

THE HISTORICITY OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST

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INTRODUCTION

Something happened over 1,970 years ago that changed the course of world history. This event turned men of fear into men of faith. This event explains the existence of the Church and changes in the lives of millions of believers. It is an event that Christians remember each Sunday as they gather together for worship. This event is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Josh McDowell was a skeptic before he examined the gospels for himself. A student asked Josh, "Professor McDowell, why can't you intellectually refute Christianity?" Josh McDowell responded, "For a very simple reason. I am not able to explain away an event in history—the resurrection of Jesus Christ." After studying the subject for a long time, Josh McDowell was forced to the conclusion that either the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the greatest hoax ever given to man or it is the most fantastic fact of history.¹

Is it possible to verify the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus? What is the correct historical method to approach the accounts of the resurrection of Jesus in the gospels? What criteria should be used to determine the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus? What historical evidence do the gospels present for the resurrection of Jesus? This article is the first in a two-part series that will attempt to answer these questions and summarize the main arguments for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

TESTING HISTORICAL EXPLANATIONS

Historiography

Historiography is the "narrative presentation of history based on a critical examination, evaluation, and selection of material from primary and secondary sources and subject to scholarly criteria."²

Why is historiography important? In this day of historical revisionism, it is important for evangelical scholars to defend the historicity of events described in the Bible. Many liberal scholars would have us believe that the gospel writers invented various events in the life of Jesus (i.e., his miracles and resurrection) to encourage people to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. They would reject the historicity of these events and say that they never really happened. Instead they would describe these events as "legends" or "myths." Evangelical scholars who accept the literal interpretation of the Bible reject this liberal historical revisionism. We believe that the miracles performed by Jesus and the bodily resurrection of Jesus were literal events in history.

How can evangelical scholars "prove" the historicity of these events recorded in the gospels? How does one actually do the work of the historian? How is such research to be conducted? Gary Habermas writes:

The occurrence of past events can usually be discovered (within a certain probability) by a careful investigation of the facts. These former events are only accessible by a study of the available historical evidence. Although the historian usually did not personally participate in what he is studying (assuming he wasn't originally there), he can inspect the relevant data such as the eyewitnesses, written documents, and various other records, structures, and archaeological finds. Upon such confirmation the historian must build his case. Such tools comprise the working principles of historical research.³

Habermas points out that "historical data must be available if the historian is to investigate the past in such a manner. These sources are often divided into two types: primary and secondary. Primary sources are underived,

¹ Josh McDowell, *The Resurrection Factor* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life, 1981), 6-7.

² *The Random House College Dictionary* (1980), s.v. "historiography."

³ Gary Habermas, "Appendix One: Historiography," in *The Historical Jesus* (Joplin, MO: College, 1996), 270.

firsthand, or contemporary with the event and are much more crucial. They may consist of eyewitness testimony given in various forms. Secondary material witnesses to primary sources, directed to past persons and events.”⁴

The Criteria of Authenticity

The science of historiography involves the application of scholarly criteria to the study of a particular event or time in history. These criteria are sometimes referred to as the criteria of authenticity. Darrell Bock writes:

Sometimes how the criteria are named reveals a great deal. To call them the criteria for authenticity suggests that a saying needs to pass these tests to be seen as authentic. To speak of criteria of authenticity simply notes that these tests can help us argue for a saying’s authenticity, without arguing that passing such a test is a necessary qualification to establish authenticity.⁵

Craig Evans believes that the same criteria used to establish the authenticity of the sayings of Jesus can also be used to establish the miraculous deeds of Jesus.⁶ What are the criteria of authenticity? The three main criteria of authenticity are multiple attestation, dissimilarity, and coherence.

Multiple Attestation

Multiple attestation involves the agreement of two or more sources on a particular fact of history. An event in history is viewed as more probable to have occurred if there are two or more eyewitnesses to it. In the study of the synoptic gospels, an event that is found in the triple tradition (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) or double tradition (either Matthew and Luke agreement, Matthew and Mark agreement, or Mark and Luke agreement) has multiple attestation and is viewed as authentic.

One major problem with the criteria of multiple attestation for the biblical historian is that it rules out almost the whole gospel of John because the gospel of John contains 90% unique material. Since John is regarded by most scholars to be late,⁷ it cannot be connected to the earlier synoptic gospels and so the eyewitness testimony of the apostle John is excluded. The Jesus Seminar views the gospel of John and the resurrection narratives in the gospel of John as non-historical myths. An event should not be labeled as myth just because it occurs in only one gospel.⁸ Evangelical scholars would accept the historicity of John’s gospel because it was given by an eyewitness to the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus.⁹

⁴ Ibid., 271.

⁵ Darrell Bock, “The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?” in *Jesus Under Fire*, ed. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 99.

⁶ Craig Evans, “Life of Jesus Research and the Eclipse of Mythology” *TS* 54 (1993): 21-33.

⁷ The gospel of John was probably the last gospel written. It was written around A.D. 90, some sixty years after the resurrection of Jesus.

⁸ The apostle John is the only gospel writer to record that the risen Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene (20:11-18) if the authenticity of Mark 16:9-11 is rejected. John is the only gospel writer to give us details regarding the risen Jesus’ appearance to eleven disciples, including Thomas, in the upper room (20:26-31). This event could have multiple attestation if one agrees that Paul is referring to this event when he says that Jesus appeared to “the twelve” (1 Cor 15:5b—the “twelve” would be the common designation given to the group of apostles but would exclude Judas Iscariot who had hung himself). John is the only gospel writer to refer to the risen Christ appearing to seven disciples by the Sea of Galilee (21:1-25).

⁹ The apostle John was an eyewitness of the death of Jesus on the cross, the empty tomb, and the risen Jesus. John wrote that he saw “blood and water come out” of Jesus’ body when the Roman soldier pierced him with his spear. John then said, “And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe” (19:34b-35; NKJV used here and throughout). John was also the first apostle to see the empty tomb of Jesus. John ran to the tomb and looked in and saw “the linen cloths lying there; yet he did not go in” (20:5). After Peter went into the tomb of Jesus, John went in “and he saw and believed” (20:8). John was present in the upper room when the risen Jesus first appeared to the disciples (20:19-25) and when Thomas was present eight days later (20:26-29).

Dissimilarity

Dissimilarity is the criteria in which the sayings and actions of Jesus are evaluated to determine in what ways they are like or unlike Judaism and Christianity. Those actions that are dissimilar from Judaism and the practices of Christianity are viewed as authentic to Jesus. Usually it is the difference from Judaism that receives the most attention. If there is evidence of reform from Jewish teaching or practice, then the teaching or practice likely goes back to Jesus.

Bock points out a major problem with this criteria of authenticity:

This criteria is actually a helpful one in determining where Jesus differs from his cultural heritage. But two problems exist with its rigorous application. First, if both sides of the dissimilarity are affirmed, so that Jesus differs from both Judaism and the early church, then Jesus becomes a decidedly odd figure, totally detached from his cultural heritage and ideologically estranged from the movement he is responsible for founding. One wonders how he ever came to be taken seriously.¹⁰

Coherence

Coherence argues that whatever coheres with the application of the other two criteria should be viewed as authentic. Bock observes that one problem of this criteria as used by the Jesus Seminar is that it limits the amount of sayings attributed to Jesus to some short statements and parables.¹¹ The same could be said for how the Jesus Seminar treats the acts of Jesus. Coherence becomes a difficult criteria to use if one accepts the historical methods used by the Jesus Seminar scholars.

HISTORICAL METHODS OF JESUS RESEARCH

A Critique of John Dominic Crossan's Historical Method of Jesus Research

John Dominic Crossan has written over a dozen books on the historical Jesus in the last twenty-five years including *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (1991), *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (1994), *Who Killed Jesus?* (1995), *Who is Jesus? Answers to Your Questions about the Historical Jesus* (1996), and *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (1998). He is the former co-chair of the Jesus Seminar, and he is chair of the Historical Jesus Section of the Society of Biblical Literature. Crossan is Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at DePaul University in Chicago.

Crossan rejects the historicity of the burial and resurrection of Jesus because of a lack of multiple independent accounts of the exact sequence of what happened at the end of Jesus' life. Crossan believes that the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* has within it the most primitive gospel of all, which he calls the Cross Gospel. Crossan states that the author of the gospel of Mark supposedly used the Cross Gospel to write his gospel. He then invented additional details of the death and burial of Jesus based on Old Testament passages which Crossan calls "historicized prophecy." Mark then retrojected the Cross Gospel's resurrection appearance back into this gospel in the form of Jesus' transfiguration.

Crossan believes that the canonical gospel of Mark was not the original form of the Cross Gospel. He believes that canonical Mark is based on an earlier secret gospel of Mark. This secret gospel of Mark supposedly ended with the Roman centurion's confession in Mark 15:39. Mark supposedly made changes to the secret gospel of Mark and then added Mark 15:40-16:8. The other canonical gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John are supposedly based on the Cross Gospel and canonical Mark.

William Lane Craig gives this evaluation of Crossan's historical method:

On the basis of this reconstruction, Crossan identifies several strata of tradition and, in reconstructing the historical Jesus, adopts the methodological principle of refusing to allow as authentic any passage not attested by multiple, independent sources, even if that passage is found in the first stratum of tradition. This ensures agnosticism concerning Jesus' burial and resurrection since, on Crossan's view, we lack multiple independent accounts of the exact sequence of what happened at the end of Jesus' life.

¹⁰ Bock, "Words of Jesus," 91.

¹¹ Ibid., 93.

Given this idiosyncratic approach to the Gospels, it is small wonder Crossan comes to conclusions so radically diverse from the majority of critics, who deny the existence of the hypothesized 'Cross Gospel,' reject any dependence of canonical Mark on a *Secret Mark*, hold that the Gospel traditions concerning the burial and empty tomb of Jesus are rooted in history rather than the Old Testament, regard the *Gospel of Peter*, even if it contains some independent tradition, as a composition basically compiled from the canonical Gospels, and maintain that multiple attestation is not a necessary condition of judging a passage to be authentic.¹²

A Critique of Robert Funk's Historical Method of Jesus Research

Robert Funk is the founder of the Jesus Seminar and Director of the Westar Institute in Santa Rosa, California. He has served as Annual Professor of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem and as a chair of the Graduate Department of Religion at Vanderbilt University. His many books include *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (1993), *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (1996), and *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (1998).

In *The Acts of Jesus*, Funk records the results of the Jesus Seminar that evaluated the works of Jesus in the gospels. *The Acts of Jesus* presents its findings by color coding the gospel texts, providing a visual guide to the Jesus Seminar's view on the historical authenticity of the accounts of Jesus' life and deeds. The colors used and their significance are: (1) red—refers to what they believe are the authentic acts of Jesus, (2) pink—refers to a close approximation of what Jesus did, (3) gray—refers to stories that show minimal historical traces, and (4) black—stories that are improbable or fictive.

Funk explains how the book *The Acts of Jesus* is organized:

The gospels that report acts of Jesus are the four New Testament gospels—Mark, Matthew, Luke, John—along with the Sayings Gospel Q, the Gospel of Thomas, and the Gospel of Peter. The Sayings Gospel Q reports very few deeds of Jesus, as its name suggests. Yet the few acts it does record are among the earliest written stories about Jesus that have survived. Because Q is believed to be the earliest of the gospels, Q stories of Jesus' activities are treated first in *The Acts of Jesus*. ... Like Q, the Gospel of Thomas contains very little narrative material. Where it does include a brief narrative or narrative framework, we have cited and color coded it in connection with parallels in the New Testament gospels. We have not reproduced Thomas in its entirety as a separate gospel. In *The Acts of Jesus*, as in *The Five Gospels*, the New Testament gospels appear in an unconventional order. Mark is placed first because most scholars (inside and outside the Seminar) believe that Matthew and Luke used Mark as the narrative base for their gospels. As a consequence, the three share a common view of the words and acts of Jesus and so are called synoptic gospels. Mark is followed by Matthew and Luke. The Gospel of John with its many eccentricities and deviations from the synoptic picture comes next. The Gospel of Peter follows the Gospel of John. The fragmentary remains of the Gospel of Peter consist of the concluding events of Jesus' trial and execution, along with a depiction of the resurrection and the story of the empty tomb. The gospel, discovered only in 1886 as a part of a small papyrus codex, at many points parallels the passion story reported by the New Testament gospels. It is also attested in two tiny Greek fragments that came to light more recently and were published in 1972. We have introduced two further innovations in this report. We have detached the empty tomb and appearance stories from the gospels and collected them into a self-contained section following, with their own introduction. We have also gathered the birth and infancy stories into the final section of the report, again with their own introduction. By locating accounts of the resurrection and the miraculous birth after stories about the public life of Jesus, we are simply reflecting the chronological order in which these elements developed.¹³

Funk and the Jesus Seminar scholars reveal their approach to Jesus research in the way they have organized the book *The Acts of Jesus*. First, the Jesus Seminar views the apocryphal gospels of Thomas and Peter as being as historically authentic as the four gospels. The Gospel of Thomas has nothing to say about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of Peter, on the other hand, has a fanciful view of the resurrection. Both of these accounts do not compare with the historical record of the resurrection of Jesus found in the canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But these apocryphal gospels are given equal weight and authority to the canonical gospels by the Jesus Seminar.

¹² William Lane Craig, "Did Jesus Rise From The Dead?" in *Jesus Under Fire*, ed. Michael J. Williams and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 167-68.

¹³ *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus*, ed. Robert Funk (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 38-39.

Second, the Jesus Seminar has detached the accounts of the resurrection from the gospels in which they were found because they reject the historicity of the resurrection. Funk gives this concluding analysis of the resurrection account in Matthew 28:1-18:

Here, as elsewhere, Matthew improves the image of Jesus' disciples, who appear to be such failures in the Gospel of Mark. Because the empty tomb story developed so late in the gospel tradition, and because of the fantastic elements that embellish the story—the appearance of the angel, the miraculous rolling away of the stone, and the earthquake—the Fellows agreed that the entire scene was the product of early Christian imagination. The designation was accordingly black.¹⁴

Third, the Jesus Seminar dismembers the gospel tradition that was passed on to Paul according to 1 Corinthians 15:3. In the Jesus Seminar's Scholars' Version the only sections that are written as red (viewed as historically authentic by the Jesus Seminar) in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 are "Christ died" and the phrase "Last of all, like the freak of nature I am, he appeared to me as well." The statement "for our sins according to the scriptures, and was buried, and rose on the third day according to the scriptures" is written in black (viewed as fiction) along with the phrase "and then to all the apostles." "He then appeared to Cephas" is written in pink letters (a possible historical event). The phrase "and later to the twelve ... then he appeared to James" is written with gray letters (minimal historical traces).¹⁵ The Jesus Seminar divides the tradition that was given to Paul and that he passed on to the Corinthians.

An Evangelical Historical Method

It is my conviction that the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus can be found in the four canonical gospels. Two of the gospels (Matthew and John) were written by eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus. These two apostles did not see Jesus literally rise from the dead on that Resurrection Sunday, but they did see Jesus with their own eyes after his resurrection. Matthew and John were selected by Jesus to be his apostles. They were eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus on more than one occasion. Matthew and John saw the risen Jesus on Resurrection Sunday night (Luke 24:33-43; John 20:19-25), eight days later along with Thomas (John 20:26-29), in Galilee when Jesus gave the Great Commission (Matt 28:16-20), and at his ascension (Luke 24:49-53; Acts 1:4-11). John actually saw the empty tomb of Jesus "and believed" (John 20:3-10). John also had the opportunity to see the risen Jesus by the Sea of Galilee when Jesus provided a miraculous catch of fish for seven of his disciples (John 21:1-14).¹⁶

Luke did some research on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus before writing his gospel. In his prologue (Luke 1:1-4), Luke writes:

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.

In writing his gospel Luke used sources that were written by eyewitnesses of Jesus. His purpose in writing was to write down a narrative of the things that had been fulfilled among them. He wrote an orderly account (not necessarily chronologically arranged) in order that Theophilus would be certain of the things he was taught.

Though Mark was not an apostle and did not personally see the risen Jesus, he was associated with the apostle Peter who did see the risen Jesus. Mark lived in Jerusalem and possibly heard Jesus preach. The church fathers believed that Mark got his information for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus from Peter. Papias writes:

Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatsoever he remembered. ... Wherefore Mark made no mistake in thus writing some things as he remembered them. For of one thing he took especial care, not to omit anything he had heard, and not to put anything fictitious into the statements.¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., 469.

¹⁵ Ibid., 453.

¹⁶ John 21 does not say if Matthew was present on that occasion. John 21:2 identifies the seven disciples as Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathaniel of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee (a reference to James and John), and two other unnamed disciples.

¹⁷ Papias, *Fragments of Papias* 6 (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:154-55).

Clement of Alexandria agrees with Papias as he writes,

Mark, the follower of Peter, while Peter publicly preached the Gospel at Rome before some of Caesar's knights, and adduced many testimonies to Christ, in order that thereby they might be able to commit to memory what was spoken, of what was spoken by Peter wrote entirely what is called the Gospel according to Mark.¹⁸

As we compare the four gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, various pieces of evidence surface that can be used to substantiate the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE EMPTY TOMB OF JESUS

The Moved Stone

One fact we know is that on the Sunday after Jesus was crucified, the huge stone which was rolled in front of the entrance to the tomb of Jesus had been moved. All four gospels mention that the stone had been moved away from the tomb entrance (Matt 28:2; Mark 16:4; Luke 24:2; John 20:1). This large stone had been rolled in front of the entrance of the tomb by Joseph of Arimathea after he had wrapped and placed the body of Jesus into it (Matt 27:60; Mark 15:46).

Large stones were placed in front of the entrance of tombs in first-century Israel.¹⁹ Josh McDowell writes in *The Resurrection Factor*, "In the Mark 16:4 portion of the Bezae manuscripts in the Cambridge Library in England, a parenthetical statement was found that adds, 'And when He was laid there, he (Joseph) put against the tomb a stone which 20 men could not roll away.'"²⁰

If the stone weighed that much, how then could Joseph of Arimathea roll the stone into place by himself? Probably the stone was on an incline and wedged maybe with another stone. After finishing the burial of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea would have removed the wedged stone, pushed the large stone down the incline, and let it roll into place in front of the entrance to the tomb.

When the women came to the tomb they discovered that the stone had been rolled away (Mark 16:4). The Greek word for "rolled away" (*ἀποκεκύλισται*) indicates that the stone had been moved away from the entrance to the tomb altogether.²¹ The stone had not been pushed open a crack. There was some distance between the huge rock and the tomb entrance. It is interesting that John uses a different Greek word (*ῥιμένον*) in John 20:1. This word means "to pick something up and carry it away."²²

Who then moved the stone? First, the Roman guards did not move the stone. They were on duty to make sure that no one broke into the tomb of Jesus and stole his body. They had also placed the seal of the Roman emperor on the stone (Matt 27:66). This was to indicate that the contents of the tomb were not to be tampered with since they belonged to Caesar. The Roman guards knew that if they moved the stone, they would have been executed. Second, the women who came to the tomb didn't move the stone. They were asking themselves as they went to the tomb about who would move the stone for them (Mark 16:3). They realized that they were not physically strong enough to move the stone. Third, the disciples did not move the stone. They did not learn that the tomb of Jesus was empty until the women came and told them (Luke 24:9).

Matthew records what happened early in the morning on Resurrection Sunday. A great earthquake occurred, and an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and rolled back the stone from the entrance to the tomb and sat on it (Matt 28:2). The Roman guards were afraid of this angel whose appearance was like lightning and whose clothes

¹⁸ Clement Alexandrinus, *Fragments* 1, quoted by Cassiodorus (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:573).

¹⁹ In 1978 I had the privilege of going to Israel and while in Jerusalem I saw several rock-hewn tombs with large round stones that were placed over the entrances to these tombs.

²⁰ Josh McDowell, *Resurrection Factor*, 53.

²¹ The Greek word *ἀνκεκύλισται* is a perfect passive indicative of *ἀνακυλίω* and indicates that the stone was in this position as a result of a completed action by the angel.

²² The Greek word *ῥιμένον* is a perfect passive participle and indicates that the stone was taken away from the entrance to the tomb and that was its position when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb of Jesus. The Greek prepositional phrase *ἐκ τοῦ μνημείου* shows that it was not in front of the entrance to the tomb of Jesus.

were white as snow. Matthew writes that the guards “became like dead men” (Matt 28:4). The guards did not literally die. They probably fainted at the sight of this angel and his fantastic feat of moving the huge stone from the entrance to the tomb of Jesus.²³ This event occurred before the women came to visit the tomb. Since the text does not say that the women met the Roman guards, we must assume that the Roman guards left the tomb after this event and went back to the city to report to the Jewish authorities.

The Eyewitness of the Women

Mark identifies for us three women who went early Sunday morning to the tomb of Jesus: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (Mark 16:1). Mary Magdalene became a disciple of Jesus after she was delivered from seven demons (Luke 8:2). The other Mary was the mother of the apostle James the Less and Joseph (Matt 27:56; Mark 15:47). Salome was the mother of Zebedee’s sons, James and John (Matt 27:56; Mark 15:40).

Matthew identifies the time of their visit as Sunday, the day after the Sabbath: “Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week” (Matt 28:1). Mark writes that they came “when the Sabbath was past” (Mark 16:1). Mark also writes, “And very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen” (Mark 16:2). Luke says that it was “on the first day of the week, at early dawn” (Luke 24:1). John agrees that it was “on the first day of the week” (John 20:1), which would have been Sunday. Since the Sabbath was officially from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday, the dawning of the first day of the week would point to early Sunday morning as the time when the women went to the tomb of Jesus.

Mark identifies the purpose for their trip to the tomb. The women brought spices “to anoint him” (Mark 16:1). Matthew says that they went to “see the sepulcher” (Matt 28:1). Luke also mentions that the women took spices that they had prepared (Luke 24:1).

Mark is the only gospel writer to record what the women were discussing as they walked to the tomb: “They were saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?’” (Mark 16:3). The women apparently realized that they were not strong enough to roll the huge stone that was placed in front of the entrance to the tomb of Jesus. When they came to the tomb, they discovered that the stone was rolled away from the tomb. Mark writes that the women entered the tomb and were amazed when they saw a young man sitting on the right side who was dressed in a white robe (Mark 16:5). Luke writes in his gospel that the women went in and did not find the body of Jesus (Luke 24:3).

The Testimony of the Angels

While the women were perplexed about not finding the body of Jesus in the tomb, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. The women were frightened by them and bowed their faces to the ground (Luke 24:4-5). Luke’s mention of two men does not contradict Mark’s mention of one. If there were two, then there must have been one. Mark emphasizes the one that was sitting on the right side (probably at the place where the body of Jesus had been laid). Matthew identifies the “men,” writing that “the angel said to the women” (Matt 28:5). Whenever angels appear on earth they appear as men and not women (cf. Gen 19:1-5).

The gospel of Mark records several statements by the angel. First, the angel told the women to not be amazed (Mark 16:6). Second, the angel announced that the one they were seeking, Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified, had risen from the dead and was not there (Mark 16:6). Third, the angel told them to see the place where they had laid him (Mark 16:6). Fourth, he told them to go and tell his disciples and Peter that the risen Jesus was going before them to Galilee and that they would see him as he had told them (Mark 16:7).

Matthew confirms Mark’s account of the angel about the empty tomb of Jesus. The angel said, “He is not here, for he has risen. Come see the place where he lay” (Matt 28:6). Matthew also includes the command given by the angel to the women to go and tell the disciples (Matt 28:7) and the announcement that the risen Jesus would go before them to Galilee (Matt 28:7).

Matthew gives us some added details regarding the angel’s words to the women. First, the angel told the women to not be afraid (Matt 28:5). Second, the angel told the women to tell the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead (Matt 28:7).

²³ The Gospel of Peter gives a fanciful story of the resurrection which defies the law of cause-effect. The Gospel of Peter 9:4 says “The stone that had been pushed against the entrance began to roll by itself and moved away to one side; then the tomb opened up and both young men went inside” (quoted in *The Acts of Jesus*, p. 462).

Luke also supports the tradition that the angel told the women, “He is not here, but has risen” (Luke 24:6). Luke adds some details to the announcement of the angels to the women. First, the angels (referred to as “men” in Luke 24:5) asked the women, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” Second, Luke records that the angels told the women to remember the crucifixion and resurrection predictions made by Jesus while he was in Galilee (Luke 24:6).

The Women’s Report to the Disciples

Mark does not indicate that the women obeyed the angel’s command. He writes, “So they went out quickly and fled from the tomb, for they trembled and were amazed. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were terrified” (Mark 16:8). Many scholars believe that this is the end of the gospel of Mark.

Matthew writes, “So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word” (Matt 28:8). Matthew’s account of the women’s reporting to the disciples seems to give a contradiction to Mark’s account which says that the women “said nothing to anyone.” A possible solution to this apparent contradiction is that the women initially said nothing because they were terrified at seeing the angel. Then later they ran to bring the disciples word. Luke writes, “Then they returned from the tomb and told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest” (Luke 24:9).

John focuses attention on one of the women: Mary Magdalene and her report to Peter and John. He writes, “Now the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. Then she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciples, whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him’” (John 20:1-2). Mary’s statement reveals that the body of Jesus was not in the tomb. Though Mary was mistaken in her view that some men had taken the body of Jesus (notice she said “they” but did not give specific names), she was correct that the body of Jesus was not in the place where it had been laid when he was buried by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Possibly, Mary thought that the men (who were in reality angels) had taken the body of Jesus somewhere. Her statement using “we” indicates that she along with the other women who came to the tomb (Mary, the mother of James the Less and Joses along with Salome) were unsure of the location of Jesus’ body.

The Witness of Peter and John

Peter and John ran to the tomb of Jesus when they heard from Mary Magdalene that the body of Jesus was gone. John outran Peter and came to the tomb first (John 20:4). John stooped down and peered into the tomb and saw the linen cloths, but he didn’t go in (John 20:5). Then Peter came and went into the tomb and saw the linen cloths and the handkerchief that had been around the head of Jesus, not lying with the linens but folded together in a place by itself (John 20:6-7). John then went in and he believed (John 20:8). John was the first apostle to believe in the resurrection. John makes note that they (the other apostles) did not know the Scripture that He must rise from the dead (John 20:9; cf. Ps 16:10).

A CRITIQUE OF EXPLANATIONS FOR THE EMPTY TOMB OF JESUS

Josh McDowell has written a defense of the resurrection of Jesus Christ entitled *The Resurrection Factor*. He writes, “Many theories have been advanced attempting to show that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a fraud. ... Historians have to become anti-historical in order to invent some of their ideas.”²⁴

Unknown Grave

Charles Guignebert in his book *Jesus* writes, “The truth is that we do not know, and in all probability the disciples knew no better, where the body of Jesus had been thrown after it had been removed from the cross, probably by the executioners. It is more likely to have been cast into the pit for the executed than laid in a new tomb.”²⁵

²⁴ Josh McDowell, *Resurrection Factor*, 76.

²⁵ Charles Alford Guignebert, *Jesus* (New York: University Book, 1956), 500.

John Dominic Crossan believes that the body of Jesus was never placed in a tomb. He thinks that the body of Jesus was taken down from the cross and thrown into a pit for common criminals and that the disciples didn't know where he was buried. He asserts:

If, as I maintain, Jesus' followers had fled upon his arrest and knew nothing whatsoever about his fate beyond the fact of crucifixion itself, the horror was not only that he had been executed but that he might not even have been decently buried. ... With regard to the body of Jesus, by Easter Sunday morning, those who cared did not know where it was, and those who knew did not care. Why should even the soldiers themselves remember the death and disposal of a nobody?²⁶

The beliefs of Guignebert and Crossan are contrary to the eyewitness accounts several individuals recorded in the gospels. There is multiple attestation of both sources and eyewitnesses for the burial of Jesus in the tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea (Matt 27:57-61; Mark 15:42-47; Luke 23:50-56; John 19:38-42). Joseph of Arimathea did not bury Jesus by himself. The gospel of John tells us that Nicodemus helped Joseph take the body, bind it with linen cloths and spices, and lay it in the tomb (John 19:39-42). Some of the eyewitnesses of the burial of Jesus were women who sat opposite of the tomb. Mark writes, "Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where he was laid" (Mark 15:47). Matthew writes, "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the sepulcher" (Matt 27:61). Luke writes, "The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and saw the tomb, and how his body was laid" (Luke 23:55). The triple tradition of Matthew, Mark, and Luke supports the view that the body of Jesus was placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea after it was taken down from the cross. The Roman soldiers knew where the tomb was located as well, as they were sent by Pilate to guard the tomb of Jesus to prevent the disciples from stealing his body (Matt 27:62-66).

In June of 1968 an ossuary was discovered in a buried cave at Vi'at ha-Mivtar in northern Jerusalem. It contained the bones of an adult male who had died by crucifixion sometime during the first half of the first century. Initial study of the skeletal remains indicated that the nail was driven through each of his forearms at the hand and a single iron nail had been driven through his heel bones. The latter nail was found still embedded in his heel bones.²⁷ This archaeological discovery is an argument against Crossan's view that crucified criminals were thrown into a common pit after they died on crosses. The fact that the man was crucified did not prevent those who cared for him from burying him in an ossuary box.

Wrong Tomb

Professor Kirsopp Lake advocates the wrong tomb theory. He writes in his book *The Historical Evidence For The Resurrection of Jesus*:

It is seriously a matter for doubt whether the women were really in a position to be quite certain that the tomb which they visited was that in which they had seen Joseph of Arimathea bury the Lord's body. The neighborhood of Jerusalem is full of rock tombs, and it would not be easy to distinguish one from another without careful note. ... It is very doubtful if they were close to the tomb at the moment of burial. ... It is likely that they were watching from a distance, and that Joseph of Arimathea was a representative of the Jews rather than of the disciples. If so, they would have had but a limited power to distinguish between one rock tomb and another close to it. The possibility, therefore, that they came to the wrong tomb is to be reckoned with and it is important because it supplies the natural explanation of the fact that whereas they had seen the tomb closed, they found it open. ... If it were not the same, the circumstances all seem to fall into line. The women came in the early morning to a tomb which they thought was the one in which they had seen the Lord buried. They expected to find a closed tomb, but they found an open one; and a young man ... who guesses their errand, tried to tell them that they had made a mistake in the place. 'He is not here,' said he, 'See the place where they laid him,' and probably pointed to the next tomb. But the women were frightened at the detection of their errand, and fled.²⁸

There are several problems with the wrong tomb theory: (1) Some women did see where Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus buried the body of Jesus (Matt 27:61; Mark 15:47; Luke 23:55). (2) When the women were coming to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus, they were discussing the problem of the huge stone that was rolled in front

²⁶ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 392-94.

²⁷ J. B. Green, "The Death of Jesus," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 147.

²⁸ Kirsopp Lake, *The Historical Evidence For The Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (New York: Putnam's, 1907), 250-253.

of the entrance to the tomb (Matt 28:1; Mark 16:1-4; Luke 24:1-2; John 20:1). The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John specifically mention that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb of Jesus early in the morning and she was present when Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus buried the body of Jesus. (3) If the women went to the wrong tomb, then the Jews or Romans could have gone to the right tomb and produced the body of Jesus and that would have stopped the story that Jesus had risen from the dead. The fact that the Jews bribed the Roman guards to say that the disciples of Jesus stole his body while they slept at night is evidence of the fact that they could not produce the body of Jesus because it was gone.

Legend

Some argue that the resurrection accounts in the gospels are just legends that were invented by the church a few decades after Jesus' death. Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar identifies the resurrection accounts in the gospels as legends. He writes:

Legends may be subdivided into two sub-types: biographical legends and cult legends. A biographical legend is a story that casts a supernatural aura around the hero. The temptation story is a biographical legend. A cult legend accounts in story form for the establishment of some ritual practice in the Jesus movement. The depiction of the last supper is also just such a cult legend.²⁹

Funk lists the following resurrection accounts as legends in table 7 in the book *The Acts of Jesus*: empty tomb, bribing of the guards, appearance to Mary of Magdala, appearance to two in the country, appearance to the eleven, doubting Thomas, appearance to seven, appearance to James, ascension.³⁰

The resurrection accounts in the gospels are not legends. Two of the four gospels were written down by eyewitnesses (Matthew and John) and the other two gospels (Mark and Luke) were associated with two apostles who lived during the time of Jesus (Peter and Paul). Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 15:6 that there were 500 eyewitnesses of the risen Christ and that some were still alive at the time of his writing of the book of 1 Corinthians, which most scholars date around A.D. 55. Funk and the Jesus Seminar have labeled the resurrection accounts as "legends" because they look at the gospels from a naturalistic perspective that rejects any possibility of supernatural miracles. Their liberal bias prevents them from seeing the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Spiritual Resurrection

The spiritual resurrection view is that Christ's resurrection was not a real physical, bodily resurrection. Proponents of this theory assert that Christ's body remained in the grave and that his resurrection was spiritual in nature.

This view can be refuted by looking at what the risen Jesus did after his resurrection. The risen Jesus first appeared to Mary Magdalene. When she recognized Jesus by his voice, she apparently began to cling to Jesus. She could not have clung to a ghost. Jesus told her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, and to My God and your God'" (John 20:17).

The risen Jesus startled his disciples when he appeared before them on Resurrection Sunday night. The disciples were terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost. Jesus said to them, "'Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Handle and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.' When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet" (Luke 24:38-40). Jesus himself told his disciples that he was not just a spirit. He told them that his resurrection body has "flesh and bones." He also showed his disciples his hands and feet. Why would he do that? To prove to them that he was the same Jesus whose hands and feet were nailed to the cross. The resurrected body of Jesus has the scars or marks of the crucifixion in it. Jesus even ate a piece of broiled fish and some honeycomb before the disciples so they would understand that he was not a ghost, but that he was a resurrected person with a resurrected, glorified body (Luke 24:41-43).

Jesus proved to his disciples that he had risen from the dead on more than one occasion. When the apostles told Thomas that they had seen the Lord, Thomas said, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my

²⁹ Robert Funk, *The Acts of Jesus*, 15-16.

³⁰ Ibid., 17.

finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe” (John 20:25). Thomas was a skeptic who refused to believe unless he could see with his own two eyes the resurrected Jesus. Eight days after Resurrection Sunday, the disciples were gathered together behind shut doors when Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst. Jesus said to Thomas, “Reach your finger here, and look at my hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into my side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing” (John 20:27). The text does not say if Thomas did what Jesus told him to do, so we don’t know from John’s gospel if Thomas touched Jesus at the place of his crucified marks. Thomas did acknowledge who was standing before him. He spoke to Jesus and said, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28).

Theft by Disciples

Probably the earliest fabrication explaining the empty tomb of Jesus was the lie that the disciples stole the body of Jesus from the tomb. Matthew 28:11-15 says:

Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, “Tell them, ‘His disciples came at night and stole Him while we slept.’ And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will appease him and make you secure.” So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.

Could the disciples have stolen the body of Jesus? Is this explanation valid? There are several problems with this view. First, the tomb of Jesus was well guarded. There were possibly four to sixteen Roman soldiers protecting the tomb of Jesus. Each Roman soldier was trained to protect six feet of ground. Four men would be placed in front of what they were to protect, while the other twelve would sleep in a semi-circle in front of them with their heads pointed in towards the other guards. To steal the body of Jesus, the disciples would have had to walk past the sleeping Roman soldiers without waking them, and then fight off the other four experienced soldiers, move the huge stone, steal the body of Jesus, and leave the graveclothes, and then somehow slip past the guards with the body of Jesus.

Second, the Roman soldiers were bribed to tell the story that the disciples came and stole the body. Why would the chief priests pay this bribe to the Roman soldiers? They had to be bribed because by telling a lie they would be putting their lives on the line. The Roman soldiers knew that to say that they were asleep when they should have been awake doing their duty would be to incriminate themselves. The penalty for a Roman soldier who slept while on guard was death. That is why the chief priests say that if the news reached the governor’s ears, they would appease him and make the soldiers secure. The fact that the soldiers were accountable ultimately to Governor Pilate shows that these were Roman soldiers and not just some Jewish temple police who were guarding the tomb of Jesus.

Third, the Roman soldiers could not have known that the disciples stole the body of Jesus if they were sleeping. How could sleeping soldiers know what happened? Also, would it be likely that all of the Roman soldiers would sleep at the same time? Probably not. How could they not have heard the disciples move the huge stone that was placed in front of the entrance to the tomb of Jesus? Their story was contradictory.

Finally, the disciples were not in a psychological state to try to steal the body of Jesus from the tomb. The disciples fled from Jesus when he was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane. Peter denied that he knew Jesus. On the Sunday night after Jesus was crucified, the disciples were behind locked doors and not out in the open. Why? They were afraid of the Jews (John 20:19).

Theft by the Authorities

This theory doesn’t make sense. If the Jewish or Roman authorities had the body of Jesus, why did they bribe the guards to accuse the disciples of stealing it (Matt 28:11-15)? They could have stopped the resurrection story cold by simply producing the body of Jesus and showing it around Jerusalem. Instead, the Jewish authorities scolded the apostles for filling Jerusalem with their teaching, arrested them, and beat them (cf. Acts 3-5). They became so upset with Stephen that they stoned him to death (Acts 7).

Resuscitation

The resuscitation view (sometimes called the swoon theory) teaches that Jesus never really died on the cross. He only swooned or fainted. Later, he revived in the cool air of the tomb and left. The disciples supposedly saw then a resuscitated or revived Jesus.³¹

This theory completely ignores the evidence for the death of Jesus on the cross. There is no evidence that Jesus was drugged. When the Roman soldier offered Jesus wine mixed with myrrh, Jesus turned down the common painkiller that was usually given to crucifixion victims (Mark 15:23). Just before his death he was given a sip of sour wine to relieve his parched throat, but that was not enough to drug him. Jesus experienced a heavy loss of blood as a result of his flogging before crucifixion and on the cross as a result of his hands and feet being nailed to the cross. John observed that when the Roman soldier thrust his spear into his side that water and blood immediately flowed out (John 19:34). Usually the Roman soldiers would break the legs of the crucified to hasten death. The legs of Jesus were not broken by the soldiers because the soldiers recognized that Jesus was already dead (John 19:33). Pilate asked for assurance that Jesus was really dead before releasing the body for burial (Mark 15:43-45). The fact that Pilate permitted Joseph of Arimathea to take the body of Jesus after obtaining confirmation of Jesus' death from the Roman centurion is another proof of the death of Jesus. Jesus was embalmed in about 75-100 pounds of spices and bandages and laid in a sealed and guarded tomb (Matt 27:60-66; John 19:39-40). Even if he did wake up in the tomb, he could not have unwrapped himself, rolled the huge stone back up the side of the carved out track, overcome the guards, and escaped unnoticed.

Medical doctor William Edwards writes:

Clearly the weight of historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead before the wound to His side was inflicted and supports the traditional view that the spear, thrust between his right ribs, probably perforated not only the right lung but also the pericardium and heart and thereby insured his death. Accordingly, interpretations based on the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge.³²

A second major problem for the resuscitation view is the undisturbed linen wrappings of Jesus in the tomb. Jesus would have had to pull off a magic trick like Houdini to get out of the wrappings and then leave them undisturbed in the place where he was laid by Joseph of Arimathea. This would have been an impossible task for the person who was wrapped, let alone for two or more people who would try to pull this trick off. Peter noticed that the face cloth which had been on his head was not with the linen wrappings but was rolled up and in a place by itself. When John saw this, he believed that Jesus was raised from the dead (cf. John 20:5-8).

CONCLUSION

Paul Maier made this observation about the evidence for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus:

Accordingly, if all the evidence is weighed carefully and fairly, it is indeed justifiable, according to the canons of historical research, to conclude that the sepulcher of Joseph of Arimathea, in which Jesus was buried, was actually empty on the morning of the first Easter. And no thread of evidence has yet been discovered in literary sources, epigraphy, or archaeology that would disprove this statement.³³

This article has attempted to show that the biblical account of the resurrection of Jesus Christ found in the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John meets the criteria of authenticity used by skeptics in historiography. The resurrection of Jesus meets the criteria of multiple attestation as the multiple sources (the four gospels) each contain multiple witnesses of the empty tomb of Jesus. The story of the resurrection of Jesus was not invented by just one person. The resurrection of Jesus also meets the criteria of dissimilarity. The Jews and the early Christians were

³¹ Barbara Thiering, in her book *Jesus the Man: A New Interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls*, argues that Jesus was crucified in Qumran rather than Jerusalem, was drugged while on the cross, was revived in the tomb with an antidote of aloes supplied by Simon Magus, and then later revealed himself to his disciples as alive.

³² William D. Edwards, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," *The Journal of the American Medical Society* 255 (21 March 1986): 1463.

³³ Paul Maier, "The Empty Tomb as History," *Christianity Today* (28 March 1975), 6.

surprised by the empty tomb of Jesus. No one anticipated it, even though Jesus predicted that he would rise from the dead. Finally, the biblical account of the resurrection of Jesus meets the criteria of coherence as there are no facts given in the gospels' narratives of the resurrection of Jesus which contradict one another. The resurrection narratives found in the biblical gospels do not contradict each other, but complement one another. The Jesus Seminar's rejection of the historicity of the resurrection reveals a naturalistic bias against the historical foundation for Christianity. The empty tomb of Jesus is best explained by the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Without the historical bodily resurrection of Jesus, there would be no Christianity.