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The Evidences for the Resurrection

Introduction

Who was Jesus of Nazareth?

This is the central question defining the differences we find among the three major world religions today (four, if you count secularism). As the world drifted further from Christianity throughout the 20th century, the challenges to the “faith once delivered to the saints” transitioned from those auxiliary, extraneous, or otherwise unique doctrines which distinguish one Christian denomination from another, to the corridors of academia and science where the very foundations of the Christian faith are called into question. This paradigm shift from an accepted Christian worldview toward secularism and other world religions requires Christians to “give a defense” in a way that is foreign to our typical Bible-belt mindset. But such a transition is *much to our advantage!* God has provided sufficient – no, abundant – evidence in the studies of history, science, religion, archeology, and textual criticism (of the Bible) that lead even the sincere skeptic to weigh the claims of scripture seriously.

And yet, at the heart of the modern challenges to the Christian worldview – the veracity of scripture, the age of the earth, the problem of evil, moral relativism, etc. – the defining question of the entire Christian worldview brings us back to: Who is Jesus of Nazareth?

Varying Views of Jesus of Nazareth

Jews: Jews are often ambivalent toward the identity of Jesus, believing at best that He was a prophet and at worst, one of many heretics. Some Jews believe He was crucified as the New Testament records, and others believe He was put to death another way by the Romans. Ultimately, all adherents to the religion of Judaism deny His claim to be the Messiah, and deny Jesus’ reinterpretation of the Messiah’s mission.

Muslims: Muslims believe that Jesus was one of the greatest prophets ever sent by God. They assert His teachings throughout the Quran, command their adherents to obey His teachings, affirm His claim as the Messiah, but deny His stated mission as the Messiah. Muslims deny Jesus’ crucifixion by claiming that someone else, made in His likeness and substituted at the last moment, died in His stead (the Substitution Theory), or that Jesus survived the crucifixion (the Apparent Death Theory). They deny His deity, forbid worshiping Jesus, and deny that He claimed to be God or the Son of God.

Christians: Christians claim that Jesus is the Messiah, that He is God, and that He lived a sinless life. They further claim that He died on a cross to atone for the sins of all humanity and was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. They claim that His mission as the Messiah was to save the world from sin and reconcile the world to God.

Regardless of what these religions posit, we can be sure that Jesus made some extraordinary claims about His identity and mission. He claimed to be God, the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Son of Man (all four claims can be found in Mark 14:61-62). The gospels contend that He sought to verify these extraordinary claims by working supernatural miracles that could not be explained through a naturalistic framework. Furthermore, these miracles were observed by His followers, His enemies, and neutral bystanders in order to impartially convince the world of His divine authority.

Unfortunately, most people rejected Him! And, His opponents' skepticism and outright rejection of His Messianic claims appeared justified when the Sanhedrin delivered Jesus to the Romans to be crucified. If the Messiah would reinstitute the Kingdom of Israel by overthrowing Roman bondage, how could His own people reject and sentence Him to death? The greatest fears of His followers were fully realized when following the kangaroo court proceedings by Pilate, Jesus was brutally tortured as the prophets predicted (Psalm 22; Isaiah 53) and publicly murdered by God's design (Romans 3:25-26) before all of Jerusalem (Luke 24:18).

His most ardent followers left the scene in utter despair. They *really* believed He was the Messiah (Matthew 16:16). So much so that days earlier they had triumphantly entered Jerusalem in a caravan meant for an ascending king (Mark 11:7-10). A day before that, they requested to be on His right and left hand when He entered into His kingdom (Mark 10:35-37). His supernatural power, coupled with His burgeoning reception by the people, made them believe that they were on the cusp of emancipation from Roman bondage. But now... Jesus was dead! Undoubtedly and unequivocally dead! Imagine the questions that raced through the minds of the apostles during those nights:

"How did He do His miracles if God didn't help Him? And why would God help Him if He knew it would all end like this?"

"What about Lazarus? Did he fake being dead? That's impossible. I smelled His body!"

"What about the bread and fishes? I watched the basket! My very hands distributed the bread to over 500 people and I started with half a loaf and a fish."

Yet, 50 days after Jesus' crucifixion, Peter is standing in the middle of Jerusalem preaching that Jesus is "both Lord and Christ [Messiah]." What changed their minds about Jesus and the fate of

His movement? Why were they almost immediately willing to risk their lives to preach His message throughout the whole world? Why did most of them die proclaiming Jesus?

One reason only: *Because Jesus rose from the dead!*

Implications of the Resurrection

Today, *all* Muslims, Jews, and Christians — a number totaling approximately 4.35 Billion people worldwide; *all* the expectations of the apostles; *all* the claims Christ made about Himself converge on one singular question: Did Jesus rise from the dead? This lesson aims to present objective evidence that, based on the preponderance of evidence, Jesus rose from the dead. The significance of this question cannot be overstated.

If Jesus did NOT rise, Paul claims that *all* Christians, including you and me, are the most miserable proselytes ever to walk upon the face of the earth. Why? Because, according to Paul, if Christ did not rise, then (I Corinthians 15:12-19):

- Our preaching is vain (I Corinthians 15:14).
- Our faith in Him is not saving us (I Corinthians 15:14).
- We are liars and false (I Corinthians 15:15).
- We are still in our sins (I Corinthians 15:17).
- Those “Christians” who have already died have perished forever (I Corinthians 15:18).

In short, if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then everything we believe about life, death, and the afterlife is a hoax. We would be better off “eating, drinking, and being merry for tomorrow we die.”

But if Christ did rise from the dead; if He is the firstfruits of them that slept; if He has through death triumphed over our last enemy which is death; if in this very hour He reigns in heaven as “the blessed and only Potentate, King of King, and Lord of Lords (I Timothy 6:15),” *then God has, once and for all, vindicated the extraordinary claims Jesus made about Himself, and given Him a name which is above every name!* If Jesus rose from the dead, then He is who He claimed to be and did what He was sent to do!

If Jesus rose from the dead, then every Jew in the world should receive Him as their Messiah (John 1:11-12), every Muslim should immediately turn their bodies from Mecca and bow their hearts to heaven, every secularist should confess their error and repent of their unbelief, and every Christian with breath – we should proclaim the message of the gospel to the uttermost parts of the world. If Jesus rose from the dead, then that changes EVERYTHING!

The Apostles Preached His Resurrection

A common theme found throughout the book of Acts, especially to Jewish audiences, is the miracle of His resurrection. This is not because the resurrection of Jesus is the most critical element of the gospel message. Nor is it because it accomplished the victory over sin; the crucifixion did that. *But Jesus' resurrection served as visible and verifiable evidence of Jesus' identity and divine mission.* Jesus performed miracles, and the Jews rejected Him. Jesus expounded the scriptures perfectly, and the Jews rejected Him. God even spoke from Heaven, and the Jews dismissed it as thunder (John 12:29). But what greater evidence can be given of God's approval than a man claiming to be the Messiah verifiably dying and then being supernaturally raised from the dead three days later (Romans 4:25)? That is the sign of Jonah meant to convince the world that He is Who He claimed to be (Matthew 12:39).

The Book of Acts is replete with examples of the apostles using the resurrection of Jesus to prove His identity and mission. A list of them are below:

1. **The Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:22-36):** Peter preaches that Jesus' resurrection is a fulfillment of Psalm 16:10 and evidence of His Lordship and Messianic office (v. 31).

"This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we are all witnesses (Acts 2:32)."

2. **Peter's Sermon at the Temple (Acts 3:13-26):** Peter indicts the crowd for killing the "Prince of Life."

"But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; ¹⁵And killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses (Acts 3:14-15)."

3. **Peter and John Before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:1-12):** After being arrested and forbidden to speak about Jesus, the apostles declare the source of their faith and boldness is Jesus' resurrection.

"Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man stand here before you whole (Acts 4:10)."

4. **Peter and the Apostles Before the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:17-42):** After miracles abound throughout Jerusalem the Sanhedrin again try to silence the apostles from preaching the gospel.

“The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. ³¹ Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him (Acts 5:30-32).”

5. **Peter with Cornelius (Acts 10:34-43):** Peter uses evidence of the resurrection with his first encounter among Gentile unbelievers.

“And we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews, and in Jerusalem; whom they slew and hanged on a tree: ⁴⁰ Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly; ⁴¹ Not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before God, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead (Acts 10:30-41).

6. **Paul on Mars Hill (Acts 17:15-34):** Paul preaches to the intellectual elite on Mars Hill claiming Jesus' resurrection as the event which gives us the assurance that God will bring the world into final judgment.

“Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead. ³² And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter (Acts 17:31-32).”

7. **Paul Before Agrippa (Acts 26:1-32):** Before King Agrippa, Festus and many notable citizens, Paul tells His testimony of salvation and says that he is preaching the same thing the prophets declared: That the Messiah would rise from the dead.

“Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come: ²³ That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles (Acts 26:22-23).”

Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus

If we treat the New Testament as reliable documents (not even inspired) which relate accurate historical events, then we will discover that there are a number of significant claims made by the Bible which deserve attention. The following points are central to the claim that Jesus' resurrection is a reliable historical event.

1. **The Bible claims that Jesus of Nazareth was brutally tortured by the Roman centurions and died publicly by crucifixion.** The trial of Jesus was before the masses (Matthew 27:11-23). The sentencing of Jesus was prolonged and clear (Matthew 27:24-26). His beating was conducted by a whole Roman cohort (Matthew 27:27). He subsequently stumbled through the streets of Jerusalem during the busiest week of the year (Luke 23:26-33). He was hung upon a cross next to the main thoroughfare outside the city. *God designed Jesus' death to be performed in public (Romans 3:25-26; Acts 26:26)! The apostles, the Sanhedrin, the Romans, and the Jews throughout the whole Roman Empire watched Jesus die!*

Furthermore, everything we know about Roman crucifixion reveals that anyone set to be crucified inevitably died, even if by some miracle they escaped the cross. The crucifixion process would begin by maliciously scourging victims with an object like a "cat of nine tails" where victims traditionally received 39 lashes. Such torture often rendered victims dead or in the early stages of hypovolemic shock, a condition in which a person loses so much blood it causes multiple organs to stop working. In Jesus' case, a crown of thorns was pressed into His skull, which would have produced substantial bleeding and immense pain. We learn of the impact such torture had on Jesus' body when He was unable to carry the wooden cross up the hill outside of Jerusalem and required help from Simon of Cyrene. Jesus was then nailed in his wrists and feet to a cross (likely with iron nails). For hours, Jesus hung upon the cross by the inside of His feet bones along with His radius and ulna bones near His wrist between every breath. After such torture, being carried out by such experts of death, the only plausible explanation to such suffering is that Jesus really did die.

A prerequisite to proving Jesus' resurrection is proving His death. One of many reasons God designed Jesus' death to be public was so that His resurrection would be hard to deny.

2. **Jesus was buried at a location known by Jews and Christians alike (the Tomb of Joseph of Arimathea) and despite being guarded by Roman centurions, the tomb was found empty on the third day.** Jesus' burial is an important historical fact, because it establishes the opportunity for claims of resurrection to be debunked. If those who denied the resurrection could produce His body, then claims surrounding His resurrection had plausible deniability.

The fact that His enemies (the Sanhedrin) deployed their own centurion guards, after receiving permission from Pilate, only adds further plausibility to the claim that something supernatural occurred (Matthew 27:62-66). How could a few civilian

followers overthrow professional soldiers? Much less the apostles. They ran scared in Gethsemane. They denied and abandoned Him at the trial scene. What evidence supports the notion that they somehow overthrew these professional soldiers and stole His body? *In sum, Jesus was buried in a tomb known by all parties involved in His death, and when sermons about His resurrection occurred a mere 50 days later, His enemies, who had previously gone to extreme lengths to squelch this movement, could not even pretend to produce the evidence which could have unequivocally proved the resurrection false: Jesus' body.*

3. **Jesus appeared to the women at the tomb, Peter, "the twelve," more than 500 at one time who were living when that fact was recorded, and to the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 15:5-8).** Eyewitness testimony is considered central evidence in any case. It allows the opportunity for corroboration among witnesses. If such eyewitness testimony was relegated to one or two individuals on one occasion, the evidence of such an extraordinary claim would be difficult to believe. But Paul claims that more than 500 people claimed a post-mortem appearance of Jesus AND they were still living at the time of Paul's letter to the Corinthians. In other words, Paul didn't require the recipients of his letter to take His word for it, they could go ask the eyewitnesses themselves! Furthermore, Luke claims that Jesus spent something of 40 days teaching them.
4. **The apostles have an unexplainable transformation of attitude, from grieving Jesus' death to proclaiming His resurrection. They ALL upheld this claim for over 50 years, under extreme persecution, and unto death.** It has often been said that men don't die about things they believe to be a lie. This is especially true for all eleven people who formed His most ardent followers. What can possibly explain such a willingness to go to such an extreme with this message if Jesus didn't really rise from the dead?
5. **The apostles emerge from the resurrection claim with a radically new understanding of the role of the Messiah.** Following Jesus' resurrection, the apostles are not only emboldened before the civil and religious leaders responsible for Jesus' death, they also have a radically new understanding of the Old Testament prophets, the law, the Messiah, and the kingdom of God. Such a drastic reinterpretation by the apostles is explained by Luke in the first chapter in Acts where it tells us the source of their change, *"To whom also he shewed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3)."*

Weight of Evidence: His Resurrection Fulfilled Old Testament Prophecy

All of these claims must also be understood within the context of the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament. The Jews did, and still do, misinterpret the identity of the Messiah to be a political figure bent on a worldly kingdom. Jesus radically reinterpreted the identity of the Messiah into a religious figure seeking to save the world from sin. The Old Testament, or books written hundreds and even thousands of years before the time of Jesus, are chock full of predictions about His resurrection. If the Old Testament predicted the Messiah would die and rise again, then this should add weight (not further evidence) to the plausibility of such a divine claim. Consider a few scriptures which predict the Messiah will be resurrected:

1. Psalm 16:10→ Acts 2:25-31
2. Isaiah 53:10-12
3. Hosea 6:2
4. Jonah 1:17
5. Job 19:25-27

Thus, not only can we look back and analyze the facts of the actual resurrection, we can also add weight to these events based upon the Old Testament predictions of these events which were misunderstood, and thus not contrived, which were fulfilled by Jesus.

Conclusion

Jesus' resurrection is God's clearest validation that Jesus is Who He claimed to be, and accomplished what He was sent to do. It validates the claim that Jesus atoned for our sins and "gave His life a ransom for all (I Timothy 2:6)."

Appendix: Subjective vs. Objective Proof

"So how do we know that Jesus is risen from the dead? The Easter hymnwriter says, 'You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart!' This answer is perfectly appropriate on an individual level. But when Christians engage unbelievers in the public square—such as in 'Letters to the Editor' of a local newspaper, on call-in programs on talk-radio, at PTA meetings, or even just in conversation with co-workers—, then it's crucial that we be able to present objective evidence in support of our beliefs. Otherwise our claims hold no more water than the assertions of anyone else claiming to have a private experience of God (William Lane Craig, Reasonable Faith)."

The validity of a source is dependent upon its veracity. Claims of veracity must be validated by appeals to evidence. For the Christian personally, I find no higher proof of validity than God's personal affirmation to the human heart through His own direct revelation (II Peter 1:18-21). I'm not referring to emotion, which is the natural human response to direct revelation. I am referencing the silent but divine voice of God which speaks to the soul of the Christian who walks in fellowship with His Creator (John 10:27). Such inaudible communication can not be examined by anyone else except the one to whom God personally speaks.

These personal revelations will always harmonize with the general revelation of God's Word; a general revelation which, despite attempts to prove otherwise, has proven to be infallible. I truly believe that God's Word as originally revealed to the authors, is divinely inspired by God. I, personally, need no other validation of its authenticity and infallibility to believe the (extraordinary) claims it makes.

However, I also recognize that the majority of the world has not perceived the personal revelation of God. Furthermore, they have not been convinced of the Bible's reliability nor of its infallibility. Thus, rather than linger upon those treasured subjective experiences which serve as the greatest validations to our personal faith, or on the inspired book which contains a compendium of truth beyond human knowledge, it behooves us to venture into the domain of the objective world whereby the claims of Christianity can undergo the same scrutiny every other worldview must undergo.

By venturing into the objective realm we seek to prove the claims of the Bible using reliable methods of uncovering truth implicit to history, archeology, astronomy, biology, textual criticism, and more. Not as primary sources upon which our personal faith rests, but as secondary sources to our personal faith and often observable or validated claims which convince objective observers and sincere skeptics of the validity of our claims.