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Q&A: Evidence for the Resurrection

Gary R. Habermas
Liberty University, ghabermas@liberty.edu

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Evidence for the Resurrection:

Question: In one of your books you mentioned that 75 % of scholars accept the empty tomb tradition in the gospels as historically true. Do you have the source for that?

Answer: I have not documented the list of scholars yet, although I have mentioned the study in a few places. Partially, this is because new studies are regularly coming out and I want to be as complete as I can. I am presently hoping to go back and update that study and see if any of the statistics have changed. But I do mention the statistics in a recently -published article, "Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present: What are Critical Scholars Saying?" It was published in *The Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (Vol. 3, 2005).

Question: What are a few sources that you would recommend for studying the evidence for the Resurrection?

Answer: I would recommend NT Wright's The Resurrection of the Son of God (Fortress), Bill Craig's writings on the resurrection, especially his Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection (Mellen) or my The Risen Jesus and Future Hope (Rowman & Littlefield).

Question: As a Christian I have always held dearly to the teaching of the resurrection of Christ, and what this means for all of humanity. However, I have been reading books by many authors and skeptics who do not support this claim. However, I still say "I believe" in the resurrection because I am now focusing on topics like the empty tomb, the transformation of the apostles, and the rapid rise of Christianity after Jesus' death. I'm understanding this as the "Resurrection package", and I don't mean this in a disrespectful manner.

Answer: I think that almost all Christians ask questions/doubt at some time, usually dependent not on the state of the evidence, but on our moods, feelings, etc. I think such questions and second-guessing ourselves is true of most human beings, believers or not. So in my opinion, the mere fact that you ask tough questions proves nothing about a lack of faith. Now, if you think that you don't really believe the resurrection, that's another matter. In the New Testament passages that define the Gospel content, the Gospel message which we are told to believe for salvation and eternal life is the Deity, atoning death, and bodily resurrection of Jesus. If you have believed in Jesus in light of these facts, that's the Gospel (as in 1 Corinthians 15:1-2; see also verses 3-7; cf. Rom. 1:3-4; Rom. 10:9; or the Acts creedal texts in passages such as 1:31-36; 4:10). I'm talking about really believing this while occasionally having questions. That's pretty normal. Sure, the evidences you mention for the resurrection are very strong. This is why more scholars writing on the topic today believe in the resurrection than those who don't. By the way, the view that Jesus was raised bodily also seems to be the most prominent critical view at present.

Question: What do you think the resurrected Jesus looked like? Do you think he had huge scars and bruises, or do you think that all the scars and markings of his death were healed? Do you think he "glowed" with the glory of God inside of him? I just wonder if this will be the same Jesus that believers will see some day?

Answer: The Gospels seem to say that Jesus appeared in a very normal manner--so normal, in fact, that that alone seemed to bewilder his disciples. When Paul saw Jesus on the other hand, Acts tell us that he was blinded by the light of Jesus' body. In Philippians 3:20-21, Paul calls Jesus' resurrection body a glorious body.

Question: Where can one find your minimal facts argument for the resurrected Christ?

Answer: Probably my best treatment of the scholarly attestation to the minimal facts is in my book The Risen Jesus & Future Hope (2003). See especially the various lists on pp. 15-31. The endnotes, in particular, provide the relevant sources.

Question: Could you give me some references concerning your minimal facts arguments, especially pertaining to the reliability of Scripture and miracles?

Answer: My minimal facts arguments for the reliability of Scripture was published in the Christian Research Journal Vol. 28 (2005), pp. 22-31. Another on inspiration was published in the Areopagus Journal Vol. 2 (2002), pp. 11-16. Some thoughts on prophecy, while not formally published, have been in my graduate class notes for many years. The two almost 500 pp (each) treatments of on miracles are Graham Twelftree, Jesus the Miracle Worker (InterVarsity, 1999) and John Meier's Marginal Jew, Vol. 2, 1994.

Question: What do you say to someone who might asks how do we know that the early church didn't just make the stories of the disciples' martyrdoms? Also, what evidence do we have that the apostles' preached the resurrection in Jerusalem 50 days after the crucifixion?

Answer: We have strong data on at least the martyrdoms of Peter, Paul, and James, the brother of Jesus, recorded by Josephus and Clement of Rome, both before the close of the First Century. Josephus, of course, was not a Christian, so we cannot argue that he wanted to make the Christians look good. Further, Roman historians like Tacitus and Suetonius, along with Roman governor Pliny the Younger also tell us that early Christians were persecuted and even killed. These were also non-Christian authors who were trying to disparage Christianity, not brag about believers. Then, just a few years later, others died for their faith, like Ignatius and Polycarp. Willing deaths show that the martyrs sincerely believed their own reports. So, just to preach Jesus in the early church context would expose the preacher to at least the possibility of death. Virtually no scholars would deny that this occurred. But please note that I generally base these points on the disciples' willingness to die, because this keeps me from having to prove the actual point and their being willing is all you need to show they were sincere.

On the early preaching 50 days later, all we have for that exact time is the comment in Acts. But nothing turns on that exact time. Critical scholars acknowledge that the preaching began in Jerusalem pretty quickly. For example, James D. G. Dunn recently wrote in his book Remembering Jesus (p. 855) that the 1 Corinthians 15 creed was formalized and taught within months of Jesus' death.

Question: In response to an argument appealing to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it sometimes will be objected that the resurrection is not unique but fits a pattern of similar claims made on

behalf of other religious figures. The most frequent example is Apollonius of Tyana. Apparently such an objection doesn't disprove the resurrection, but challenges the uniqueness of such a claim. How would you respond?

Answer: While this issue is commonly brought up these days, the responses are devastating. The short rejoinder is that:

1) these accounts almost always refer to non-historical characters from ancient mythology, such as Isis and Osiris, Dumuzi and Inana, Venus, Hercules, etc. (Granted, Apollonius is an exception.)
2) More importantly, no evidence is produced in these cases (because there is none!). Apollonius of Tyana and another key figure, Sabbatai Sevi, are perhaps the most mentioned of the historical persons, and yet the sources do not even claim a resurrection for either one! In the case of Sevi, his own chief disciple and forerunner, Nathan, even held that Sabbatai never died in the first place, thereby proclaiming the Swoon Theory!! So make it a practice to always ask after one of these cases is mentioned: "And since you've required this of Jesus' resurrection, could you please tell me what early evidence--within a decade or two--supports a resurrection for this person?" Watch the dead silence while they squirm and/or change the subject!!
3) The sources that report other ancient "miracles" are far too late to be of any help--from centuries to a thousand years or more after the alleged event!
4) As several studies have shown, there are virtually no accounts prior to Jesus that are even very similar to Jesus' miracles. For many more details see my essay "Did Jesus Perform Miracles" in Jesus Under Fire, edited by Michael Wilkins and J.P. Moreland, especially pages 119-124. On Apollonius in particular, see the specifics there, on pp. 123-124. On the non-historical myths like Isis and Osiris, check my response to Evan Fales in Philosophia Christi, where many other considerations are mentioned. You can also get a copy of my article "Resurrection Claims in Non-Christian Religions," in Religious Studies, Vol. 25 (1989), pp. 167-177.

Question: How would you address high school or even junior high students (perhaps even unbelievers) about the resurrection? How would you point out the particulars of doing history?

Answer: I might try to get them to think through the subject along with me, by asking: how do we know when something happened in history? For example, how do we know that the Magna Carta was really signed, or that Julius Caesar or George Washington ever lived? Ask what sorts of criteria we would need. Point them in the direction of needing good records, especially those by eyewitnesses. Reading someone's account of walking and talking with Washington would be a good example. A copy of the Magna Carta would be nice, etc. Maybe write these historical criteria on a board or somewhere.

Then tell them that we have that sort of evidence for the resurrection--many reliable writings, eyewitnesses like the apostle Paul, an empty tomb (archaeology), possibly the Shroud of Turin (more archaeology), and so on. Attempts by critics don't disprove this event. So what we are left with is that Jesus died by crucifixion and his disciples believed they saw him afterwards. Virtually every critic admits these two facts. But here's the key: since natural hypotheses don't explain these two facts, as these same critics usually admit, now we're pretty close to a resurrection.

Further, we have the disciples' transformations due to their beliefs. These high school students would probably like to hear details about how some of these disciples died for the resurrection message. This proves the sincerity of their beliefs. Tell them that two ancient critics, James the brother of Jesus and Paul, both were unbelievers before they met the risen Jesus.

After making a simply but exciting case, I would tell them that if Jesus rose from the dead 2000 years ago, then this message is still relevant and can change their lives today. If God raised his Son from the dead and God was in charge of the world in 30 AD, then he is still in charge today. This says something about pain and suffering, for example. And the New Testament repeatedly links the resurrection to the believer's resurrection and eternal life (almost 20 times in the New Testament). Then I would leave them with my testimony--as a real example of life having meaning. It's so crucial today that young people see the connection between truth and their needs--that Christianity really answers their personal questions. I think it can all be done in an exciting and interactive manner. If the students get their questions answered too, this makes it all the better.

Question: I have heard that the earliest references to other ancient figures being raised from the dead all post-date Jesus. Is this true?

Answer: Yes, that is strictly true. For more details, you can check either The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus, by Mike Licona and me (Kregel, 2004), pp 89-92 or my book, The Risen Jesus and Future Hope (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 29-30. You can also check my website (www.garyhabermas.com) for some video and audio lecture material on these subjects.

Question: Since Wright's book on the resurrection came out, do you think that the popular refrain that "Paul's concept of resurrection was spiritual, not physical" has lost any of its popularity?

Answer: I think that Wright's volume will have continued influence on the notion of bodily resurrection. At least I hope that it does. But I have recently documented that the trends toward the bodily nature of the resurrection appearances were beginning to turn prior to the publication of Wright's text. My essay "Mapping the Recent Trend Toward the Bodily Resurrection Appearances of Jesus in Light of Other Prominent Critical Positions" recently appeared in The Resurrection of Jesus, edited by Robert Stewart (Fortress, 2006).

Question: I was wondering if there are any books, articles, or any other replies being given to the book, The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave, edited by Robert Price and Jefferey Jay Lowder?

Answer: Yes, I know of two responses that are due to be published pretty soon. One is by Steve Davis, in the journal Philosophia Christi. The other is a very lengthy response by Norm Geisler in the journal Christian Apologetics.

Question: Could you list some of the books you have written on the resurrection and the historical Jesus? I have many questions and doubts concerning these subjects.

Answer: Here are several of them that may help with your questions:
1) The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus (with Mike Licona--Kregel Books);
2) The Historical Jesus (College Books);
3) Beyond Death (with JP Moreland, Wipf and Stock);
4) In Defense of Miracles (co-edited with Doug Geivett--InterVarsity Press);
5) The Risen Jesus & Future Hope (Rowman and Littlefield). Regarding your doubts, I have also written The Thomas Factor (Broadman and Holman) and Dealing with Doubt (Moody Press).

Question: I think it is obvious that Jesus really existed, but I can't accept the resurrection. I just don't feel that it happened. What advice can you give me?

Answer: Try your skepticism over against the historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection and try to explain this event some other way. I questioned it for 10 years and ended up doing my Ph.D. dissertation on it at a state university. I couldn't just say that it was true because the Bible was inspired! But there is some real serious evidence for the resurrection. Again, we can discuss all this if you want. Regarding your feelings about Christian doctrine, you may have to learn not to ask yourself how you feel about something. Feeling differently about whether Julius Caesar was murdered 20 centuries ago won't change the fact of his death. So again, let's look at the evidence for the resurrection and see if you can explain it just as well in some other manner. Christianity rests on the truth of Jesus' Deity, death, and resurrection. We can show that these beliefs are accompanied by incredible evidence and are the very best explanations for the data that we know. If this is so, what stands in the way of your believing it?

Question: Where do you make the move from the resurrection of Jesus to the truth of Christian theism?

Answer: Arguing from a minimal facts argument for Jesus' resurrection to Christian theism is quite difficult, especially in philosophical terms. Nonetheless, I have attempted in several places to do so. The most detailed case is presented in my volume The Risen Jesus and Future Hope (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003). The first six chapters argue from the resurrection, to the likelihood of theism, to the truth of Jesus' deity and message, to the truth of the Kingdom of God and eternal life. Subsequent chapters move on to Scripture and several practical applications, like the fear of death and suffering. If you are interested, it was reviewed in recent issues of both Philosophia Christi and by the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society.

Question: What reasons would you give to show that the resurrection of Jesus is central to the Christian Life?

Answer: Basically, the resurrection is essential to the Christian's faith for a number of crucial reasons. It is at the very center of the Gospel data, which involve at least the deity, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We must respond to Jesus in faith/commitment. But the resurrection is also the fact that evidences all the other facts. Further, in the New Testament, the resurrection is said to be the center of theology (such as 1 Cor. 15:12-20) as well as Christian practice (like 1 Pet. 1:3-9). Most of all, that Jesus was raised from the dead guarantees that believers will also be raised. For example, as great as creation is, the resurrection is a greater miracle, because it signals the beginning of the New Creation, that we will never die. It is not even claimed that

other major religious founders were raised from the dead. Check out 1 Corinthians 15:12-20 and I think you'll get a few more ideas, too.