

THE CASE FOR THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Source of arguments: *'The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus'* by Gary R. Habermas & Michael R. Licona.

THE PROBLEM

The leaders of the Jews have accused Jesus' disciples of stealing His body.
The disciples are making the outrageous claim that Jesus rose from the dead.

THE PROOFS

The New Testament's explanation of the empty tomb [**John 20:1-9, 19-20**]

I. THE EMPTY TOMB

How do we know that the tomb was empty?

A. Jerusalem factor

Jesus was publicly executed in Jerusalem. His post-mortem appearances and empty tomb were first proclaimed publicly there.

It would have been impossible for Christianity to get off the ground in Jerusalem if the body had still been in the tomb. His enemies in the Jewish leadership and Roman government would only have had to exhume the corpse and publicly display it for the hoax to be shattered.

Not only are Jewish, Roman, and all other writings absent of such an account, but there is total silence from Christianity's critics who would have jumped at evidence of this sort.

B. Enemy Confirmation

If your mother says that you are an honest person, we may have reason to believe her, yet with reservation, since she loves you and is somewhat biased. However, if someone who hates you admits that you are an honest person, we have a stronger reason to believe what is being asserted, since potential bias does not exist.

The empty tomb is attested not only by Christian sources. Jesus' enemies admitted it as well, albeit indirectly.

Matthew writes, "When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, 'You are to say, His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep'" (Matt. 28:12-13).

In A.D. 150, **Justin Martyr** writes that the Jewish leadership was still spreading the same rumor in his day. There would have been no need for an attempt to account for a missing body, if the body had still been in the tomb.

When the boy tells his teacher that the dog ate his homework, this is an indirect admission that his homework is unavailable for assessment.

Likewise, the earliest Jewish claim reported regarding Jesus' resurrection was to accuse the disciples of stealing the body, an indirect admission that the body was unavailable for public display. This is the only early opposing theory we know of that was offered by Jesus' enemies.

C. Testimony of Women

If someone concocted a story in an attempt to deceive others, we presume that they would not knowingly invent information that could hurt the credibility of their story.

For example, we have heard of those who, in attempting to promote themselves, have made up stories about their heroism in the military or of having an education they really did not possess. However, is it normal to invent and spread a story about oneself as a thief or liar?

When we come to the account of the empty tomb, women are listed as the primary witnesses. They are not only the first witnesses mentioned. They are also mentioned in all four Gospels, whereas male witnesses appear only later and in two gospels.

This would be an odd invention, since in both Jewish and Roman cultures, women were lowly esteemed and their testimony was regarded as questionable, certainly not as credible as a man's.

Even the disciples did not believe the testimony of the women. Luke writes that they "did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense" (Luke 24:11).

II. THE FACTS

There are four facts backed by so much evidence that nearly every scholar, even the skeptical ones, accept them.

FACT #1: Jesus died by crucifixion.

Crucifixion was a common form of execution employed by the Romans to punish members of the lower class, slaves, soldiers, the violently rebellious, and those accused of treason.

The first-century Jewish historian **Josephus** reports that during the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Roman soldiers felt such hatred toward the Jews that they crucified a multitude of them in various postures. Crucifixion was a very tortuous death.

In the first century B.C., **Cicero** calls it the most horrendous torture. So hideous was the act of crucifixion upon a man that he also writes that “the very word ‘cross’ should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears.”

Tacitus in the second century refers to it as “the extreme penalty.”

1. Reported in all four Gospels

That Jesus was executed by crucifixion is recorded in all four Gospels (Matthew 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 19).

2. Reported by a number of non-Christian sources

A number of non-Christian sources of the period report the event as well.

Josephus writes, “...Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified....”

The Roman historian **Tacitus** reports, “Nero fastened the guilt [of the burning of Rome] and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate.”

Lucian, the Greek satirist, writes, “The Christians, you know, worship a man to this

day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account.”

The **Talmud** (a collection of ancient Jewish writings) reports that “on the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged.” Yeshu is Joshua in Hebrew. The equivalent in Greek is Jesus.

Being hung on a tree was used to describe crucifixion in antiquity.

Clearly, Jesus’ death by crucifixion is a historical fact supported by considerable evidence.

FACT #2: The disciples believed that Jesus rose from the dead.

There is virtual consensus among scholars who study Jesus’ resurrection that, following Jesus’ death by crucifixion, His disciples really believed that He appeared to them risen from the dead.

1. They claimed it.

(1 Corinthians 15:1-11) Most scholars believe that verses 3-5 is from a creed that was circulating among believers within 5 years of Jesus’ crucifixion.

Paul knew the apostles personally and reports that they claimed that Jesus rose from the dead.

After writing on the resurrection of Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, Paul said he worked harder than all of the other apostles (15:10), but that whether “it was I or they, this [i.e., Jesus’ resurrection] is what we preach” (15:11).

Sources that cannot be ignored are the Gospels themselves.

No matter how skeptical the critic might be concerning the Gospels, it is well-accepted that all four Gospels were written during the first century.

Each Gospel attests to the resurrection of Jesus. This means that 4 accounts were written within 70 years of Jesus at the latest, reporting the disciples’ claims that Jesus rose from the dead.

According to Irenaeus, **Polycarp** (c. 69-c. 155) was taught by the apostles, taught others what he had learned from them, appointed by the apostles as bishop of the church in Smyrna, and had talked with many who had seen Jesus.

Polycarp was martyred in Smyrna (modern Izmir, Turkey) around the year 160 at the age of eighty-six.

Around 110, he wrote a letter to the Philippian church, speaking of the righteousness and endurance witnessed in the lives of several including “Paul himself and the other apostles.” Of them he says, “For they did not love the present age, but him who died for our benefit and for our sake was raised by God.”

2. They believed it.

After Jesus’ death, the lives of the disciples were transformed to the point that they endured persecution and even martyrdom.

Such strength of conviction indicates that they were not just claiming that Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to them in order to receive some personal benefit. They really believed it.

Compare this courage to their character at Jesus’ arrest and execution.

They denied and abandoned Him and then they hid in fear.

Afterward, they willingly endangered themselves by publicly proclaiming the risen Christ.

These facts are validated by multiple accounts, both from early sources in the New Testament as well as outside of it.

According to **Tertullian**, if one did not want to believe the Christian records concerning the martyrdom of some of the apostles, the information could be found in the public records. Tertullian says that Peter was crucified and Paul was beheaded under Nero, who was the first emperor to execute Christians.

Origen (c. 185-c. 254), in *Contra Celsum*, relates how the disciples’ devotion to the teaching of Jesus “was attended with danger to human life... [and that they] themselves were the first to manifest their disregard for its [i.e., death’s] terrors.” Another of Origen’s writings relates that Peter had been crucified upside down and that Paul had been martyred in Rome under Nero.

FACT #3: Paul the persecutor was converted.

Saul of Tarsus, better known by history as the apostle Paul, changed from being a skeptic

who believed that it was God's will to persecute the church to becoming one of its most influential messengers.

In his letters to the churches in Corinth (1 Cor. 15:9-10), Galatia (Gal. 1:13-16), and Philippi (Phil. 3:6-7), Paul himself writes of his conversion from being a persecutor of the church to one who strongly promoted the Christian message.

What caused Paul to change? Why did one who persecuted Christians suddenly become one?

Both Paul himself and Luke report that it was because he believed firmly that he had experienced an encounter with the risen Jesus.

FACT #4: James the skeptic was converted.

In 2002, what was thought to be a significant archaeological discovery was made. An ancient ossuary or bone box dating to the first century was found with the inscription "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus."

While controversy continues regarding the authenticity of the inscription, the fact that such a find enthralled the religious world shows the historical importance attached to James, the brother of Jesus.

The Gospels report that Jesus had at least four brothers, James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon, plus unnamed sisters.

Josephus, the Jewish historian from the first century mentions "the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, whose name was Jesus."

The Gospels report that Jesus' brothers, including James, were unbelievers during His ministry (Mark 3:21, 31; 6:3-4; John 7:5).

1 Corinthians 15:7 lists an appearance of the risen Jesus to James: "Then he appeared to James."

After the alleged event of Jesus' resurrection, James is identified as a leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:12-21; Gal. 1:19). Not only did James convert to Christianity, his beliefs in Jesus and His resurrection were so strong that he died as a martyr because of them.

4 facts:

- (1) Jesus died by crucifixion;**
- (2) The disciples believed that Jesus rose from the dead;**
- (3) Paul the persecutor was converted; and**
- (4) James the skeptic was converted.**

How do we explain these facts?

III. POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

How can these facts be explained? 6 explanations:

EXPLANATION #1: Apparent Death Theory

That Jesus was crucified is certain. But how can we be certain that He actually died while on the cross?

We've all heard of cases in which someone who had been declared dead started breathing again a few hours later. If this can happen in our modern society, what would have prevented it from happening two thousand years ago?

Perhaps Jesus never died to begin with, so there was no Resurrection. Could it have been that the soldiers at the cross mistook him for being dead when He had actually fallen into a coma?

Jesus had many followers. Certainly some of them must have been wealthy.

Could they have bribed the soldiers to take him off the cross while He was still alive? Then Jesus could have recuperated and showed His nail-scarred hands and feet so that some believed Him to be risen from the dead.

There are at least 2 major problems with this theory.

First, the nature of scourging and crucifixion make it highly unlikely that Jesus could have survived. In the March 21, 1986 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, a team of three medical doctors concluded, "...interpretations based on the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge."

Also, John's Gospel says, "One of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a

sudden flow of blood and water” (John 19:34). The blood and water that were described as flowing from His body were probably due to the rupturing of the sac that surrounds the heart (called the pericardium). This would produce water and, if the right side of the heart was pierced, blood would likewise flow. The Roman author Quintilian (A.D. 35-95) reports this procedure being performed on crucifixion victims. The flow of blood and water indicated that death had occurred.

Second, it’s not believable that, having been scourged and crucified, Jesus pushed the heavy stone away from the tomb with pierced hands, overpowered the guards, and walked blocks on pierced and wounded feet.

Even if such a ridiculous scenario were possible, when He appeared to His disciples in His pathetic and mutilated state, would this convince them that He was the risen Prince of life?

B. EXPLANATION #2: Wrong Tomb Theory

Maybe the women and the disciples went to the wrong tomb and, having discovered it empty, concluded that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Can we be certain that they remembered where the tomb was?

There are at least 6 major problems with the wrong tomb theory.

First, even if the disciples went to the wrong tomb, this does not account for their belief that they had seen the risen Jesus.

Second, the testimony of the Gospels is that the empty tomb convinced no one but John. The Gospel of John reports that Mary Magdalene immediately jumped to the conclusion that someone had stolen the body upon discovering the empty tomb. Her first thought was not that Jesus had risen. The Gospels further report that Peter, upon seeing the empty tomb, was unconvinced as well. Thomas was unconvinced by reports of an empty tomb and reports of appearances by the risen Jesus to the others.

Third, the church persecutor Paul converted based on the appearance of the risen Jesus, not on an empty tomb. Paul would have assumed that someone had stolen the body or that the wrong tomb was visited.

Fourth, the skeptic James would not have been convinced merely by an empty tomb. Like

Paul, James was convinced by an appearance.

Fifth, no sources support the wrong tomb theory. If the women and the disciples had gone to the wrong tomb, all that the Roman and Jewish authorities would have to do would have been to go to the right tomb, exhume the body, publicly display it, and clear up the misunderstanding. Yet, not a single critic is recorded to have even thought of this explanation for the Resurrection during the first few centuries of Christianity.

Sixth, the evidence suggests that the tomb's location was known, because a well-known man, Joseph of Arimathea, buried Jesus in his own tomb.

EXPLANATION #3: Fraud Theory

Claiming that something is true is a long way from establishing that something is true. The disciples, Paul, and James claimed to have seen the risen Jesus, but why should we believe them?

For three years the disciples had placed their normal lives on hold and followed Jesus with total dedication.

Most of them were peasants who had not formally studied religion. Yet they were teaching that the well-educated Jewish religious leaders were wrong and that Jesus, the carpenter, had it right.

Then Jesus was arrested, and within twenty-four hours He was dead.

Bewildered and without a leader, they came to the realization that they had made an embarrassing mistake. So they invented the story of Jesus' resurrection in order to save face, or to promote their own views or causes.

Did the disciples lie about the appearances and possibly steal the body from the tomb? The evidence strongly suggests that this was not what happened.

First, we established earlier that the disciples of Jesus claimed to have seen the risen Jesus because they really believed that they had seen Him. Their transformation indicates that their claim of seeing Jesus was the result of strong and sincere belief that they truly had seen Him.

Of course simply being willing to die for one's beliefs does not verify that those beliefs are true. Many who embrace beliefs contrary to Christianity's have also died for their beliefs.

But there is a difference between people today being willing to die for their beliefs and the case of the disciples.

Adherents to other religions may be deceived by false teachings, but the disciples claimed that they themselves saw the risen Jesus.

Second, a mere story spread by the disciples would not have convinced Paul, who was an enemy of the church. But instead of rejecting the claims of Jesus' resurrection as fraud, Paul was convinced by what he described as the risen Jesus appearing to him.

Third, it is doubtful that fraud on the part of the disciples would have convinced James who, even though he may have heard of Jesus' miracles, had rejected Him prior to His resurrection.

Jesus' resurrection from the dead would likely have been perceived merely as another lie from Jesus' disciples.

Like Paul, James appears to have been convinced by what he believed was an appearance of the risen Jesus to himself.

EXPLANATION #4: Hallucination Theory

If the disciples believed they were telling the truth when they testified that the risen Jesus had appeared to them, perhaps hallucinations could be responsible for the appearances to the disciples?

It's common for a person to experience grief hallucinations following the death of a loved one. No different from us moderns, the ancients used wine and drugs to soothe emotional pain. Too much of either might cause people to see things that are not there.

This theory, however, suffers from a number of problems.

First, today we know that hallucinations are private occurrences, which occur in the mind of an individual. They are not collective experiences.

In a group, all of the people may be in the same frame of mind to hallucinate, but each experiences hallucinations on an individual basis. Nor will they experience the same hallucination.

Hallucinations are like dreams in this way. Imagine that it's the middle of the night. You wake up your husband or wife and say, "Honey, I just had a dream that we were in Hawaii. Go back to sleep and join me in my dream and we'll enjoy a free vacation together." It would be impossible to do so, since a dream exists only in the mind of the individual. It cannot be shared with another person.

Likewise, a hallucination cannot be shared. The disciples of Jesus claimed that as a group they saw the risen Jesus (see 1 Cor. 15:5-7).

Second, hallucination don't account for the empty tomb. Even if the Twelve, Paul, and James had all experienced hallucinations of the risen Jesus, His body would still have been in the tomb.

Third, hallucinations don't account for the conversion of Paul. He didn't appear to have been in the frame of mind to experience a hallucination, since it seems he hated both Jesus and His followers and believed it was God's will to stop them. He was far from grieving over Jesus' death.

Fourth, there are too many incident variances.

Let's suppose that a UFO hovering one thousand feet above the ground is seen by a group of Boy Scouts in the country one evening. When they report it to the police, the sergeant thanks them and tells them that they have received numerous calls during the past week from individuals and groups reporting similar phenomena, even a couple of individuals who are known to be skeptical of aliens. We may not necessarily conclude that the UFO is an alien spaceship. But we can know for certain that all of these individuals could not have been hallucinating.

Likewise, individuals and groups, friends as well as foes saw Jesus not once but many times over a period of forty days. We are told that these numbers included both men and women, hardheaded Peter and softhearted Mary Magdalene, indoors and outdoors, and so on. Not all of these persons would be in the same state of mind. It would be unreasonable to view every last one of these appearances as hallucinations.

E. EXPLANATION #5: Legend Theory

Maybe the disciples never claimed that Jesus rose from the dead. Maybe as the story of Jesus and His teachings spread, they were embellished with supernatural details.

This is much like the game "telephone," where a person in the front of a room whispers something to the person next to him who does the same until it reaches the last person in the back of the room. By then, the original message has changed substantially.

If that much change can happen in one room over five minutes, what can happen over two thousand years stretching across the globe?

Even in our own times when people tell stories of their childhood, details change. One example most will recognize is how far their grandfather walked to school and how deep the snow was in which he walked.

Are embellishments responsible for the accounts of Jesus' resurrection that we see in the New Testament?

The textual purity of the New Testament is rarely questioned by scholars.

It is well established and agreed among almost all who have seriously studied the ancient texts that the text is virtually the same as what was originally written. Even critical scholars question very few words in the New Testament, and those words in question do not affect doctrinal issues.

The question raised by skeptics today is, “Did legend creep into Christian tradition before they were put into writing?”

No. The story of the Resurrection can be traced back to the original disciples. Critics can accuse them of lying or hallucinating, but claiming that a resurrection legend developed after the time of the disciples is not an option; the disciples themselves made the claim.

F. THE BEST EXPLANATION: Jesus rose from the dead.

Believers: Your faith is not based on fairytale. Your hope is not built on a hoax. The Resurrection is a fact. It’s the truth.

Skeptics and seekers: Consider the overwhelming evidence in favor of the Resurrection.

According to the Guinness Book of World Records, Sir Lionel Luckoo was the most successful defense attorney ever.

This is what it says on page 547: “*Most successful lawyer: Sir Lionel Luckhoo...(who) succeeded in getting his 254th successive murder charge acquittal by January 1, 1985.*”

That’s an absolutely astonishing feat that nobody in the world has come close to replicating—245 murder trials in a row, either won before a jury or on appeal. No wonder he’s renowned as the real-life Perry Mason.

Wouldn’t it be interesting to get an opinion from an expert like Luckhoo on the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Well, we’re in luck, so to speak.

During his own spiritual journey, Luckhoo turned his expertise to the question of whether the resurrection of Jesus Christ fits the test of legal evidence.

And here’s the conclusion he ultimately reached: “I say unequivocally that the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so overwhelming that it compels acceptance by proof which leaves absolutely no room for doubt.”

The most successful attorney in the world applied the test of legal evidence to the case of Jesus Christ and concluded with absolute confidence that His resurrection is reality.

And then Luckhoo did the most logical thing he could do: he gave his life to Christ.

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies” (John 11:25).

Jesus died because our wrongdoing has separated us from a perfect God.

But out of His love for us, Jesus chose to suffer the pain of the cross as our substitute, to pay the penalty that we deserved for our sin so that we could be reconciled with God.

And when we confess our wrongdoing and personally apply Christ’s work on the cross to our lives—we receive Christ as our Lord and Savior and we receive eternal life as a gift of grace—then we can have confidence that we, too, will overcome the grave and live forever with Him in heaven.