



# Myth or Miracle?

## Historical Evidence for the Reality of the Resurrection

“What happens to me when I die?” We all ask ourselves this question, and it can be difficult to imagine how to answer it beyond just guessing. Christians may find hope in the resurrection of Jesus and his promises (at least as recorded in the Bible) to raise the dead on the Last Day, but isn’t this something you just have to believe, a blind leap of faith? Isn’t belief in immortality just wishful thinking? How would someone think about evidence when talking about life after death? Is this possible? Is it even *allowed*?

It turns out that there is strong historical evidence backing the resurrection of Jesus. Not conspiracy theories or Ancient Aliens logic, but hard evidence that even skeptical scholars take seriously. Several Christian philosophers have written extensively on the subject, including Gary Habermas and Mike Licona, who focus their argument on what they call the “minimal facts.” The minimal facts are a core historical bedrock that the majority of scholars writing on the subject, regardless of worldview (Christian, Jewish, agnostic, atheist, etc.), have become convinced is factual. For the sake of their argument and to bolster their argument, Habermas and Licona don’t even assume the Bible is fully historically reliable, let alone inspired or inerrant. Instead, they focus merely on the historical minimal facts.

What are these minimal facts? Licona lists three (Licona 302-303):

1. Jesus died by crucifixion.
2. After Jesus’ death, several of his disciples had experiences that they interpreted as appearances of Jesus risen from the dead.
3. After Jesus’ death, one of his enemies (Saul of Tarsus, later to become the apostle Paul) also had an experience that he interpreted as an appearance of the risen Jesus, which resulted in his conversion to the new Jesus movement.

That’s it; that’s all it takes to make the case. And there is broad scholarly support, including among skeptics, that these things are factual, historical realities. While non-Christian scholars seek to explain away the resurrection appearances of Jesus as subjective and imaginary, they agree that the disciples and Paul at least had these experiences. What is the evidence for these experiences, and what is the best explanation for them? Were they subjective and imaginary, or real and objective appearances by a really resurrected Jesus? Let’s look at the historical record to see where the evidence points, and let’s see whether the evidence gives us confidence in the resurrection or leaves us in the darkness of wishful thinking.

### Evidence for Jesus’ Death

Before examining the evidence for Jesus’ resurrection, we have to determine whether he was dead to begin with. Suppose the cross didn’t kill Him, and people saw Him alive afterward. In that case, it would be a remarkable survival story but not a resurrection. If he didn’t die on the cross, he couldn’t rise afterward.



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Jesus' crucifixion is well attested by historical sources, both Christian and non-Christian. For example, the Roman historian Tacitus records the following in around 115 A.D. regarding Nero's response to the fire in Rome:

Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt 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 Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular (Tacitus, *Annals*, c. 115 A.D., Habermas 87-88).

While Jesus' crucifixion is historically well-attested by many early sources, how do we know that the crucifixion killed Him? Two reasons make his survival extremely unlikely. First, the probability of surviving crucifixion, in general, is very low. In fact, we only have one recorded instance of someone surviving a Roman crucifixion. The Jewish historian Josephus records that he witnessed three of his friends being crucified. So he pleaded with the Roman commander that they be removed from their crosses and provided the best medical care in Rome. Two of the three crucified friends still died (Licona 311). In contrast, we have no record that Jesus was removed from the cross while alive, let alone provided any medical care. Instead, we do have records of Roman guards certifying Jesus' death by (1) not feeling a need to break his legs (a practice which is also reported by the ancient writer Cicero) and instead (2) piercing his side with a spear.

Even if the biblical record is unreliable regarding the details of Jesus' crucifixion, and even if he could have survived the cross, there is a second reason that makes it highly unlikely that Jesus actually did survive his crucifixion. This argument goes back to 1879 and is based on Jesus' disciples' transformation from terrified to courageous after Jesus supposedly appeared to them. (The evidence, biblical and extra-biblical, Christian and non-Christian, for this transformation will be discussed below.) Had Jesus merely survived crucifixion, what kind of condition would he be in when his disciples saw Him afterward? Alive? Barely. Risen victoriously from the grave? Not a chance. There is no plausible explanation for the disciples' transformation from deathly afraid to becoming bold in the face of persecution if Jesus had merely survived the cross. Further, Jesus would have been in no condition to convince Saul/Paul, who was hostile to the Jesus movement, to convert to following Jesus after his crucifixion.

Jesus was dead. Period. Common sense and scholarly consensus are agreed on this point.

### Evidence for the Post-Resurrection Appearances

If Jesus was dead, then what evidence has led the majority of scholars to conclude that his disciples, and even one of his enemies (Saul/Paul), experienced seeing Him alive afterward? A key text is 1 Corinthians 15:3-9:



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For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God (1 Corinthians 15:3-9 ESV).

Most critical scholars agree that Paul received a portion of this passage as an early Christian creed formulated by Jesus' followers. Paul even says, "What I received I delivered to you," technical language for the passing on of oral tradition. Paul wrote these words in about 55 A.D., less than three decades after Jesus' crucifixion. He would have received this Christian creed even earlier, and many scholars believe Paul received it when he visited Jerusalem in 36-38 A.D., based on Galatians 1:18-19—less than a decade after the events themselves! The early date of the creed, combined with the references to specific, named eyewitnesses, means this statement of Jesus' resurrection was not a legend that developed over time. Actual people were claiming actual experiences they either did or did not have.

How do we know these people weren't lying about seeing Jesus alive, though? Did they conspire to spread a lie? Two reasons make this extremely unlikely. First, there are aspects of the Gospel's accounts of the resurrection that would have been embarrassing to the Jesus movement and thus unlikely to be invented. The Gospel writers would have included these embarrassing details only if they had actually happened. In particular, the fact that the first witnesses of the resurrection are women, who were not well respected in ancient Jewish society, and whose testimony was not given much credibility in courts of law, would not have been fabricated by the Gospel writers. Consider this rule recorded by the first-century Jewish historian Josephus: "Let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex" (*Antiquities of the Jews* IV.8.15.219, Craig 367). The embarrassment is multiplied in the Gospel accounts when the male followers of Jesus do not believe the women and require additional appearances of Jesus to be convinced; these accounts were not manufactured to give confidence in church leadership.

The second and more serious reason it is highly unlikely that Jesus' disciples and Paul were not lying about their experiences is that they were willing to suffer and die for their message. Sean McDowell's *The Fate of the Apostles* is a good reference for this argument. Jesus was crucified, yet his disciples told the authorities who crucified Him that they made a mistake in crucifying the Son of God (Acts 2:22-24)! This is bold. They knew what was at stake—Jesus had warned them that if people persecuted and killed Him, they would treat his followers the same way (Luke 21:12-19; Matthew 10:16-23, 24:9; Mark 13:9; John 15:18-21, 16:1-3, 16:33). And in fact, we have multiple accounts of them boldly facing persecution and threats of martyrdom, both in the New Testament and in extra-biblical sources (cf. Acts 5:40-42, 7:59-8:3, 8:1-3). For example, Polycarp, the pastor of the church in Smyrna who was reported to have known several of the apostles, including John, wrote in the early 100s A.D.:

I urge all of you, therefore, to obey the teaching about righteousness and to exercise unlimited endurance, like that which you saw with your own eyes not only in the blessed Ignatius and



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Zosimus and Rufus but also in others from your congregation and in Paul himself and the rest of the apostles. Be assured that all these did not run in vain but with faith and righteousness, and that they are now in the place due them with the Lord, with whom they also suffered. For they did not love the present world but the one who died on our behalf and was raised by God for our sakes (Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians 9:1-2, The Apostolic Fathers in English 138-139; cf. Ignatius' Epistle to the Smyrnaeans 3:1-2, The Apostolic Fathers in English 122; Clement 5:1-4, The Apostolic Fathers in English 44-45).

While many people die for a lie, they don't die for a lie if they know that it's a lie. The September 11, 2001, suicide pilots died for their interpretation of Islam, which doesn't prove that Islam is true. It does, however, prove that they sincerely believed that Islam is true. The difference with the apostles is that their belief in Jesus' resurrection was not second-hand; they claimed eyewitness experience. If Jesus was not raised, they would have known it was a lie, and who would die for a lie, knowing that it is a lie? Martyrs and con artists are not made of the same stuff.

The evidence for the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus is so strong that the majority of scholars, both Christian and skeptical, are convinced that the disciples and Paul really had these experiences. The question remains, then, were these real? Or were they imagination, hallucination, grief-induced delusion, or something more in line with modern science?

### Explaining the Post-Resurrection Appearances

We are left with two options—either the experiences of the disciples and Paul were products of their imaginations, their brains deceiving them in something like a hallucination, or the experiences were based on a physical reality of Jesus actually being there, alive. Which option does the evidence support?

While hallucinations and similar experiences are somewhat common (especially compared with resurrections from the dead!), the odds are not good for this explanation in the case of Jesus. Two major reasons make the hallucination theory highly improbable.

First, the statistics of hallucinations, known from the science of psychology, do not fit the facts of what the disciples and Paul experienced. Let's take a look at the staggering odds involved in this case. While 15% of the general population will experience a hallucination at least once in their lifetimes, the chances of the 11 disciples hallucinating simultaneously are vastly lower. Treating the hallucinations as statistically independent events to get a rough order-of-magnitude, the probability of 11 randomly chosen people hallucinating is (one in a billion); the odds are much more severe if Paul's report of five hundred people seeing Jesus at the same time is accurate. Furthermore, while it is possible that groups can hallucinate simultaneously, it is very rare. And even then, the people involved tend to hallucinate different things. But the disciples would not have merely had simultaneous and distinct hallucinations. They would have had to be sharing in the same hallucination, which is not known to happen. Gary A. Sibcy, a Ph.D. psychologist, writes,



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I have surveyed the professional literature (peer-reviewed journal articles and books) written by psychologists, psychiatrists, and other relevant healthcare professionals during the past two decades and have yet to find a single documented case of a group hallucination, that is, an event for which more than one person purportedly shared in a visual or other sensory perception where there was clearly no external referent (Licona 484).

Finally, the odds of hallucinations get even lower when the hallucinations involve more than one physical sense, and we have records of people seeing, hearing, and in some cases touching (Matthew 28:9; John 20:27) Jesus.

In addition to the staggering odds involved if these experiences were hallucinations, a second factor makes this theory highly improbable: No one was expecting Jesus to rise. This is important for two reasons: (1) The idea at the core of the hallucination would not have entered their minds on its own, and (2) even if they had experienced simultaneous but distinct hallucinations, their experiences would not have convinced them that Jesus had been bodily raised. They might have concluded that Jesus' spirit had appeared to them, or they might have simply realized they were hallucinating. However, experiencing hallucinations that did not agree within the group would not make them bold in preaching Jesus as risen in the flesh. Jewish belief in the bodily resurrection of the dead always involved the resurrection of (1) everyone (or all the righteous) (2) at the end of time (Craig 392-393); they had no concept or expectation of the bodily resurrection of (1) an isolated individual (2) before the end of time. Because of these expectations from their Jewish theology, the disciples would have had to have been convinced by reasonable evidence that Jesus had been bodily resurrected in the middle of history.

And this is precisely what we see in the New Testament records. The male disciples at first do not believe the women's report (Luke 24:11). Thomas at first does not believe the other ten disciples (John 20:24-29). Paul not only didn't believe the report of Jesus' resurrection but tried to stamp out the movement of those who did, even using violence. While it is sometimes popular to say that people in the Bible were gullible, this is not what is recorded of them. They knew the facts of life—dead people stay dead. Even their Jewish belief in the general resurrection did not prepare them for what they experienced with Jesus. They had to be convinced.

Therefore, not only is the hallucination theory unlikely due to the staggering odds of so many hallucinations involving multiple individuals and groups and multiple physical senses (e.g., sight, hearing, touch), but the transformation of the disciples and Paul only makes sense if their experiences were so obviously real that they could conclude, against common sense and their prior theology, that Jesus had really been bodily raised.

Put differently, when it comes to the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, you have to choose your miracle: Either we have a miraculous set of hallucinations unparalleled in the psychological case books with no reason or explanation, or we have the miracle of Jesus rising from the dead. While some skeptical scholars might prefer to stretch theories of hallucinations over the data, preferring an implausible non-supernatural explanation over any supernatural one, in the context of Jesus'



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teachings, claims about Himself, and ministry, the resurrection seems to be a much more natural conclusion.

There is good evidence that won't fit in this article that Jesus was a miracle worker during his life (and that these miracles are still happening widely across the world today). There is also good evidence that Jesus saw Himself as more than a man and that his life and teachings are consistent with his extraordinary claims about Himself. In fact, the cumulative evidence of history, science, and philosophy points to the truth of Christianity. The resurrection of Jesus is a crucial part of this case for Christ, but not the whole story. The field of theology which deals with the evidence for Christianity is called apologetics, based on the Greek word *apologia*, or "defense," as in 1 Peter 3:15: "Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."

### So What?

All this evidence and logic is nice, but does it matter whether you can prove Jesus really rose from the dead? It matters for several reasons! First, Paul emphasizes that if Jesus has not been raised in real history, Christian faith is worse than useless (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). More personally to each of us, what happens when death comes knocking on our door? If we can have confidence, based on evidence, that Jesus really did defeat death, what a difference that makes! We don't have to face death with fear, holding onto mere wishful thinking. Still, we can point to hard realities outside ourselves that reassure us that Jesus really has walked through death before us and "holds the keys of Death and Hades" (Revelation 1:18).

What happens when we doubt these promises in the Bible that are meant for our comfort? Doubt can be really scary, and it makes a lot of people uncomfortable. But there is Good News! God can handle our doubts, just as He graciously handled the doubts of people in Bible, and His love is able and ready to help us navigate hard questions. He doesn't want us to be paralyzed by fear or ashamed and afraid to bring up or face our questions. He wants to reassure us that the things He tells us are actually true.

You are not alone. Others have walked the paths of doubt before you and have discovered reasons and evidence to believe that Christianity is really real. Lean into the hard questions with God, with a trusted and mature friend, and with someone who has walked through your questions before you. Along the way, God promises to give you the answers and reassurance you need. God's grace is able to turn even doubt into a wonderful opportunity for spiritual growth and confidence that impacts not just your relationship with Him, but also the people God will put in your life, who may be wrestling with the same questions you are facing now.

Jesus defeated death. This is not just a theological statement but a testable historical fact. God's message is not meant to be wishful thinking, and doubt is not meant to be shamefully hidden. If Christianity is true, it will stand up to scrutiny. God's love is so big that he wants to give us confidence—including intellectual confidence—in his promises, and he is eager to walk the paths of



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doubt with us to bring us this confidence and peace. Let's encourage each other, as God encourages us while we discuss these things together.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4 ESV).

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