

The Resurrection of Jesus as historical fact – a few reflections

- Catholics accept the four Gospel accounts of the Resurrection not only as texts from ancient times, but as the inspired word of God. However, taking the viewpoint of one who does not yet accept Christian faith, St Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians* also stands out as an important early historical witness (since historians generally accept its authorship by Paul and its dating to the mid-fifties of the 1st century AD). The key testimony of 1 Cor 15:1-11 summarises some appearances of the Risen Jesus:
- *Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast—unless you believed in vain.*

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the Twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

- Paul himself had reversed from being a persecutor of Christians to being their persecuted (and eventually martyred) co-worker – showing his sincerity. His collaboration with them made him well-informed of their message; he also claimed his own personal vision of the Risen Lord (1 Cor 15:8-9).
- His letter from the mid-fifties refers back to his preaching of the Resurrection during his first visit to Corinth, which archaeological evidence shows to have been about 51 AD. (Gallio was proconsul during Paul's visit, and we know closely the dates he held office.) That preaching in turn refers back to Paul's first conversion and appropriation of the Christian teaching in the mid-thirties AD – only a few years after the death of Jesus. So we have a chain of historical evidence going back close to the actual events.
- The Apostles did not *primarily* preach the ethical and moral teachings of Jesus, with his Resurrection coming as an 'afterthought' or even a later legend. Rather, **it was the Resurrection that was itself the central message, about which everything else revolved.** St Paul proclaims the Resurrection to be 'of first importance' in the Gospel teaching by which the Corinthian believers are saved (1 Cor 15:1-3). All the first Christian homilies as reported in the *Acts of the Apostles* are focused on proclaiming the Resurrection (see Acts 1:22; 2:14-41; 3:12-26; 4:8-12).
- **Jesus' empty tomb** is a key piece of evidence. Though the mere absence of Jesus' body does not by itself prove his Resurrection, it is clearly a historically true element that the Gospels all report, since if his body was actually still in the tomb, the Jews and the Romans could have produced the body at the time when the Apostles were first proclaiming that he had risen. This would have been the most obvious refutation of the Christian claim. (See Mt 28:11-15, where the opponents of Jesus choose a different tack.)

- Interesting corroborating evidence is that the empty tomb is reported by all four gospels as first being discovered by women. In the patriarchal Jewish outlook of the time, women were not considered as reliable witnesses. If the story were simply a later invention, the first Christians would presumably have represented the first witnesses as males. In fact, the male apostles are reported as initially disbelieving the women's report (Mk 16:11; Lk 24:11). (Other factors in the Gospels also make them unlikely to be 'inventions' as a whole. For example, if they were fabrications by the Apostles, why did the Gospels often give an unflattering picture of the Apostles as stupid and bickering, with special detail in every Gospel about an event such as Peter's denials of Jesus?)
- The reports of the empty tomb also show that **the Apostles intended to preach a *literal and physical* Resurrection** – not something 'metaphorical' that did not actually involve Jesus' physical remains (for example, that Jesus 'spiritually' rose, or that he lived on 'in the hearts' of the disciples). This is also indicated by the references to Jesus rising on 'the third day' (e.g. 1 Cor 15:4), and the very early change of the Christian holy day from the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday) to 'the Lord's Day' (Sunday), the day of the Resurrection. A merely metaphorical or spiritual 'resurrection' would seemingly not have happened on a specific particular day. St Paul uses Jesus' physical Resurrection as the primary basis for arguing for our own eventual physical resurrection (1 Cor 15:12-57), so again, a metaphorical interpretation is ruled out. The proclamation of Jesus' literal Resurrection was the foundation of the apostolic preaching. **So: was their claim true?**
- Either **the Apostles' claims about their encounters with the Risen Lord** were really **the truth**; or they were **lying**, or they were **mistaken**.
- If they were **lying**, Jesus – normally held even by non-believers to have been a very wise ethical teacher – certainly managed to choose a set of rogues for his closest disciples! And strangely again, those rogues wasted years, closely accompanying this great ethical teacher.

But even then, why did these 'rogues' spend the rest of their lives suffering persecution for a lie? Further, in some cases there was not only persecution but martyrdom. St Peter, St James the Great and St James the Less all certainly died as martyrs, surrendering their lives rather than just dropping the entire hoax. (Indeed, all of the other Apostles except St John are traditionally held to have been martyred, though the historical evidence is more tenuous in various of these other cases.)

And then, what of the five hundred witnesses mentioned by St Paul (1 Cor 15:6)? We hear no reports of anyone – from the Apostles or from the five hundred – ever withdrawing their testimony and revealing the deception. That would have undermined the whole apostolic claim, and Christianity would have fizzled out. Further, for any conspiracy to have been considered worthwhile to undertake in the first place, the participants would need to have been *confident in advance* that no one would be likely to crack under pressure. But then it was foolish to involve so many supposed 'witnesses'.

- Alternatively, if the Apostles were not lying but mistaken, their meetings and conversations with the Risen Lord were **hallucinations**. But it is not reasonable to think that eleven people (let alone five hundred people) would have a simultaneous identical hallucination, let alone of one that conducts coherent conversations with them. Further, the 'hallucination' was repeated in various circumstances, and when the various witnesses were not expecting it. (Lk 24:13-35, 36-42; Jn 20:11-18, 24-29)

- A final logically possible alternative is the 19th century theory that Jesus actually **survived** the crucifixion and revived, and thus the Apostles were fooled into thinking he was risen. This is medically most unlikely. Crucifixion normally kills by asphyxiation, after the victim is too exhausted to use his feet to briefly raise himself up in order to breathe. If Jesus had merely fallen unconscious, then he would have immediately been unable to do this, and he would have been asphyxiated immediately. This is not even taking into account Jesus' various other reported wounds – brutal scourging, which would have caused massive blood loss, and then the piercing with a lance by the Roman soldier, seemingly to make quite sure of his death.

And even then, if Jesus did survive the crucifixion, it is extraordinary this escaped the notice of the Roman soldiers and of his friends who buried him. To then escape the tomb two days later, he would have to single-handedly roll away the stone (that the group of women thought too large for them to move). He would still have been at death's door, so hardly likely to inspire the Apostles to mistakenly think he was the glorious Risen Lord. It becomes increasingly preposterous as we think of Luke's Gospel (and more briefly Mark's Gospel) recounting his appearance on the road to Emmaus on the very day of the Resurrection, accompanying the disciples for miles in a seemingly healthy state!

- Any other claimed historical event supported by such solid testimony would be universally accepted. Conversely, if there were a very rare but well-established medical phenomenon of dead people returning to life after a few days, non-believers would be unanimous in giving this as the true explanation of the Resurrection, in preference to the other non-miraculous solutions already discussed above. This thought-experiment highlights for us the desperation of those 'solutions'.
- In truth, the real reason not everyone accepts the clear evidence for the Resurrection is simply **a prejudice that 'miracles can't happen'**. This prejudice leads the unbeliever to prefer any other hypothesis, no matter how unlikely, rather than admit a miracle. But unless the impossibility of miracles is already proven, this is irrational. As long as the miraculous remains on the table as a legitimate possibility, the actual Resurrection of Jesus emerges as the obvious explanation of the historical data, because of the utter implausibility of the logically possible alternatives.
- The 'ruling out in advance of miracles' is exactly what the unbelievers need to prove is correct, to justify their refusal to even seriously consider miraculous explanations. Yes, the onus of proof is on Christians to rule out lying, hallucination and survival of the crucifixion as plausible alternatives. But **the onus of proof is then on the unbeliever** to show that the miraculous is rationally unacceptable – and this has not been done. No valid proof against the possibility of miracles has ever been given, whether scientific or logical.
- And actually, science only investigates what happens when the ordinary laws of nature are in operation; whether those laws can themselves be overridden by a higher cause is a philosophical question, not one that can itself be answered by science.
- We all naturally 'feel' the great improbability of someone rising from the dead, and this is (in a sense) a legitimate feeling. The feeling is based on the fact that *for as long as the ordinary laws of nature remain in full operation* then a resurrection from the dead is scientifically unlikely in the extreme. But take away the assumption that the ordinary laws of nature remain in operation, then the legitimacy of our reason (and of our associated 'feeling') for saying the Resurrection is improbable disappears.

- And that assumption is in itself neither scientifically ‘probable’ nor ‘improbable’, because scientific estimates of probability only themselves operate, given that the ordinary laws of nature are not being bypassed by a higher cause – precisely the point at issue that the unbeliever has to prove in order to keep the hypothesis of miraculous explanations off the table. Thus as an attempt to rule out the miraculous in advance, this reveals itself as completely circular and invalid reasoning. (Philosopher David Hume’s attempt to rule out acceptance of miracles due to their ‘infinite improbability’ basically amounts to this circular reasoning.)
- We turn then to see if miracles can be ruled out as implausible on philosophical rather than scientific grounds. If God exists, then he has the power to bypass the ordinary laws he placed in his creation, should that suit his ultimate purposes (such as the salvation of the beings he created). Conversely, there is no proof that the ultimate creative purpose of the God of infinite love is simply to have his physical universe with its ordinary laws unbrokenly running like clockwork.
- Neither are human beings ‘too small’ for him to notice or care about. Unlike a ‘finite’ god, God’s infinite knowledge and care descend to the smallest details of his creation. And to a being of love, physical size is not what determines importance. To God, the salvation of a single person is more important than an entire inanimate galaxy. So we cannot rule out in advance that God’s interest in the happiness of human beings might lead him to act miraculously within human history.
- This does not presuppose God’s existence (though in actual fact his existence can be philosophically proved anyway). Again, the onus of proof is here on the unbeliever to show that the miraculous is impossible – so even the simple possibility of God’s existence opens the way for the miraculous to be considered.
- Thus no general reasons appear that show the working of a miracle to be always inherently implausible on philosophical grounds. In short, there is no reason why all miraculous explanations should be ruled out ‘in advance’. Each case should be considered on its merits: if all plausible non-miraculous explanations for the data have been ruled out or shown to be very highly improbable, and conversely, the working of a miracle in the given circumstances could imaginably be in accordance with divine wisdom and intention, then a miracle will be the rationally preferable explanation of the data.
- A full treatment of all this would take a book (and various such books have been written), but in summary the evidence of history and reason does establish the truth of Jesus’ bodily Resurrection ‘beyond reasonable doubt’, with the same kind of certainty as we have for most well-known historical events.
- This is not the absolute certainty of supernatural faith, but along with evidence for many other miracles, and other rational considerations, it clearly points us in the direction of making that decision of saving faith, stepping beyond dependence on what reason can prove, and basing ourselves on total personal trust in God’s word.