

The Historical Argument for the Resurrection of Jesus

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Part I: The Nature of a Historical Proof

No fact about a historical figure or event can be proven with 100% certitude. All historical arguments fall within the realm of probability. This is simply the nature of historical inquiry. So the argument here only claims to establish the divinity of Jesus with some degree of probability.

The nature of historical knowledge is inductive - in other words it is probable reasoning and does not speak in terms of mathematically “airtight” arguments. It’s possible that the sources we have for any historical event are lying to us. *But the question really is; is it plausible or likely?* While many things are logically possible, this does not mean they are reasonable given the evidence. This is the best that can be done given the nature of historical study.

Historians use several criteria to help them establish historical facts. It is not that these criteria again establish an event as factual with absolute certainty, but again that they are reasonable criteria that give us some reasonable claim to probability that an event occurred. There are several of these criteria, but a couple of examples are:

1. *The Criterion of Embarrassment* – the gospel writers would not have gone out of their way to record material that was either an embarrassment or an obstacle to their purpose. Embarrassing material about Jesus would have been suppressed or softened in light of any later “gospel elaboration”. Examples: Jesus not knowing the day or the hour of the end times, a sinless Jesus being baptized by an inferior John the Baptist, etc. In short, the early Christians were “stuck with” certain facts about Jesus and so recorded them even though such facts were counterproductive to their cause of evangelism. The recording of these embarrassing facts indicates a conservative bent and intent to relay the truth and not fantasy.
2. *The Criterion of Multiple Attestation* – details that appear in more than one source are *more likely* to be authentic (something found in both Mark and Q for example, or Matthew and Paul, is more likely to be true); i.e. the feeding of the five thousand is found in all four Gospels. More striking is Jesus speaking of the “Kingdom of God”, which appears in nearly every source we have about Jesus; Mark, Q, M, L, John and Paul.

These criteria “pull out” more details that can likely be taken as historical fact. We’ll talk more about these later.

It is important to remember that the argument does not take the Biblical literature as writings of faith, but simply as historical documents. No assumption of faith is presupposed.

Part II: The Argument

The argument holds that a) Jesus claimed to be divine and b) backed up the claim with his rising from the dead. Given his claim and the miraculous support he gave for it, it is reasonable to hold

that he was who he claimed to be. This is inferred from three main facts to which a majority of New Testament critics agree.¹

Three Basic Facts Needing an Explanation

- a. The empty tomb
- b. The post-resurrection appearances
- c. The origin of the disciples faith

A. *The empty tomb*: We know the tomb of Jesus was found empty because;

1. The story is very old and lacks indications of legendary development (Paul implies the empty tomb in the early creedal passage 1Cor 15:4),

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, *that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve*. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1Cr 15:3-8)

This a passage that is widely held to be a translation of an Aramaic original hymn or creed dating to within just a few years of Christ's death.

2. *The empty tomb is in every source we have* – it is in all 4 Gospels and Paul – satisfying the *criterion of multiple attestation*. So all of the available evidence suggests the tomb was empty, and thus there is no good reason to think otherwise.
3. The Gospels report that the empty tomb was discovered by *women* (criterion of embarrassment - women were considered untrustworthy in ancient Palestine),
4. *The reply of Jesus' enemies, admits the empty tomb* -The empty tomb is presupposed by the Jewish rejoinder “the disciples stole the body”, Moreover, *it would have been impossible for the disciples to proclaim the resurrection and the empty tomb in Jerusalem, if the tomb was not in fact empty*. The Jewish authorities anxious to crush the Jesus movement could have easily disproved the proclamation of resurrection by showing that the tomb was not empty at all. That they did not take this obvious and definitive refutation, and instead stood helplessly by, can only be explained by the fact that they could not have taken it. *The tomb, therefore, must have been empty*.

B. *The post-Resurrection appearances*: We know that certain people had experiences *that they believed* to be appearances of the risen Jesus after his death because;

1. These appearances occur in every source we have – its in all four Gospels and Paul, which indicates their historical trustworthiness given the *criterion of multiple attestation*.
2. That very early creedal passage from Paul in 1Cor 15: 6-8 attests to these appearances given that this passage comes from a very early source in

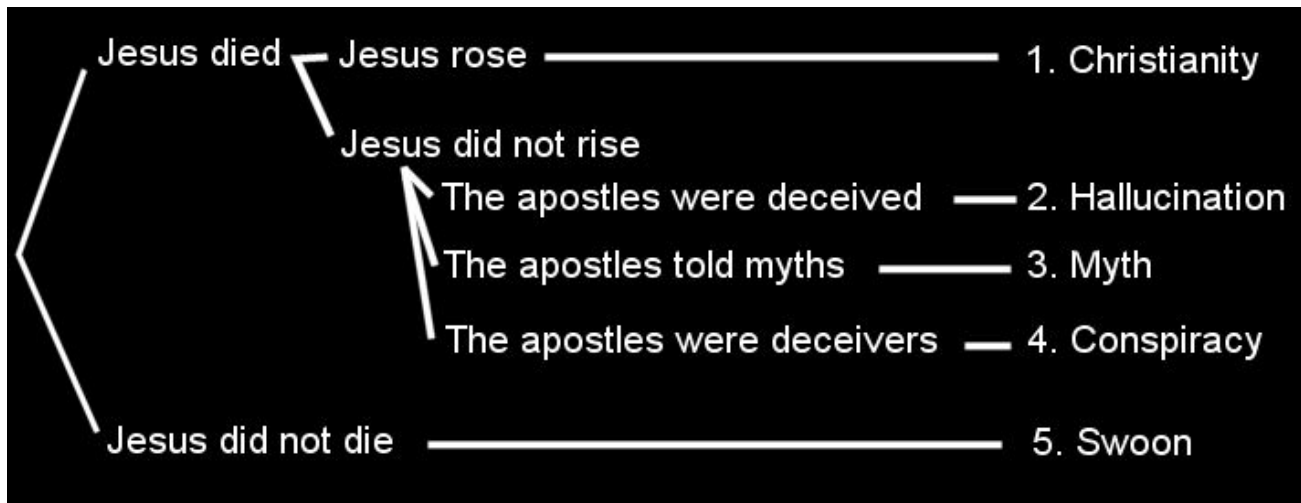
¹ This listing is from William Lane Craig, *The Son Rises: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Eugene, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1981)

Christianity indicates that the post-resurrection appearances are not a later embellishment by the Church, but go back to the very beginning.

3. No scholar really contests this point – it is accepted by nearly every critical scholar that *something* happened to those people in ancient Palestine that they at least *thought* were the appearances of the risen Jesus.

C. *The origin of the disciple's faith:* The Resurrection of Jesus was at the heart of the Christian message. While skeptics may not admit that Jesus rose from the dead, they do admit at least the disciples believed that he did and that was the central point in the Gospel proclamation.

So those are the three historical facts we have. Now the question is, Can any naturalistic explanation suffice in covering all of these facts while yet refraining from unnecessary complexity? Which theory about the data can account for what happened on that Easter morning? *There are only five reasonably possible options:*



The argument holds that all naturalistic attempts to account for the data fail and thus Christianity is the most reasonable alternative. Here's why:

The Swoon Objection: Jesus Did Not Die

Reply:

- Jesus could not have survived crucifixion. Crucifixion meant death by asphyxiation. When one is in the low position on the cross, they cannot breathe. One must push themselves up with their legs (in Jesus case on nailed feet!) to get a breath. If one is in the low position for a length of time, say 30 minutes, you don't need a medical license to know they are dead. *The Roman soldiers were accustomed to crucifixion and death, and they pronounced Jesus dead.* Moreover, normally a technique known as *crurifragium* was used, this was a large club used to break the legs of someone on a cross preventing them from pushing up and getting a breath which of course makes their death come much more quickly. The Gospels explicitly tell us that *Jesus' legs did not need to be broken* because he was already dead.

- *Coup de Grace* death blow - The Gospels also tell us that Jesus was pierced in the side with a lance and that water and blood poured from the wound. This lance thrust in the side would have finished him had he not been dead already. From this wound flowed a mixture of blood and water (John 19:34), a proof that physical death had occurred. This detail alone, and its confirmation by modern medical experts, strongly validates the claim that this narrative is an eyewitness account. An article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (21 March 1986) concluded:

Clearly, the weight of historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead before the wound to his side was inflicted and supports the traditional view that the spear, thrust between his right rib, probably perforated not only the right lung but also the pericardium and heart and thereby ensured his death. Accordingly, interpretations based on the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge. [1463]

- A critique from the 19th century by liberal theologian D.F. Strauss decisively refuted the swoon theory. His argument was this - In addition to Jesus mysteriously surviving crucifixion, the improbability of a nearly dead Jesus rolling back the huge stone to his tomb, getting past the guards and walking for miles on wounded feet – the largest problem of all still remained. *A weakened, bleeding, sweating, pale, limping, gasping, half-dead Jesus knocking on the door of the Upper Room would never have convinced the disciples that He was the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings, and the Master over death. They wouldn't have proclaimed the Resurrection; they would have called a doctor!* Its important to note that since Strauss' critique, no scholar has held to the view that Jesus didn't die on the cross. So one can say, if you'll pardon the pun, Strauss's critique *killed* the swoon theory.

The Conspiracy Objection: The Apostles Were Liars

Reply:

- *Liars do not make martyrs.* Willingness to die for a belief may not prove the belief itself, but it does show that the martyr is sincere in his conviction (hence not a deceiver).
- *No reasonable motive:* As Boston College Professors Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli put it; "There could be no possible motive for such a lie. Lies are always told for some selfish advantage. What advantage did the "conspirators" derive from their "lie"? They were hated, scorned, persecuted, excommunicated, imprisoned, tortured, exiled, crucified, boiled alive, roasted, beheaded, disemboweled and fed to lions -- hardly a catalog of perks!"²
- *The Jewish polemic that the "disciples stole the body" is ridiculous.* First, how could the guard know it was the *apostles* who stole the body? They were allegedly sleeping! Secondly, it is inconceivable that the apostles who were so timid during the Passion would suddenly risk their lives and get the courage to steal the body. How could timid fishermen overpower Roman guards or quietly roll back a huge stone while they slept? Third, what possible gain then could there be from preaching a fraudulent Resurrection?

² Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli, *The Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, Intervarsity Press 1994) 195-196

Persecution, torture, and death were the obvious result of perpetrating this “lie”. In light of this absurd proposition, no scholar today holds this view. As William Lane Craig rightfully argues “I cannot emphasize strongly enough that *no modern biblical scholar would for a moment entertain the theory that the disciples conspired together to steal the corpse and then lie about the resurrection appearances.* It is utterly out of the question. The fact that this issue is still batted back and forth at the popular level is sad testimony to the terrible lack of communication between the specialist and the man on the street. The theory has been dead for nearly two hundred years.”³

- Furthermore, it’s unreasonable to think that non-believers became lying believers? *Why would Saul the Pharisee lie?* He was a persecutor of Christians and his goal was to stomp out Christianity! *Why would James the “brother of the Lord” lie?* He didn’t believe in Jesus at first anyway! *Would the 500 witnesses participate in this “lie” by the Apostles?*
- Lastly and most importantly, the enemies of Jesus anxious to eradicate Christianity could have easily nipped this “lie” in the bud by going to the tomb and getting the body of Jesus for all to see. That they did not take this obvious refutation must be because they *could not* have taken it, which means of course that the apostles were not liars.

The Hallucination Objection: The Apostles Were Mistaken (aka “The Elvis Objection”)

Reply:

- *The Appearances of Christ do not have the earmarks of a hallucination:* Hallucination cannot account for the appearances because hallucinations are brief, local, private, and non-life changing. The appearances of the risen Jesus, on the other hand, transformed the Apostle’s lives, were geographically dispersed, occurred to numerous witnesses and sometimes to entire groups of people, and continued over a long period of time. Even unbelievers (James) and his enemies (Saul) experienced them. Paul said some of these witnesses were still alive in his day and implied that they can be questioned (1Cor 15:6) – something he never could have gotten away with it if were not true. All of these factors are incompatible with hallucination.
- Ask yourself - Can a possible hallucination be convincing enough to make *you* want to completely change your life; knowing that this change will make you an outcast of your society, abused, ridiculed, and eventually bring about your death? Wouldn’t you at least check out the tomb to see if it was empty first? No one claiming to see Elvis has been willing to die for that belief.
- *Hallucinations do not eat* – the Risen Christ did⁴. *Hallucinations cannot be touched* – the Risen Christ was⁵
- Kreeft and Tacelli; “Five hundred separate Elvis sightings may be dismissed, but if five hundred simple fishermen in Maine saw, touched and talked with him at once, in the same town, that would be a different matter.”⁶
- *Finally and most notably, the objection lacks explanatory scope:* what about the empty tomb? Enemies of Jesus could have easily disproved this “hallucination” of the Apostle’s

³ William Lane Craig, 36 emphasis in original)

⁴ Lk 24:42-43; Jn 21:1-14

⁵ Mt 28:9; Lk 24:39; Jn 20:27

⁶ *Handbook of Christian Apologetics,*

by merely producing the body of Jesus. *There is no empty tomb of Elvis*. As Dr. William Lane Craig observes; “That is the decisive argument against the religious hallucination hypothesis. For it is impossible that Jesus’ followers could have believed He was raised from the dead, if the corpse were there before them in the tomb.”⁷

The Myth Objection: The Gospels are Inaccurate

Reply:

- First – this is simply false - the Gospels are historically reliable (as we have argued earlier). In addition, the three facts of the empty tomb, the post resurrection appearances, and the origin of the disciple’s faith stand on their own independent reasons and thus are beyond reasonable doubt.
- There was not enough time for myth to develop. Myths about events develop centuries after their occurrence.
- The Resurrection story goes back to the very beginning (1Cor 15) and not a later elaboration
- Finally we have to ask who would be responsible for this myth? The Apostles? If so then they were either lying or mistaken which means the myth objection *collapses* back into the conspiracy or hallucination objection and we have already shown these options to be unreasonable.

That covers all four naturalistic alternatives. So by a simple process of elimination, none of those 4 naturalistic alternatives - Swoon, conspiracy, hallucination, and myth, can sufficiently account for what we know. This leaves only one answer, the traditional answer as to what happened that Easter morning – Jesus really did rise from the dead.

Again it needs to be stressed that this argument does not attempt to say that one can know that Jesus rose from the dead with some sort of mathematical certitude. History does not allow us to speak in term of absolutes. History seeks an inference to the best explanation; that is, selecting from a pool of live options that is in best accord with the available evidence. The argument here attempts to show that the Resurrection hypothesis is the most plausible explanation of the historical facts as we know them and this is just as valid of a methodology as any other historical inquiry.

Conclusion – Christianity: Jesus is Divine

All other possible options attempting to account for these three historical facts concerning Jesus’ death fail. From this we can reasonably accept the traditional answer concerning those facts, namely, *that Jesus really did rise from the dead and thus verified His claim to divinity.*

⁷ Craig, *The Son Rises*, 36