

Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?

Text: 1 Corinthians 15:12-19

We now come to an absolutely critical topic: “Did Jesus rise from the dead?” If this can be shown to be false then Christians all over the world might as well back up their spiritual suitcases and go home. With no resurrection of Jesus there is no Christianity. It rises and falls on this one fact. The resurrection sharply distinguishes Christianity from all other religions. The bones of Abraham, Mohammed, Buddha, and Confucius are still here on earth. But Christians believe Jesus’ tomb is empty.

A reasonable challenge to the skeptic is this: If it can be proved that Jesus really rose from the dead, will you believe in him? The resurrection, if true, provides a concrete, factual, empirical proof that life has hope and meaning. If the resurrection did not occur then we are cosmic orphans, abandoned to wallow in obscurity along with 6 billion other people. Is there a proof for the resurrection of Jesus? There is and it is rooted in the historical data of the NT.

Why so important? 1 Cor 15:12-19 (NIV)

12 But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? **13** If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. **14** And if Christ has not been raised, *our preaching is useless and so is your faith.* **15** 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. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. **16** For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. **17** And if Christ has not been raised, *your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.* **18** Then *those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.* **19** *If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.*

The Argument for the Resurrection: Five Possible Theories

Let’s first define what is meant by resurrection. It literally means “the standing up of the corpses.” The resurrection of Jesus did not involve a ghost, resuscitation (out of body experience), reincarnation, vision, legend, or myth. It was the raising up of a man’s corpse, completely dead for three days, which retained the personality and identity of Jesus. It was not arriving at Nirvana as the Eastern religions would suggest since there was no loss of personal individuality into the One or All which is by definition the sought after Nirvana.

What happened then on that first Easter morning? Or more specifically, what theory can account for data contained in the NT texts and the fact that a Christian religion exists today? There are five possibilities as diagrammed below.

Jesus died	Jesus rose		1. Christianity
	Jesus didn't rise	the apostles were deceived	2. Hallucination
		the apostles were myth-makers	3. Myth
		the apostles were deceivers	4. Conspiracy
Jesus didn't die			5. Swoon

These are the only possibilities unless you want to invoke some type of flying saucer and Martian theory or some such thing. Given these theories Christians certainly admit that the resurrection is not directly observable, but the data are directly observable. If the data refute theories 2-5 then we will have proved the truth of the resurrection.

Refutation of the Swoon Theory (Jesus did not really die but resuscitated)

- 1 Jesus could not have survived crucifixion. Roman law even laid the death penalty on any soldier who botched up a crucifixion. Soldiers simply would not fail at this point.
- 2 The fact that the Roman soldier did not break Jesus' legs (John 19:31-33) means the soldier was sure that he was dead.
- 3 John an eyewitness saw blood and water come from Jesus' pierced side (John 19:34-35). If the spear in his side did not kill him then the massive internal injuries as evidenced by the blood and water did (likely by asphyxiation). See "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ" (Journal of the American Medical Association-JAMA, (1986) 255:1455-1463) for a detailed description the physiological consequences of death by crucifixion through the eyes of physicians.
- 4 The body was totally encased in winding sheets and entombed. The body was apparently wrapped in 100 pounds of spices as was the custom (John 19:38-42)..
- 5 The postresurrection appearances convinced the disciples that Jesus was alive (John 20:19-29). To fearlessly worship a half-dead, staggering sick man and refer to him as God would be strange indeed.
- 6 How were the Roman guards overpowered by a swooning corpse?
- 7 How could a swooning half-dead man have moved the great stone at the door of the tomb? Who moved the stone if not an angel? No skeptic has ever answered this question.
- 8 If Jesus awoke from a swoon, where did he go? With a past like Jesus' you would expect to find some data on his post-death life. There is none.
- 9 Most simply, the Swoon theory turns into the Conspiracy theory or the Hallucination theory because the disciples testified that Jesus did not swoon but really died.

Refutation of the Conspiracy Theory

Why couldn't the disciples have made up the whole story?

- 1 There is no evidence from any historical data that the resurrection was a fake, a lie, or a deliberate deception. Even under the most extreme of torture, not one of the twelve Apostles, as far as can be known, "let the cat out of the bag" that the whole resurrection story was a hoax. The human heart would seem to be too fickle to imagine that not one of the twelve would explain the hoax, if indeed it was such.

2 If the Apostles made up the story they were some of the most brilliant, creative, and clever writers in all of history to produce such an enduring story.

3 The character of the disciples argues against a conspiracy. They were honest, simple, common peasants. They willingly died for their “conspiracy”. Nothing proves sincerity like martyrdom. How can you explain their radical transformation from fearful fisherman to bold proclaimers of the resurrection, if it were not true. There is an effect, what then is the cause?

4 What was the motive for their lie? To be tortured, burned, boiled alive, sawn in two, fed to lions? Some motive! Many have died for a lie without knowing it to be true (Jim Jones’ followers) but to knowingly die for a lie is a different matter.

5 If the resurrection was a hoax, the Jews needed to only produce the corpse and that would have been the end of it. The Jews and Romans were in this together so getting the body would not have been a problem. If the disciples stole the body, how in the world would unarmed fisherman and peasants overpower the Roman guard, move the stone, and take the body? A Roman guard consisted of 4 to 16 men and each man was trained to protect six feet of ground; these were not countryside peasants but battle hardened Roman soldiers.

6 If it was a conspiracy, the disciples never would have gotten away with proclaiming the resurrection in Jerusalem—a place full of eyewitnesses to the events—if it was a lie. They even proclaimed it in the face of their enemies who apparently knew it to be true.

7 Why wasn’t the conspiracy unearthed by the enemies of the disciples and exposed? The Jew’s explanation that the disciples stole the body does not hold up in light of point 5 above.

Refutation of the Hallucination Theory

If you saw a dead man walking around wouldn’t you think you were hallucinating rather than seeing correctly? Why couldn’t this have been the case with those who thought they saw Jesus. There are at least twelve reasons.

1 There were too many witnesses. Hallucinations are private, individual, and subjective. Jesus was seen by numerous people including 500 at one time (I Cor. 15:3-8)! This fact was a cornerstone to why the apostle Paul did what he did. Anyone doubting what he was saying about the resurrection could have found one or more of the 500 and asked them directly!

2 The witnesses were qualified. They had firsthand knowledge of the facts.

3 The 500 people saw Jesus together, at the same time and place (I Cor 15:3-8). 500 separate Elvis sightings could be dismissed, but if 500 simple fisherman walked, touched, and talked with him at the same time and place that would be a different matter.

4 Hallucinations usually last a few seconds or minutes; rarely hours. This one hung around for 40 days (Acts 1:3)!

5 Hallucinations usually happen only once, except for the insane. This one returned many times, to ordinary people (John 20:19-21:14, Acts 1:3)

6 Hallucinations come from within, from what we already know, at least unconsciously. This one said and did surprising and unexpected things (Acts 1:4,9)—like a real person and unlike a dream.

7 Hallucinations do not eat. The resurrected Christ did, on at least two occasions (Luke 24:42-43, John 21:1-14).

8 The disciples touched him (Matt. 28:9, Luke 24:39, John 20:27).

9 The disciples spoke with him, and he spoke back. Can a hallucination hold profound, extended conversation?

10 The apostles could not have believed in the “hallucination” if Jesus’ corpse had still been in the tomb. All they would have to do is check for the corpse. If it was there they could not have believed in the “hallucination”.

11 If the apostles had hallucinated and then spread their hallucinogenic story, the Jews would have stopped it by producing the body of Jesus-unless the disciples had stolen it, in which case we are back to the conspiracy theory and all its difficulties.

12 A hallucination would explain only the postresurrection appearances; it would not explain the empty tomb, the rolled-away stone, or the inability to produce the corpse.

Refutation of the Myth Theory

Many of these arguments refuting the Swoon, Conspiracy, and Hallucination theories are as old as the second and third centuries. Many skeptics will argue that the resurrection didn't occur by bringing up one of these theories or modified version; others simply realize that these theories don't support the data so they have used another approach. Their counterattack which is by far the most popular today, is to try and escape the traditional dilemma of the disciples being "deceivers" (conspirators) or "deceived" (hallucinators) by interpreting the Gospels as myth; i.e. the Gospels are spiritually or symbolically true not historically. This view discounts the historical accuracy, reliability, and authenticity of the NT texts. So we are back to arguing about the NT documents. Let's recount the reasons why these documents are not some myth, loaded with folklore but rather point to a Jesus and his resurrection at a specific time and place in history.

1 The style of the Gospels is radically and clearly different from the style of all the myths. It does not contain the elements in say an "Alice in Wonderland". It contains small details of personal actions and character. The Gospels contain depth if you will; fully bearing the marks of eyewitness accounts. For a comparison of myths written near the time of the Gospels see the so-called "Gospel of Peter" (125 AD) which contains images of men with their heads protruding into the clouds and a talking cross; notice that this myth never took root, probably because it was too close to the actual events (see below). Also see the story of "Apollonius of Tyana" (220 AD) by Flavius Philostratus for another example of myth from this era.

2 There was not enough time for myth to develop. The Gospels were simply written too close to the actual event to have come about by myth. There was no time for a myth to take root and if a mythic version was being proclaimed it would easily be discredited by eyewitnesses of the events.

3 The myth theory has two layers. The first layer is the historical Jesus, who was not divine, did not claim divinity, performed no miracles and did not rise from the dead. The second, later, mythologized layer is the Gospels as we have them, with a Jesus who claimed to be divine, performed miracles and rose from the dead. The problem with this theory is simply that there is not the slightest bit of any real evidence whatever for the existence of any such first layer. The Gospels we have is the only layer!

4 In distinguishing the Gospels from myth, note that the first witnesses of the resurrection were women. Women in first-century Judaism had no legal right to serve as witnesses. If someone was going to start a myth and invent the legend of the resurrection, they never would have started it with women witnesses. The Gospel writers simply reported what happened and that was Jesus first appearing to women after he rose from the dead.

5 The NT could not be myth misinterpreted and confused with fact because it specifically distinguishes the two and repudiates the mythic interpretation (see 2 Peter 1:16).

6 The textual arguments including the bibliographic test, internal evidence test, and external evidence test all attest to the historical accuracy, reliability, and authenticity of the NT documents.

Conclusions

These are the arguments. With the massive amount of historical evidence to support that the resurrection occurred the skeptic must ask himself whether he can truly neglect the resurrection. To paraphrase Pascal “you cannot destroy eternity by neglecting it” and so playing on this thought, we say, “you cannot destroy the fact of the resurrection by neglecting it”. To disbelieve the resurrection means that you are willing to make an exception to the rules you use everywhere else in history. You must commit a type of intellectual euthanasia to reject it. The implications of the resurrection are staggering not only for this life but the one to come.

1 Peter 1:3-5 (NIV)

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade--kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

References

The majority of this material is from Kreeft and Tacelli.

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