



# Is the Resurrection Historically Reliable?

by Jared Compton

## DIFFICULT ISSUES

Is the resurrection historically reliable?

Well, I suppose it depends who you ask. Scripture, not least Paul and the gospel writers, sure seem to think so. In fact, Paul goes so far as to suggest that if Jesus did not rise Christianity is nothing short of a blind alley—a fool’s hope ([1 Corinthians 15:14](#)). To be sure, a good number of folks think Christianity, along with its tale of resurrection, is precisely that—a tale—and not a few of these wear tweed sport coats and occupy tenured university chairs. These routinely suggest that the resurrection most certainly did not happen and that the existing records (esp. the gospel accounts) are *themselves* the problem, since these are simply the late and largely fictitious creations of the strand of Christianity eventually dubbed “orthodox” (much to the chagrin of the competitors it snuffed out). Here, then, we must ask, Can the history Scripture teaches be trusted or has this alternative view gotten things right?

### *Evidence*

The alternative view has gotten things wrong by wrongly assuming two things about Scripture’s account. (1) It wrongly assumes the account of Jesus’ resurrection was written long after the death of the historical Jesus (i.e., the Jesus most everyone admits lived and died in the first century). (2) It wrongly assumes the account of Jesus’ resurrection was created by these later writers so that the historical Jesus would match the Christ they were already worshipping. To point up these wrong assumptions, we need simply to show that the records are both early and full of details not likely to have been invented by Christian, much less later Christian, groups. We’ll do this by noting three firm facts.

#### *Firm Fact # 1—The empty tomb.*

This fact is supported by two considera-

tions. *First*, Jesus was buried in a well-known tomb. This is important because were Jesus' tomb well-known, the claim by the early church that Jesus had vacated his tomb could be easily verified (or, for that matter, *discounted*). That Jesus' tomb was well-known is pointed up in both early and non-legendary material. Mark's gospel, written no more than thirty years after Jesus' crucifixion and itself based on even earlier sources, mentions that Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea ([Mark 15:43](#)). And, this early detail was not likely a fictitious insertion by later Christian authors. After all, Joseph was a member of the Jewish Council (or Sanhedrin; [Mark 15:43](#)). In other words, why would later Christians invent a story about a Jewish Sanhedrist helping Jesus? Had the early Christians created this detail, the Jewish authorities could have easily disproven it. They could have simply checked the records to find out whether or not Joseph had been a member of the Council and/or whether or not his tomb had been used, not to mention vacated, by Jesus.

*Second*, not only was Jesus' tomb well-known, but it was also found empty by Jewish women. This detail is also found in very early sources, this time not only in Mark's report ([16:1-8](#)) but also in Paul's (implied in [1 Cor 15:4](#)). In fact, many scholars date the tradition Paul speaks of in [1 Corinthians 15:3](#) to within five or six years after Jesus' death. Moreover, these early reports of the empty tomb contain non-legendary material. They indicate that the tomb was found empty *by women*. That is to say, in Jewish society the testimony of women was at this time considered unreliable. As Josephus, the early Jewish historian (ca. 31–100 A.D.), notes, women were not allowed to serve as credible witnesses in Jewish courts. To this, N. T. Wright adds, "If [the early Christians] could have invented stories of fine, upstanding, reliable

male witnesses being first at the tomb, they would have done it" ([The Resurrection of the Son of God](#) 2003: 608).

Even further, Matthew's still-relatively early account itself adds to the historicity of the empty tomb. Matthew notes what the early Jewish response was to the apostolic preaching of Jesus' resurrection. Significantly, it was not: "These fellows are out of their minds—here is Jesus' body!" Rather, the Jewish authorities invented a tale that suggested the disciples had stolen away the body (see [Matthew 28:13](#)). In short, the earliest Jewish response was itself an attempt to explain why the body was missing and the tomb was empty.

*Firm Fact #2—The Resurrection Appearances.*

Paul's early account speaks of hundreds of witnesses who claim to have seen Jesus risen ([1 Corinthians 15:5-9](#)). Timothy Keller adds,

Paul indicates [in this text] that the risen Jesus not only appeared to individuals and small groups but he also appeared to five hundred people at once, most of whom were still alive at the time of his writing [ca. 56] and could be consulted for corroboration. Paul's letter was to a church, and therefore it was a public document, written to be read aloud. Paul was inviting any one who doubted that Jesus had appeared to people after his death to go and talk to the eyewitnesses if they wished. It was a bold challenge and one that could easily be taken up, since during the *pax Romana* travel around the Mediterranean was safe and easy. Paul could not have made such a challenge if those eyewitnesses didn't exist ([The Reason for God](#) 2007: 204).

### *Firm Fact #3—The Rise of the Early Church’s Belief in the Resurrection.*

Three final considerations demonstrate that the resurrection was not something created by early Christians. First, the majority of Jews simply did not believe in a resurrection in the middle of time, nor would they have called a non-bodily appearance a resurrection. Rather, for a Christian Jew (as the disciples were) to proclaim “he is risen” meant that Jesus was indeed bodily risen. Therefore, we must ask, where did this belief in a bodily resurrection in the middle of time come from?

*Second*, resurrection was important but not central in the Hebrew Scriptures or in the time between the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament (i.e., 2nd Temple Judaism). In contrast, resurrection moved to the center of Christian belief (see Paul’s “first importance,” [1 Corinthians 15:1–6](#)). Again, we must ask, what made resurrection so central to early, largely Jewish, Christianity?

*Third*, we must remember, the disciples were so convinced of this event that they were willing to risk their lives testifying to it. One must, therefore, explain what happened to the disciples between their fearful flight (see [John 20:19](#)) following Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion and their bold preaching soon thereafter (see [Acts 2:24](#); [3:15](#); [4:2](#)). (We might add to these Paul and James’s conversions; see [Acts 9:1](#) and [John 7:5](#) respectively.) In short, we must ask, what caused these remarkable transformations?

In the end, the alternative view’s assumptions simply don’t account for these three facts. The empty tomb, the appearances and the rise of the early church’s belief in the resurrection are details that come from early sources and are details which cannot be satisfactorily explained as the creation of later Christian writers.

Still, these three facts don’t automatically prove the resurrection, since any number of explanations could be and, in fact, are given for them (e.g., someone stole Jesus’ body, the disciples hallucinated, Jesus didn’t die on the cross). Presently, none of these explanations has gained much traction, since each stretches the bounds of credulity. Thus, it is simply important to point up here (1) that alternative explanations of these facts are offered, something which provides tremendous confirmation of the firmness of these three facts, and (2) that incredible alternative explanations are given, since believing in a resurrection, it is claimed, is even more incredible. After all, the resurrection is a miracle and miracles, it is routinely asserted, simply do not and *cannot* happen.

### **Worldviews**

To evaluate whether something can or cannot happen gets one around to talking about *worldviews*. And, as postmodernism helpfully reminds us, everybody’s got one of these. It’s the lens through which each of us interprets reality. It’s the thing that tells one to expect what goes up to come down or to expect things in motion to stay in motion. It’s the thing that tells us to expect  $y$  to not equal non- $y$  or  $y+y$  to always equal  $2y$ . The question, then, is not whether or not someone has a worldview, but whether or not one has the correct worldview.

Now, the mechanism for evaluating worldviews and attempting to locate the correct one involves criteria such as *coherence* (internal consistency), *scope* (comprehensive explanatory power), *efficacy* (livability), and *simplicity* (simplest is often the best explanation), among a few others. The trouble that those run into whose worldview denies the possibility of the miraculous is that their worldview runs up short on a number of these criteria. For instance, this worldview is

founded upon two very basic premises about human knowledge: all knowledge is gained by (1) sense experience and (2) reason (e.g., inductive reasoning). However, neither of these premises explains the near universal belief in moral obligation (e.g., it's always wrong to rape, sex traffic, torture children). In other words, nothing about sense experience or reason suggests that something *ought* not to happen or that something *ought* to happen, yet most people are deeply committed to knowledge of this sort. Can a worldview be sufficiently comprehensive if it is unable to explain some near universal phenomenon? Other examples could be given. Suffice it to say that this worldview comes up short time and again. Therefore, to reject the possibility of the miraculous on the basis of a largely-inadequate worldview is simply bad form.

### ***Decisions***

If the facts are patiently considered and one's worldview is not illegitimately predisposed against the miraculous, then Scripture's claim that Jesus rose from the dead is, at the least, a possible conclusion. In other words, the resurrection could be historically reliable. We might even say, for the moment, that since no better alternative explanation of the facts has arisen, Scripture's explanation is presently the most satisfactory or plausible. The trouble is, Scripture (not least its divine author) is not content with "possible" or "most satisfactory." In fact, Scripture is not even content with definite and best, because Scripture is not simply content with belief in a historical event, even in a resurrection. Scripture's goal is not simply assent to history but, rather, conversion. Therefore, Scripture not only wants the events it records to be recognized as historical, it wants the explanations it gives those events to be believed (e.g., "Jesus was raised

*for our justification, [Romans 4:25](#)"). And, for this to occur, more than evidences are required, since forces, some supernatural, are at work that prevent the proper functioning of the human mind (see [Romans 1:18-32](#) and [2 Corinthians 4:4](#)). In the end, how one views the evidence for the resurrection is inextricably bound up with how one views the significance of the resurrection. And, since this is the case, not only is historical proof necessary but so also is the illumination of the mind. This sort of thing, at other times called *faith*, comes only by hearing and reading Scripture (see [Romans 10:17](#)).*

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