

A Short Defense of the Resurrection of Christ

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Just as we test the historicity of any event, not through emotional conviction, but with historical evidence, I would like to devote some time to laying out a brief historical case for the Resurrection of Christ, the central issue of the Christian faith.

Here is what we need (the tools of the trade):

1. Internal Evidence: Evidence coming from within the primary witness documents, the New Testament.
2. External Evidence: Collaborative evidence coming from outside the primary witness documents.

Internal Evidence:

- Honesty
- Irrelevant Details
- Harmony
- Public Extraordinary Claims
- Lack of Motivation for Fabrication

Honesty:

The *entire* Bible records both successes and failures of the heroes. I have always been impressed by this. It never paints the glorious picture that you would expect from legendary material, but shows them in all their worst moments. The Israelites whined, David murdered, Peter denied, the apostles abandoned Christ in fear, Moses became angry, Jacob deceived, Noah got drunk, Adam and Eve disobeyed, Paul persecuted, Solomon worshiped idols, Abraham was a bigamist, Lot committed incest, John the Baptist doubted, Abraham doubted, Sarah doubted, Nicodemus doubted, Thomas doubted, Jonah ran, Samson self-served, and John, at the *very* end of the story, when he should have had it *all* figured out, worshiped an angel (Rev 22:8). I love it! (ahem).

And these are the Jews who wrote the Bible!

In addition, the most faithful are seen as suffering the most (Joseph, Job, and Lazarus), while the wicked are seen as prospering (the rich man). In the case of the Gospels, the disciples who recorded it claimed to have abandoned Christ and did not believe in His resurrection when told. Even after the resurrection, they still present themselves as completely ignorant of God's plan (Acts 1:6-7). Women are the first to witness the resurrection which has an element of self-incrimination since a woman's testimony was not worth anything in the first century. If someone were making this up, why include such an incriminating detail? (I am glad they did---what an Easter message this is for us today!)

Irrelevant Details:

The Gospel writers (especially John) contain many elements to their story that are really irrelevant to the

big picture. Normally, when someone is making a story up, they include only the details that contribute to the fabrication. Irrelevant details are a mark of genuineness in all situations.

Notice this small segment of the Gospel of John 20:1-8 (HT: Gregory Boyd, but modified):

“Early on the first day of the week (when? does it matter?), while it was still dark (who cares?), Mary Magdalene (an incriminating detail) went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one who Jesus loved (John’s modest way of referring to himself—another mark of genuineness) and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don’t know where they have taken him!” (note her self-incriminating lack of faith here). So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. They were running, but the other disciple out ran Peter and reached the tomb first (who cares who won the race? a completely irrelevant detail). He bent over (irrelevant, but the tomb entrance was low—a detail which is historically accurate of wealthy people of the time—the kind we know Jesus was buried in) and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in (why not? irrelevant detail). Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb (Peter’s boldness stands out in all the Gospel accounts). He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head (irrelevant and unexpected detail—what was Jesus wearing?). The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen (somewhat irrelevant and unusual. Jesus folded one part of his wrapping before he left!). Finally the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went inside (who cares about what exact order they went in?)

Harmony:

The four Gospel writers claim to have witnessed the resurrected Christ. The same is the case for most of the other writers of the NT. The four Gospel writers all write of the same event from differing perspectives. Although they differ in details, they are completely harmonious to the main events surrounding the resurrection, and all claim that it is an historical event. Many people are disturbed by the seeming disharmony among the Gospels since the Gospel writers do not include all the same details. However, this is actually a mark of historicity since if they all said exactly the same thing, it would be a sign that they made it up. However, the Gospel writers contain just enough disharmony to give it a mark of genuine historicity.

Public Extraordinary Claims:

The Bible records that the resurrection of Christ happened and gives the time, place, people involved, and it names many of the witnesses. In other words, the extraordinary claims were not done in secret as would be the case if it were fabricated. Look to all the ancient myths and you will see how obscure the mythology has to be in order to claim historicity. Why? Because if you give too many details of times, people, and places it can be easily disproven. If it was a fabrication, the author should have said only one person knew about it. He should have said it happened in a cave or a place no one has ever heard of. We have those type of stories that start religions.

Lack of Motive for Fabrication:

There is no *reasonable* explanation as to why the Apostles (or anyone for that matter) would have made up such a story. They had no popularity, power, or riches to gain from it if it was a lie. They were in

constant persecution because of their confession, and finally, [most probably met a terrible death, sealing their testimony in blood.](#)

Beyond this, it was culturally unacceptable at *all* levels to have a crucified and resurrected Messiah. The Jews certainly were not expecting their Messiah to be crucified or raised. The Greek world would have nothing but disdain for the idea of a bodily resurrection (yet Christ wants the his disciples to spread this message to the Gentiles! Acts 1). Therefore, for this idea to arise as a fabrication at this time in history would have been about the most counterproductive story anyone could have made up.

It could not have been an illusion, for illusions do not happen in mass over time. It could not have been a case of mistaken identity (i.e., they merely thought they saw Christ), since it is impossible to explain how this many witnesses could be mistaken about seeing someone dead and buried, and then seeing the same person alive three days later. It could not be that Christ did not really die, since the Romans were expert executioners, and many people helped in the burial process, wrapping Christ in burial cloths as was their custom. It could not have been made up since all the objectors (and there were *plenty* of them) had to do was to produce a body.

In the end, [all other alternatives for the resurrection, while possible, are completely improbable and take a greater leap of faith than believing that Christ rose from the grave.](#)

Now we move to the external evidence.

External Evidence

While the internal evidence looks to the evidence coming from within the primary witness documents, the external evidence seeks to find collaborative evidence coming from *outside* the primary witness documents.

For the resurrection of Christ, I submit this line of external evidence:

- Preservation of the Documents
- Archeology
- Extra-biblical Attestation
- Survival in a Hostile Environment

Preservation of the Documents:

This has to do with the manuscript evidence of the New Testament, the primary source documents concerning the resurrection. While we don't have any of the originals in our possession (nor should we expect to), the manuscript evidence for the New Testament is very strong. According to top text critic Daniel Wallace, "We have an embarrassment of riches." Not only do we have hundreds of manuscripts that date before the fifth century (some into the second and third), but we have many quotations from the early church fathers that alone could be used to reconstruct most of the New Testament. All of this tells us that the accounts that we read are essentially the same as the accounts that were originally given. While there are some differences among the manuscripts, even Bart Erhman, former Fundamentalist, text critic,

and critic of Christianity, says that no major doctrine is effected by the differences and that most are very insignificant.

In addition, and very significantly, the manuscript evidence tells us that the Gospel accounts of the resurrection were all written within a generation of the events which they record, giving evidence for their claims of eye-witness testimony. Therefore, there is no time for legendary material to arise.

Archeology:

The witness of archeology has continually confirmed the scriptural data. When there has been doubt in the past about the Gospel accounts (e.g., the date of the census in Luke and the reign of Quirinius, Governor of Syria, date of the Gospel of John, etc.), later archaeological and historical finds seem to always confirm the Scriptures to be historically accurate.

Jewish Archaeologist Nelson Glueck says this about the Bible: "It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or in exact detail historical statements in the Bible. And, by the same token, proper evaluation of biblical descriptions has often led to amazing discoveries." (Nelson Glueck *Rivers in the Desert; History of Negev* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publications Society of America, 1969], 31). Tim Kimberly has been covering this recently.

Sir William Ramsay is regarded as one of the greatest archaeologists ever to have lived. As an atheist, he set out to dis-prove the historical accuracy of the Scriptures. However, after researching the writings of Luke (Luke-Acts), he changed his mind. He became a firm defender of Christianity and the historical accuracy of the Gospel accounts. About Luke he wrote: "Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy...this author should be placed along with the very greatest historians."

As well, it cannot be overlooked that Christ's remains were never found. This is an issue of archeology. Combined with the understanding that Christianity arose very early under the claim of Christ's resurrection and that there were many detractors, the archaeological evidence of the historically empty tomb is important. Those who denied the resurrection in the first century could not produce a body, nor can those who deny it today. This is a necessary precondition to collaborate the evidence of such a belief.

Extra-Biblical Attestation:

Over 39 extra-biblical sources attest to more than 100 facts regarding the life and teachings of Jesus. Besides all of the early Apostolic Fathers (whose witness cannot be dismissed simply because they believed that Christ was the Messiah) are the Jewish and Roman historians.

There are numerous first and second-century extra-biblical writings that witness to the fact that Christians believed that Christ did extraordinary things, died on a cross, and rose from the grave: Josephus, Clement, Papias, Didache, Barnabas, Justin Martyr, Ignatius, Irenaeus, Hermas, Tatian, Theophilus, Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria.

In reality though, "extra-biblical attestation" is not really the best word for this line of evidence. Really it should be "collaborative attestation" since it is not attestation that is outside the Bible or even the New Testament that we are looking for, but collaborative evidence outside the respective document that is under historical investigation. Therefore, the New Testament itself provides more than enough collaborative support for the events of the resurrection since each of the twenty-seven documents must be seen as pieces of individual evidence that stand on their own. There is no reason, at this point, to put them together in a single corpus called "The New Testament" and say that the corpus must find its own collaborative support. Mark supports Luke. John supports Matthew. Paul supports Acts. The point is that every New Testament book individually provides very strong collaborative evidence for the historicity of the resurrection.

As a side note, I am often humored by those who say that Christians must produce "secular" support for the resurrection, defining "secular" as those who are not believers. It is as if those who believed in the resurrection have less credit than those who *did not* believe in it. It would be like saying that in order for me to believe in the assassination of John F. Kennedy, I have to have evidence from those who do not believe that he was assassinated and that those who do not believe it are more credible than those who do. However, as in the case of the resurrection, if it truly happened, then we would expect the closest people to the evidence to believe it rather not believe it. Therefore, to deem "secular" or "skeptical" support as necessary and more trustworthy evidences is a bias that is too bent to come to objective conclusions.

Survival in a Hostile Environment:

The very fact that Christianity could have survived with such public and extraordinary truth claims is offered as a line of external evidence. That Christianity had its hostile objectors is supported by all the evidence, internal and external. The objectors of Christianity had every opportunity to expose the fabrication of the resurrection if it were truly a fabrication. The fact that those who were hostile to Christianity did not put forth a substantial or unified case against it adds to its historicity.

According to Gregory Boyd,

“Christianity was born in a very hostile environment. There were contemporaries who would have refuted the Gospel portrait of Jesus—if they could have. The leaders of Judaism in the first century saw Christianity as a pernicious cult and would have loved to see it stamped out. And this would have been easy to do—if the 'cult' had been based on fabrications. Why, just bringing forth the body of the slain Jesus would have been sufficient to extinguish Christianity once and for all. In spite of this, however, Christianity exploded. . . . Even those who remained opposed to Christianity did not deny that Jesus did miracles, and did not deny that His tomb was empty.” (Gregory Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic* [Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communication Ministries, 2003], 85-86).

Conclusion

Considering the internal and external arguments for the resurrection of Christ, I don't ask anyone to look to one of these lines of evidence alone, but to consider the cumulative case. It is very impressive. If the

resurrection indeed occurred, it would be hard to expect more evidence. In fact, what we would expect is exactly what we have.

Of course, alternatives to each one of these could be and have been offered. Alternatives to many well established historical events have been offered as well, including the Holocaust, the landing on the moon, and the death of Elvis. However, in most cases the alternatives go against the obvious. The simplest explanation is always the best. The simplest explanation to the data here is that Christ *did* rise from the grave. Those who deny the resurrection do so not on the basis of the evidence, but because they have other presuppositions that won't allow them to believe. The evidence is simply too strong.

I believe that any objective historian must look to the evidence for the resurrection of Christ and concluded that he is indeed risen.