The Evidence for the Resurrection

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Objective: To show that even when we consider the New Testament simply a collection of ancient documents, which no one can deny, the known historical facts overwhelmingly support a real, bodily resurrection. No other theory of what could have happened even comes close.

All of Christianity stands or falls on the Resurrection as a real historical event.

“And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless…”

-- 1 Corinthians 15:14-19, 32

Abductive Reasoning: Historians analyze source data to determine if it is reliable enough that any historical facts can be established beyond doubt. Then, they develop theories that might explain what happened. All of the historical facts must fit any given theory, else the theory must be rejected. Those defending a given theory bear the burden of proof that all historical facts fit.

Gary Habermas, and the Minimal Facts Approach: Analyzed over 2400 of the most critical scholarly works on the resurrection written from 1975 to 2014.

“The approach considers only those data that are so strongly attested historically that they are granted by nearly every scholar who studies the subject, even the rather skeptical ones.” And, “… We simply approach the New Testament as we would any other book in antiquity.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Source data is rich and of high integrity. We have the 27 books of the New Testament along with their 9 writers. We also have the writings of at least 10 non-Christian sources, many of whom were unfriendly to Christianity. In total, we have 42 authors who mention Jesus within 150 years of his life.

Five historical facts granted by nearly every scholar[[2]](#footnote-2):

1. Jesus died by Roman crucifixion.
2. The tomb was found empty just a few days later.
3. The disciples believed that he rose from the dead and appeared to them.
4. James, a skeptic, was converted due to what he believed was an appearance of the risen Jesus.
5. Paul, an enemy, was converted due to what he believed was an appearance of the risen Jesus.

Possible Theories: (Numbers are the facts that do not fit that theory)

1. Legend (2,3,4,5): The Resurrection is simply a fabrication that was made up and evolved over a long period of time, to try to vindicate a leader long since dead, or validate the teachings of Jesus and his claims.
* If the resurrection was an embellishment that appeared over time, it would mean that the original story told by the disciples did not include resurrection. But their claims clearly do include it.
1. Disciples lied or stole the body (3,4,5): Conspiracy theory. Jesus’ disciples went to his tomb and stole his body, then lied.
* Doesn’t explain appearances. How many would have to be involved in lying about an appearance?
* James and Paul wouldn’t be convinced only by a missing body. They would suspect foul play.
1. Someone other than the disciples stole the body (3,4,5):
* Jews or Romans? This would not be in their interest if they wanted to stop Christianity.
* Somebody else? An empty tomb does not account for anybody’s belief that they had seen the risen Jesus.
* Again, a missing body would not have convinced Paul, an enemy, or James, a skeptic. They would have suspected foul play.
1. Wrong or Unknown tomb (3,4,5): The witnesses went to the wrong tomb, or the body of Jesus was thrown into a common pit grave unknown to the disciples. Perhaps his body was eaten by wild dogs.
* This theory assumes a kind of collective amnesia on the part of all the Jewish and Roman authorities as to what happened to the body.
* Again, a missing body is not enough to convince anyone of a Resurrection, and does not account for belief that the risen Jesus had been seen.
1. Apparent Death (1,3,4,5): Jesus didn’t really die on the cross but fell into a coma and survived. The cold air and spices in the tomb resuscitated him.
* Not reasonable, considering the nature of a Roman scourging and crucifixion.
* He would have terribly crippling, mutilating wounds. His disciples would not believe he came back from the dead, but would need to hide him and get medical care.
1. Hallucination (1,2,3, 4,5): When the disciples, James, and Paul claimed they saw the risen Jesus, they had actually only seen hallucinations.
* Science tells us that multiple people don’t hallucinate the same thing.
* Why would an enemy, Paul, or James, a skeptic, hallucinate Jesus?
* The answer that “we’ll never know” simply walks away, but the evidence demands an explanation.
1. Jesus had a twin, or imposter (2,3,4,5): Jesus died and was buried, but shortly afterwards his long lost identical twin brother or another imposter emerged on scene and was worshiped as the risen Christ.
* This misses with the empty tomb. The tomb could have been checked.
* Wouldn’t people notice a difference behavior, speech, or dialect?
* An imposter could be easily tested.
1. A Substitute took Jesus’ place on the cross (1,2,3,4,5).
* Can so many witnesses to the resurrection be wrong?
* Doesn’t explain the empty tomb.
* Doesn’t explain the appearances. Jesus had wounds his disciples could see.
1. Existential or Spiritual Resurrection (2,3,4,5): Jesus rose from the dead not really in history, but only in our hearts (Existential). Or, Jesus’ physical body did not rise from the dead. Instead, he rose from the dead as a spirit (Spiritual).
* What about the empty tomb? That could have been checked.
* For existential resurrection, what about the appearances?
* Jesus was not a non-physical spirit. His disciples were convinced he rose from the dead because they touched him and ate with him.
1. Jesus Was an Alien (all facts fit): Like Star Trek. The body on the cross was a very realistic android or robot. It was later exchanged by transporter or teleportation by a cloaked (or hidden) space ship for the real living alien Jesus after it appeared to be dead. All facts fit.
* By proper definition, Jesus *was* an alien—he had access to the Father’s power.
* But this is too easy. What is the evidence? How do you know *I’m* not an alien. Maybe *all* of us are.
* To argue this theory, one must must provide credible evidence that intelligent alien life could and does exist.
1. Bodily Resurrection (all facts fit): Jesus actually rose physically from the grave as claimed by the disciples and the rest of the early church. All the facts fit.

Conclusion:

The minimal facts approach removes any appearance of bias or circular reasoning, because is does not rely on the inspiration of scripture to make the case for the Resurrection.

Rather, this approach examines the work of thousands of scholars across the theological spectrum (including skeptics) to see what they all agree upon concerning the core facts of historical bedrock surrounding the events.

Possible theories are tested against the known facts to see how the facts fit. Only a real bodily Resurrection is the best explanation; no other theory comes close; it stands far and above any other possible explanation.

1. Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004), pp. 44-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There will always be those who deny certain established facts for no apparent reason. For example, one could say that none of us really exist, rather, reality is just an illusion. The five facts presented are widely accepted as historical bedrock by basically every serious historical scholar who has studied the source data, Christians and skeptics alike. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)