

# Understanding Christian Apologetics

## Lesson 17: The Historicity of the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ

### I. Historical Fact # 1: Jesus's Tomb Was Empty<sup>1</sup>

#### A. Why this is an established fact

1. The empty tomb is multiply attested in early, independent sources (canonical Gospels; 1 Corinthians; apostolic sermons in Acts; the non-canonical Gospel of Peter)
2. Numerous Jewish scholars, such as Pinchas Lapide and Geza Vermes, are convinced that the tomb was empty
3. If Jesus's body was still in the tomb, his followers never would have made the claim that he had been raised from the dead; "Let us be quite clear at this point... when the early Christians said 'resurrection' they meant it in the sense it bore both in paganism (which denied it) and in Judaism (... which affirmed it). 'Resurrection' ... meant bodily resurrection; and that is what the early Christians affirmed."<sup>2</sup>
4. If Jesus's body was still in the tomb, nobody would have believed the disciples' claims that he had been raised from the dead
5. If the empty tomb story was a legend, women would not have been presented as the discoverers of the tomb, since women had a low social status and were unable to serve as legal witnesses

#### B. Alternative explanations for the empty tomb

1. The conspiracy hypothesis
  - a) Says that the disciples stole the body and made up the stories about the appearances

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<sup>1</sup> This lesson is largely drawn from chapter 8 of William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*.

<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 209.

- b) This theory has been entirely abandoned by modern scholarship; “No scholar would defend the Conspiracy Hypothesis today. The only place you read about such things is in the popular, sensationalist press or in former propaganda from behind the Iron Curtain.” [373]
- c) Says that the disciples made women the ones who discovered the empty tomb
- d) Fails to explain the transformation in lives of disciples
- e) First-century Jews were not expecting the Messiah to be raised from the dead; when messianic pretenders were put to death, their followers concluded that they had been mistaken and moved on with their lives
- f) The disciples’ character testifies against this, especially their willingness to be put to death because of their belief in the resurrection
- g) The Gospels were written within the lifetime of eyewitnesses; false claims would have been refuted and not taken seriously

## 2. The apparent death hypothesis

- a) Says that Jesus did not die on the cross and that he was revived in the tomb
- b) Virtually no defenders today
- c) Roman executioners were experts in carrying out their work
- d) Jesus would not have been able to survive after being subjected to the torture of the scourging, the crucifixion, and the soldier’s spear thrust
- e) “the appearance of a half-dead man desperately in need of medical attention would hardly have elicited in the disciples the conclusion that he was the Risen Lord and conqueror of

Death." [373]

3. The wrong tomb hypothesis
  - a) The women were so distraught that they went to the wrong tomb and were told by the caretaker of that tomb that Jesus was not there
  - b) Not embraced by anybody except the man who invented it (Kirsopp Lake in 1907)
  - c) Offers no explanation for the resurrection appearances
  - d) The site of Jesus's tomb was known
  
4. Displaced body hypothesis
  - a) Joseph of Arimathea only placed Jesus's body in his tomb temporarily due to the lateness of the hour; later, he moved Jesus's body to the criminals' graveyard
  - b) No scholars today defend this theory
  - c) Offers no explanation for the resurrection appearances
  - d) "The earliest Jewish/Christian disputes about the resurrection were not over the location of Jesus's grave or the identity of the corpse but over why the tomb was empty."
  - e) Jewish law did not permit the body to be moved after burial

C. "As we look at these hypotheses proffered to explain the fact of the empty tomb, it is striking that scarcely any modern historian or biblical critic would hold to these theories. They are almost completely passé. You may say to yourselves at this point, 'Well, then, what explanation of the empty tomb do modern critics offer who deny the resurrection?' The fact is that they are self-confessedly without any explanation to offer. There simply is no plausible natural explanation available today to account for how Jesus' tomb became empty. If we deny the resurrection of Jesus, we are left with

an inexplicable mystery.” [377]

## II. Historical Fact #2: The Appearances of the Risen Christ

- A. Why this is an established fact
1. Read 1 Corinthians 15:3-8
  2. The appearances are attested by multiple, independent sources
    - a) Paul and Luke attest the appearance to Peter (1 Cor. 15:5; Lk. 24:34)
    - b) Paul, Luke, and John attest the appearance to the Twelve (1 Cor. 15:5; Lk. 24:36-43; Jn. 20:19-20)
    - c) Matthew and John attest the appearance to the women (Mt. 28:9-10; Jn. 20:11-17)
  3. The Scriptures unanimously testify that the appearances were bodily and physical
- B. The only alternative explanation for the resurrection appearances is that they were hallucinations
1. Fails to explain the empty tomb
  2. Fails to explain the origin of the disciples’ belief in Jesus’s resurrection; for people in the ancient world, visions of a deceased person were not taken as evidence of that person’s resurrection but a confirmation that he was dead
  3. Does not fit with the fact that the appearances took place at various places and circumstances and involved different individuals and groups
  4. Relies on a psychoanalysis of Peter and Paul that contends that their guilt complex caused them to have the hallucinations; psychoanalyzing someone who has been dead for nearly two millennia is a tall task; the evidence in Acts makes it clear that Paul

did not have a guilt complex when Christ appeared to him

### III. Historical Fact #3: The Origin of the Christian Religion

#### A. Why this is an established fact

1. The earliest disciples clearly believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and this in spite of the fact that none of them were in any sense expecting the resurrection; "It is difficult to overemphasize what a disaster the crucifixion was for the disciples' faith. Jesus' death on the cross spelled the humiliating end for any hopes they had entertained that he was the Messiah." [388]
2. The Christian religion quickly spread on the basis of the claim that Jesus is risen

#### B. Alternative explanations for the origin of Christianity

1. Cannot be the result of the influence of early Christianity because it was the foundation of Christianity
2. Pagan influence
  - a) Alleged parallels in pagan myths
    - (1) Stories where a hero is taken up to heaven (Hercules, Romulus)
    - (2) Stories that symbolize the seasonal crop cycle (Osiris)
    - (3) Emperor worship (Julius Caesar, Caesar Augustus)
  - b) None of these examples is parallel to the Jewish idea of resurrection from the dead
  - c) The first Christians need to be understood against the backdrop of Palestinian Judaism, since that is what they were

d) Jews knew about seasonal deities and abhorred them (Ezek. 8:14-15)

3. Jewish influence

a) Could the disciples have come to believe in Jesus's resurrection due to Jewish influences? Not likely.

b) In Judaism, the resurrection was something that took place at the end of history and involved the resurrection of all people

c) "Hallucinations, as projections of the mind, can contain nothing new. Therefore, given the current Jewish beliefs about life after death, the disciples, were they to project hallucinations of Jesus, would have seen Jesus in heaven or in Abraham's bosom, where the souls of the righteous dead were believed to abide until the resurrection. And such visions would not have caused belief in Jesus's resurrection."  
[394]

#### IV. Jesus's Resurrection and Our Resurrection

A. The New Testament declares that Israel's end-time hope of resurrection has been realized in Jesus's resurrection

B. Jesus's resurrection and our resurrection are part of the same harvest; he is the first-fruits of the end-time resurrection

C. Jesus's people are raised inwardly and spiritually when we are united to him by the working of the Holy Spirit, and we will be raised outwardly and bodily when Jesus returns