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2004

## The Case for Christ's Resurrection

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### Recommended Citation

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## THE CASE FOR CHRIST'S RESURRECTION

Gary R. Habermas

THE CASE FOR THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST IS CERTAINLY MULTIFACETED. Few New Testament topics involve more details or are treated so seriously by recent critical scholars. Due to the hundreds of studies on this topic, this chapter must frequently rely on a summarized format that simply lists some of the many conclusions that have emerged in contemporary research.

Throughout, we will cite chiefly those data to which the vast majority of recent researchers agree, regardless of their prior theological positions. Even more crucial is that these critical scholars agree with these data precisely because they are well supported on factual grounds, often for multiple reasons. I have argued the details for my conclusions elsewhere, as have others. So the sources cited in the notes will provide additional background information, argumentation, as well as other details for those who wish to consult them. The author is employing the results of his recent study of fourteen hundred sources on this subject, published since 1975 in German, French and English.

In addition to furnishing some of these summarized conclusions, I will concentrate in this chapter on just two major topics that are seldom discussed in detail. Both are crucial components in a historical case for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

First, for a variety of reasons, it is the virtually unanimous conclusion of contemporary scholars that Jesus' early followers at least *thought* that

they had seen appearances of the risen Jesus after his death. But how do we move from our certainty that the early disciples *believed* that they had seen appearances of Jesus to their *really* seeing Jesus? In other words, how do we move from their convictions to a historical resurrection? It is my contention that this is the single most crucial aspect of an argument for the historical resurrection appearances of Jesus.

Second, religious and political transformations are common in our world during recent decades. Whether one studies the history of communism, Muslim suicide strategies, missionary activity or particular news events such as Jonestown, David Koresh or the Heaven's Gate UFO group, it is increasingly obvious that many individuals, both Christians and non-Christians, are willing to give their lives for what they believe. So what makes the transformations of Jesus' disciples, even to the point of being willing to die for their faith, so unique? How can this aspect of early Christianity be such an important component of most arguments for the resurrection, if it is nowhere near unique?

### THE DISCIPLES' EXPERIENCES OF THE RISEN JESUS

In contemporary studies of the historical Jesus, some items are supported by a broad scholarly consensus. That Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God was his central message and that Jesus died by crucifixion are two of the most readily agreed-upon events in Jesus' life.

Ranking with these two is the substantially unanimous verdict of contemporary critical scholars that Jesus' early disciples at least thought that they had seen the risen Jesus. Prominent historian E. P. Sanders, who calls himself a liberal,<sup>1</sup> signifies this agreement. He declares that the "equally secure facts" include that Jesus' disciples "saw him (in what sense is not certain) after his death. . . . Thereafter his followers saw him."<sup>2</sup>

**Support for the disciples' experiences.** It is certainly noteworthy that the vast majority of scholars, representing many viewpoints, in spite of extensive disagreements in other areas, recognizes that the disciples

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<sup>1</sup>E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), p. 324.

<sup>2</sup>E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 11, 13.

actually had real experiences of some sort. It seems equally clear that this recognition is due to the presence of a rather impressive number of strong reasons for holding this conclusion. Even a brief listing of these reasons may be instructive.

1. In contemporary critical studies, the apostle Paul is almost always thought to be the best witness among the New Testament writers. A former opponent of this message, Paul clearly points out that the risen Jesus appeared personally to him. Paul makes this claim more than once (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8; Gal 1:16). We also have corroboration of Paul's testimony from another New Testament author, who retells the story three times (Acts 9:1-8; 22:3-11; 26:9-18).

The data behind the fact of Paul's conversion from being an enemy of the church are recognized by all. But there needs to be a reason for this brilliant young scholar being convinced against his former beliefs and persecution of believers, as he explains (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13-14; Phil 3:4-7). Paul's reason is very clear: he was persuaded that he had seen the risen Lord. Therefore Paul was obviously an eyewitness to his own experience. The scholarly consensus here is attested by Michael Martin, a philosophical atheist who admits: "However, we have only one contemporary eyewitness account of a postresurrection appearance of Jesus, namely Paul's."<sup>3</sup>

2. Beyond Paul's own experience, this apostle presents plenty of additional evidence for the claim that Jesus had appeared to his early followers. Essentially all critical scholars today agree that in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, Paul records an ancient oral tradition(s) that summarizes the content of the Christian gospel. Jesus the Christ died for human sin, was buried and raised from the dead, afterwards appearing to both individuals as well as groups of witnesses. While Paul penned the words, he is clear that this material was not his own but that he had passed on to his listeners years before (1 Cor 15:1-2) what he had received from others, as the very heart of his message (1 Cor 15:3). If he were writing today, he might have footnoted his source! Thus this testimony is actually years earlier than the book of 1 Corinthians. Reginald Fuller indicates the

<sup>3</sup>Michael Martin, *The Case Against Christianity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), p. 81.

scholarly agreement here: "It is almost universally agreed today that Paul is here citing tradition."<sup>4</sup>

So Paul provides a straightforward explanation that he delivered to his audience what he had first received from others (1 Cor 15:3), which are the equivalent terms for passing rabbinic tradition to others (cf. 1 Cor 11:23). Besides this clear declaration of his actions, there are many other indications that this is exactly what happened. The sentence structure, diction, verbal parallelism, the threefold sequence of "and that," as well as the presence of several non-Pauline words, the proper names of Cephas (cf. Lk 24:34) and James, and indications that there may have been an Aramaic original all point clearly to this tradition being pre-Pauline. Critical scholars agree that Paul received it from others.<sup>5</sup>

The most popular view among scholars is that Paul first received this very early material when he visited Jerusalem just three years after his conversion. He visited Peter and James, the brother of Jesus (Gal 1:18-19), both of whom are listed as having seen the risen Jesus (1 Cor 15:5, 7).

Stronger evidence to support this conclusion comes from Paul's use of the verb *historēsai* in Galatians 1:18, which is usually not very helpfully translated into English. The Greek term indicates that Paul visited Peter for the purpose of investigating a particular subject. The immediate context reveals that subject: Paul's topic for discussion was ascertaining the nature of the gospel message (Gal 1:11—2:10). And Jesus' resurrection was the focus of the gospel message (1 Cor 15:3-4; Gal 1:11, 16). Without it, faith is vain (1 Cor 15:14, 17).

Critical scholars usually concede that this pre-Pauline tradition(s) originated at an exceptionally early date. For Ulrich Wilckens, this content "indubitably goes back to the oldest phase of all in the history of primitive Christianity."<sup>6</sup> Walter Kasper even thinks that this "ancient text" was

<sup>4</sup>Reginald Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup>Of the dozens of scholarly publications here, the following are among the more helpful sources: Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, pp. 10-11; Pinchas Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), pp. 97-99; John Kloppenborg, "An Analysis of the Pre-Pauline Formula in 1 Corinthians 15:3b-5 in Light of Some Recent Literature," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978), pp. 351, 360; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, *Mentor, Message and Miracle* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), p.139; Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, p. 277.

possibly "in use by the end of 30 A.D."<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, skeptics frequently even agree. Skeptic Gerd Lüdemann asserts that "the elements in the tradition are to be dated to the first two years after the crucifixion of Jesus . . . not later than three years. . . . *The formation of the appearance traditions mentioned in I Cor. 15.3-8 falls into the time between 30 and 33 C.E.*"<sup>8</sup> Philosopher Thomas Sheehan thinks that this pre-Pauline formula "probably goes back to at least 32-34 C.E., that is, to within two to four years of the crucifixion."<sup>9</sup> Michael Goulder holds that this resurrection report "goes back at least to what Paul was taught when he was converted, a couple of years after the crucifixion."<sup>10</sup>

Other skeptics are often not shy about expressing their agreement.<sup>11</sup> In fact, most of the critical scholars who date these events conclude that Paul received this material within just a few years after Jesus' death, in the early or mid 30s.<sup>12</sup> We will see how the existence and circumstances at such an early date translate to additional eyewitness testimony besides Paul's.

3. Paul was exceptionally careful to ascertain the content of the gospel

<sup>7</sup>Ulrich Wilckens, *Resurrection: Biblical Testimony to the Resurrection: An Historical Examination and Explanation* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1977), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup>Walter Kaspar, *Jesus the Christ*, trans. V. Green (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1976), p. 125.

<sup>9</sup>Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), p. 38 (Lüdemann's emphasis).

<sup>10</sup>Thomas Sheehan, *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity* (New York: Random, 1986), p. 118; cf. pp. 110-11.

<sup>11</sup>Michael Goulder, "The Baseless Fabric of a Vision," in *Resurrection Reconsidered*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996), p. 48.

<sup>12</sup>For just a few examples, see Robert Funk, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), p. 24; Jack Kent, *The Psychological Origins of the Resurrection Myth* (London: Open Gate, 1999), pp. 16-17; A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Beyond Resurrection* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999), p. 274 n. 265; G. A. Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?* (London: Pemberton, 1986), p. 30.

<sup>13</sup>Some of the other scholars who agree here include: Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, pp. 10, 14, 48; Raymond Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1973), p. 81; J. A. Fitzmyer, "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ According to the New Testament," *The Month*, SNS, 20 (1987), p. 409; J. D. G. Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster, 1985), p. 70; C. E. B. Cranfield, "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ," *Expository Times* 101 (1990), p. 169; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Jesus of Nazareth—Christ of Faith*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993), p. 8; Leander E. Keck, *Who Is Jesus? History in Perfect Tense* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2000), p. 139; Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, *Mentor, Message and Miracle*, p. 139.

message, which centered on the resurrection. To do so, he made a second trip to Jerusalem specifically for the purpose of checking out his gospel preaching (Gal 2:1-10). Amazingly, he states his fear that perhaps he had been teaching the wrong message (Gal 2:2). Some think that Acts 15:1-35 describes an amazing third trip to Jerusalem to do the same.<sup>13</sup> Paul obviously desired to be absolutely positive of the gospel truth! Further, Paul was careful to ask his questions of the proper authorities—the chief apostles. In his initial trip, he met with Peter and James, the brother of Jesus (Gal 1:18-20). On the second occasion, he met with these same two men, plus the apostle John (Gal 2:9). Martin Hengel points out that "evidently the tradition of I Cor. 15.3 had been subjected to many tests" by Paul.<sup>14</sup>

It is easy to overlook the significance of these meetings. The four men who met together on the latter occasion were certainly the chief apostles in the early church, and each one had been an eyewitness of Jesus' resurrection appearances (1 Cor 15:5-7). Therefore, when Paul received their confirmation that his gospel was correct (Gal 2:9; cf. Acts 15:23-35), we have their assurance that Paul's message of Jesus' resurrection appearances agreed with their own experiences. Certainly, if they thought that Paul erred on the central fact of the gospel, this would have created grave problems, especially given the apostolic concern to insure doctrinal truth in the early church.

So Paul provides more than his own eyewitness testimony, as in (1) above. During his trips to inquire of the three senior apostles in Jerusalem, Paul passed their examination regarding his gospel proclamation. Their blessings assume their own eyewitness testimony concerning Jesus' resurrection appearances, since they had also experienced the risen Jesus. Here we are but one step removed from additional eyewitness testimony.

4. Not only did the other apostles confirm Paul's gospel message, but we also have the reverse testimony. After reporting a list of Jesus' resurrection appearances, Paul explains that he knew what the other apostles

<sup>13</sup>Others hold that the account in Acts 15 confirms the same meeting as that in Gal 2:1-10.

<sup>14</sup>Martin Hengel, *The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), p. 38.

were preaching on this subject and that it was the same as his teaching about Jesus' appearances (1 Cor 15:11). Together, they proclaimed the risen Jesus (1 Cor 15:12, 15). So we have both the previous, more indirect apostolic confirmation of Paul's gospel message provided by the apostolic leadership, as well as Paul's firsthand, more direct approval of their resurrection message.

5. Insights into the earliest resurrection preaching are gleaned not only from the pre-Pauline report in 1 Corinthians 15. Other early creedal texts found in the New Testament also provide spotlights on the apostolic witness to the resurrection appearances. The book of Acts incorporates many of these early traditions, located in the sermons contained there.<sup>15</sup> Although not as unanimously as with the creed(s) in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, a majority of critical scholars still hold that at least some of these snippets represent the earliest Christian gospel preaching.<sup>16</sup> Like other early traditions, they are identified by their brevity, lack of theological complexity, and because the structure, style and/or diction reflect language patterns other than the author's. Crucially for our purposes, the risen Jesus is the center of each of these traditions.

These Acts creeds could provide a window on the ancient world of apostolic preaching before a single New Testament book was written. John Drane thinks that these sermons in Acts are our "earliest evidence" for Jesus' resurrection and that this material "almost certainly goes back to the time immediately after the resurrection event is alleged to have taken place. . . . But there can be no doubt that in the first few chapters of Acts its author has preserved material from very early sources."<sup>17</sup> Ger-

<sup>15</sup>The condensed creedal segments are found within a number of the sermons in Acts: Acts 1:21-22; 2:22-36; 3:13-16; 4:8-10; 5:29-32; 10:39-43; 13:28-31; 17:1-3; 17:30-31; cf. Lk 24:34.

<sup>16</sup>For just a small sampling of these scholars, see Gerd Lüdemann, *Early Christianity According to the Traditions in Acts: A Commentary*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), pp. 47-49, 112-15; Hengel, *The Atonement*, p. 34; PHEME PERKINS, *Resurrection: New Testament Witness and Contemporary Reflection* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984), pp. 90, 228-31; Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1994), pp. 112-13, 164; Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, pp. 44-45; Kloppenborg, p. 361; Johnson, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1999), p. 34; although older, two of the better studies are C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1980), pp. 17-31, and Max Wilcox, *The Semitisms of Acts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), esp. pp. 79-80, 164-65.

<sup>17</sup>John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 99.

ald O'Collins concludes more specifically that Acts "incorporates resurrection formulae which stem from the thirties."<sup>18</sup>

6. We have been discussing the earliest apostolic witness to Jesus' resurrection appearances. It is seldom questioned by critical scholars that James, Jesus' brother, was an unbeliever and probably a skeptic during his brother's public ministry (Mk 3:21-35; Jn 7:5). Then, just a few years later, James is the pastor of the Jerusalem church, where Paul finds him when he went for his two visits (Gal 1:18-19; 2:1-10; cf. Acts 15:13-21). In between, the early pre-Pauline creed in 1 Corinthians 15:7 states that James met the risen Jesus. One can only imagine what transpired there!

While there may not seem at first look to be much textual data here, critical scholars find at least three major reasons for concluding that James was an unbeliever before he met the risen Jesus. John Meier states the case well. James's unbelief is attested by multiple independent sources.<sup>19</sup> Further, the criterion of coherence is satisfied in that Jesus frequently demanded that his disciples be willing to leave their family behind and follow him, even if it engendered their wrath, as it did with Jesus' own family. The criterion of embarrassment probably provides the strongest reason here, since it is highly unlikely that early church authors would make such potentially "deeply offensive" comments regarding both an esteemed leader as well as Jesus' own brother, unless they thought they were reporting facts.<sup>20</sup>

Fuller concludes that even if the pre-Pauline creed in 1 Corinthians 15:7 had never been recorded, "we should have to invent" an appearance to James to justify both his conversion as well as his promotion to the pastorate in Jerusalem, the largest of the early churches!<sup>21</sup> The majority of scholars, including many skeptics, agree that James was converted by Jesus' appearance to him.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Gerald O'Collins, *Interpreting Jesus* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), pp. 109-10.

<sup>19</sup>The Jesus Seminar even thinks that two independent sources indicate that a teaching may be older than its source. See Funk, Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels*, p. 26.

<sup>20</sup>Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, *Mentor, Message and Miracle*, pp. 68-71.

<sup>21</sup>Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, p. 37.

<sup>22</sup>For instance, see Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, p. 109; Helmut Koester, *History & Literature of Early Christianity*, vol. 2 of *Introduction to the New Testament* (Philadelphia: For-

7. If Jesus' burial tomb was later found empty, this does not prove that a resurrection occurred. However, it adds some credibility to the disciples' claim to have seen the risen Jesus, since it both seriously complicates the search for a naturalistic hypothesis, as well as indicating that whatever happened most likely involved Jesus' body.

There are well over a dozen reasons supporting Jesus' empty tomb, only a few of which we will simply mention here. The Gospels are in complete agreement that women were the earliest witnesses to the empty tomb, a simply remarkable report since female testimony was generally disallowed in a law court for declarations on crucial topics. Thus, to fabricate this story with women as the central witnesses most likely would serve only to have the case dismissed without a hearing. This report only makes sense if it reflected what actually happened. Jerusalem is absolutely the last place on earth for Jesus' followers to proclaim that he had been raised, unless his grave was empty. Otherwise, a Sunday afternoon stroll would clearly indicate that the stone was still in place, revealing their erroneous message.

The empty tomb accounts are surprisingly attested by multiple sources, being found in almost every Gospel source. Ancient historian Paul Maier remarks, "Many facts from antiquity rest on just one ancient source, while two or three sources in agreement generally render the fact unimpeachable."<sup>23</sup>

The early pre-Pauline creed in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 at least implies an empty tomb. The sequence involved in the triple "and that" phrases, especially for a Jew, intimates that if Jesus died, was buried, rose and appeared, then what had been living was placed in the ground and later emerged. In such a case, the tomb would have been vacated. What may be another early creed (Acts 13:29-31, 36-37) even more clearly indicates

gress, 1982), p. 84; John Shelby Spong, *The Easter Moment* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), p. 68; Wedderburn, *Beyond Resurrection*, p. 116; Funk, *Honest to Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 33; Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2, *Mentor, Message and Miracle*, pp. 70-71; Peter Stuhlmacher, "The Resurrection of Jesus and the Resurrection of the Dead," trans. Jonathan M. Whitlock, *Ex Auditu* 9 (1993), p. 49; E. P. Sanders, "But Did It Happen?" *The Spectator* 276 (1996), p. 17.

<sup>23</sup>Paul Maier, *In the Fulness of Time: A Historian Looks at Christmas, Easter and the Early Church* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 197.

that Jesus was buried in a tomb, was raised and appeared.

Not only did the Jewish leaders not dispute the empty tomb, but their reported response even conceded it (Mt 28:11-15). So enemy attestation also supports the empty tomb.

While the empty tomb is not as unanimously held as are the other historical reasons that we have given for the disciples' experiences, most critical scholars still think that the tomb where Jesus was buried was later discovered to be empty.<sup>24</sup> J. D. G. Dunn firmly states: "I have to say quite forcefully: the probability is that the tomb was empty. As a matter of historical reconstruction, the weight of evidence points firmly to the conclusion." The alternative explanations are all worse.<sup>25</sup> Historian Michael Grant explains that "the historian . . . cannot justifiably deny the empty tomb" since normal historical criteria attest that, "the evidence is firm and plausible enough to necessitate the conclusion that the tomb was indeed found empty."<sup>26</sup>

8. Last, there is no question that the disciples' belief that they had actually seen Jesus after his death led to a radical transformation in their lives, even to the point of being willing to die for their faith. But since the question regarding the degree of the uniqueness here is the chief concern of the second section of this chapter, we will not belabor the point here.

We have listed eight different reasons that indicate why contemporary scholars almost without exception conclude that the disciples truly thought that Jesus had appeared alive to them after he had died on the cross. Paul's own eyewitness testimony, the exceptionally early date when he received the creed(s) recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, checking his own gospel message at least twice with the chief apostles who were also witnesses, and his knowledge of their eyewitness teaching on the resurrection appearances form a simply remarkable, interconnected

<sup>24</sup>My study of hundreds of scholarly sources on the resurrection, cited above, notes almost two dozen arguments for the empty tomb. About 75 percent of the surveyed scholars embrace one or more of the supporting arguments.

<sup>25</sup>Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus*, p. 68.

<sup>26</sup>Michael Grant, *Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels* (New York: Collier, 1992), p. 176. An excellent treatment of additional arguments for the empty tomb is William Lane Craig, "The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus," *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 39-67.

trail of evidence that is virtually unheard of in ancient documents. Eminent scholar Howard Clark Kee makes the astounding comment that Paul's research "can be critically examined and compared with other testimony from eyewitnesses of Jesus, just as one would evaluate evidence in a modern court or academic setting."<sup>27</sup>

Further, other early creedal witnesses such as those in Acts, the conversion of James the skeptic, the empty tomb and the disciples' transformation all provide support that the disciples were utterly convinced that they had seen the risen Jesus. Additional factors could be mentioned. For example, the centrality of the resurrection message in the early church provided ample opportunity for believers who were prepared to die for the message to repeatedly focus on its truth, but without refutation or recanting, as far as we know. And the Jewish leaders particularly had both a motive and the power to oppose a message that threatened their existence and came up empty-handed.<sup>28</sup>

No other hypothesis is even a viable rival to the conclusion that the early disciples at least thought that they had witnessed Jesus' appearances after he had died. But can we somehow move from the recognized historical fact that the disciples believed this to their actually having seen the risen Jesus? To make this move could well be the most crucial aspect of an historical argument for Jesus' resurrection appearances.

**From conviction to event.** Each of the eight reasons above points to the belief that Jesus was *seen* again after his death. In other words, the claim to which virtually all scholars agree is a *visual* claim. The disciples were sure that Jesus' person had impinged on their visual field. This is what Paul claimed. Peter agreed. So did Jesus' brother James. Further, the tomb was no longer occupied by his body. As a result, they were changed forever.

Even recent skeptical scholars agree. Koester asserts that "We are on

<sup>27</sup>Howard Clark Kee, *What Can We Know about Jesus?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 1-2.

<sup>28</sup>For details on these two additional reasons, as well as much more information, including both factual and scholarly agreement, regarding the previous eight arguments, see Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), chap. 1.

much firmer ground with respect to the appearances of the risen Jesus and their effect." These appearances "cannot very well be questioned."<sup>29</sup> Bart Ehrman states that "we can say with complete certainty that some of his disciples at some later time insisted that he soon appeared to them. . . . Historians, of course, have no difficulty whatsoever speaking about the belief in Jesus' resurrection, since it is a matter of public record."<sup>30</sup> Traugott Holtz concludes that the disciples' "experience of resurrection . . . is in fact an undeniable historical event."<sup>31</sup> Lüdemann even reminds us that Paul's resurrection language is the language of real sight: "active sensual perception. . . . Paul is claiming a visual side to the appearance."<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Paul was teaching that Jesus appeared in his "transformed spiritual resurrection corporeality."<sup>33</sup>

It seems clear, then, that Jesus' disciples were utterly convinced that he had appeared to them after his death. It is granted by virtually all critical scholars because the data are extraordinarily strong. But how do we get from the disciples' resurrection *conviction* to the resurrection *event*, namely, to real appearances of the risen Jesus?

This may seem like a rather straightforward question, yet it can get a little slippery. Believers presumably would think that they were quite justified in their stance that reasons like those above establish their position. After all, each of the evidences points to a visual event that changed the disciples' lives, which they were utterly convinced was an appearance of their best friend.

Unbelievers would seemingly have to reply by severing the connection between what the disciples thought and what really happened. To do this, they might move in two directions, by indirectly or directly replying to a case like that which we have outlined here.

Initially, perhaps they might try an indirect maneuver by posing vari-

<sup>29</sup>Koester, *History and Literature*, p. 84.

<sup>30</sup>Bart Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 230-31.

<sup>31</sup>My translation of the German text in Traugott Holtz, "Kenntnis von Jesus und Kenntnis Jesu," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 104 (1979), p. 10.

<sup>32</sup>Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, p. 50; cf. p. 37.

<sup>33</sup>Gerd Lüdemann, *What Really Happened to Jesus: A Historical Approach to the Resurrection*, with Alf Özen, trans. John Bowden (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1995), p. 103.

ous a priori objections<sup>34</sup> that, whatever the data, Jesus was simply not raised from the dead. These sorts of miraculous events just do not occur in our world. These philosophical responses take us far beyond our study of the resurrection of Jesus, especially in that such objections are typically not concerned with this event at all. Usually, they make more general inquiries regarding the background information or the nature of the evidence, both areas where the resurrection excels.<sup>35</sup>

Or, another indirect move is to respond with the agnostic plea that we do not know what occurred. The disciples indeed believed that they saw Jesus, but we cannot determine a cause.

This fence-straddling approach is very difficult to maintain, since one must dodge many factual considerations, when just one might cause the thesis to topple. A few brief and general problems will have to suffice here. (1) The agnostic position smacks of rejecting the possibility of a resurrection before following the evidence to its conclusion or even resenting that the discussion might lead to the truth of Christianity.<sup>36</sup> (2) To assert that we cannot discover a cause for the disciples' faith assumes its own burden of proof. But on what grounds should such an assertion be made?

More crucially, (3) we have plenty of evidence already to decide the case, *especially* since we used only those data that virtually all critical scholars accept. So critics must not reject or pull up short of the results that are indicated by their own research!<sup>37</sup> (4) The objection often does not level complaints against this specific resurrection data, so believers

<sup>34</sup>It might be noted here that not all a priori questions are automatically ruled out as question begging. Some ask by various means if it is possible to postulate in advance a reason for questioning certain occurrences.

<sup>35</sup>For distinctions between various sorts of a priori arguments, along with a detailed response to several specific examples, see Gary R. Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 2004), chap. 9. For a more technical treatment, see Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, esp. chap. 2.

<sup>36</sup>For details on how Jesus' resurrection and other relevant data lead to a case for the heart of Christianity, see Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, chaps. 1-6. A more popular approach is detailed in Gary R. Habermas, "Evidential Apologetics," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Stephen B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000).

<sup>37</sup>For additional comments on how these methodological considerations used by critical scholars lead to the historicity of the resurrection, see esp. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, chap. 1.

are more than justified in holding their view in light of the many evidences for this event.

Our major methodology is applicable to this agnostic position. Throughout, we have used data that are recognized by virtually all scholars. These same minimal historical facts that even agnostics accept clearly indicate that more than an undefined something occurred to Jesus' disciples. We pointed out above that all the evidence supports a visual claim—the disciples thought they saw Jesus after his death. By failing to account viably for the majority of the recognized facts that even they generally accept, like the eight mentioned above, agnostics miss the cause of the disciples' experiences. But it is insufficient to simply stop there and refuse to investigate further. What they fail to explain may be precisely the data that are capable of establishing the resurrection appearances as the most likely explanation, as pointed out below. As Fuller asserts, what we know "therefore requires that the historian postulate some other event" besides the disciples' faith. We must ascertain "the cause of the Easter faith . . . outside of their belief."<sup>38</sup>

Precisely in order to address directly these facts, the more popular approach through the centuries has been to pose a naturalistic theory to account for the data. Such a move basically attempts to allow for historical facts where the evidence is the strongest, while veering off in a natural direction before getting to the punch line involving the resurrection. Here they need to propose an alternative scenario: "Jesus didn't really rise from the dead. What really happened was (fill in the blank)."

However, this is probably the most difficult method of all. In fact, when faced with this option, the vast majority of critical scholars opt out. They are often well aware that when an option is chosen, the weight of the known historical facts comes crashing down against their proposal. In fact, they are so well aware of this eventuality that only a few attempt it. Even among scholars, it is generally conceded that none of these options work.

For instance, Raymond E. Brown calls these theses "gratuitous charges."<sup>39</sup> Dunn concludes: "alternative interpretations of the data fail

<sup>38</sup>Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, pp. 169, 181.



to provide a more satisfactory explanation" than the resurrection.<sup>40</sup> Davis responds: "All of the alternative hypotheses with which I am familiar are historically weak; some are so weak that they collapse of their own weight once spelled out. . . . The alternative theories that have been proposed are not only weaker but far weaker at explaining the available historical evidence."<sup>41</sup> Robinson notes that "it is indeed very difficult to dismiss [Jesus' appearances] and still find a credible explanation."<sup>42</sup>

Given that the skeptic would have to account for the disciples being sure that they had seen the risen Jesus, the most popular naturalistic response (although still a real minority rejoinder) is to suggest that they saw hallucinations. A detailed critique is impossible here, but we can provide a list of some of the myriad problems with such a response.<sup>43</sup>

For example, (1) hallucinations are private experiences, while clearly we have strong reasons to assert that groups of people claimed to have seen Jesus. (2) The disciples' despair indicates that they were not in the proper frame of mind to see hallucinations. (3) Perhaps the most serious problem is that there were far too many different times, places and personalities involved in the appearances. To believe that with each of these varying persons and circumstances a separate hallucination occurred borders on credulity. (4) Further, on this view, Jesus' body should still have been located safely in the tomb! (5) Hallucinations very rarely transform lives, but we have no records of any of the eyewitnesses recanting their faith. Two huge problems are the conversions of both (6) Paul and (7) James, neither of whom had a desire to see Jesus. These are just a very few of the serious questions for this alternative view. All other proposed natural hypotheses have similarly been disproven.<sup>44</sup>

Now we are ready to state a general principle for moving from the dis-

<sup>39</sup>Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, p. 163; cf. pp. 163-67.

<sup>40</sup>Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus*, p. 76. Another more recent and similar testimony is that of N. T. Wright, "Christian Origins and the Resurrection of Jesus: The Resurrection of Jesus as a Historical Problem," *Sewanee Theological Review* 41 (1998): 118-22.

<sup>41</sup>Stephen T. Davis, "Is Belief in the Resurrection Rational?" *Philo* 2 (1999): 57-58.

<sup>42</sup>J. A. T. Robinson, *Can We Trust the New Testament?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 124.

<sup>43</sup>For a treatment of the latest trends plus a detailed critique, see Gary R. Habermas, "Explaining Away Jesus' Resurrection: The Recent Revival of Hallucination Theories," *Christian Research Journal* 23 (2001), pp. 26-31, 47-49.

ciples' convictions to the historical resurrection appearances. The strong reasons for supporting the disciples' experiences of seeing Jesus, in conjunction with the failure of alternative theses, even by critical standards, indicates that by far the most likely scenario is that the disciples *actually* saw the risen Jesus. Further, the more thoroughly the natural hypotheses fail, the more likely are the historical resurrection appearances. To state this principle more briefly as a mock mathematical equation: given a reasonable explanation, the disciples' experiences plus the failure of alternatives equals the historical resurrection appearances of Jesus.

This follows because, due to the failure of alternatives, the impressive evidences that make the case for the disciples' experiences as strong as anything in the New Testament now become impressive evidences for the resurrection appearances themselves. In brief, the disciples' experiences are recognized for what they actually were: Jesus' postdeath appearances.

## THE UNIQUENESS OF THE DISCIPLES' TRANSFORMATIONS

Today, many have been willing to die for their religious or even political convictions. From communists to Muslims to Christians, we are well-acquainted with examples. However, many throughout history have also propagated false beliefs. What separates Jesus' disciples from these latter cases? Is their transformation in any way unique?

Virtually no one disputes the disciples' radical transformations. Before Jesus died, his followers abandoned and even denied him.<sup>45</sup> In contrast, after the resurrection the remainder of their lives were undeniably and radically altered. They were willing to die for their faith, and many were martyred.<sup>46</sup> The disciples' metamorphoses are also visible from their eth-

<sup>41</sup>In "Explaining Away Jesus' Resurrection," I list nineteen different problems for various forms of the hallucination theory. For a readable treatment of many other potential naturalistic responses, see the more than one hundred pages devoted to the topic in Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, esp. chaps. 7-9.

<sup>45</sup>Some examples are found in Mt 26:56, 69-74; Mk 14:50, 66-72; Lk 22:55-72; Jn 18:25-27.

<sup>46</sup>See Acts 2:41-47; 4:1-4, 8-21, 29-31; 5:17-32, 40-42. For their willingness to die, see Jn 21:18-19; Acts 7:57-60; 12:1-3; 21:13; 25:11; Rom 14:8; 1 Cor 15:30-32; 2 Cor 4:7-14; 11:23-32; Phil 1:20-24; cf. 2 Pet 1:13-15. We have early references to the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul (Clement of Rome *Corinthians* 5) and two accounts of the martyrdom of James, the brother of Jesus (Josephus *Antiquities* 20:9:1; Hegesippus in Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 2:23). Eu-

ics, evangelism and other teachings, reflected throughout the New Testament. Extrabiblical sources, both secular and Christian, also attest to these changes.<sup>47</sup>

What is responsible for the changes in the disciples? The New Testament is unmistakably clear that Jesus' resurrection appearances were the intervening events, the catalyst between their confusion and exaltation. Critical scholars are in total agreement here. Ben Meyer states it clearly: "That it was the Easter experiences which affected [the disciples'] transformation is beyond reasonable doubt."<sup>48</sup> Hugo Staudinger agrees: "Only the appearances of Jesus brought about a new change of mood in them."<sup>49</sup> N. T. Wright declares: "the first generation of Christians . . . announced and celebrated the victory of Jesus over evil. . . . That was the basis of their remarkable joy."<sup>50</sup>

Admittedly, life conversions have happened for untrue causes. But I would assert that there is a *qualitative* difference between what occurred to the disciples and what we see today. Granted, there is the often-acknowledged precept that those who are willing to die for a cause genuinely believe in it. The disciples did suffer for their belief in a cause, like everyone else. But here the main similarities between the disciples and others stop.

Distinctly *unlike* the other cases, as we have seen in this chapter, the disciples died for more than being sold out to a cause. They willingly gave their lives *precisely because they were absolutely convinced that they had seen the risen Jesus*. In short, their transformations were not caused by an ideology, like the others, but their new outlook was expressly based on a personal experience—their profound conviction that

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sebius records that James the brother of John, Peter and Paul all died for their faith (*Ecclesiastical History* 2:9, 25).

<sup>47</sup>Secular references appear in Tacitus (*Annals* 15.44), Josephus's disputed paragraph (*Antiquities* 18.3.3) and in Mara Bar-Serapion's letter to his son (located in the British Museum). Christian testimonies are recorded by Clement of Rome (*Corinthians* 42), Ignatius (*Smyrneans* 3) and *Barnabas* (5).

<sup>48</sup>Ben Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979), p. 60.

<sup>49</sup>Hugo Staudinger, "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ as Saving Event and as 'Object' of Historical Research," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 (1983), p. 321.

<sup>50</sup>N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), p. 659.

they had actually seen the risen Jesus.

Apart from their resurrection experiences, there would have been no transformations, for without this event their faith was vain (1 Cor. 15:14, 17). As Paul argues, they actually saw Jesus (1 Cor 15:1-11), and this is what confirmed their eternal life, for if Jesus was raised, so they would be raised (1 Cor 15:17-20). Death had no more sting for them (1 Cor 15:53-55). Peter similarly but surprisingly declares that because Jesus' resurrection secured heaven, even the serious struggles of life could be faced with rejoicing (1 Pet 1:3-7).

Think about it. If your eternity depended on Jesus being raised from the dead, which would you rather have—a strong conviction or your actually having seen the risen Jesus along with an even stronger conviction precisely because you did so? In other words, which circumstance would carry a greater conviction: your being convinced centuries later that you ought to follow someone's teachings, or simply the knowledge that you actually had been with that same person last night, however unusual the particulars? Now can you imagine the disciples' joy when they saw Jesus alive—face to face, gazing straight into his eyes? In that moment when they saw Jesus, heaven entered earth's realm and eternity burst upon them. After all, what is a resurrection appearance of Jesus? When the disciples saw the risen Jesus, they saw walking, talking, eternal life! No wonder they were assured of heaven!<sup>51</sup>

So here is the chief difference between Jesus' disciples and others who hold religious convictions. In addition to their fortified convictions, the disciples had an evidenced experience that no one else ever has, before or since.<sup>52</sup> They saw heaven in the person of Jesus Christ. And although believers today have not seen Jesus (1 Pet 1:8), we have the next best thing—very powerful evidence that the disciples did!

## CONCLUSION

I contend that the most crucial aspect of an argument for the historicity

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<sup>51</sup>For an itemized argument from Jesus' resurrection to eternal life, see Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, chaps. 1-7.

<sup>52</sup>Gary R. Habermas, "Resurrection Claims in Non-Christian Religions," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989):167-77.

of Jesus' resurrection is that the disciples were totally convinced that they had seen appearances of the risen Jesus. The community of critical scholars holds that these experiences are thoroughly historical. These same scholars nearly always recognize that natural alternative responses do not explain the data. Therefore, the impressive evidences that establish the disciples' experiences, especially in light of the failure of these alternatives, now become impressive evidences for the resurrection appearances themselves.

Further, that these appearances were the reason for the disciples' transformations separates them from other religious and political metamorphoses. That the disciples actually saw the risen Jesus bases their convictions of heaven on their foretaste of that reality, which they had personally witnessed. Excitingly, although they have not seen the resurrected Jesus, believers today have the next best thing—very powerful evidence that the disciples did! The argument is firm and heaven still follows!

#### FOR FURTHER READING

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## PART 4

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# PHILOSOPHICAL AND CULTURAL CHALLENGES TO CHRISTIAN FAITH

*J. P. Moreland*

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK FOLLOWS A VERY CAREFULLY CRAFTED PROGRESSION OF IDEAS. In part 1 we tackled the whole question of faith and reason in order to defend the very practice of apologetics. Having given a rationale and some practical advice for its employment, parts 2 and 3 took on the task of providing a defense of the existence of God and the truth of Christianity. Again, the order is important. If monotheism is true, then it is clearly possible that God could perform miracles in human history and reveal himself in ways consistent with his reality as known from the creation itself and the arguments for his existence. So understood, the arguments of part 2 do not merely provide grounds for God's reality; they also provide some information about his nature (that he is wise, intelligent, good, powerful and excellent in all ways appropriate to being a person). Part 3 captured the search to see if God has in fact revealed himself in a special way, and the case for the New Testament's depiction of Christ and the credibility of miracles, especially the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, constitute the appropriate end of that search.

However, no case is complete if it considers only evidence in its favor, and the case for the Christian worldview is no exception to this rule. So in parts 4 and 5, we provide a statement and response to some important philosophical, cultural and religious challenges frequently raised against