
Outline the arguments made against the historical resurrection, and explain how they should be refuted.

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Outline

1. Introduction
2. The Swoon Theory
3. Hallucination, Myth and the Resurrection
4. The Wrong Tomb Theory
5. Theft of the Body by the Disciples
6. A Spiritual Resurrection?
7. The Resurrection as a Miracle
8. Reliability of the Witnesses
9. Conclusion
10. Bibliography

1. Introduction

The resurrection of Jesus Christ, as attested to by the scriptural record, is a foundational principle of Christian faith and doctrine. Christ's identity and mission, as the son of God and saviour of mankind rests with the historical accuracy of his resurrection. Paul recognised this in writing to the Corinthian church:

...If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins (1 Corinthians 15:14-17, NIV).

For Paul, the resurrection is the turning point in human history – if it is true, it vindicates the teaching of Christ and is the fulfilment of all his teaching. However, if it is not true, then the whole of Christianity is to be rejected as a false religion.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is cited by Paul as proof of his deity (Romans 1:4) and guarantee of our own resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20). However, there are a number of arguments against the resurrection include alternative theories, a general disbelief in miracles and a rejection of the resurrection as myth. We consider first some of the rationalistic explanations for the resurrection.

2. The Swoon Theory

This theory, championed by 18th/19th century rationalists such as Schleiermacher, is the view that Christ did not actually die on the cross, rather he swooned or fainted. After being taken down from the cross alive, perhaps in a comatose state and very close to death, he was then placed in the tomb. He then subsequently revived, perhaps through the cool air in the tomb, and later appeared to his disciples.

Supporters of this view draw attention to the fact that Christ's death on the cross appeared to take place much sooner than was usual (Mark 15:44) and argue that he therefore may well have been alive when taken down from the cross.

In refuting this argument, we first note that it plainly contradicts the gospel record which clearly states that the Roman soldiers confirmed Christ's death by thrusting a spear into his side and not breaking his legs, as was the normal practice, in order to hasten death (John 19: 32-37).

Furthermore, we need to take into account that the severe wounds, bleeding and other bodily trauma that suffered by Christ, would have made it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for him to escape from the tomb, under the watchful eye of the Roman guards. To escape, it would have been necessary for him, in his weakened state, to move the stone, overpower the guards. After that, he would then have to walk seven miles on the Emmaus road.

The critic David Friedrich Strauss, who rejected the historical events of the resurrection, nevertheless argued strongly against the Swoon Theory:

It is impossible that a being, who had stolen half-dead out of the sepulchre...wanting medical treatment...could have given to his disciples the impression that he was a conqueror over death and the grave...an impression which lay at the bottom of their future ministry. ¹

3. Hallucination, Myth and the Resurrection

Another argument against the resurrection is the view that the disciples and other followers of Christ were so emotionally involved with him that it is possible that they had a hallucination of him rising from the dead. Another is that the resurrection was simply a myth or legend that grew up over time.

1. Quoted in *The Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, p713.

The disciples were not the only ones who are recorded in scripture as having seen the risen Christ. For the Apostle Paul, comments in 1 Corinthians 15, that Christ "...appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time (v. 6), and separately "...last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born" (v.8). He notes many of those who Christ appeared to were still living, which presents a challenge to his readership to verify these details themselves and refute any view that the resurrection was mythical.

While psychological understanding allows for group hallucinations to occur, this theory demands acceptance of the claim that a large group of people experienced the same hallucination at exactly the same time, which appears implausible. Furthermore, many post-resurrection appearances occurred to more than one person, making simultaneous illusions unlikely.

It should also be noted that the disciples, as Orthodox Jews, were not expecting the resurrection at all, rather they viewed his death as final ², again making an hallucination unlikely. This is underscored by the fact that James, as the brother of Christ, is said to have not believed in him until after the resurrection (John 7:5).

4. The Wrong Tomb Theory

This theory states that the women, in their grief and sorrow, simply came to the wrong tomb, as there may have been many similar tombs in Jerusalem. Coming across an empty tomb, they left and began proclaiming the resurrection.

The Synoptic gospels all point out that, seventy-two hours earlier, the women had made a careful note of the position of the tomb, in order that they might return later to anoint the body (Matthew 27:61, Mark 15:47 and Luke 23:55). Though not impossible, it seems unlikely that they would forget its location after such a short space of time.

2. cf. John 20:9, in which the disciples are said to still "...not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead."

Furthermore the women did not come looking for an empty tomb, rather one that was sealed. One would expect them therefore to bypass an empty tomb, if they were unsure of the exact location of the correct tomb.³

We also note that on hearing Mary Magdalene's account, Peter and the beloved disciples made straight for the tomb (John 20:2-9). If they too went to the wrong tomb, it would have been an independent mistake. Yet, the tomb belonged of Joseph of Arimatea (Luke 23:53), who would have known its location, as did the Romans, as they stationed a guard there.

Matthew's account also suggests that the Jews knew where the body was to be placed (Matthew 27:62-66). They therefore could have identified it, and thus offer proof against the resurrection.

5. Theft of the Body by the Disciples

This is perhaps the oldest of the rationalistic explanations for the resurrection, as evidenced by Matthew's narrative on the event (28:12-15). The disciples are said to have come and stolen the body while the guards were sleeping.

The soldiers being well trained, would have however realised the penalty for sleeping on the job. Such penalties could be severe, even resulting in death, under Roman law. We might also ask the question, If the guards were indeed sleeping, how would they know who stole the body?

The disciples themselves make unlikely candidates for such a daring raid, especially in light of the fact that Matthew records them as fleeing immediately after the arrest at Gethsemane (Matthew 26:56). Furthermore, the fact that many of them would subsequently face deaths of martyrs, would seem to imply that they were prepared to lay down their lives for what they knew was a fabrication.

3. Wayne House, *Charts of Christian Doctrine*, p63.

The Gospels record that Christ appeared first to a woman, Mary Magdalene (Matthew 28:9, John 20:14-16). First century Israel would not have accepted the testimony of any woman as being valid in any court of law. As a result, by accepting Mary's testimony, the disciples would have been seen in an unfavourable light.⁴ This suggests, consistency with the facts, rather than some plan of invention.

6. A Spiritual Resurrection?

It has also been suggested that Christ's resurrection was purely spiritual and after the crucifixion, his actual body remained in the grave.

Again, we note the gospel record which mentions the material aspects of Christ's resurrection, such as being touched by Mary Magdalene (John 20:17), having his wounds felt by Thomas (John 20:27) and eating with his disciples (Luke 24:42-43). If such a resurrection did occur, we are still left with the issue of the physical body. The enemies of Christ were never able to produce the body nor disprove the resurrection.

7. The Resurrection as a Miracle

The Enlightenment period saw the development of objections to miracles on the grounds that they contradict human experience which in turn confirms the absolute and inviolability of the laws of nature (this was the argument advocated by David Hume). Yet in Christ's nature miracles, we see him in action having authority over the powers of nature itself.

4. Samples, *Without a Doubt*, p143.

C.S. Lewis attempted a defence of miracles in his book at the same title. In chapter 8 of the book, he argues that miracles may “interfere” with natural laws without breaking them. Thus miracles are not inconsistent with natural law. Lewis also draws attention to what he defines as the “Grand Miracle”, that of the incarnation.

Indeed, Lewis also argued that accepting the very existence of God, brings with it the fact that miracles are possible: “If we admit God, must we admit miracles. Indeed, indeed, you have no security against it”.⁵

Miracles are special acts of God, and acts of God are only possible if there is a God who can act.

8. Reliability of the Witnesses

We have to consider whether the witnesses to the event were trustworthy. John for example offers his own verification: “This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true.(21:24)”. The Gospel accounts give further credibility to the witnesses by indicating their doubt as to Christ's resurrection (e.g. Matthew 28:17, Luke 24:11).

In addition, the fact that the gospels do not include significant events such as the martyrdom of Peter and Paul (c. AD 64-66) and the fall of Jerusalem (c. AD70), could point to an early date for at least some of the Gospels, perhaps as early as AD 55, just 20 or so years after the death of Christ.⁶ lending credibility to the view that at least some of the Gospel accounts were eyewitness testimonies. The Gospel writers show careful attention to details, such as customs, names date and events.

5 C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*, p109.

6. Samples, *Without a Doubt*, p140.

9. Conclusion

The resurrection is the ultimate confirmation of Christ's identity as Saviour, Messiah and Lord (Romans 1:3-4, 14:19). The empty tomb, and the fact that none of Christ's enemies were ever able to produce a body are important pointers to the historical value of the event. The numerous post resurrection appearances noted by the Gospel writers and Paul, together with the transformation of the Apostles into in some cases martyrs and the subsequent growth of the Church also give credence to the biblical accounts.

Numerous theories (including conspiracy theories) attempt to provide rationalistic explanations for the resurrection. Many of these do not fit the facts and do not appear plausible in the light of the Gospel accounts.

WORD COUNT: 1892

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