

How Can You Believe Someone Rose From the Dead?

Question 10

Christianity is founded on historical events, the most important one being the bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. As the apostle Paul says, if Jesus is not risen our faith is useless and we might as well not waste our time. But if Jesus truly did rise from the dead then Jesus truly is the Lord and Savior of the World

*The first question would be “Can modern people believe in miracles?” This question was tackled on the outline “Christianity and Science in Harmony”, so go there (section IV). The conclusion is that if God exists and created the universe than it is possible for God to work within the universe to do seemingly miraculous things. Has God done such things? Is there good evidence to believe in the miracle of Jesus’ resurrection?

I. The Resurrection of Jesus¹

A. *The Resurrection is a necessary condition for Christian faith (1 Cor. 15:14-17)*

1. The Resurrection is necessary for Christianity (and Jesus) to be worth anything
2. What would prove the resurrection?
 - a. *Inference to the Best Explanation* – what conclusion best explains all the events (most plausible, includes fewest assumptions, falsified by fewest accepted beliefs)

B. *Data to Be Explained – what conclusion best explains this data?*

1. Jesus was Dead
2. The Disciples were in fear – all the evidence says they were terrified of being arrested too
3. A Jewish and Roman secured tomb (Matt. 27:57-66) – only way to rule out that Jesus was buried in the tomb is to discount the evidence we have (gospels in the Bible and other later gospels); no other ancient evidence for anything else
4. An empty tomb – the tomb was empty, how?
5. Eyewitnesses changed and were willing to die for this claim – the scared disciples now willing to die for fact that Jesus is alive

C. *Evidential Considerations Regarding the Resurrection* (Resources: “Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?” in *Jesus Under Fire* and “The Empty Tomb of Jesus” from *In Defense of Miracles*)

1. The Historical Fact of the Empty Tomb
 - a. Historical Credibility of the burial stories supports the empty tomb
 - i. Paul’s testimony provides early evidence for the historicity of Jesus’ burial (1 Cor. 15:3-5) – eyewitnesses were still alive; Paul is writing only about 15 years after Jesus’ death
 - ii. The burial story is part of the pre-Markan Passion Story and is therefore very old (it was a story found in all four gospels and was probably passed on prior to the gospels being written down)
 - iii. Story itself is simple and in its basic elements lacks theological reflection or apologetic development
 - iv. Joseph of Arimathea is probably historical – the writers could not have made up such a high-ranking Jewish leader if he really did not exist
 - v. Jesus was buried late on the day of Passover
 - vi. The observation of the burial by women seems historical (Mk. 15:40, 47, 16:1)
 - vii. The graves of Jewish holy men were carefully preserved – tradition was to give such people a place of rest to be visited
 - viii. There is no other burial tradition in existence
 - b. Paul’s testimony implies the fact of the empty tomb

¹ Adapted from “The Resurrection of Jesus” by Richard Knopp, outline from Defending the Christian Faith at Lincoln Christian Seminary, spring 2003.

- i. From sequence in 1 Cor. 15:3-5
 - ii. From his notion of resurrection and bodily transformation in 1 Cor. 15
 - iii. From the phrase “from the dead” (Rom. 4:24)
 - iv. From his belief in a personal return of Christ (1 Thess. 4:17)
 - c. The presence of the empty tomb narrative in the Passion story passed around prior to Mark writing his gospel supports its historical credibility
 - d. The use of “the first day of the week” (Mk. 16:2) instead of “on the third day” points to the primitiveness of the tradition – “third day” has more theological agenda and was how it was interpreted later; earliest story has empty tomb without the interpretation
 - e. The nature of the narrative itself is theologically unadorned and non-apologetic
 - f. *The empty tomb was discovered by women* – writers would not make this up – the early church was mostly men but in this story the men are cowards; women could not be witnesses in Judaism but the church keeps them in (why would they make up women finding it if women’s testimony was meaningless?)
 - g. *It would have been virtually impossible for the disciples to proclaim the resurrection in Jerusalem had the tomb not been empty.*
 - h. The earliest Jewish response presupposes the empty tomb (Matt. 28:15)
 - i. The fact that Jesus’ tomb was NOT venerated as a shrine indicates the tomb was empty
- 2. Explaining the historical fact of the empty tomb
 - a. Swoon theory – Jesus did not really die, he just passed out, in the tomb he came to and when his disciples saw him they assumed he had risen from dead
 - i. People do not survive Roman crucifixion
 - ii. Even if he did, a beat up Jesus in dire need of medical help would not cause the disciples to think God had risen him to an exalted body
 - b. Stolen body – the Jews, Romans or disciples stole the Bible
 - i. Jews or Romans had no reason to; when the disciples began preaching Jesus had risen the Jews/Romans would have wanted to produce the body to shut them up
 - ii. Disciples steal the body?
 - 1. And later die for what they know is a lie?
 - 2. Further – there was no precedent for them to think Jesus would rise in 3 days; he would rise in the end of time (see outline of Wright)
- 3. The Postmortem Appearances (source: “The Resurrection Appearances of Jesus” from *In Defense of Miracles*)
 - a. Historical Fact of Appearances
 - i. Testimony of Paul, which he received from others, is that the disciples saw appearances of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:6-8)
 - ii. Gospel accounts of the resurrection appearances are fundamentally reliable historically
 - 1. There was not enough time (30-50 years from death of Jesus to writing of Gospels) for legends to grow significantly
 - a. Later Gospels (Secret Gospel of Mark) have appearance of legends (talking cross!)
 - 2. The controlling presence of living eyewitnesses would retard significant accrual of legend
 - 3. The authoritative control of the apostles would have helped keep legendary tendencies in check
 - iii. Particular Resurrection appearances have historical credibility
 - 1. Appearance to women – even though women have no authority to testify in a court of law
 - 2. Appearance to Peter (Lk. 24:34)
 - 3. Appearance to the Twelve
 - 4. The Lake of Tiberias appearance (Jn. 21)

5. The appearance in Galilee (based on Jesus' and angels' prediction and Marks' inclusion of these predictions)
6. Appearance to the 500 believers (which Paul refers to in 1 Cor. 15:6)
7. Appearance to James (note James' radical conversion; cf. Mk. 3:21, 31-32; Jn. 7:1-5; Acts 15:13ff; Gal. 1:19; 2:9)
- iv. Resurrection Appearances were Physical and Bodily
 1. Paul implies that the appearances were physical events – “visions” vs. “appearances”; if they were not physical Paul's teaching on bodily resurrection makes little sense
 2. Gospels confirm that the appearances were physical – they narrate the experience of a bodily Jesus
- b. Examining the Historical fact of the Resurrection Appearances
 - i. “subjective vision hypothesis” – the disciples just had visions of what they hoped for (Jesus alive) and upon reflection made up the resurrection
 1. Problem – the appearances vary in number and circumstances
 2. Problem – such visions might have produced the idea of Jesus exalted in heaven, but not resurrection
 3. Problem – the disciples had no hope for a resurrection 3 days later; but visions come from some hope/thought in humans
 4. Problem – Does not account for empty tomb
4. The Origin of the Disciples' belief in Jesus' Resurrection
 - a. The fact of belief in the resurrection (note Acts 2 and many other NT references)
 - b. Explaining belief in the resurrection of Jesus
 - i. Jewish doctrine of resurrection (Isa. 26:19; Ezek. 37; Dan. 12:2; Pharisees in Matt. 22:23-33) is different from NT accounts of Jesus' resurrection
 - ii. Jews believed in a resurrection at the end of the world, not in the middle of history
 - iii. Jews believed in the general resurrection of the people, not a resurrection of an isolated individual
 - c. Parallel in ancient pagan mystery religion stories
 - i. Chronological problems – mystery religions did not come about until the 2nd or 3rd century so they would not be around for early Christians to copy (or at least, there is no evidence for them)
 - ii. Way resurrection works in the stories is different (see below on Wright)
 - iii. Differences – in other stories the death has no sacrificial value (only Jesus dies for sin); the stories have repeating deaths (Jesus died once); other stories are mythical (Jesus' death grounded in history)

II. NT Wright's *The Resurrection of the Son of God*

A. Summary

1. In this book NT Wright demonstrates the uniqueness and historical truth of the early Christian preaching. First he examines “resurrection” in the ancient world and shows that no ancients (Greeks Homer, Plato to Egyptian mystery religions) use “resurrection” the way early Christians do. He then shows Jewish beliefs on resurrection at the end of time and how the early Christians held to this belief with the exception of Jesus who rose to life in the present time. Finally, he concludes that with all the evidence he has the best explanation as a historian is that Jesus rose from the dead.

B. Summary of the Major Sections

1. Life Beyond Death in Ancient Paganism
 - a. Referring to Homer and other ancient Greeks: “This basic tenet of human existence and experience is accepted as axiomatic throughout the ancient world; once people have gone by the road of death, they do not return...’resurrection’ was not one way of describing

what death consisted of. It was a way of describing something everyone knew did not happen: the idea that death could be reversed, undone, could (as it were) work backwards” (33).

- b. “The immediate conclusion is clear. Christianity was born into a world where its central claim was known to be false. Many believed the dead were non-existent; outside Judaism, nobody believed in resurrection” (35).
 - i. Homer – death is a place of gloom for the soul
 - ii. Plato – death is a delight, separation from the body is good
 - c. “The grief of Achilles and the calm of Socrates confront one another, half a millennium and more on, as the two positions between which the Greco-roman world oscillated. As will already be obvious, neither bore any resemblance to the belief and message of the early church” (55).
 - d. Popular idea that some, emperors or other heroes, became gods – they were taken away to a land of gods or became stars – but they had not been risen from the dead (56-60).
 - e. Dying and rising gods was a major theme in Egypt and elsewhere – often coupled with fertility rites and was cyclical with the seasons – very different from Jewish and Christian belief – “Remarkably enough, there is no sign of dying and rising gods and goddesses within the Jewish world... when Jews spoke of resurrection it was not something that they expected would happen to their god YHWH. Nor was it something that would happen to them again and again; it would be a single, unrepeatable event. Likewise, when the Christians spoke of the resurrection of Jesus they did not suppose it was something that happened every year, with the sowing of seed and the harvesting of crops” (81).
 - f. “It is of course quite possible that, when people in the wider world heard what the early Christians were saying, they attempted to fit the strange message into the worldview of cults they already knew. But the evidence suggests that they were more likely to be puzzled, or to mock. When Paul preached in Athens, nobody said, ‘Ah, yes, a new version of Osiris and such like.’ The Homeric assumption remained in force. Whatever the gods – or the crops – might do, humans did not rise again from the dead” (81).
 - g. “*We cannot stress too strongly that from Homer onwards the language of ‘resurrection’ was not used to denote ‘life after death’ in general, or any of the phenomenon supposed to occur within such a life. The great majority of the ancients believed in life after death; many of them developed, as we have seen, complex and fascinating beliefs about it and practices in relation to it; but, other than within Judaism and Christianity, they did not believe in resurrection. ‘Resurrection’ denoted a new embodied life which would follow whatever ‘life after death’ there might be. ‘Resurrection’ was, by definition, not the existence into which someone might (or might not) go immediately upon death; it was not a disembodied ‘heavenly’ life; it was a further stage, out beyond all that. It was not a redescription or redefinition of death. It was death’s reversal*” (82-3).
 - i. When Christians spoke of Jesus raising from the dead the claim was that something had happened in Jesus which had happened to no one else
 - ii. Christian belief that Jesus was divine cannot have been the cause of belief in resurrection – the ancients had belief in divine persons but those persons had died and remained in graves; it involved the soul, not the body
2. Death and Beyond in the OT
- a. “The hope of the biblical writers, which was strong and constant, focused not upon the fate of humans after death, but on the fate of Israel and her promised land” (99).
 - b. “The constant love of YHWH was never merely a theological dogma to the ancient Israelites. In many parts of their literature, and supremely the Psalms, we find evidence that they knew this love in vivid personal experience. It was this personal experience, rather than any theory about innate immortality, that gave rise to the suggestion that, despite the widespread denials of such a thing, YHWH’s faithfulness would after all be known not only in this life but in a life beyond the grave” (103)

- i. Psalm 16, 104; Job 33:15-30; Psalm 73 and 49
 - c. Resurrection is what will happen to people who are dead already (not what already happened to them) (109)
 - i. Daniel 12:2-3 (cf. Isaiah 52-3 and mostly Isa. 24-27)
 - ii. Isa. 26:19 cf. Hos. 13:14
 - iii. Ezekiel 37
 - d. “The constant factor, throughout the types of belief we have surveyed, is Israel’s god himself. The vision of YHWH’s creation and covenant; his promise and his faithfulness to them; his purposes for Israel, not least his gift of the land; his power over all opposing forces, including finally death itself; his love for the world, for his human creatures, for Israel in particular, and especially for those who served him and followed in his way; his justice, because of which evil would eventually be condemned and righteousness upheld – this vision of the creator and covenant god underlies the ancient belief in the national and territorial hope, the emerging belief that the relationship with YHWH would be unbreakable even by death, and the eventual belief that YHWH would raise the dead. The biblical language of resurrection (‘standing up’, ‘awakening’ etc.), when it emerges, is simple and direct; the belief, though infrequent, is clear. It involves, not a reconstrual of life after death, but the reversal of death itself...It is a way of saying that a time will come when sleepers will sleep no more. Creation itself, celebrated throughout the Hebrew scriptures, will be reaffirmed, remade” (127-8).
- 3. Hope Beyond Death in Post-Biblical Judaism
 - a. “‘Resurrection’, with the various words that were used for it and the various stories that were told about it, was never simply a way of speaking about ‘life after death’. It was one particular story that was told about the dead: a story in which the present state of those who had died would be replaced by a future state in which they would be alive once more...’resurrection’ was life after ‘life after death’...Resurrection was, more specifically, not the redefinition or redescription of death, a way of giving a positive interpretation to the fact that the breath and blood of a human body had ceased to function, leading quickly to corruption and decay, but the reversal or undoing or defeat of death, restoring to some kind of bodily life those who had already passed through the first stage” (201)
 - b. Nobody imagined any individuals had already been raised or that any would be raised prior to the last day
 - c. Most Jews hoped for resurrection, most hoped for a Messiah, but none put the two hopes together as the early Christians did (205).
- 4. Resurrection in Paul
 - a. “When the early Christians said ‘resurrection’ they meant it in the sense it bore both in paganism (which denied it) and in Judaism (an influential part which affirmed it). ‘Resurrection’ did not mean that someone possessed ‘a heavenly and exalted status’; when predicated of Jesus, it did not mean his ‘perceived presence’ in the ongoing church. Nor, if we are thinking historically, could it have meant; the passage of the human Jesus into the power of God’. It meant bodily resurrection; and that is what the early Christians affirmed” (209).
 - b. “He believed, that is, in the future bodily resurrection of all the true people of the true God, and he cautiously explored, here and there, ways of referring to the intermediate state which was the necessary corollary of that belief. He believed that Israel’s God, being both the creator of the world and the God of justice, would accomplish this resurrection by his Spirit, who was already at work in the Messiah’s people. At the same time, Paul believed two things which are only comprehensible as mutations within the Jewish worldview, not as combinations of a Jewish eschatology with something else. First, he believed that ‘the resurrection’ had divided, as a historical moment, into two: the resurrection of the Messiah in the first place, and then, at his ‘parousia’, of all his people.

Second, he believed, and articulated in considerable detail, that the resurrection would not only be bodily...but that it would also involved transformation. The present body is corruptible, decaying and subject to death; but death, which spits in the face of the good creator God, cannot have the last word. The creator will therefore make a new world, and new bodies, proper to the new age” (372).

5. Resurrection in the NT

6. Hope in Person: Jesus as Messiah and Lord

- a. Had Jesus simply been executed as a failed Messiah we would expect James to take the mantle of leadership – that is how messiah claims went, to the next brother – but no one ever did this! James was a powerful leader but never called Messiah (562).
- b. “Jesus’ resurrection...vindicated or validated his Messiahship; and if he was Messiah, he was the world’s true lord. Resurrection was every bit as radical a belief for the early Christians as it had been for the Pharisees, in fact more so. The Christians believed that ‘the resurrection’ had already begun, and that the one person to whom it had happened was the lord at whose name every knee would bow” (583)

7. The Story of Easter

- a. “The very strong historical probability is that, when Matthew, Luke and John describe the risen Jesus, they are writing down very early oral traditions, representing three different ways in which the original astonished participants told the stories. These traditions have received only minimal development, and most of that probably at the final editorial stage, for the very good reason that stories as earth-shattering as this, stories as community-forming as this, once told, are not easily modified. Too much depends on them” (611)

8. Belief, Event and Meaning

- a. “The historical datum now before us is a widely held, consistently shaped and highly influential belief: that Jesus of Nazareth was bodily raised from the dead. This belief was held by virtually all the early Christians for whom we have evidence. It was at the centre of their characteristic praxis, narrative, symbol and belief; it was the basis of their recognition of Jesus as messiah and lord, their insistence that the creator god had inaugurated the long-awaited new age, and above all their hope for their own future bodily resurrection. The question we now face is obvious: what caused this belief in the resurrection of Jesus?” (685)
- b. Two things must be historically secure: the empty tomb and the meetings with the risen Jesus – neither by themselves would be enough (the empty tomb would be a tragedy and a puzzle, the sightings would be visions or hallucinations) – but together they are powerful reason for emergence of the belief as it came (686)
 - i. “From everything we know both of the second-Temple context and of the beliefs of the disciples about Jesus and his mission, we can be confident that if they discovered on the one hand that his tomb was empty, and found on the other hand that, for a while, they kept meeting him in ways which gave every appearance that he was dead no longer, but actually alive, the belief we have studied through the first two centuries of Christianity would certainly emerge” – not for everyone, but Jewish people with their hope in future resurrection, would see it this way (692-3)
- c. “The best one available is that it was the appearance of Jesus that precipitated this transformation in the understanding of resurrection. The language of ‘resurrection’, and the specific modifications within Jewish resurrection belief which we have seen in early Christianity could only have occurred, I suggest, if the early Christians believed they had clear evidence, against all their own and everyone else’s expectations, both of continuity between the Jesus who died and the Jesus who was now alive and of a transformation in his mode of embodiment. Appearances of this living Jesus would have provided such evidence. Nothing else could have done. *We are left with the conclusion that the combination of empty tomb and appearances of the living Jesus forms a set of*

circumstances which is itself both necessary and sufficient for the rise of early Christian belief (696).

- i. Rival theory – they had visions of what they hoped for – but there is no evidence they hoped Jesus would rise now (maybe in future) (697-700)
 - d. “The early Christians did not invent the empty tomb and the ‘meetings’ or ‘sightings’ of the risen Jesus in order to explain a faith they already had. They developed that faith because of the occurrence, and convergence, of these two phenomena. Nobody was expecting this kind of thing; no kind of conversion experience would have generated such ideas; nobody would have invented it, no matter how guilty (or how forgiven) they felt, no matter how many hours they pored over scriptures” (707)
 - i. Other historical evidence than fits in: early Christians observed first day of the week as a special day remarkably early; no one ever venerated Jesus’ tomb; never a question of performing a secondary burial for Jesus (Palestinian Judaism had a two-stage burial) (707-8)
 - e. “*We are left with the secure historical conclusion: the tomb was empty, and various ‘meetings’ took place not only between Jesus and his followers (including at least one initial skeptic) but also, in at least one case (that of Paul; possibly, too, that of James), between Jesus and people who had not been among his followers. I regard this conclusion as coming in the same sort of category, of historical probability so high as to be virtually certain, as the death of Augustus in AD 14 or the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70*” (710)
9. What does it mean?
- a. Combined with what Jesus had said, resurrection validates him as Messiah and show that Israel is being renewed through Jesus (726-7)
 - b. Jesus is the true Lord of the Gentile world as well (728-9)

*We have seen that belief in the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is a belief we can hold reasonably and rationally. Of course we cannot prove it beyond a doubt in the way we can prove $2+2=4$; but the weighing the evidence allows us to believe it with a high percentage of probability. For further study of the resurrection, see the bibliography.

*Believing it rationally and reasonably is only one part – the second part is what does it have to do with our lives? The resurrection is the foundation of hope in the Christian life.

III. The Hope of Resurrection

A. Hope for the Future – 1 Corinthians 15

1. Paul’s gospel: Christ died for our sins, was buried, was raised on the third day and appeared to many people (15:3-8)
2. The Corinthians doubted whether Jesus really rose (possibly influenced by the Greek idea that the body was evil...if the body is evil a good man, especially a god-man, would not want to return to it and rise from the dead; death would be liberation)
 - a. If Christ has not been raised our preaching and faith are useless (15:14)
 - b. If Christ has not been raised you are still guilty of sins (15:17)
 - c. If Christ has not been raised those who die are lost, death is the end, and all we have is this life (15:18-19)
 - d. Christ has been raised – the first of those who are dead (15:20)
 - i. Death came through one man; life comes through Christ (15:21-22)
 - ii. Christ is the first to rise – the rest will rise when he comes in the end (15:23)
 - iii. This will be the end and death will be defeated (15:26)
 - e. The body we have now is weak but the future body will be perfected, new, imperishable, not like this one (15:35-44)

- f. We are born in the likeness of earthly bodies; our new bodies will be heavenly bodies (15:49)
 - g. Some will not die; those who are around when Jesus returns will be changed and given new bodies immediately while the dead are raised to new bodies (15:51-53)
 - h. Through Christ, death is defeated (15:57)
3. Hope.
- a. We have hope for the future. Death will be defeated, we will be raised up to new life with a new body on a new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21-22)
 - b. Our hope is in the future...but Jesus brings a little of the future to the present...

B. Hope for the Present

1. All people are guilty before God (Rom. 1:18-3:20)
2. People are made right by God through Jesus Christ – through grace (Rom. 3:21-26)
3. We trust in Jesus for peace and forgiveness and all things (Rom. 5:1-2)
 - a. We even praise God for suffering which produces good character (5:3-5)
4. Jesus saves us from sin by grace – should we sin more to be saved from more for God’s glory? (Rom. 6:1)
 - a. No! We died to sin so we cannot live in it any longer (Rom. 6:2)
 - b. We were baptized into Christ Jesus’ death and raised from the dead to live a new life (Rom. 6:3-4)
 - i. We were united with him in his death and will be in his resurrection (6:5)
 - ii. Our old self (sin, evil) was crucified so that now we are free from sin (6:6-7)
 - iii. We also live with Christ (6:8)
 1. Do not let sin reign in your body, do not offer your body as instruments of wickedness – instead be servants of God and offer your body to him for holiness (6:11-14)
 - c. We are slaves to God (and righteousness) not to sin (6:16-23)
5. We receive new life in Christ RIGHT NOW – we are already made new by the grace of Jesus Christ, we are a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). But we are not yet fully made new, we still await the day when the Holy Spirit finishes his work in us.
 - a. Already new creation...not yet fully new creation
 - b. Present – struggle (Rom. 7:7-25) between what good and evil – called to produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22-25)
 - i. We will fail but we continue to grow in the Spirit
 - c. Future – the work is completed – we are made new completely!

C. Changed Lives

1. When Jesus was crucified his disciples ran away in fear; they knew he was dead and feared the might be next. Soon after they began preaching he was alive and the Savior of the world. They were so confident of this that they were willing to die for it, and most of them did.
2. What could cause such a life change? Only seeing the risen Jesus!
 - a. People may die for something they have been deceived into believing but no one will die for something they know is false. If the disciples had banded together to make the resurrection up at least a couple, under pain and torture, would have confessed.
 - b. Muslims may die believing Muhammad is the prophet and might be wrong.
 - c. You and I could die “believing” Jesus is risen and be wrong.
 - d. The disciples saw him die and believed he rose again – they would not die for Jesus if he was still dead; but if they knew he was alive it was worth dying for.

Conclusion: The Resurrection is the foundation of all we are. It is the climax of the story – Jesus undoes the crisis as he defeats evil and death. We are made new creations and called to come alongside of God in preaching the good news and becoming holy. At the same time, we look forward to the day when the Holy Spirit finishes the work of new creation in us and in the world!

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