

## THE HISTORICAL VALIDITY OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST FROM THE DEAD

A cynic reportedly quipped to his colleagues, *Gentlemen, it would be easy to start a new religion to compete with Christianity. All the founder would have to do is die and then be raised from the dead.*

But, did Jesus in fact rise from the dead? Is belief in the resurrection of Jesus an illogical leap in the dark or a credible claim which rests in the sufficiency and reliability of the evidences?

### **Does anyone have truth?**

Suppose you don't know the answer, but are willing to inquire. You show up at a seminar on world religions. The first speaker is a young woman who relates a dramatic change in her life from drug addiction to wellness. She attributes it all to Jesus, *I asked Him to come into my life, to bring me deliverance, and He did. I am so happy.*

However, she is followed to the podium by representatives of various faiths -- Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu -- each averring that their religious faith has had a positive impact on them, bringing an inner feeling of congruence and God-connectedness. They are followed by a young man, rather unkempt in appearance, who says *I grew up in a very dysfunctional family, and in recent years lived alone with deep depression. While cooking breakfast one morning, I accidentally flipped an egg too high and it landed on my head. Instantly, I experienced the sensation of warmth over my whole being. I have not been the same since that moment. My whole life has changed. A warm egg on the head will do the same thing for you as it did for me.*

Who do you believe? They all testify from their own subjective experience.

Add to their number the final person who addresses the seminar with a smart smirk: a buoyant confident college coed who says, *I'm glad religion has worked for all these other people, but I don't need any crutches of faith to get through life. I don't believe in anything outside myself and I am so happy to be free of all superstition. If you need a transcendental belief system or a warm egg, have at it -- but, not me. I'm strong enough to stand on my own without beads in my hands, prayers on my lips, a cross around my neck, or a god in my heart.*

Which *testimony* is the true one? Does *truth* even exist?

Experience is not always right.

Imagine the individual who says, *I don't believe in gravity. In fact, I can fly.* She then goes to the top of a ten story building and jumps. As she plummets down, she may be singing at the top of her voice, *Look at me, I'm flying. I feel good. Gravity doesn't exist.* But, within milliseconds, her subjective experience will meet objective reality head on.

How do you know whether what you feel and what's real are the same thing?

### **How is truth established?**

If the reality being tested involves repeatable phenomena -- then the scientific method is your answer. For example, you can drop a ball from the leaning Tower of Pisa every minute for the rest of your life -- and you will always get the same result. It falls to the ground. Therefore, you conclude, gravity exists!

But, what about a phenomenon that is unique, non-repeatable? You use the historical method for validation. For example, the existence of Abraham Lincoln (or any other person) is not provable by the scientific method. Why? Because individuals are unique. They appear once and are gone. How then do we establish the existence of a person? By eye witnesses! What happens when the eye-witnesses die? We rely upon documents (writings, drawings, photographs, etc.) left by the eye-witnesses.

We ask, *Are these witnesses credible?* In Abraham Lincoln's case -- no one is alive today who eye-witnessed him. So we must assess his existence on the basis of documents -- including the ones he himself left. If a revisionist comes along and says, *No, Lincoln never was president -- that's all a fabrication. I know in my heart he was never president,* we would regard such a person as foolish. We'd have the same opinion of one who said, *Well, I don't really know if Lincoln existed or not. I haven't made up my mind yet -- but, I support people on both sides of the question so long as they are sincere.*

*Nonsense!* you would say! And, rightly so! For a person to remain undecided about what is so clearly decided is the height of folly. That's not broad-minded, but empty-minded.

How do we examine the claims of Jesus? Through application of the historical method. The scientific method only tells us that people are born, live, and die. That's very predictable. What do you do with a claim that One Person in human history lived, died, *and lived again*? You apply the same kind of analysis you would to any other claimed event in human history -- you look at the testimony of the eye-witnesses and the totality of the circumstances surrounding the purported event. You sift through the evidence, and if the witnesses are no longer alive, you evaluate the documents they left behind.

### **Non-debatable facts about Jesus**

What can be known regarding Jesus of Nazareth? Look first at the historical factors commonly accepted by most all persons of sound mind who have thought on the subject -- regardless of their own religious faith or lack thereof.

1. *Jesus lived.* Born a Jew in the first century of the Christian era, no serious historian casts doubt today on the historicity of Jesus. Argument rages as to whether or not He performed miracles, whether the words He spoke were His own or the invention of His followers, whether He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven -- but no debate exists on the fact he is an historical figure: a real man who lived in real time.

This immediately separates him from legendary figures like Paul Bunyan, Alice in Wonderland, the Tooth Fairy, Easter Rabbit, and Santa Claus.

One of the more recent assaults on the historical validity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ was written by Hugh Schonfield in his book *The Passover Plot* -- but, even he presumes without question the existence of Jesus as a person.

Why? The existence of Jesus is attested by the literature of the New Testament, the activity of the apostles, the sudden emergence of the Church, Jewish and Roman literature, and the overwhelming verdict of civilization.

Further, there is no way to explain the emergence of the Christian faith without Him, even as one could not account for Islam without Mohammed, Buddhism without Buddha, or Mormonism without Joseph Smith.

2. *He was crucified in Jerusalem.* No credible reasons exist for disputing the written eyewitness accounts of Jesus' contemporaries, as recorded in the New Testament, that Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem at the instigation of the religious leadership and with approval of the Roman governor Pilate.

To deny the crucifixion would require a plausible alternative explanation for Jesus' demise -- and no such idea was ever launched even by the opponents of Christian Faith in the first centuries of the Church's existence.

3. *He was considered dead.* Disagreement exists as to whether or not Jesus died from the crucifixion -- a most horrible means of execution. His followers said, *Yes*; others centuries later said *No*. Whether or not he died will be left to the discussion that follows -- sufficient for now to say that no dispute exists that His sufferings on the cross rendered Him as one who appeared dead.

4. *He was buried in an accessible tomb.* The earliest Christian documents record Jesus was taken down from the cross, prepared for burial by His followers, and laid in a new and borrowed tomb which was sealed and watched by a guard from the religious leadership who feared His followers would steal the body within three days (see Matthew 27:57-66). Schonfield holds the tomb was neither sealed nor guarded, but even he does not challenge the fact that both Jesus' opponents and partisans knew where He lay.

5. *His followers preached Him as raised from the dead.* The dramatic spine-tingling hair-raising ecstatic news echoes across the centuries, *He is risen!* That's the claim made by Jesus' followers -- but, is it true? We'll examine that assertion shortly, but for now, simply note that no one -- absolutely no one -- disputes that the disciples of Jesus proclaimed Him as

resurrected from the dead. They did so right from the beginning, in the very city where the crucifixion occurred -- Jerusalem.

6. *The religious opponents of Jesus were anxious to discredit the preaching of the resurrection.* The New Testament tells us the enemies of Jesus were so desperate to disprove the preaching of His resurrection that they bribed the grave guards into saying His disciples had stolen the body (Matthew 28:11-15). Many have difficulty accepting the idea that religious leaders would act so nefariously -- but, the fact remains that a debunking of the resurrection would have silenced the earliest Christians. How can one preached a raised Christ if a dead Jesus could be produced? The authority structure of the religious leadership, their continued livelihood and role as leaders -- all this was at stake. If Jesus had risen, then they were wrong and discredited. They had ample motive to disprove the resurrection; but, were they able to do so?

7. *Horrible persecution occurred to those preaching the resurrection of Jesus.* The opponents of the first generation of Christians did not relegate their opposition to civil debates in lecture halls. They assaulted and battered the preachers of the resurrection, threatened them, threw them into prisons, severely beat them, and even killed them. Why such animosity? If the corpse of Jesus is available, why bother to persecute anyone who preaches its resurrection? Just put the dead body on display in front of the preacher, and then have a good laugh all around.

No serious historian doubts the lightning spread of Christianity across the Graeco-Roman world of the first century. Without automobile, airplane, telephone, fax, or modem -- the *good news* went far and wide. Because of lacking today's modern communications, the followers of Jesus could not continue to collaborate on their story once they had dispersed to the nations. Yet, they remained consistent and insistent -- each in their separate scattered locations -- that they had seen Jesus of Nazareth after He had risen from the dead. None recanted their story, and many were put to death or endured unspeakable suffering for insisting the story was true.

8. *His body is missing.* The corpse of Jesus disappeared from the tomb. Where is it? Why was it never found, or produced by anyone? From the first century to this day, no one has ever stepped forward with a show and tell, *Here is the dead body of Jesus of Nazareth.*

### **What Happened?**

The alternatives narrow down to a few. All theories, over twenty centuries, can be boiled down to eight possibilities as to why the corpse of Jesus disappeared from human history.

1. *The followers of Jesus stole the body.* This is the very first theory advanced to counter the claim that Jesus rose from the dead (see Matthew 28:13). To hold this position, you must discount the New Testament assertion that the gravesite was guarded by soldiers, placed there with Roman permission by religious leaders fearful that his disciples would steal the body in order to perpetrate a hoax (see Matthew 27:62-66). An armed guard would have been sufficient deterrent to a dispirited rag-tag group of loyalists to Jesus.

Additionally, what about motive? Why would the disciples of Jesus even want to steal a dead Jesus? He had been given an honorable burial, and the disciples do not appear to be macabre individuals who would disturb the gravesite of a revered friend. Only hours before His death they had all forsaken Him and fled -- what would account for their sudden bravery and duplicity in stealing the body? The plain fact is they were in no shape psychologically to engineer a hoax. The crucifixion left them devastated and afraid for their own lives.

2. *Jesus did not really die on the cross.* This view has been called *the swoon theory.* Mohammed held to this position, as stated in The Koran: *Surely we have killed the Messiah, son of Mary, the Apostle of Allah, and they did not kill him nor did they crucify him.*

If Mohammed is right, why was the body of Jesus never produced to refute the preaching of the resurrection?

The modern non-Christian scholar, Hugh J. Schonfield, wrote The Passover Plot in which he alleged the following scenario: *It is the moment before sundown in Jerusalem. On the hill of Golgotha three bodies are suspended on crosses. Two, the thieves are dead. The third appears*

*so. This is the drugged body of Jesus of Nazareth, the man who planned his own crucifixion, who contrived to be given a soporific potion to put him into a deathlike trance . . .*

What's interesting about Schonfield is, that as a Dead Sea Scrolls first century Judaism scholar, he knows a more credible theory is needed than those used in the twenty centuries before him to rebut the resurrection. Schonfield gives us a Machiavellian Jesus who psychologically manipulates events to fit Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22, stampeding Jewish authorities and the Roman military into crucifying Him. Jesus' plan of being drugged into unconsciousness on the cross goes awry when a soldier thrusts a spear into his side. His "smart" disciples, such as Joseph of Arimathea, were supposed to have gotten him down unconscious from the cross, sprung him out of the tomb and into exile far away while His "dumb" disciples (Peter and company) swallowed the resurrection hoax. But, Jesus never made it to retirement. Schonfield says Jesus died in the tomb from the spear wound, living just long enough to give a deathbed wish to the "smart" disciples, *Go tell my [dumb] disciples I have risen.*

A legion of logical problems faces Schonfield (which unfortunately the brevity of this essay doesn't permit time to rebut) -- including the fact he is the first person in twenty centuries to advance such a view. It's like waiting another nineteen hundred years for someone to say, *Lincoln was not really shot at Ford's Theater in 1865. He faked his assassination in order to retire in southern France.* It's a rather quixotic idea -- but no one thought it a possibility at the time.

Granted, it will be charged that the New Testament witnesses were biased. But, simply because my wife sees another driver cross a double yellow line and hit our car head on does not invalidate her as a witness. Here is the witness of the first Christian documents: Jesus said He would die. The religious leadership continually sought his destruction. The soldiers at the cross said he was dead (John 19:34, professional executioners generally have a knack for that sort of pronouncement). Witnesses watching him die said He breathed His last (Luke 23:46). The preaching recorded in the book of Acts emphasizes his violent death by terms such as slay

(2:33), kill (3:15), and murderers (7:52). The entirety of the New Testament rests upon the asserted fact that Jesus died on the cross.

Those like Schonfield who advocate a revisionist dressed-up-in-modern-clothes Swoon Theory also do not account for the fact that had Jesus survived crucifixion, it would have left Him emaciated. But, the disciples of Jesus preached Him as dynamically alive.

Further, if Jesus pulled off such a hoax, there should be no respect for Him in the common culture. How can anyone even say he is a good teacher, if at the core He is a liar or a lunatic?

Finally, if He did not die on the cross, when did He die? Where was He buried? Why was His corpse never produced? How can the emergence of His large contemporary following be explained, men and women willing to stake their lives -- not for His teaching per se (there have been many who would die for someone who taught them ethical or moral lessons) -- but, for what He did, rising from the dead.

3. *The Romans took the body.* 4. *The religious leadership took the body.*

Both these assertions, made centuries ago, can be laid to rest easily. If either the Romans or the religious leadership took the body -- they would have immediately produced it the moment the apostles began preaching Jesus as raised from the dead. Nothing like a corpse to end a passionate sermon on resurrection!

5. *The women went to the wrong tomb.* This view was advanced because of the accounts in the Gospels of women arriving at the tomb early on Easter morning. Rather than meeting an angel, as claimed, they actually met a gardener whom they mistook for a heavenly being. When he tried to point out they were at the wrong tomb, *He is not here*, they falsely assumed Jesus had risen and ran to tell his disciples the news. Of course, the rebuttal to this theory is that if the women went to the wrong tomb, then all someone had to do, in follow-up, was go to the right tomb -- which the opponents of Jesus would certainly have done under this scenario.

6. *The body of Jesus evaporated.* The few who advocated this view suggested that in the cool recesses of a first century Jewish tomb -- a most remarkable chemical interaction took place upon the corpse of Jesus. Poof! He vaporized! While this would explain the Gospel evidence of grave clothes not in disarray (John 20:6-7), as well as explain why the corpse was never found -- it doesn't explain how the followers of Jesus underwent such fundamental changes in their personalities -- from being fearful to bold. This view is even harder to believe in than the resurrection itself for it suggests not a divine intervention, but a naturalistic phenomenon that has never been known to occur on any other corpse. It holds nature intervened, but God didn't. The view cannot, however, account for the New Testament witness that the stone over the doorway of the tomb was rolled away nor can it explain why the early followers of Jesus insisted He had personally appeared to them after His entombment -- eating and talking with them, as well as being touched by them.

7. *The disciples were victims of hallucination.* This view suggests that the purported post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to His followers took place in their minds and not in real time and space. However, hallucinations occur to individuals and not to groups *en masse*. And, if the preaching of the resurrection resulted from hallucinations, then a trip to the grave to produce the corpse of Jesus would have quickly brought everyone back to reality. Finally, what would account for the hallucinations abruptly ending after forty days?

8. *The followers of Jesus told the truth -- He had risen.* Why should anyone believe their account?

### **Credible evidence**

By temperament and training the disciples of Jesus were not people of a disposition to create a religion. They represent a cross section of ordinary people living in Israel at the time of Jesus. Unlike Marx, Lenin, or other reformers, they were not engaged in an intellectual quest to locate some key to reform society.

What happened? Luke's Gospel tells the story of two followers of Jesus, Cleopas and an unnamed disciple, returning the seven miles from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus the very morning of the resurrection. They are pictured as *sad*, scattering because they were shattered. Hope is in the past tense: *We had hoped*, they said, *that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel*. They were disappointed and disillusioned with Jesus.

And, they were not easily duped or gullible. They had already heard a report that some of the women from their company had gone to the tomb at daybreak and returned saying Christ was risen. *But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense* (Luke 24:11). They didn't even bother to go to the tomb and check out the story.

Two others did: Peter and John (John 20:1-9). Three Greek words for the verb *to see* are employed to describe their visit to the grave of Jesus. First, there is a cursory or surface look: *John reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in [blepo] at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in (vv.4,5)*. A quick look at evidence does not prompt any conclusion. Peter, arriving second, *went into the tomb. He saw [theoreo] the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen (vv. 6,7)*. This was not a casual look, but one of taking things in, observing more closely, seeing critically and carefully. It also does not result in any conclusion being drawn about what the evidence means. *Finally the other disciple (John) who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw [horao] and believed (v.8)*. This third look was one of comprehension.

John sized up the evidence and drew inferences from it. What could explain the grave clothes appearing in such a neat and folded manner? If enemies of Jesus had stolen His body, they would not have taken time to unfold and refold the clothes. Why would they have carried away the corpse naked into the night? If they would so desecrate a tomb, why would they not also desecrate the clothes? And, if friends of Jesus had stolen his body -- why? He had had a

decent burial. What friend of Jesus would desecrate His grave? Who would have had courage in the midst of such grief to try to rob a guarded and sealed tomb?

Only one logical explanation fit -- and John knew it. He deduced from the facts that Jesus had risen, even though he himself had not yet seen the risen Christ nor had he understood from the Scripture the necessity of Christ's resurrection (v. 9).

But, these eye-witnesses of Jesus had even better evidence than that found at the gravesite -- the risen Lord appeared to them. *After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days . . .*(Acts 1:3).

The lives of these followers were radically changed. If the resurrection did not happen, how can you account for that change? What makes each of them face persecution without a single denial? How do you account for the fact that they never defended themselves with violence nor advanced their cause by violence? How do you explain their insistence on moral purity if, at the core, they are liars?

The earliest history of the church, the book of Acts, records that two members were struck dead by God's Spirit for misrepresenting how much they had given in the offering (Acts 5). If so heavy a punishment existed for what most regard as a small lie, how much more so would God punish those who told a really big lie -- if the resurrection story was fake?

Our culture separates private character from public conduct -- not so the early followers of Jesus. They staked their message and very lives on His credibility and theirs.

Additionally, the resurrection is preached in Jerusalem itself -- where it occurred, not out in the boonies where gullible people could be duped. Jerusalem was filled with those who had eye-witnessed the crucifixion, heard the rumors of the resurrection and appearances by Jesus, and knew the corpse had disappeared. At great danger to themselves, in the very city where He was executed for holding himself out to be the Son of God and Messiah, the followers of Jesus boldly declare: *This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and*

*you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead . . .(Acts 2:22-24).*

What accounts for their courage and conviction? They knew the real story. Jesus had risen from the dead on the third day, as He said. And, they knew who the real liars were. It was not only the followers of Jesus who knew He had risen -- but, also His enemies. In fact, the opponents of Jesus were among the first to empirically know of the resurrection for they heard the first-hand report of the tomb guards they had hired.

What did these opponents do with that information, reported to them by their own soldiers? They launched a cover-up far worse than Watergate. *When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."* So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed (Matthew 28:12-15). Like the enemies of Jesus, your conduct can fly in the face of reason if you are disposed to evil. The first persons to disbelieve the resurrection did so not because their head was unconvinced, but because their heart was darkened and rebellious.

### **Your response**

Who do you believe -- Jesus and His followers or those who opposed Him? Why is it important what you believe?

Remember that Christianity is the only Faith which bases truth upon what its Founder did, not just on what He said. Christians openly admit, *And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:14-15).*

Some say, Jesus did not rise again from the dead, but He was a great moral teacher. Not so. If His followers lied about Him, then He was a poor teacher of truth; and, if He lied about Himself, He should be disgraced and undeserving of a following.

Jesus taught, *I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me* (John 14:6). How do we know He's telling the truth -- that He is the only way to God? By His resurrection from the dead. If Jesus did not rise again, His words have no more authority than that of any other human being.

What does the resurrection mean to you? Everything -- if you will respond to this call from an eyewitness of the Risen Christ: *if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved* (Romans 10:9). To be saved is to be forgiven of sin, to be in right relationship with God, and to receive God's gift of eternal life -- all that hinges on Jesus' resurrection from the dead and your heart belief in evidence that demands a personal verdict, *He is risen!*

From a strictly rational view, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the only satisfactory conclusion that may be reached when all the evidences are weighed. From a personal experiential point of view, the ongoing presence of Jesus Christ living in your life by the power of the Holy Spirit brings you into true, loving, and joyful relationship with God. In the last analysis, faith is not a leap in the dark. It's resting in the sufficiency of the evidences.

The late William Sangster, an English Methodist minister of this century, became seriously ill with progressive muscular atrophy two years before his death. For those final years he endured suffering, but with good courage. On Easter day, in the grips of the disease, unable to walk or speak, he wrote to his daughter, *It is terrible to wake up on Easter morning and have no voice with which to shout, "He is risen!" -- but it would be still more terrible to have a voice and not want to shout!*

Oh, I want to shout! I hope you do too! *Jesus is risen from the dead!*