

The Resurrection

The resurrection of Jesus in history and theology

THE IMPORTANCE

Central to the gospel

'But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true the dead are not raised.... If Christ has not been raised your faith is futile and you are still in your sins... If for this life only we have hoped in Christ we are of all people most to be pitied.' (1Cor 15:13-19)

This is the clear biblical foundation, that the resurrection is central to the whole gospel, without it our faith is meaningless. It is through the resurrection that the purposes of God come together and by which they are made available to all people.

When Peter preached at Pentecost the force of his message depended entirely upon the irrefutable reality of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

This Jesus.... you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, for it was not possible for him to be held by it.' (Acts 2:23-24)

The New Testament is quite clear that the resurrection is the keystone to the gospel.

Notice when reading each of the Gospels the proportion of the whole that is given to describing in detail the events of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Each writer retelling the same narrative but emphasising and highlighting those details which for their purpose are most significant. The focus of each Gospel is the resurrection of Jesus. The pace of each Gospel slows down as it considers in detail this central event. As we shall see they are constructed out of a multitude of eyewitness reports.

Resurrection defined

The Greek word for 'resurrection' is *anastasis*, which signifies a rising up, a standing up; from *anisthmi*, to stand up, or again, to cause to rise. The word appears over 40 times in NT, not once in OT.

NT Wright, says of the idea of resurrection "A fresh living embodiment following a period of death-as-a-state." It does not mean 'life after death', more accurately it is 'life after life after death'. The first stage is non-bodily, second stage a renewed bodily existence.

NT Wright describes it as six 'mutations' from Jewish belief:

- Moves from the periphery to the centre
- 'Sharpening' of the image to immortal physicality



- No spectrum of belief (as in Judaism)
- Split into two events: Christ the first fruits and at his coming those who belong to him
- Extra metaphorical meaning for baptism and holiness
- Demonstration that Jesus was the Messiah

Foundational to scholars

From outside the pages of the New Testament observers of the phenomenon of the Church, the conclusions are exactly the same; the fact of the resurrection is essential to understanding what has taken place within history. Here are just three quotations which are typical of those made by theologians and historians over the years:-

- ‘...Christianity stands or falls with the resurrection’ (Harnak)
- ‘..the empty tomb has been the cradle of the Church’ (Presseuse)
- ‘..if the resurrection is not historic fact the power of death remains unbroken’ (Sparrow-Simpson)
- “Christian faith in God is faith in the resurrection.” (Moltmann)
- “a deeply orthodox theology about the resurrection...is the proper seedbed of radical politics.” (Wright)

With the resurrection central to our faith it is little wonder that its truth has been under attack from the earliest times and continues as fiercely as ever today. For this reason we must have all the evidence at our fingertips. The truth is that the facts are so overwhelming that the step of faith it demands becomes almost the only logical response one can make.

THE FACTS

Presenting the case

It has been said, ‘The meaning of the resurrection is a theological matter, but the fact of the resurrection is a historical matter’ (Wilber Smith). It is not our purpose to discuss the theology of the resurrection here, though its implications will be present throughout. It is our purpose to prove the case for it being an event, which actually took place within history. Much modern radical theology has tried to take the emphasis away from the historical aspects, emphasising the ‘theological’ truths, forgetting that they are powerless if they are not rooted into the historical event.

It is interesting that we in fact know more about the details of the hours immediately before the actual death of Jesus, in and near Jerusalem, than we know about the death of any other person in ancient history.

In presenting our case to a skeptical world let us assemble our facts clearly. Remember that in a court of law evidence must be taken as a whole for the case to be proved. Certain facts may leave some questions unanswered, but it is what they are saying when they are all held together that is the important thing. Let us then examine the facts of the case.

The prediction

On many occasions Jesus clearly predicted his own death adding the startling fact that three days following that event he would rise again: ¹

¹ Cf also Mt 12:38-40; 16:21; 17:9,22-23; 20:18-19; 26:32; 27:63; Mk 8:31-9:1,10,31,32; 14:28,58.



- **Jn 2:18-22** 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up'
- **Lk 9:22-27** 'The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and raised up on the third day'

These predictions were not just to his inner group of disciples but were heard and registered by others like the priests who took enough notice to place a guard on the tomb (Mt 27:63). There were also the predictions in the Hebrew scriptures suggesting resurrection. When walking the road to Emmaus Jesus says, "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?", and beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.²

The execution

▪ **Condemned**

Jesus was publicly condemned by Pilate to be put to death by crucifixion (cf Mk 15:15).

▪ **Scourged**

Jesus was forcefully stripped, tied to a post and whipped with a *flagrum* (Latin for a whip with metal and bone pieces to lacerate the flesh). The punishment was inflicted by *lictors* (Latin for the 'scourgers'). Hebrew law limited the stripes to 40, Roman law had no such limitation, 'veins were laid bare, and muscles, sinews and bowels could be exposed' (Eusebius).

▪ **Crucified**

This was the most excruciating form of torture, its purpose was that the victim should die of exposure in the greatest amount of agony. Every nerve in the body screamed. Breathing was only possible by lifting oneself up painfully upon the legs (breaking legs brought suffocation). It inflicted dizziness, cramp, raging thirst, starvation, sleeplessness, traumatic fever, festering wounds, tetanus and gangrene. There was the shame of nakedness and collapsed bowels. The unnatural body position made every movement painful. Lacerated veins and crushed tendons throbbed. Arteries of the head and stomach became swollen with surcharged blood. There was a longing for the release of death.

▪ **Death**

Jesus died. Mark notes the surprise of Pilate at how early death came to Jesus (15:44). He required the personal confirmation of the centurion on duty of the death before he would officially release the body. Custom demanded the agreement of four of the executioners; 'they knew a dead man when they saw one'. The chief executioner had actually heard the death cry and remarked upon it (Mk 15:39). The Jews clearly believed that Jesus was dead (Mt 27:62-64). The Roman soldiers were professionals, they knew exactly what they had to do and did it thoroughly, and any slip-ups would mean severe punishment.

▪ **Blood and water**

This is a rare physiological phenomenon that could not have been invented; it must be an eyewitness report. Crucifixion causes a condition of the blood in the lungs similar to that

² Cf. Ps 16:10; 30:3; 41:10; 118:17; Hos 6:2; Mt 28:6; Mk 16:6; Lk 24:46; Acts 2:13; 13:33.



produced by drowning; death following the rupture of the heart. On piercing the left side after death these two factors would lead to the unusual phenomenon of a copious flow of blood followed by a flow of water (this information is based on the detailed observations made by Dublin physiologist S.Houghton). As an eye -witness John was so startled by the phenomenon that he believed it to be miraculous. Had Jesus not actually been dead there would have been spurts of blood at each heartbeat.

Jesus was dead. John was watching and he knew. He follows his description of Jesus' death with the words, "He who has seen has borne witness, and his witness is true; and he knows he is telling the truth" (19:35).

The burial

Normal Roman practice was to leave the body of the victim on the cross to become the prey of birds and beasts. Jewish law demanded the burial of the condemned (Dt 21:23). The Gospel writers' emphasise the involvement of Joseph of Arimathea, which suggests strongly that he was buried and the special circumstances that surrounded it. (Cf. Mt 27:57-58; Mk 15:42-45; Lk 23:50-52; Jn 19:38).

▪ **The tomb**

This is an important focus in the story. It is significant to note that it is referred to directly 32 times in the Gospels in connection with the resurrection. The details and events of the burial are of great significance to the writers in establishing the facts of the resurrection. The grave was in a garden near the execution site (Jn 19:41), not a natural cave but one cut out of the rock (Mk 15:46), it was not cut down but horizontally. It had not been previously used [Mt 27:60]. The resting place for the body was probably a simple shelf cut into the rock, the bottom being higher than the floor of the chamber, the length and depth just sufficient to hold a human body.

▪ **Preparations**

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus wrapped (bound) Jesus' body in clean linen and added 100 lbs. of spices, according to the Jewish custom, creating a fairly stiff covering. In later times pious Jews chose to be wrapped in cloths that had previously be used to cover copies of the Torah. The women watched the internment (Lk 23:55) and then returned home to prepare their own spices (Mk 16:1; Lk 23:56). It was customary to embalm bodies with huge quantities of spices, especially if the person was held in great esteem.

▪ **The stone**

The opening was guarded by a huge disc of rock, which could roll along a groove slightly depressed at the centre, in front of the tomb's entrance. In Hebrew it was called *golel* and protected the tomb from grave robbers and wild animals. It usually required a number of strong people to remove it. This group of women certainly believed it was too heavy for them to consider moving it (Mk 16:3). Several times the narratives refer to it as 'exceedingly great' (cf Mk 16:4). This stone has been called, 'the one silent infallible witness in the whole episode'.

The precautions

'So they went and made the grave secure
by sealing the stone and setting a guard'
(Mt 27:66)



▪ The seal

This was probably a cord stretched across the stone and sealed at each end with sealing clay (cf Dan 6:17). It was done in the presence of the guards who were then left to protect this impress of authority. The door could not have been opened without breaking the seal. 'In doing their best to prevent theft they over-reached themselves and provided additional witness to the resurrection' (Plummer).

▪ The guard

Were the guards, Roman soldiers or Temple police? We cannot give a conclusive answer. The Gk. *kustodian* is a transliteration of the Latin military term for soldiers who serve as guards, thus suggesting Imperial troops. The grammar of Matthew 27:65 could imply either:

“You have a guard...” Temple troops
“Take a guard.....” Roman troops

- The fact they first reported to the High Priest suggests Temple guards
- The fact Caiaphas promises protection suggests Roman soldiers. Would Roman soldiers have got off so lightly? Why would they have gone to the priests - other than having been seconded to their authority?
- Temple guards could have been punished by Rome if the body had been stolen as it belonged to the victim of Imperial justice
- The final answer must remain open, though the majority opinion is in favour of Roman soldiers
- There were usually two sets of guards made up of four soldiers apiece; one watched while one rested. Of those on duty one soldier acted as a sentinel while the others could relax a little, but ready to start at a moments notice
- Temple guards had to stand as long as they were on duty; caught sleeping, and their clothes were set on fire. No criminal has been given so much protection after their execution, which in itself witnesses to the resurrection taking place
- The guard had no self interest in its task, merely to carry out orders; the seal was more sacred to them than anything else
- These soldiers were not going to be hoodwinked by timid Galileans nor were they going to sleep at their post

▪ The reaction

‘.. then all the disciples left him and fled’
(Mt 26:56)

.. he began to invoke a curse on himself and swear,
“I do not know this man of whom you speak”
(Mk 14:71)

‘.. the doors being shut,
where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews ’
(Jn 20:19)

All the disciples ran away at Jesus' arrest. Peter repeatedly denies that he even knows Jesus. After the crucifixion they hide themselves in a room with doors barred. When the women summon them, only two venture out to check the story, which the majority thought



was, “rubbish!” (Lk 24:11). Everything about the disciples was fear and self-preservation. They did not expect a resurrection let alone plan to create the impression of one.

The exhibits

▪ The empty tomb

This is acknowledged by opponents and affirmed by the disciples. In itself it is not proof of a resurrection. John says he, 'saw and believed' (20:8). In seeing the empty tomb he remembered what Jesus said about his resurrection and on the uniting of these two facts he came to faith. The fact of the empty tomb along with the resurrection appearances verified the truth for the disciples. It is interesting that the empty tomb is not mentioned in the preaching of the early church. No one denies that the tomb was empty, the question is, “Why is it empty?” and “What does it prove?” The gospel could not have been preached in Jerusalem for a single day if there was not conclusive proof that the tomb was empty. The fact that the Jewish authorities put about that the body was stolen is also proof that the tomb was empty (Mt 28:11-15). Why didn't the tomb become a place of veneration like that of other great individuals? Quite simply because the body wasn't there and they knew Jesus was alive.

▪ The folded grave clothes

The same passage that tells us about the grave being empty points out that the grave clothes were still there (Jn 20:6-7). The whole account is the meticulous record of an observant eyewitness:

- The grave clothes remained completely undisturbed, the body had simply withdrawn itself
- The grave clothes were 'lying' (ie. collapsed in upon themselves), with the head napkin 'by itself' (ie. where the head had been), 'rolled up' (ie. showing the rounded indented shape where Jesus' face had been)

The tomb may be empty but this was no grave robbing. What we have is another important piece of evidence for the resurrection.

▪ The moved stone

The Greek words used in relation to the stone at the empty tomb are significant:

- **Mt.27:60** the stone has been rolled
- **Mk.16:3-4** the stone is rolled 'upwards', suggesting an incline at the entrance
- **Lk.24:2** the stone is rolled 'away from', suggesting distance from the tomb
- **Jn.20:1** the stone is 'picked up and carried away'

Something dramatic had happened!

▪ The broken seal

The stone could not have been moved without breaking the seal, a crime few would venture to commit due to the severe wrath of the State. But broken it was - by a higher authority!

▪ The frightened guard

The earthquake that accompanied the resurrection left these hardened soldiers 'like dead people' (Mt 28:4). What were they to do? The open tomb meant immediate court martial. To admit sleeping would bring about a summary execution. Would the truth be believed? They had no option but to ask the priests for help.



The witnesses

There are ten recorded appearances of Jesus after his resurrection and a further four after his ascension, to:

- Mary Magdalene (Jn 20:14; Mk 16:9)
 - Women returning from the tomb (Mt 28:9-10)
 - Peter (Lk 24:34; 1Cor 15:5)
 - Emmaus disciples (Lk 24:13-33)
 - The disciples - Thomas absent (Lk 24:36-43; Jn 20:19-24)
 - The disciples - Thomas present (Jn 20:26-29)
 - Disciples at Lake Galilee (Jn 21:1-23)
 - 500 in the Galilee hillside (1Cor 15:6)
 - The 'eleven' (Mt 28:16-20; Mk 16:14-20)
 - The Ascension (Acts 1:3-12)
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- Paul on the Damascus road (Acts 9:3-7; 1Cor 15:8)
 - Stephen (Acts 7:55)
 - Paul in the Jerusalem Temple (Acts 22:17-21)
 - John on the island of Patmos (Rev 1:10-19)

With regard to the appearances:

- The transformation to the lives of the disciples is a historical fact.
- Even sceptical scholars are convinced of the appearances to the disciples, (e.g. Crossan)
- "We are on much firmer ground with respect to the appearances of the risen Jesus and their effect...That Jesus also appeared to others, such as Peter, Mary, James, cannot very well be questioned." (Koester)
- The dispute tends to come with the nature of the appearances rather than whether they actually happened.
- "Their evidential value...depends on one's assessment of what these experiences imply." (Barclay)
- For an atheist such as Goulder the appearances are explained away as psychological delusions akin to the Bigfoot phenomenon

The silence

When Peter preached on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) proclaiming that Jesus was raised, not a voice was raised in protest with evidence to the contrary, no body was produced as final evidence against the gospel. Nor did this happen at any other time in the life of the early church. Everyone knew the grave was empty.

When Paul spoke to Festus in Caesarea (Acts 25) the Jews attempted to bring serious charges against him, but none could be proved. The central issue was the resurrection (v19).



It has been well said that, 'the silence of the Jews is as eloquent as the speech of the Christians'. They had every opportunity to produce the body or put a valid alternative explanation but failed to do so.

The impact

▪ **Changed lives**

How did these followers of Jesus who fled at his arrest, denied him when questioned and locked themselves into a room after his burial change into fearless proclaimers of the gospel? Because they knew that Jesus had been raised from the dead. How was it they went throughout the world drawing thousands of others to faith in Christ, in the end almost all dying at executioners' hands themselves? Because they had seen Jesus risen from the dead. Nothing apart from the resurrection could account for this change.

▪ **Church foundations**

Wherever the church has been truly founded it has been upon the preaching of the resurrection (cf Acts 1:21-22; 2:23-24, 31-32; 3:14-15,26; 4:10; 5:30; 10:39-41). It is the conviction of the resurrection that has spread the gospel worldwide. Millions have experienced changed lives; hundreds of thousands have themselves died the martyrs' death in witness to its truth.

▪ **Christian practice**

Both 'baptism' and 'breaking bread' have the death and resurrection of Jesus at their heart. They are quite meaningless without it. They have also marked Christian practice from its inception. The recurring phrase 'first day of the week' only has significance because that was the day on which Jesus rose from the dead. Without the resurrection we have nothing!

THE OBJECTIONS

Welcome challenge

There has been skepticism about the resurrection from the earliest days; the humanist mind, whether Sadducee, Athenian or modern, rejects the whole concept in principle:

'Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead,
some mocked, but others said, "We will hear you again about this".
(Acts 17:32)

We should welcome every objection and attempt to attack the resurrection of Jesus; the evidence to its truth is there and will stand up to the toughest investigation. Every time we refute an objection we stand more confident than before. Our objectors do us greater favours than they and often we realise.

Fabrication

▪ **Argument**

The simplest way to dispose of the evidence of the resurrection is to say that it is a complete fabrication. Even to suggest that the women did not visit the grave at all. That it lay sealed and untouched for months even years, and that life in Jerusalem continued



normally apart from the inevitable discussion occasioned by the events of the crucifixion itself. It relies on the fact that the empty tomb narrative does not arise until at least a generation after Jesus' death.

▪ Refutation

However, no serious critic takes this attitude. How is one to account for the individual detailed and yet complementary accounts of the events surrounding the resurrection? How are we to account for the changed lives of the witnesses to the resurrection, once frightened, now bold? Are we really to imagine that the men and women who preached and practised the highest ethical teaching the world has ever known formulated it upon a lie? It is all quite unthinkable.

Fuller says, "That Jesus' disciples believed he was raised from the dead is one of the indisputable facts of history. If the disciples had *thought* Jesus' body remained in the tomb, they would not have come to believe in his resurrection."

Swoon

▪ Argument

This suggests that Jesus did not in fact die on the cross, but merely swooned due to his agonies and everyone imagined him dead due to the limited medical knowledge of the day. However, the coolness of the tomb and the balm of the spices revived him, resulting in his ignorant disciples believing it to be a resurrection. This idea was first popularised by Venturini an 18th century rationalist; more recently the Ahmadiya movement, a radical sect within Islam, has propounded the theory.

▪ Refutation

'To believe this is more incredible than Thomas' unbelief'. The soldiers said he was dead, as professionals, their lives depended upon being right. Accounts of prisoners being reprieved, having been crucified, say they rarely survived long. Jesus was scourged, crucified, pierced through the heart with a spear, hungry, wounds festering and unattended, spent a day and two nights in a cold cave (which in itself would have halted his impaired blood circulation). Yet his disciples see him radiant. How did he free himself from the tightly bound grave clothes pasted with 100 lbs. of spices (the smell alone of which would have killed him in the enclosed cave)? He walks miles to Emmaus, appears and disappears; all quite impossible. If it were true, the fact that he pretended it was a resurrection would link him with a lie, which would destroy the whole of his message. Also if it were true where is the account of what happened to him when he finally did die, even if of old age? He either rose and is alive or died and is dead. NT Wright says, "Even those historians who are passionately committed to denying the resurrection do not go by this route."

Stolen

▪ Argument

There are a number of variations to this theory. Most popular is the suggestion that Jesus' disciples stole the body and then claimed that a resurrection took place. Another is that the gardener moved the body; he was annoyed that so many visitors to the tomb were walking on his lettuces (a view quoted by Tertullian)! Another is that Joseph of Arimathea moved



the body to a more suitable site. Others argue that either the Jews (cf Mt 28:11-15) or the Romans moved it.

▪ **Refutation**

That the empty tomb is either divine work or human work is without question. The disciples had no power to remove the body (the guards and the seal), the authorities had no motive, it was in their interests to leave it where it was. Could the disciples really have overpowered the guards? They were surely too frightened even to try. If the soldiers were asleep they all would have to have been, which is unlikely. Moving the stone must surely have wakened them. Could the lives of the disciples have been so changed and their preaching so bold when they knew it was all a lie? If the Jews had removed the body they would have produced it immediately the disciples started preaching seven weeks later, settling forever the issue of resurrection. It is so ridiculous that Matthew does not even try to refute it (28:11-15). The Romans had no motive, they wanted peace at any price, and best leave dead bodies lie. Had they moved it is inconceivable they would have acted without telling the Jews about it. It is clear that Joseph was part of the believing community, he would not have moved the body without telling the others, certainly if they began speaking about a resurrection. The soldiers' unsolicited testimony was about an 'earthquake'. All the eyewitnesses speak of undisturbed grave clothes; had the tomb been robbed they would have taken body, grave clothes and all. Nothing adds up to this being a remotely possible explanation.

Hallucination

▪ **Argument**

This very simply suggests that all resurrection appearances to the disciples were in fact nothing more than hallucinations. A hallucination is an 'apparent act of vision for which there is no corresponding external object', the optic nerve being stimulated by inner psychology alone.

▪ **Refutation**

Only certain kinds of people have hallucinations, but among the disciples of Jesus there was every variety of temperament and character. They all expressed quite different emotions to the death of Jesus. Hallucinations are highly individual and subjective, making it almost impossible for two people to have the same hallucination at the same time. Yet Jesus was seen by up to 500 people on one occasion, and by quite different types of people in the most varied of circumstances within very short spaces of time from one another. Hallucinations are usually restricted as to when and where they occur. The disciples who had lived for three years with Jesus saw him again, having seen him die, they touched him, saw him eat, he specifically refuted the idea that he was a spirit (Mt 28:9,17; Lk 24:31-39; Jn 20:20). People who have hallucinations usually want them to happen, the disciples in no way anticipated a resurrection. They came to believe against their wills. Mary even mistook Jesus for the gardener! From the outset they were skeptical (Jn 20:25) and 'slow at heart to believe' (Lk 24:25). Hallucinations tend to recur fairly regularly over a long period of time. Jesus was seen frequently for 40 days after which those who had seen him never did so again. People who receive hallucinations never go out and change the world, instead they huddle in introspection; not so these people.

Habermas in "Mapping the Trend Toward Bodily Resurrection Appearances" categorises four types of explanation of the appearances:



- Natural Internal- hallucination from stimulus, religious intoxication and enthusiasm. (Ludemann)
- Natural External- illusion misinterpretation of real external stimuli. (Goulder)
- Spiritual Internal- eg. Empty tomb accounts are legendary but Jesus did appear in a non-corporeal but spiritual manner (Grass)
- Supernatural External- historical, bodily, spiritual appearances. (Wright)

Mistaken

▪ Argument

Quite simply it believes that first the women and subsequently everyone else went to the wrong tomb. It was first propounded by Kirsopp Lake. It argues that Jerusalem and its environs was full of rock tombs, and in their distress the women could easily have become uncertain of their directions and mistaken in the tomb that they visited. It is further suggested that the young man mentioned in Mark's Gospel was trying to put them right but they simply didn't understand.

▪ Refutation

The women were in no doubt as to where Jesus was laid (Mt 27:61; Mk 15:47; Lk 23:55). Peter and John made their way independently to the tomb and confirmed what the women said, they were not confused (Jn 20:2-8). The angel said, "Come see the place where the Lord lay"; was the angel also mistaken? Even if the disciples had made a mistake, the Jews knew exactly where he was buried and the moment 'resurrection' began to be preached they would have immediately produced the body. Even if the disciples, Jews and Romans all went to the wrong tomb, Joseph of Arimathea certainly would not have made such a mistake! The young man in Mark clearly says, "He is risen!". If they falsely believed a resurrection had taken place why did they wait seven weeks before preaching it, why not straight away? In fact Jesus was not buried in a public cemetery, where one might be confused about graves, but in a private personal tomb within a garden; there were no other tombs to confuse it with.

Metaphor

For many Christians, belief in the resurrection as a literal, historical or concrete event can prove problematic. Objections from this perspective tend to focus on the resurrection as a symbolic, metaphoric or psychological experience, as a myth rather than an historical event. For many holding these views, this does not prevent the resurrection from being 'real' although it is not an event embedded in history in the same way that the orthodox argument holds. See for example Walter Wink's claim that "something 'objective' did happen to God, and Jesus and to the disciples. What happened was every bit as real as any other event, only it was not historically observable. It was an event in the history of the psyche."³ The challenge posed by such an objection is fundamentally different to the others outlined above such as swoon or stolen and cannot be fully discussed here. The discussion below under 'theologians' engages in a little more detail as to how such debate can be fruitful and beneficial for all involved.

³ See W Wink *'The Human Being'* Fortress Press 2002



THE VERDICT

Affirmation by Luke

Luke has consistently been shown to be a historian of supreme competence; he has stood up to the most rigorous modern investigations. He tells us at the beginning of his two-part history 'Luke-Acts' that all his information has been gathered from eyewitnesses (Lk 1:2). At the beginning of Acts where he speaks specifically of the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus he says:

‘To them he (Jesus) presented himself alive after his passion
by many infallible proofs,
appearing to them during forty days’
(Acts 1:3)

The Greek word *tekmerion* ('proofs') indicates 'demonstrable proof', 'inescapable empirical evidence'. In Greek it is an expression indicating the strongest type of legal evidence. For Luke all the evidence was there, he had interviewed the eyewitnesses, he believed in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Scholars and lawyers

- **E.G.Selwyn (1925)**

‘The fact that Christ rose from the dead on the third day in full continuity of body and soul - that fact seems as secure as historical evidence can make it’

- **Lord Darling** (former Chief Justice of England)

‘The crux of the problem of whether Jesus was, or was not, what he proclaimed himself to be, must surely depend upon the truth or otherwise of the resurrection. On that greatest point we are not merely asked to have faith. In its favour as a living truth there exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in a verdict that the resurrection story is true.’

Personal testimonies

- **Frank Morrison**

A young English barrister, an unbeliever, promised he would write a book disproving the resurrection 'fairy tale' finally and forever. An honest man, he made the time, did the study and became a Christian! He said the trial and conviction of Jesus could only be explained if you accept that Jesus foretold his death and resurrection. He wrote his book, 'Who moved the stone?', a powerful apologetic for the Christian faith.

- **West and Lyttleton**

Both 'society' students at Oxford they determined to attack the very basis of the Christian faith. Lyttleton set out to prove that Saul of Tarsus never became a Christian, West to prove that Jesus never rose from the dead. When both met sometime later to discuss their findings each had to confess they had not proved their case. Saul was radically changed by his conversion experience, and all the evidence proved that Jesus did rise from the dead.



▪ **Josh McDowell**

'I came to the conclusion that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the most wicked, vicious, heartless hoaxes ever foisted upon human minds, or it is the most fantastic fact of history.'

**HE IS RISEN!
HE IS RISEN INDEED!**

Theologians

For over 200 years the 'historicity' of the gospel narratives, the person of Jesus and the resurrection have been subject to intense academic scrutiny and debate. Starting with Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768), this has been labeled 'the Quest for the Historical Jesus,' by which academics have approached the person of Jesus using historical tools rather than theological ones. Although there was a lull following the writings of Albert Schweitzer and Karl Barth during 1920-1970, the historical quest is now well and truly alive in the 21st Century, exemplified by the 'Jesus Seminar' of the Westar Institute. Obviously the role and implications of the resurrection are central to this type of historical quest. Two theologians who perfectly highlight the breadth and scope of academic views on the historical Jesus and the resurrection are NT Wright and John Dominic Crossan.

▪ **NT Wright**

The Bishop of Durham and an immense intellectual. His 817 page *tour de force* 'The Resurrection and the Son of God' is a thorough and articulate defence of a historical and literal or 'concrete' resurrection. For Wright, whilst neither the empty tomb nor the post-resurrection sightings of Jesus constitute sufficient evidence for resurrection belief *in themselves*, taken *together* they do. Wright is a critical realist - "a way of describing the process of "knowing" that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence "realism"), while fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence "critical")". This shapes his study and view of the resurrection as a critical-real event in space and time.

▪ **John Dominic Crossan**

Co-founder (with Robert Funk) of the Jesus Seminar in 1985, which seeks to study and discuss the 'historical Jesus'. He is a good example of a gracious 'liberal' theologian who views the resurrection as metaphorical in *mode*, but as real and powerful in *meaning*. For him, the *meaning* of the resurrection and its implications for the radical breakthrough of the Kingdom of God is more important than debating the *mode* of the resurrection, i.e. whether it is a historical event that could have been 'caught on camera' or not. His debates and engagement with Wright are an excellent demonstration of conservative and liberal theologians engaging with each other's studies in a humble, meaningful and respectful manner. It is important to familiarize oneself with liberal arguments and alternative conceptions of the resurrection such as Crossan's in order to fairly and lovingly engage with the breadth of opinion inside and outside the church.

Rowan Williams

"I am not happy with either an apologetic colonizing of historical study or a theologically dictated indifference to history."



- Dogmatics cannot solve an historical question.
- For Williams, the continuing life of Jesus is necessarily material rather than dogmatically literal.
- The gospel narratives are messy, tied up with ideology and work powerfully with indeterminacy.
- Williams does not believe that scholarly analysis of the resurrection stories yields a single or compelling resolution.
- “That materiality is associated with the historical realities of community and sacraments and transfigured persons, but it is not completely exhausted in these”

Resurrection as eschatology

The resurrection will always be problematic because it flies in the face of normative history and heralds the promise of the new creation.

- For Russell, the Easter event is “the first instantiation of a new law of nature,” (FINLON)
- To believe this we must suspend analogy and nomological universality, i.e. the past and future look like the present and are governed by the same laws as the present.
- Resurrection is the breaking-in of the new creation, but is held on faith.
- “What we know historically about Christ’s resurrection must not be abstracted from the question of what we can hope from it and what we have to do in its name.” (Moltmann)

Questions

1. Does it really matter that Jesus physically rose from the dead? If so explain why.
2. How would you meet the genuine objections of someone who found it impossible to believe in Jesus' resurrection?
3. The fact that early Christians were convinced that Jesus rose from the dead has always presented a physical, historical and scientific challenge. Other great spiritual and religious teachers have died, but their death and burial has not detracted from their teaching. Why is the resurrection of Jesus central to the Christian faith? In what way does it authenticate the teaching of Jesus in a way that has not been necessary with other world teachers?

Reading and resources

P Benoit *'The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus'* Sheed & Ward 1996
 P Carnley *'The Structure of Resurrection Belief'* Clarendon Press 1987
 J.D. Crossan *'The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant'* Harper Collins 1993
 J McDowell *'The Resurrection'* Scripture Press 1981
 J McDowell *'Evidence That Demands a Verdict'* Campus Crusade 1972
 JF Jansen *'The Resurrection of Christ in NT Theology'* Westminster 1980
 GE Ladd *'I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus'* Eerdmanns 1975
 GWH Lampe & DM MacKinnon *'The Resurrection'* Mowbrays 1966
 P Perkins *'Resurrection: NT Witness & Contemporary Reflection'* Doubleday 1984
 R.B. Stewart *'The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N.T. Wright in Dialogue'* SPCK 2006



D Tomlinson '**Re-enchanting Christianity**' London, Canterbury Press, 2008 see chapter 8 (Easter Surprise)

W Wink '**The Human Being**' Fortress Press 2002

NT Wright '**The Resurrection Of The Son Of God**' SPCK 2003

A free on-line synopsis of N.T.Wright's "Christian Origins and the Question of God", including Volume 3 on "The Resurrection of the Son of God" is available from Open Source Theology at

<http://www.opensourcetheology.net/node/167> (digital editable version) or

<http://www.opensourcetheology.net/christianorigins.pdf>. (PDF version).

"The Cosmic Christ". A set of CDs by Richard Rohr, available from Agape Ministries at http://www.agapeministries.co.uk/index_old.html.

"Re-enchanting Christianity" Dave Tomlinson London, Canterbury Press, 2008 chapter 8 (Easter Surprise)

