas that Jesus and his followers set forth as the doctrines of their religion. In O’Collins’ words, “if the alleged resurrection did not serve coherently such a total pattern of meaning, its plausibility would be severely jeopardized.”¹⁵⁹ O’Collins points to a book of Christian doctrine written by Scheffczyk, which uses Jesus’ resurrection as the starting point. “By clarifying all major Christian doctrines in the light of Christ’s resurrection and vice versa, he [Scheffczyk] moves towards some kind of coherent totality of meaning which inevitably recommends the truth of the particular claim about the resurrection.”¹⁶⁰ This further matches with the scholars’ work which this paper observed above in the examination of the importance of Jesus’ resurrection in

¹⁵⁵ Cabal, 124.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 123.

¹⁵⁷ Brink, “How to speak with intellectual and theological decency on the resurrection of Christ,” 415.

¹⁵⁸ O’Collins, 73.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 74.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

Christian doctrine. Smith asserts that, were one to remove all passages of Scripture that made any sort of reference to the resurrection, no coherent meaning could be made out of what remained.¹⁶¹ Smith writes, “All evidence of the New Testament goes to show that the burden of the good news or gospel was not ‘Follow this Teacher and do your best,’ but, ‘Jesus and the Resurrection.’ You cannot take that away from Christianity without radically altering its character and destroying its very identity.”¹⁶² The resurrection therefore passes this check as its occurrence not only connects with the rest of what Jesus and his disciples taught and understood, but it was vital to everything they taught and understood.

The Resurrection and its Sources

The fourth check is one of the most vital and contested: can the sources be trusted? “This test... examines the status of the »authorities« in question.”¹⁶³ O’Collins explains his line of thought here,

Most of what we believe, we believe on authority anyway. In such fields as the natural sciences and biology, we accept innumerable things often simply on the word of the relevant experts. Even research scientists cannot possibly check for themselves the truth of much which they accept; frequently they have to take for granted the results established by others.¹⁶⁴

True though O’Collins’ words may be, he admits that when it comes to Jesus’ resurrection, we cannot simply believe the authorities here as we do authorities in science or other areas of history. O’Collins continues,

Believing in the resurrection means much more than simply accepting from a recognized scientist the results of certain experiments which we cannot repeat for ourselves... more than merely believing the word of a seemingly reliable witness for a historical event at which we were not personally present. Accepting Jesus’ resurrection... involves answering the fundamental question about the nature, meaning and destiny of our own human existence.¹⁶⁵

Since so much rides on whether or not Jesus rose from the dead, simply believing it because the authorities say so is not as acceptable as believing what recent studies say about the health benefits of drinking coffee.

¹⁶¹ Smith, 369-370.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ O’Collins, 74.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

In examining the authorities, two points must be established: 1) the “quality of conviction exhibited by the Easter witnesses”¹⁶⁶ and 2) “the Testimony of those chosen Witnesses, transmitted down in Writings.”¹⁶⁷ As O’Collins examines the belief of the disciples in the resurrection, he notes,

The gospels refer to some confusion and hesitation on the occasion of the Easter encounters (for example, Matt 28,17 and Luke 24,36-43). But these are only initial doubts and they trust the evidence of their experience in testifying with complete conviction to Jesus as living and therefore risen from the dead.¹⁶⁸

Were the disciples to show any continued hesitation or doubts moving forward from the initial discoveries, their testimony would greatly suffer. Furthermore, O’Collins even points out, “If the first disciples claimed to have seen the risen Jesus, but continued to lead thoroughly ordinary, unheroic lives, this would count severely against their testimony.”¹⁶⁹ But instead, as noted above, we find the disciples completely changed by the events of the first Easter morning. In O’Collins’ words, “Saul the persecutor became the missionary to the gentiles; Peter the broken failure became *the* official witness to the resurrection. In both cases their conviction led them eventually to death by martyrdom.”¹⁷⁰ The disciples, after this event, are so completely sure of what they believe that nothing, not even their own deaths could stop them from proclaiming Jesus’ resurrection. Lawyer Sir Edward Clarke explains that he had secured the verdict in court on evidence that was not nearly as compelling as what he sees from the apostles. In his words, “Inference follows on evidence, and a truthful witness is always artless and disdains effect. The Gospel evidence for the resurrection is of this class, and as a lawyer I accept it unreservedly as the testimony of truthful men to facts they were able to substantiate.”¹⁷¹

If the apostles themselves are trustworthy, the next question depends on whether we can trust their writings. Can we be sure that the Gospels we have today come from those same apostles? Gilbert West, mentioned above as a man who sought to disprove Jesus’ resurrection

¹⁶⁶ O’Collins, 74.

¹⁶⁷ Gilbert West, *Observations on the History and Evidences of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (4th ed. London: Printed for R. Dodsley, 1749), 217.

¹⁶⁸ O’Collins, 74.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.* (Italics in original.)

¹⁷¹ John R. Stott, *Basic Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 47.

but ended up converting to Christianity, wrote a great deal on this topic. West sought to establish the authority of the apostles' testimony in the writing we have today, which, in his words, were "either penned by themselves, or authorized by their Inspection and Approbation."¹⁷² West believed that the names attached to the New Testament books of the Bible are those of the real authors. He explains his line of thought,

To prove the Apostles and Evangelists to be the Authors of those Scriptures, which are now received under their Names, we have the concurrent Attestation of all the earliest Writers of the Church, deduced by an uninterrupted and uncontrolled Tradition, from the very Times of the Apostles. Which is such an Authentication of these sacred Records, as is not to be overturned by bare Presumptions, and a surmised and unproven Charge of Forgery.¹⁷³

West finds no reason to doubt that the New Testament books really did originate from the apostolic witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. West is furthermore amazed to find in his studies that while the books of the New Testament record that miracles, speaking in tongues, casting out evil spirits and the like were very often found among the first converts to Christianity and even to those in some of the generations following, it seems that none of these people took these miraculous manifestations of the spirit as proof that they had some kind of immediate revelation from God.¹⁷⁴ Instead, these Christians unflinchingly appealed to the Holy Scriptures and to the authoritative word of the apostles.¹⁷⁵ For example, Paul teaches and instructs the Galatians in many basic teachings of the faith, even though they had the Spirit and miracles in their midst. Paul even uses these miracles to teach them the truth.¹⁷⁶ Since these early Christians esteemed the authority of the apostles to such a degree, West believes it simple logic that these same people would seek the apostles' teaching in writing. West says that these Christians, who were to pass the apostles' message, upon which their salvation depended, on to future generations would have recognized the many cases where their own understandings and messages passed on by word of mouth had gone contrary to what the apostles' taught.¹⁷⁷ Since they recognized their own weakness in this manner, it makes no sense that they would trust future generations to keep

¹⁷² West, 217.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 218.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 219-220.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 220.

¹⁷⁶ Galatians 3:1-6

¹⁷⁷ West, 220-221.

the apostles' teaching pure if they themselves were not able to do it.¹⁷⁸ For these reasons, West is convinced that these early Christians obviously would have sought out writings, either of the apostles themselves or approved by them to pass their teachings on.¹⁷⁹ West believes that there is no way that the apostles did not have their teachings written down. If the apostles of their own accord and because of their deep care for those who followed what they taught did not decide to write down their teachings, and if the Holy Spirit himself did not suggest to them that they do this, surely those who followed their message and looked upon them as teachers who had been called and inspired by the Spirit of God himself would have pursued such writings.¹⁸⁰ West further points to the Gospel of Luke as proof that there were others who wrote down what the apostles taught. However, it again makes sense that among those who did write these things down, those writings which had greater authority, as in those "either penned by the Apostles themselves, or authorized by their Inspection and Approbation," surely superseded all others with the result that most of them simply died out, but those authoritative works have been preserved into modern times and maintain the same esteem and authority which they had among these early Christians.¹⁸¹ For these reasons, West is convinced of the integrity of the Scriptures still maintained today. Thus the authorities are proved trustworthy both by their personal convictions and by the integrity of their writings passed down to modern times.

The Resurrection and Human Experience

O'Collins' fifth and sixth checks involve human experience. The fifth check looks at the experience of others: "What has been the quality of the commitment produced by this confession? ... Has the truth of the resurrection shown up in practice by leading believers into deeper union with God and with one another?"¹⁸² The point here is not, as O'Collins says, "a mere appeal to a certain consensus... rather: What testable and valuable differences has belief in the resurrection made in human lives?"¹⁸³ O'Collins further clarifies his question by asking, "Have the lives of those who accepted Christ's resurrection proved (a) deeply satisfying and

¹⁷⁸ West, 220-221.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 221.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 222.

¹⁸² O'Collins, 75.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

worthwhile to them, and (b) productive, even heroically productive, for others?”¹⁸⁴ In answer, O’Collins looks to the Church Fathers:

Origen, Athanasius and other Church Fathers found such social and historical confirmation for this belief by observing the effects it had produced and continued to produce in the life of the Christian Church... the resurrection vindicated itself in lived experience by transforming the lives of the faithful.¹⁸⁵

Such an experience has been observed by people throughout history. Christianity has been shown to have been deeply satisfying to those who followed the word and heroically productive for others. At the same time, however, there certainly have been Christians who were not very satisfied at all with what they learned and whose lives even proved harmful to others. This is usually the case with human experience: it ranges all over the spectrum. O’Collins does not answer what happens for these people, but he does make his point: the faith produced by Jesus’ resurrection has been shown to have a profound and world changing effect on the experience of other people in the world.

O’Collins’ sixth and last check is directed at you, the person considering this topic. What effect would Jesus’ resurrection have on you personally? In his words, in this check the individual must ask him or herself, “How does or could the truth of the resurrection prove itself in the practice of my life? What kind of experience might I expect to have from believing the resurrection to be true?”¹⁸⁶ Such an answer is very individual and this paper therefore cannot answer it for everyone, except to say that the resurrection would then grant authority to everything Jesus has said.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE RESURRECTION

In the final section of this paper, we will examine those explanations which seek to show that the resurrection did not happen or cannot be called a historical event. We will examine various counter-theories for the verifiable events recorded in the Gospels, whether or not we can trust the biblical record, consistency, and finally whether or not we can believe that someone actually came back to life after dying.

¹⁸⁴ O’Collins, 76.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 75-76.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 76.

Counter-Theories Based on the Recorded Events

In the counter-theories, some of the most well-known arguments against the resurrection include the theory that the disciples' resurrection experiences were strictly mental, the swoon theory, and the more modern theory that Jesus' resurrection was spiritual rather than bodily.¹⁸⁷

The Hallucination/Wishful Thinking Theory

The mental theory states that the post-mortem appearances of Jesus were the result of wishful thinking, hallucinations, or emotional instability. This theory was proposed fairly early, found even in Celsus' writings.¹⁸⁸ Celsus points out that such experiences have happened to thousands of people for various reasons and he, therefore, believes this is what started the beliefs in Jesus' resurrection.¹⁸⁹ Origen counters by pointing to the context of these appearances and the evidence:

His view would not be unreasonable if the visions had occurred by night. But his idea of a vision in the daytime is not convincing when the people were in no way mentally unbalanced and were not suffering from delirium or melancholy. Because Celsus foresaw this objection he said that the woman was hysterical; but there is no evidence of this in the scriptural account which was the source upon which he drew for his criticism.¹⁹⁰

Origen's response proves to be the response to many of these counter-theories: they do not adequately explain the information provided to us.

The Swoon Theory

The swoon theory suggests that Jesus did not actually die on the cross, but that he simply swooned and was put into his tomb still alive, after which he revived and exited the tomb as though he had risen from the dead. The suggestion is that Jesus' wounds were not as bad as recorded in the Scriptures. Again, Celsus suggested this theory in his early work. Origen counters with the fact that Jesus died publicly.¹⁹¹ It is simply not logical that the Roman guards and authorities would have failed to recognize that Jesus had died. Also, as noted above, Le Camus points out that modern medical science shows that, had Jesus not died on the cross, the

¹⁸⁷ Cabal, 120. Note: we will not deal with the conspiracy/fraud theory in this section because it has been sufficiently addressed in the above sections on the changed lives of the disciples.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 119.

¹⁸⁹ Origen, 112.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 113.

¹⁹¹ Cabal, 119.

conditions in the tomb would not have been sufficient to bring someone out of a swoon as strong as the one Jesus must have had or, rather, even may have killed him if he were still alive!¹⁹² The swoon theory, therefore, matches neither the evidence we have for what happened, nor medical science as we now understand it.

Spiritual Resurrection Theory

A more modern theory suggests that Jesus' resurrection was not physical, but spiritual.

Van den Brink explains,

The standard view on resurrection comprises at least the following four theses: (1) In the opaque context of Jewish Hellenism at the beginning of the first century "resurrection" could mean many different things. (2) One of the earliest and most influential Christian writers, Paul, did not believe in physical resurrection, but had a more "spiritual" view. (3) Early Christian resurrection language was originally used to express the view that Jesus after his death was exalted into heaven in some special way; only subsequently it became conflated with more literalist views, as appearing e.g. in the empty tomb stories. (4) Given the current scientific worldview, it is undeniable that whatever happened to Jesus' body, it was not "raised from the dead" as the gospels suggest (at least when read at face value).¹⁹³

Theological writer John J. Johnson writes that this concept has become popular because of the reluctance of modern scholars to declare the resurrection a historical fact. Instead, they attempt to say that it has occurred in a "history beyond history."¹⁹⁴ Others believe that asserting Jesus' resurrection as a historical event takes away from the theological meaning attached to it in the Scriptures, adding that these events rather touch on an eschatological reality that cannot be expressed in human words.¹⁹⁵

In response to this, Cabal points to the Gospel of John, "Thomas may have been willing to believe Jesus was raised as a spirit but not bodily, which explains why Thomas needed not just to see but to touch the risen Jesus."¹⁹⁶ Van den Brink agrees: Thomas only came to faith *after* he was convinced that Jesus had truly been raised from the dead.¹⁹⁷ Such an understanding of the resurrection does not really fit with what the Gospel accounts describe. Cabal further asserts,

¹⁹² Le Camus, 484-485.

¹⁹³ Brink, "How to speak with intellectual and theological decency on the resurrection of Christ," 410.

¹⁹⁴ John J. Johnson, "Hans Frei as unlikely apologist for the historicity of the resurrection," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (April 2004), 137-138.

¹⁹⁵ Brink, "Christian faith without arguments?" 109.

¹⁹⁶ Cabal, 119.

¹⁹⁷ Brink, "How to speak with intellectual and theological decency on the resurrection of Christ," 418.

“First century Jews and Pagans alike would have understood a non-bodily resurrection as an oxymoron.”¹⁹⁸ Van den Brink also points out, in contrast to what modern scholars have established,

Careful scrutiny shows that Paul understood Jesus’ comeback at Easter in terms of a bodily resurrection, that the empty tomb tradition goes back to the earliest post paschal times rather than being a later invention, that the gospel writers considered Jesus’ resurrection as a real historical event.¹⁹⁹

Van den Brink’s opinion seems to fit much more with Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 15, where he points out people to whom Jesus appeared as evidence that Jesus’ rose from the dead, as well as the fact that the entire Christian faith is useless if Jesus has not been raised from the dead. His clear point is that if there is no resurrection, then there is no reason to live the way the apostles preached.²⁰⁰ Furthermore, van den Brink asserts, “the disanalogous, eschatological character does not make historical inquiry into the resurrection either impossible... or inappropriate.”²⁰¹ Furthermore, this view of a spiritual resurrection rather than a physical resurrection has brought problems for many Evangelicals as well. “A good deal of liberal theology is premised on the mistaken notion that people can embrace the symbolic meaning of an event while denying the event ever literally took place.”²⁰² O’Collins dismisses such ideas because they “not only fail to match the claim made by the apostolic witnesses, but also do not call for any detailed discussion of public checks and evidence.”²⁰³ Smith sees no disconnect between the theological and historical natures of Jesus’ resurrection. “The *meaning* of the resurrection is a theological matter, but the fact of the resurrection is a historical matter; the nature of the resurrection body of Jesus may be a mystery, but the fact that the body disappeared from the tomb is a matter to be decided upon by historical evidence.”²⁰⁴ By the Gospel accounts, and the evidences from the early Christian church, all indications point to Jesus’ resurrection being a physical bodily return to life after death.

¹⁹⁸ Cabal, 116.

¹⁹⁹ Brink, “How to speak with intellectual and theological decency on the resurrection of Christ,” 414-415.

²⁰⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, 14-17, 19, 30-32

²⁰¹ Brink, “How to speak with intellectual and theological decency on the resurrection of Christ,” 417.

²⁰² Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 93.

²⁰³ O’Collins, 68-69.

²⁰⁴ Smith, 386. (Italics in original.)

The Integrity of the Bible

We have looked at a number of counter-theories to explain the more easily verifiable events recorded in the Gospels. In this section, we will look at counter-theories which attack the integrity of the biblical records. The main questions in this category deal with whether the Gospels are simply copies of other dying-rising myths, from where they actually did come, and how are we to deal with the discrepancies in the different Gospels.

Dying-Rising Myths

The first theory in this category questions whether the Gospels are simply copies of an earlier dying-rising myth from other cultures. This theory is as early as Celsus, who claimed that “Jesus’ resurrection was just a poor copy... of pagan heroes having descended to Hades and returned.”²⁰⁵ Celsus believed that, in the case of these pagan stories, such heroes simply disappeared for a time and then showed themselves again claiming to have returned from Hades.²⁰⁶ Origen responds to this theory by pointing out that Jesus did not simply disappear, he was crucified publicly.²⁰⁷ It was nothing like such stories of the past. Johnson makes the point that, while there are similar “dying-rising” myths in other cultures, Jesus’ resurrection is significant because the account contains an “unsubstitutable individual whose mysterious identity is not ineffably behind the story but is inseparable from the unsubstitutable events constituting it, with the resurrection as its climax.”²⁰⁸ In Johnson’s opinion, these similar myths contain characters who have no significance. Anyone could take their place in the story without much change. In Jesus’ resurrection, however, no one could take Jesus’ place without the story being completely changed. C. S. Lewis says it more clearly,

The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It *happens* – at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) *under Pontius Pilate*.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁵ Cabal, 119.

²⁰⁶ Origen, 110.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Johnson, 137.

²⁰⁹ C. S. Lewis, “Myth Became Fact,” in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 66-67. (Italics in original.)

The significant difference between these dying-rising myths and Jesus' resurrection is that the story of Jesus can be placed specifically within human history, while other similar-sounding myths have no such connection.

The Origin of the Gospel Accounts

The next category of theories against the integrity of the Gospels involves how we got the Gospel accounts which we currently have. As we observed in West's explanation of where the Gospels came from, much of this work involves simply telling a story which can explain the data we currently have. In contrast to West's explanation, Professor Bart Ehrman offers this explanation,

The Gospels were not written by eyewitnesses, but were written 30-60 years after the events, and are unreliable because they were changed during their oral transmission as evidenced by discrepancies... the resurrection stories result from corrupted oral transmissions twisted over time by Christians zealous to win converts.²¹⁰

The task, then, is to fit such stories with the data we have. Were the Gospels written by the apostles or approved by them, or are they simply the result of corrupted oral traditions? Cabal records yet another explanation:

Disciples in their disappointment over Jesus' death, turned to the scriptures. They found texts that made sense to them that the Messiah would die and be vindicated or exalted... so Christians started circulating the story of his resurrection... Five years later they didn't know where the stories had started. Nobody could go to the tomb to check; the body had decomposed. Believers who knew he had been raised from the dead started having visions of him... On the basis of these stories, narratives were constructed and circulated and eventually we got the Gospels of the New Testament written 30, 40, 50, 60 years later.²¹¹

Again, a logical story; the question remains, which story best fits the data we have? Some call these views the "no access" view of the resurrection. The idea is that there are no true eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection.²¹² Cabal explains his opinion of Ehrman's strategy, "Ehrman utilizes creative reasoning to arrive at his theory... The evidence adduced by Ehrman for all of this consists of alleged inconsistencies in the Gospels coupled with historical

²¹⁰ Cabal, 125.

²¹¹ Ibid., 129.

²¹² Ibid., 125.

methodological naturalism.”²¹³ In response, Wright contends that, even if one were to assume that the Gospels were not written by eyewitnesses,

The very strong historical probability is that when Matthew, Luke and John describe the risen Jesus, they are writing down very early oral tradition, representing three different ways in which the original astonished participants told the stories.²¹⁴

Wright accounts for the discrepancies as simply different points of view telling the same story. Here, we have two different explanations for the same information. A proper examination must attempt to account for all the data currently available. For example, one theory contends that the stories about Jesus’ resurrection spread well after Jesus’ body had decayed so no one could go and confirm the empty tomb claim. Cabal, however, asks, “What of the Jewish practice of collecting the bones into ossuaries after decomposition of the body?”²¹⁵ Ehrman may respond that Jesus was not actually buried in his own tomb as the Gospels record. Professor Ambrose Fleming finds Ehrman’s whole theory to be suspect. According to Fleming,

We take the facts of astronomy on the evidence of astronomers who do not contradict each other. This being so, we can ask ourselves whether it is probable that such book, describing events that occurred about thirty or forty years previously, could have been accepted and cherished if the stories of abnormal events in it were false or mythical.²¹⁶

Fleming does not believe it possible that people who had been alive when Jesus died would have been unable to remember those events well enough to investigate the claims about Jesus’ resurrection. He explains:

No one could now issue a biography of Queen Victoria, who died thirty-one years ago, full of anecdotes which were quite untrue. They would be contradicted at once. They would certainly not be generally accepted and passed on as true. Hence, there is a great improbability that the account of the resurrection given by Mark, which agrees substantially with that given in the other Gospels, is a pure invention. This mythical theory has had to be abandoned because it will not bear close scrutiny.²¹⁷

Fleming believes that it is simply not possible for such stories to be spread about Jesus’ life while so many people who had been there were still living. The data seems to favor those

²¹³ Cabal, 129-130.

²¹⁴ Wright, 611.

²¹⁵ Cabal, 130.

²¹⁶ Smith, 427-428.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 428.

explanations of the origins of the Gospels which show those same accounts to be written or approved by the eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection.

Contradictions in the Gospel Accounts

As we have seen in these theories that seek to discredit the integrity of the Gospels, many of them claim as their starting point the contradictories within the Gospels. For example, Matthew says that there were two women who went to the tomb, Mark names three, Luke names three (with one different name than Mark has) and also adds "the others with them," and John only mentions Mary Magdalene going to the tomb.²¹⁸ The Gospels contain a number of similar differences, which many scholars believe to be indications of corruptions of what originally happened. Scholars have countered these attacks in varied ways. Van den Brink points out, "These discrepancies are largely what might be expected given such an extraordinary event and reflect only minimal adjustments and theological elaboration."²¹⁹ Many adopt this view, using the example that if ten different people saw a car accident, rarely will all of their testimonies be exactly the same. In fact, it is often suspicious when all the testimonies are exactly the same. The further problem with these claims of inconsistencies between the Gospels is that they are "not relevant unless [one] can show them to be irresolvable, lie at the heart of the narrative rather than in the details, and that it's impossible that any one of the Gospels get the facts correct."²²⁰ Pointing to the differences in the Gospel accounts alone does not prove that the Gospels are unreliable, because even one explanation of how these differences could possibly make sense completely invalidates the entire argument. Cabal also points out that these differences are found in the small and inconsequential details rather than in the main important events,

The Gospels all agree that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified in Jerusalem by Roman authority during the Passover feast... He died within several hours and was buried Friday afternoon... Certain women... including Mary Magdalene, who is always named, having observed his interment, visited his tomb early Sunday morning, only to find it empty. Thereafter, Jesus appeared alive from the dead to his disciples, including Peter, who then became proclaimers of the message of his resurrection.²²¹

²¹⁸ Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1, 10; John 20:1

²¹⁹ Brink, "How to speak with intellectual and theological decency on the resurrection of Christ," 415.

²²⁰ Cabal, 127.

²²¹ Ibid.

If the Gospels disagreed on these facts which actually have some weight in this debate, then the discrepancies would require much more explaining. Since they only deal with details that add virtually nothing to the discussion, there really is no reason to dwell on them further.

Philosophical Arguments

We have now dealt with counter-theories that address both the events recorded in the Gospels and which seek to discredit the Gospel accounts. In the last section of this paper, we will examine some of the more philosophical arguments such as consistency, whether or not we can believe someone who died actually came back to life, and assumptions.

Consistency

Consistency is one of the most pointed aspects of this debate. As we read above in the quote from Powell about the historical Jesus, scholars seek to find only what is verifiable about Jesus in a way that is free from both religious and anti-religious bias.²²² This sounds great on paper, but it is quite difficult in practice. For example, Cabal records a debate between William Lane Craig and Bart Ehrman, in which Craig points to the four historical facts (examined above) which can only be explained by the resurrection.²²³ Craig further points out that the majority of New Testament scholars agree that Craig's four points are historically verifiable. Ehrman responds that just because the majority agrees with Craig does not mean they are correct.²²⁴ True, the majority view is not always the correct view. However, Ehrman claims that these scholars "agree with Craig's four points—which seem to infer the resurrection—because they are biased like Craig due to believing NT scripture."²²⁵ Is all the work of these scholars, therefore, to be ignored because they have a religious bias? And what about those who agree with Ehrman? Can they prove that their own work does not contain an anti-religious bias? Both sides would struggle to prove their point of view free from one bias or the other.

Powell's definition of history continues on to say that historians cannot prove the miracles attributed to Jesus verifiable, "at least, not in accord with any criteria that are normally employed for historical research."²²⁶ The struggle, therefore, is consistency. How can we

²²² Powell.

²²³ Cabal, 125.

²²⁴ Ibid., 128.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Powell.

examine a historical figure as unique as Jesus Christ in a way consistent with how we examine any other figure of history? Scholars seem to disagree on this point as well. Whereas Powell says that this is impossible, Professor Craig Keener states, “I contend that if skeptics really treated the Gospels as they treat other historical documents, they would be less skeptical. Using standard historical methods, we can challenge many skeptics’ doubts about Jesus.”²²⁷ Rather than attempt to prove one side or other guilty of inconsistencies, we will only examine two inconsistencies which advocates of the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection must address.

Other Religions on the Resurrection

The first question asks, what do other religions say about the resurrection? If we are to claim that the Gospels are an accurate record of what happened, O’Collins asks, “To what extent is it advisable and even obligatory to consider the claims of other religions about what happened to Jesus after death?”²²⁸ Powell proposes a similar attack on Keener,

Craig Keener, for example, authored a detailed two-volume work on why the miracles attributed to Jesus should be accepted as authentic, historical events. He maintains that a refusal to recognize the historicity of events that are deemed “supernatural” stems from an anti-religious form of bigotry that is at least culturally biased and probably racist. Others wonder if he would apply the same reasoning to miracles reported in the Qu’ran or Book of Mormon.

Are we consistent if we claim that the miracles of the Bible happened but that the miracles recorded in other religious books or what such religions claim about Jesus’ resurrection have no historic value?

Similar Historical Events

The second question regarding consistency asks, how do we deal with similar events recorded in history? O’Collins gives the example of Queen Elizabeth I, who reportedly died in the 1600s, was buried, “but after a month appeared alive, resumed the throne and governed her kingdom for three more years before dying again.”²²⁹ O’Collins asks if it is consistent to attribute this case, “to the knavery and folly of men... even though it was attested by the Queen’s contemporaries and accepted by all the historians who treat of England.”²³⁰ O’Collins does point

²²⁷ Cabal, 122.

²²⁸ O’Collins, 77.

²²⁹ Ibid., 72.

²³⁰ Ibid.

out that this case is significantly different from Jesus' resurrection because "early Christians never proposed that Jesus had been merely reanimated to resume life under normal human conditions and die once again some time later."²³¹ But his point remains clear: in this case, "no amount of evidence and, specifically, no number of alleged appearances of someone who was dead and buried could ever count as a reliable sign that a resurrection had taken place."²³² Are we being consistent if we hold that Jesus' resurrection happened, but Queen Elizabeth I's did not?

These questions of consistency pose some great arguments, not necessarily against the historicity of Jesus' resurrection, but against those who believe it happened. A proper response to these arguments would require a sufficient examination of the historical documents of other religions or similar events in question. This paper does not have the time or space to properly explain them, but for now will simply refer to the above section which dealt with the origin of the Gospels.

Resurrection is Impossible

Now that we have examined the many theories proposed against the historical verification of Jesus' resurrection, we will now turn to the core argument against Jesus' resurrection: it is impossible for someone who has died to come back to life. Granted, not all theories have their base in this axiom, but it is a powerful starting point for many arguments against Jesus' resurrection. Can we really believe that a resurrection actually happened? Cabal explains what he calls the "no analogy" position, "Since the contemporary historian has never experienced a resurrection, he is disallowed from writing about one in the past."²³³ For example, in Ehrman and Craig's debate mentioned above, Ehrman offers the following argument,

Historians can only establish what probably happened in the past, and by definition a miracle is the least probable occurrence. And so, by the very nature of the canons of historical research, we can't claim historically that a miracle probably happened. By definition, it probably didn't. And history can only establish what probably did.²³⁴

²³¹ O'Collins, 72-73.

²³² Ibid., 73.

²³³ Cabal, 126.

²³⁴ Ibid., 125.

Ehrman's line of thought leads to the conclusion, "There cannot be historical probability for an event that defies probability, even if the event did happen."²³⁵ In response, defenders of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection have pointed out that this philosophy really works both ways.

Dr. A. C. Ivy asserts,

On the basis of historical evidence of existing biological knowledge, the scientist who is true to the philosophy of science can doubt the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, but he cannot deny it. Because to do so means that he can prove that it *did not* occur. I can only say that present-day biological science cannot resurrect a body that has been dead and entombed for three days. To deny the resurrection of Jesus Christ on the basis of what biology now knows is to manifest an unscientific attitude according to my philosophy of the true scientific attitude.²³⁶

If historians want to claim that Jesus resurrection did not happen because modern science cannot prove a resurrection to be possible, they really are not being true to the scientific method. Cabal too weighs in with the same argument, "Dr. Ehrman says that the historian cannot say anything about God. Therefore, he cannot say that God's existence is improbable. But if he can't say that, neither can he say that the resurrection of Jesus is improbable. So Dr. Ehrman's position is literally self-refuting."²³⁷ Cabal also points out that this argument really comes across as a reason not to consider the arguments proposed in favor of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. He explains, "No matter how one rules out the possibility of miracles, one has still ruled them out—and has done so arbitrarily. Ehrman's maneuver looks like a smoke screen behind which he avoids responding to the historical data at issue."²³⁸ To dismiss the resurrection simply because one thinks a resurrection is impossible is to ignore the historical data available to us, rather than to carefully and seriously examine it.

Assumptions

Finally, we cannot consider the debate of whether or not Jesus' resurrection is historically verifiable without speaking about our assumptions. Cabal explains,

Judging the probability of an event includes more than just weighing specific evidence, it includes the background knowledge we bring to the table. Background knowledge is everything we know or assume about the world prior to examining any evidence in light of a hypothesis. Background knowledge, such as

²³⁵ Cabal, 126.

²³⁶ Smith, 22. (Italics in original.)

²³⁷ Cabal, 127.

²³⁸ Ibid., 126.

whether God does miracles and we can know them, affects probability that our hypothesis will explain the evidence. What makes probability calculations controversial is finding agreement on the background knowledge, and how prior and posterior probabilities should be understood.²³⁹

These assumptions really rule the entire debate. Van den Brink states that judging the resurrection reports as trustworthy or not really depends on whether or not one believes that an event like the resurrection could happen in the first place.²⁴⁰ If one does not believe a resurrection to be possible, in many cases, no amount of evidence will be able to convince such a person otherwise, though there are exceptions. Wright states, “It will always be possible for ingenious historians to propose yet more variations on the theme of how the early Christian belief could have arisen, and taken the shape it did, without either an empty tomb or appearances of Jesus.”²⁴¹ Furthermore, the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection requires a number of assumptions that many people simply will not share. One must assume the existence of God, “a God who can and does intervene in human history and who, in particular, was specially present, active and revealed in the history of Israel.”²⁴² In addition, Jesus’ resurrection presupposes “some divine revelation communicated through [Israel’s] history.”²⁴³ And still more, it also assumes that we “have some substantially reliable information about his ministry, message and person.”²⁴⁴ Disagreement in these starting points makes debate over whether the resurrection happened or not quite difficult, as we have seen.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we examined the history and importance of apologetics concerning Jesus’ resurrection, what the main source (the Bible) has to say on the issue, and the main arguments for and against the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection. We have seen intelligent points on both sides. We have noted the power prior assumptions bring to the table. But for this paper, we will rest on the following points. Most scholars agree that Jesus died, that he was buried, that he

²³⁹ Cabal, 126.

²⁴⁰ Brink, “How to speak with intellectual and theological decency on the resurrection of Christ,” 412.

²⁴¹ Wright, 694.

²⁴² O’Collins, 69.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

appeared to his disciples after his death, and that the disciples demonstrated a dramatic change in character after these events which lead to the spread of one of the most influential religions in human history. No theory comes as close to explaining all of these events as does the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. No historical evidence suggests anything other than a resurrection. The only true question remaining is this: will you listen to what Jesus has to say?

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