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## MAKING A CASE FOR THE RESURRECTION AT 36,000 FEET

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This past February I boarded a plane for a long flight. I had a new book that I had saved for the flight and was very much looking forward to reading it. Shortly after I took my seat, an elderly man, probably in his eighties, took his seat next to me. I smiled thinking, "He's going to fall asleep and I'm going to get in a lot of reading!"

I was mistaken. Just after I began to read, my fellow passenger leaned over and looked very deliberately at the pages I was reading. I smiled and showed him the cover. It was a book on the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. He chuckled and said, "Well, I guess we don't have to think seriously about that, since it has now been proven that Jesus never even existed!" He nodded and sat straight up, as though our conversation had ended and now it was time to find something else to do. Hit and run? Not a chance, my new friend.

"Why do you think Jesus never existed?" I asked. This led to a short conversation on Jesus' existence that would take us outside the scope of this article.<sup>1</sup> It did not take long for him to concede that Jesus indeed had existed, but he maintained that "resurrections are made of fairy tales. There is no evidence for the resurrection of Jesus and it certainly could never be proved." Perhaps you have had a similar discussion with someone and wished you had known how to reply. I will share the approach I took.

**What Is Proof?** When stating conclusions, historians may say "such and such occurred"; however, all historians concede that absolute or 100 percent certainty in historical matters is impossible. They, instead, seek *reasonable certainty*. We cannot prove with absolute certainty that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 49 BC, for example, but the evidence is good enough for historians to conclude that he did. Historians consider a number of theories of what occurred and select the best theory. They refer to this as an *argument to the best explanation*. At the end of this article, I'll explain how to do this with two resurrection theories.

**Minimal Facts.** A very strong case can be made for the trustworthiness of the New Testament, but those who argue for Jesus' resurrection from trustworthiness must be prepared to answer questions raised by skeptics regarding hundreds of alleged errors and contradictions in the New Testament. Since most Christians are unable to do this, I would like to propose a way that I learned from my mentor, professor Gary Habermas. He calls it the *minimal facts approach*, where we consider *only those historical facts related to the resurrection of Jesus that are so strong that the vast majority of scholars, including skeptical ones, agree that they are facts*. This is not to suggest that accounts in the New Testament that do not meet this strict criteria are false; only that we cannot *prove* them as being true. It also is not to say that we should believe something simply because the majority of scholars believe it. It is saying, rather, that we will use only those facts that are so strong that the majority of scholars concede them.

The strength of this approach is that a skeptic cannot deny the resurrection of Jesus simply because he or she does not believe the Bible. I do not believe that the Qur'an is God's Word; however, there is historical knowledge to be gained from reading the Qur'an. For example, we can learn what seventh-century Muslims taught and perhaps be able to trace a few teachings back to Muhammad himself. The New Testament, likewise, at minimum, tells us much about the beliefs of the first-century church, and historians are able to determine with reasonable certainty a number of teachings and actions of the apostles and Jesus Himself.

Here are the three most important minimal facts related to Jesus' resurrection:

1. *Jesus' death by crucifixion.* This event is reported even outside of the New Testament. The Jewish historian Josephus reported it toward the end of the first century, and the Roman historian Tacitus likewise reported it in the beginning of the second century.<sup>2</sup>
2. *Jesus' empty tomb.* One must consider that Jesus' resurrection was proclaimed in Jerusalem, the same location where Jesus had been publicly executed and buried. If the tomb had been occupied, Jewish or Roman authorities would only have had to go to the tomb and view the corpse and the claim of a resurrection would have been demolished immediately, but there is no indication that this occurred. Jesus' enemies instead claimed that His disciples had stolen His body, which appears to be an alternate explanation for an empty tomb. This is reported not only by Matthew (28:13), but Justin Martyr reported that the Jewish leaders were making the same claim in his day (c. AD 150).<sup>3</sup> It also is significant that the primary witnesses to the empty tomb reported by the Gospels were women, who in general had a low status in the first century. If you are going to invent a story you want people to believe, why invent witnesses who would be unbelievable? An invented story more likely would have portrayed Joseph of Arimathea or Nicodemus or the disciples themselves as the witnesses. We instead find the male disciples, who were to become the church's leaders, hiding behind closed doors in fear while the women check out the tomb!
3. *Jesus' resurrection appearances.* A number of people, friends and foes, reported that Jesus had risen from the dead and had appeared to them. That Jesus' disciples had claimed this is reported by Paul (1 Cor. 15:11), by a disciple of Peter named Clement (1 Clement 42:3), and by various early oral traditions embedded in the New Testament writings (1 Cor. 15:3–7).<sup>4</sup> The historical data also indicate that a skeptic (James) and, more important, an enemy of Jesus (Paul) became followers of Jesus after experiencing what they believed were post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. Paul, according to his own testimony, had persecuted Christians severely prior to his conversion (1 Cor. 15:9–10; Gal. 1:12–16, 22–23; Phil. 3:6–7). Luke corroborates Paul's testimony in Acts (chaps. 9, 22, 26) and we perhaps have an early oral tradition to this effect (Gal. 1:23). Early, eyewitness, and multiple testimonies mount a strong case for Paul's conversion. No less than 11 ancient sources report that the disciples of Jesus, who then included James and Paul, were willing to suffer continuously and even to die for their testimony that they had seen the risen Jesus. This suggests that they sincerely believed what they were proclaiming; after all, liars make poor martyrs.

**The Historian's Task.** The task of the historian is to weigh various possibilities and to identify the best explanation for the facts. This process is much like putting together a puzzle. The correct solution to a puzzle uses all of the pieces and does so without having to force any of the pieces to fit. In a similar manner, the best historical explanation incorporates all of the facts without forcing any of them to fit that explanation. Let's see how this works with regard to two explanations for the resurrection accounts.

*Hallucination.* Suppose Jesus' grieving followers merely hallucinated that He had risen from the dead and appeared to them. Do the facts fit using this theory?

1. *Jesus' death by crucifixion?* Yes. Jesus' agonizing death would be a reasonable cause for the grief required on the part of the disciples to hallucinate that He was resurrected.
2. *Jesus' empty tomb?* No. If the resurrection appearances were merely hallucinations, Jesus' body would have remained in the tomb.
3. *Jesus' resurrection appearances?* No. Many of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances were reported to have occurred in a group setting. Hallucinations, however, like dreams, occur in the mind of an individual; thus, even if all the members of a group simultaneously hallucinate—an incredible claim itself—they would not experience the same hallucination. Grief hallucinations also cannot account for the appearances to James or Paul. Paul especially would not have been grieving.

The hallucination theory, accordingly, is very weak, since it cannot account for most of the facts.

*Resurrection.* Suppose Jesus really did rise from the dead. Do the facts fit using this theory?

1. *Jesus' death by crucifixion?* Yes. There can be no resurrection if there is no death.
2. *Jesus' empty tomb?* Yes. There can be no resurrected body if there is no empty tomb.
3. *Jesus' resurrection appearances?* Yes. This certainly explains the transformed lives of the disciples and the conversions of the skeptics James and Paul.

The resurrection theory accounts for every fact and none are forced. The pieces of the puzzle come together beautifully. It is by far the best explanation. (Try fitting together the resurrection facts using a few other theories, such as the disciples stole the body, the resurrection was a legend that developed over time, or Jesus only appeared to be dead.)

After discussing the facts, I let my new friend formulate numerous theories of what he thought may have occurred. Then we both examined how each theory accounted for the facts. Growing frustrated, he waved his hand for me to stop and said, "Well, I'm not a historian." I replied, "I understand. But we can think logically. Isn't it amazing how well the evidence supports the truth of the greatest love story of all time? God loves you and did not spare even His Son so that you could have a relationship with Him." He would hear no more of it.

I have thought of that man several times since. Being in his eighties, eternity is weighing on him. Perhaps he likewise has given further thought to our discussion. I hope so.

— *Michael Licona*

## NOTES

1. For more on this subject, see Paul L. Maier, "Did Jesus Really Exist?" *Apologetics—Jesus*, North American Mission Board, <http://www.4truth.net/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=hiKXLbPNLrF&b=784399&ct=1740233>.
2. For references and more on this subject, see Mike Licona, "Can We Be Certain That Jesus Died on a Cross?" *Apologetics—Jesus*, North American Mission Board, <http://www.4truth.net/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=hiKXLbPNLrF&b=784437&ct=1483159>.
3. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 108.
4. Most scholars regard the sermon summaries in Acts 2, 10, and 13 as reflections of the content of the apostles' teaching.