

The Historical Case for Jesus' Resurrection: Evaluating the New Testament Documents

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Detective Inspector: We're obviously looking at a suicide.

John Watson: That does seem to be the only explanation of all the facts.

Sherlock Holmes: Wrong. It's *one* possible explanation of *some* of the facts. You've got a solution that you like but you are choosing to ignore anything that you see that doesn't comply with it.

-- *Sherlock* (BBC Version, Season 1, Episode 2)

The Four Gospels as Complementary Witnesses: The Thesis

As Sherlock Holmes, played by Benedict Cumberbatch, investigates what looks like a suicide, he notices other clues that others don't. He deduces, correctly, that the man was murdered. The story demonstrates what we must do to explore a historically unique event that cannot be repeated. We cannot be content with looking at some of the facts. We cannot have a theory that explains only the facts we want to consider. We have to consider all the evidence, from every angle.

Dr. Simon Greenleaf (1783 – 1853), former attorney, one of the principal founders of Harvard Law School, and a Harvard Law professor, is regarded as one of the finest legal minds of all time. He wrote the famous *A Treatise on the Law of Evidence*, considered by some the greatest legal volume ever written. Dr. Greenleaf initially set out to expose Jesus' resurrection as a myth. However, after he thoroughly examined the evidence for Jesus' resurrection, Dr. Greenleaf came to the opposite conclusion. He became a Christian. He stated emphatically: 'It was impossible that the apostles could have persisted in affirming the truths they had narrated, had not Jesus Christ actually risen from the dead...The character of their narratives is like that of all other true witnesses, containing... substantial truth, under circumstantial variety. There is enough discrepancy to show that there could have been no previous concert among them; and at the same time such substantial agreement as to show that they all were independent narrators of the same great transaction, as the events actually occurred.'¹ How did he reach that conclusion? He started by looking at the New Testament documents.

Were Our Current Manuscripts Faithful to the Originals? The Question of Transmission

The New Testament manuscript evidence is impressive, with 24,000 known copies, 5,366 which are complete, and some that date as early as the second and third centuries. This manuscript authority greatly surpasses all other writings of antiquity, as illustrated in the following table:²

<i>Work</i>	<i>When Written</i>	<i>Earliest Copy</i>	<i>Time Span</i>	<i>No. of copies</i>
Homer, <i>Iliad</i>	800 BC	AD 100	900 yrs	643
Herodotus, <i>History</i>	485 – 425 BC	AD 900	1,300 yrs	8
Thucydides, <i>History</i>	496 – 406 BC	AD 900	1,300 yrs	20
Plato, <i>Tetralogies</i>	496 – 406 BC	AD 900	1,200 yrs	7
Aristotle, <i>Ode to Poetics</i>	384 – 322 BC	AD 1100	1,400 yrs	49
Julius Caesar, <i>Gallic Wars</i>	58 – 50 BC	AD 900	1000 yrs	10
Josephus, <i>Jewish War</i>	AD 80	AD 950	870 yrs	< 30
Josephus, <i>Antiquities of the Jews</i>	AD 95	AD 1050	1000 yrs	< 30
Tacitus, <i>Annals</i>	AD 100	AD 850	750 yrs	20
Pliny the Younger, <i>History</i>	AD 110	AD 850	740 yrs	7

¹ Simon Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelists Examined by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice*, 1874, p.29. Professor Thomas Arnold (1795 – 1842), former chair of history at Oxford and author of the volumes, *History of Rome*, stated, 'I have been used for many years to study the histories of other times, and to examine and weigh the evidence of those who have written about them, and I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, than the great sign which God has given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead.'

² Fred Williams, <http://www.bibleevidences.com/archeology.htm>, 1995 – 2005

Suetonius, <i>Lives of the Caesars</i>	AD 120	AD 850	730 yrs	8
New Testament	AD 40 – 100	AD 125	50 yrs	5,000+ in Greek

Homer's *Iliad*, the most renowned book of ancient Greece, is a very distant second to the New Testament in manuscript support. Of these copies, there are 764 disputed lines, compared to only 40 lines in the New Testament.³ The New Testament even fares better than the 37 plays written by William Shakespeare in the 17th century. Every play contains various gaps in the printed text, forcing scholars in many cases to 'fill in the blanks.' With the 5,000+ Greek copies of the New Testament, we can be sure that nothing has been lost. Scholar F.F. Bruce, in *The Books and the Parchments* sums it up well: 'There is no body of ancient literature in the world which enjoys such a wealth of good textual attestation as the New Testament.'⁴

Are the Biblical Narratives Historically Reliable? The Question of Historical Reliability

One of the most compelling testimonies regarding the historical reliability of the New Testament is the opinion of historian and archeologist Sir William Ramsay. Educated at Oxford, Ramsay eventually held several prestigious professorships. At Oxford, he was First Professor of Classical Archaeology and Lincoln and Merton Professorship of Classical Archaeology and Art. Initially, Ramsay was very skeptical of the accuracy of the New Testament, and he conducted archaeological study in Asia Minor to refute its historicity. He especially took interest in Luke's accounts in the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, which contained numerous geographical and historic references. Dig after dig, the evidence without fail supported Luke's accounts. Without a single error, Luke was accurate in naming 32 countries, 54 cities, and 9 islands. Ramsay became so overwhelmed with the evidence he eventually converted to Christianity. Ramsay finally had this to say: 'I began with a mind unfavorable to it...but more recently I found myself brought into contact with the Book of Acts as an authority for the topography, antiquities, and society of Asia Minor. It was gradually borne upon me that in various details the narrative showed marvelous truth.'⁵ Later he concluded, 'Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy...this author should be placed along with the very greatest historians.'⁶

Recently, Cambridge scholar Peter Williams gave a stimulating lecture about very important demographic data and statistical analyses done since the late 1990's and early 2000's.⁷ He suggests this experiment: Try to write a novel about a place you do not know that well, taking place a hundred years before you. What would you name all your characters? What were the most popular names of the time? What proportion of those popular names was given to people? What details can you get right about houses, buildings, features of the land, figures of speech, customs, etc.? In response to skeptical scholars who argue that the Gospel writers were people who wrote without any real personal knowledge of the land and people of first century Palestine, Williams notes that they know the right details of names, buildings, customs, geography, and cultural interactions. If people were making up stories, you would need a huge attention to detail and vast amount of research to get these details right. And in fact, scholars have studied Jewish personal names in the first century has been done through literature and physical objects like tombs. The most popular names on tombs, in the Dead Sea Scrolls, in Josephus, etc. match the most popular names inside the New Testament, down to the frequency of names. That is very significant to placing the Gospels in the time period from which they claim.

Do the Gospel Narratives Tell One Story? The Question of Content

Within well understood Hebrew literary conventions,⁸ the four Gospels contain some literary differences,

³ Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 1986, p.367

⁴ F.F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, 1963, p.178

⁵ William M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen*, 1892, p.8

⁶ William M. Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, 1915, p.222. A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, 1963, p.189 corroborates Ramsay's work regarding the Book of Acts: 'Any attempt to reject its basic historicity even in matters of detail must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted.'

⁷ Peter J. Williams, "Eyewitnesses to Jesus? A Cambridge scholar investigates new evidence for the authenticity of the Gospels", Veritas Forum; <http://www.veritas.org/Talks.aspx#!/v/1204> (23 minutes). He references Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006)

⁸ The four Gospels employ literary techniques found in Old Testament biblical narrative. Jewish scholars of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament include: Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, *The World of Biblical Literature*; Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*, James Kugel, *The Bible as It Was*; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*. Christian scholars include: J.P. Folkelmann, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*; Isaac Kikawada and Arthur Quinn, *Before Abraham Was*; John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative, Old Testament Theology*. Scholars of the Gospels as literature

but not historical discrepancies. Here are the questions asked of the resurrection narratives in the four Gospels. Were there men (Mark, Luke) or angels (Matthew, John) at the tomb? Angels. The Old Testament literary precedent was to describe the appearances of angels and even God as ‘men’ (e.g. Gen.18:2; 19:1; Judg.13:16; Dan.10:5; Zech.1:8, 11). Jewish scholar of the Hebrew Bible Jon D. Levenson says, ‘The notion that “man” (ish) can denote an angel in biblical Hebrew is beyond dispute.’⁹

Was there one angel (Matthew, Mark) or two angels (Luke, John) at the tomb? Two. Hebrew biblical narrative and common sense allow a narrator to leave out information, but not to make up anything.¹⁰ On the number of angels, each Gospel writer desires a literary symmetry between beginning and end. Luke starts his narrative with two people, Zecharias and Elizabeth (Luke 1), announcing to all Israel the news of the Son of God taking to himself human nature. Luke ends his narrative with two ‘men’ (Luke 24:4) announcing to a renewed Israel the news of Jesus rising with a renewed human nature. John starts his narrative with an image of Jesus as a new Temple: ‘the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us’ (John 1:14). John ends with the two angels (John 20:12) partly because they were another image from the old Temple: the two angels over the ark of the covenant between whom the presence of God was manifested. However, Matthew and Mark speak of one angel. Matthew appears to narrate one angel at the empty tomb (Mt.28:2 – 7) to match the appearance of one angel to Joseph (Mt.1:20 – 21), relating the same elements in the beginning of his Gospel as at the end: the fulfillment of a prediction, Gentile inclusion through Jesus, Jesus’ kingly authority by virtue of being a descendant of King David, and the theme of Immanuel – ‘God with us.’ Mark also seems to desire literary symmetry between beginning and end. One man, John the Baptist, directed people to Jesus in Galilee (Mk.1:1 – 15), and one ‘man’ directed people to the resurrected Jesus, once more in Galilee (Mk.16:1 – 8).

This principle of economy in storytelling also explains why the lists of women vary. Each Gospel writer is probably pointing out women familiar to the Gospel writer’s original audience, and not claiming to be exhaustive. Notice that John’s account highlights Mary Magdalene yet, though her, refers to the other women (Mary says ‘we’ in Jn.20:2).

Did Jesus first appear to the disciples in Galilee (Matthew, Mark) or Jerusalem (Luke, John)? Jerusalem. Jesus also wanted to meet them later in Galilee for symbolic reasons: Galilee was where Jesus enacted ministry to Jews and Gentiles; Matthew and Mark make use of this fact to signal the start of the global mission. Matthew and Mark knew about the Jerusalem appearances, but were simply using the principle of economy in storytelling.

*Was the Empty Tomb of Jesus a Historical Fact?*¹¹

What is the evidence that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was discovered empty by a group of female disciples of Jesus on the Sunday following the crucifixion, and then shortly afterwards by the male disciples?

First, Jesus’ resurrection was announced in the very same city where Jesus had been killed and buried shortly before. As Paul Althaus writes, the resurrection proclamation ‘could not have been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact for all concerned.’

Second, the earliest Jewish arguments against Christianity admit the empty tomb. This is significant because it shows that the Jews did not deny that Jesus’ tomb was empty. Instead, their ‘stolen body’ theory admitted the significant truth that Jesus’ body was unaccounted for. Matthew’s Gospel refers to the Jewish leaders’ attempt say that the disciples stole the body (Mt.28:11 – 15). The *Toledoth Jesu*, a compilation of early Jewish writings, acknowledges that the tomb was empty, and attempts to explain it away. Further, the recorded debate in the second century between a Christian named Justin Martyr and a Jew named Trypho refers to the fact that the Jews claim the body was stolen (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, ch.58). In acknowledging the tomb being empty, the Jews were admitting a fact that was certainly not in their favor or to their liking. Dr. Paul Maier calls this ‘positive evidence from a hostile source. In essence, if a source admits a fact that is decidedly not in its favor, the fact is genuine.’ Neither the Jews nor Romans had a motive to steal the body – they wanted to suppress Christianity, not encourage it by providing it with an empty tomb.

Third, the historical reliability of the empty tomb is supported by the historical reliability of the burial story. Joseph of Arimathea is said to be the one who buried Jesus of Nazareth. Joseph was a member of the Jewish

include: Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, *The Literary Guide to the Bible*; Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* and *Through Peasant’s Eyes*; Robert Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*; N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.

⁹ Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), p.108

¹⁰ Meir Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*

¹¹ My thanks to Matt Perman, *Historical Evidence for the Resurrection*, September 12, 2007

Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jewish people. People in this ruling council were simply too well known for fictitious and false stories about them to be circulated about them. Also, the burial account and empty tomb account have grammatical and linguistic ties, indicating that they are one continuous account. The two stories share details of Jesus' linen burial cloths (Mt.27:59; Jn.19:40; 20:5 – 7), the massive stone sealing the entrance to the tomb (Mt.27:60, 66; 28:2), and the new, freshly cut tomb being located in a garden (Jn.19:41; 20:15). If the burial account is accurate then everyone knew where Jesus was buried. If the tomb had not been empty, it would have been evident to all and the disciples would have been exposed as frauds at worst, or insane at best.

Fourth, Jesus' tomb was never venerated as a shrine. Jesus was surely regarded as a holy man, a miracle-worker, and the first century Jewish custom was to set up a shrine at the site of a holy man's bones. At least fifty such sites existed in Jesus' day. There was no such shrine made for Jesus, suggesting that his bones were not there.

Fifth, the tomb was said to be discovered empty by the female disciples of Jesus. The testimony of women in first century Judaism, under the influence of Greek thought, was not considered valid for legal purposes. As William Lane Craig says, 'If the empty tomb story were a legend, then it is most likely that the male disciples would have been made the first to discover the empty tomb. The fact that despised women, whose testimony was deemed worthless, were the chief witnesses to the fact of the empty tomb can only be plausibly explained if, like it or not, they actually were the discoverers of the empty tomb.'

Because of the strong evidence for the empty tomb, most recent scholars do not deny it. D.H. Van Daalen has said, 'It is extremely difficult to object to the empty tomb on historical grounds; those who deny it do so on the basis of theological or philosophical assumptions.' Jacob Kremer, who has specialized in the study of the resurrection and is a New Testament critic, has said 'By far most exegetes hold firmly to the reliability of the biblical statements about the empty tomb' and he lists twenty-eight scholars to back up his fantastic claim.

Were the Appearances of the Resurrected Jesus Historical or Hallucinations?

Did the disciples have a pre-existing motivation to see an 'appearance' of a resurrected Jesus? Or to fabricate the idea of the empty tomb? Psychologists tell us that the various types of hallucinations we experience deal with an individual's fears, memories, or chemical imbalances. But the experience of the disciples was a shared one, complete with a coherent system of shared belief and practice that resulted from it; from a historical standpoint, this is simply astonishing. Moreover, the idea that the Jewish Messiah would be raised from the dead in the middle of history was simply not on any first century Jew's theological roadmap. Their assumption was that everyone would be raised by God together at the end of time. Thus, the resurrection of Jesus by himself in the middle of history cannot be said to have been a latent wish, desire, suppressed fantasy, or other expectation on the part of the disciples. They did not have a pre-existing motivation for wanting Jesus alone to be resurrected and seen.

Nor did they or anyone have a moral, emotional inclination to do all the things which they did and said which, as they argued, flowed theologically from the resurrection of Jesus: He is God's new humanity for all humanity. The Jewish disciples expressed sudden love for the Roman oppressor, renunciation of military resistance while Jewish uprisings continued for another hundred years, renunciation of the sacred Promised Land to verbally spread their Jesus message, dramatic sharing of whatever personal wealth they had, relativizing of Jewish cultural distinctives, and courageous embrace of persecution by their own national leadership. The four Gospels' portrayal of the disciples hoping until Jesus' death that he would lead a military revolution wielding supernatural power, being utterly downcast afterwards, and completely shocked and surprised by his resurrection, is an entirely plausible emotional account. Given the social and political conditions of first century Judaism being occupied by Rome, this portrayal of the Jewish disciples fits perfectly as real history. It then follows that none of them had a preconceived idea of Jesus' resurrection, nor did they have a personal, emotional investment in such an idea.

N.T. Wright suggests, 'We can test [the hallucination theory] out with a little thought experiment. In A.D. 70 the Romans conquered Jerusalem, and they led back to Rome thousands of captive Jews, including the man they regarded as the leader of the Jewish revolt, 'the king of the Jews,' a man named Simon bar Giora. He was led into Rome at the back of a triumphal procession, and the end of the spectacle was Simon being flogged and then killed.

Now, suppose we imagine a few Jewish revolutionaries, three days or three weeks later. The first one says, 'You know, I think Simon really was the Messiah – and he still is!'

The others would be puzzled. Of course he isn't; the Romans got him, as they always do. If you want a Messiah, you'd better find another one.

'Ah,' says the first, 'but I believe he's been raised from the dead.'

'What do you mean?' his friends ask. 'He's dead and buried.'

'Oh, no,' replies the first, 'I believe he's been exalted to heaven.'

The others look puzzled. All the righteous martyrs are with God, everybody knows that; their souls are in God's hand; that doesn't mean they've *already* been raised from the dead. Anyway, the resurrection will happen to

us all at the end of time, not to one person in the middle of continuing history.

‘No,’ replies the first, ‘you don’t understand. I’ve had a strong sense of God’s love surrounding me. I have felt God forgiving me – forgiving us all. I’ve had my heart strangely warmed. What’s more, last night I saw Simon; he was there with me...’

The others interrupt, now angry. We can all have visions. Plenty of people dream about recently dead friends. Sometimes it’s very vivid. That doesn’t mean they’ve been raised from the dead. It certainly doesn’t mean that one of them is the Messiah. And if your heart has been warmed, then sing a psalm, don’t make wild claims about Simon.

That is what they would have said to anyone offering the kind of statement that, according to the revisionists, someone must have come up with as the beginning of the idea of Jesus’ resurrection. But this solution isn’t just incredible, it’s impossible. Had anyone said what the revisionists suggest, some such conversation as the above would have ensued. A little bit of disciplined historical imagination is all it takes to blow away enormous piles of so-called historical criticism.’¹²

¹² N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2008), p.49 – 50