

SUPPORT OF DEITY: THE RESURRECTION – HOAX OR HISTORY

By Mark Paynter THD

Josh McDowell opens his examination of the resurrection account with this statement.

“After, more than seven hundred hours of studying this subject and thoroughly investigating its foundation. I have come to the conclusion that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of *the most wicked, vicious, heartless hoaxes ever foisted upon the minds of men*, or it is the most fantastic fact of history.

Jesus has three basic credentials: 1) The impact of his life through his miracles and teachings, upon history; 2) Fulfilled prophecy in His life; and 3) His resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus Christ and Christianity stand or fall together.”¹

The Biblical account of the resurrection is found in Matthew 28:1-11; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-53 and John 20:1-21:25.

“There are several accounts of Jesus’ resurrection appearances in the New Testament, but there is no uniformity with regard to sequence, place or names and numbers of people. If the four resurrection accounts were exactly the same, we would be suspicious, not convinced, as we would if the testimony of four witnesses at a murder trial was identical in all respects...

Despite the differences in the resurrection accounts, all of the writers are in agreement that Jesus was raised from the dead and appeared to many people in many places to confirm his mission and his message.”²

¹ McDowell page 203

² Schwarz page 70-71

Why is the resurrection so significant?

Erickson points out that Wolfhart Pannenberg has examined the significance of the resurrection to the Jewish mind and observed

“1 To a Jew living at the time Jesus’ resurrection would have meant that the end of the world had begun...2. The resurrection would have been evidence that God himself confirmed Jesus’ pre-Easter ministry...3. The resurrection would have established that the Son of Man is none other than Jesus. Before Easter, Jesus was understood to be a man who walked visibly upon the earth; the Son of Man was a heavenly being who would come in the future on the clouds of heaven. After Easter, however, the two were regarded as identical. 4. The resurrection would have meant that God has been revealed in Jesus.”³

Wayne Grudem identifies four doctrinally significant aspects of the resurrection.

“1 Christ’s resurrection insures our regeneration...

2 Christ’s resurrection insures our justification...

3 Christ’s resurrection insures that we will receive perfect resurrection bodies as well...

4 Ethical significance of resurrection...We should continue steadfastly in the Lord’s work...Second, Paul encourages us when we think about the resurrection, to focus on our future heavenly reward as our goal...A

³ Erickson page 709 sites Wolfhart Pannenberg “Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation” in Revelation as History ed Wolfhart Pannenburg (New York: MacMillan 1968) p 134.

third ethical application of the resurrection is the obligation to stop yielding to sin in our lives.”⁴

Steve Kumar states

“The Christian faith is based on an historical event – the resurrection. All other major world religions are based on philosophical or theological system, but Christianity is based on a time-space event. There is one event in the life of Christ that separates him from every other person that ever lived in the history of the world – the resurrection. There is absolutely nothing in any philosophy or religion that compares with what is found in Jesus Christ.

G.B Hardy states it eloquently:

There are but two essential requirements:

1 Has any one cheated death and proved it?

2 Is it available to me? Here is the complete record:

Confucius tomb - occupied

Buddha’ tomb – occupied

Mohammed’s tomb – occupied

Jesus tomb - **EMPTY**

Argue as you will... **THERE IS NO POINT IN FOLLOWING A LOSER.**”⁵

⁴ Grudem pages 614-616

⁵ Kumar page 135-136 quotation Steve Kumar makes is from G B Hardy Countdown page 56 McDowell quotes the same passage on page 284

Let us briefly consider the historical events that surround the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Steve Kumar points out the resurrection is an historical event that has space-time dimensions. McDowell quotes Ignatius (A.D. C50-115) as having said

“He was crucified and died under Pontius Pilate. He really, and not merely in appearance, was crucified, and died, in the sight of beings in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth.

He also rose again on three days... On the day of preparation, then, at the third hour, He received the sentence from Pilate, the Father permitting that to happen; at the sixth hour he was crucified; at the ninth hour He gave up the ghost; and before sunset he was buried.

During the Sabbath He continued under the earth in the tomb in which Joseph of Arimathaea had laid Him.

He was carried in the womb, even as we are, for the usual period of time; and was really born, as we are; and was in reality nourished with milk, and partook of common meat and drink, even as we do. And when he had lived among men for thirty years, He was baptized by John, really and not in appearance; and when he had preached the gospel three years, and done signs and wonders, He who was Himself the judge was judged by the Jews, falsely so called, and by Pilate the governor; was scourged, was smitten on the cheek, was spit upon; He wore a crown of thorns and a purple robe; He was condemned: He was crucified in reality, and not in appearance, not in imagination, not in deceit. He really died, and was buried, and rose from the dead.”⁶

⁶ McDowell cites Ignatius, “Ignatius’ Epistle to Trallians” *Ante Nicene Christian Library: Translation of the Writings of the Fathers*. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Volume 1 Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1867.

The historical facts are that Jesus died and was buried in a tomb.⁷ Jesus was embalmed in grave clothes. A great stone was rolled into place at the entrance to the tomb and the tomb was sealed. The Jewish leaders were so concerned that someone might attempt to steal the body that they asked Pilate for a guard to be placed at the site of the tomb to ensure no one stole the body⁸. Pilate granted the request. Jesus disciples were bewildered and went their own way after Jesus had been arrested. (Matt. 26:56; Mark.14: 50)

After Jesus had been crucified, and sealed in the tomb and the guard placed around the tomb, the stage was set for the greatest event in all human history – the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. No human being, other than Jesus Himself saw this event. The only direct witness was God Himself and His holy angels. If no one saw this event, how do we know it occurred? The reason we know this event occurred was the overwhelming evidence that points to its reality.

What is the evidence?

- 1 The seal was broken when the stone was rolled away. (Matt. 28: 2; Mark 16: 3-4; Luke.24: 2)
- 2 The tomb was and still is empty. (Matt.28: 1-8, Mark 16: 1-8; Luke 24: 1-12; John 20: 1-10)
- 3 The grave clothes were still there, but the body was not to be found. (Luke 23: 53, Luke.24: 12; John 20: 5)

Merrill Tenney explains

“In preparing a body for the burial according to Jewish customs, it was usually washed and straightened, and then bandaged tightly from the armpits to the ankles in strips of linen about a foot wide. Aromatic

⁷ See McDowell page 221 – 243 for intense discussion.

⁸ See McDowell page 231-235 for discussion.

spices, often of a gummy consistency, were placed between the wrappings or folds. They served partially as a preservative and partially as a cement to glue the cloth wrappings into a solid covering... John's term "bound" (Greek *edesan*) is in perfect accord with language of Luke 23:53 where the writer says ...that the body was wrapped...in linen...On the morning of the first day of the week the body of Jesus had vanished, but the grave clothes were still there. ⁹

- 4 The Roman guard were cold blooded men but at the sight of the empty tomb (Matt. 28:4) became so bewildered and afraid that they became like dead men.
- 5 After His resurrection, Jesus made many appearances to his followers.
- 6 The enemies of Christ gave no refutation of the resurrection.

McDowell explains.

"In Acts 2, Luke records Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. There was no refutation given by the Jews to this bold proclamation of Christ's resurrection. Why? Because the evidence of the empty tomb was there for anyone to examine if they wanted to disclaim it. However, everyone knew that the grave no longer held the body of Jesus Christ."¹⁰

- 7 The disciples were radically transformed men, as have many millions who have been transformed through the two thousand years that have past since.

McDowell gives the verdict.

⁹ McDowell cites Merrill Tenney *The Reality of the Resurrection* Chicago Moody Press 1963

¹⁰ McDowell page 251

“The established psychological fact of changed lives, then, is the credible reason for believing in the resurrection. It is the subjective evidence bearing witness to the objective fact that Jesus Christ arose on the third day. For only a risen Christ could have such transforming power in a person’s life.”¹¹

- 8 The resurrection was the basic foundation of the Church and the reason for its phenomenal growth rate.

McDowell expands.

“The church is a fact of history. The explanation for the existence of the church is its faith in the resurrection. Throughout its early years, this institution suffered much persecution from the Jews and Romans. Individuals suffered torture and death for their Lord only because they knew He had risen from the grave.”¹²

- 9 The early Christians changed the day of worship from the Jewish Sabbath, which was from the setting of the sun on the Friday afternoon to the Saturday, to Sunday to celebrate the Lords resurrection. They would only have had the courage to do this if the resurrection was an historical event that they wished to celebrate through the rest of time. McDowell calls this “probably one of the biggest decisions any religious body ever made.”¹³

- 10 The church has only two sacraments, Holy Communion and Water Baptism. Both sacraments reflect the fact of the resurrection.

Josh McDowell explains

¹¹ McDowell page 253.

¹² McDowell page 255

¹³ McDowell page 256

“ The Lord’s Supper is a remembrance of His death, but we read in Acts 2:46 that it was a time of joy. Now, if there was not a resurrection, how could there be joy? “¹⁴

Concerning baptism McDowell comments

“There is little doubt about this! Paul explains that in baptism a believer is united to Christ in His death and resurrection. When he enters the water he dies to his old sin nature, and he rises out of the water to share a new resurrected life of Christ.”¹⁵

Today our understanding of the resurrection rests upon what Kreeft and Tacelli refer to as “ two things, both of which are hard data, empirical data, which no one denies, the existence of the New Testament texts as we have them, and the existence...of the Christian religion as we have it today.”¹⁶ Both pieces of data are dependent upon and rose out of the resurrection. The question then becomes a search to find an answer as to how to explain the reason for the resurrection. There are five possible explanations. The third explanation subdivides into three parts making a total of five.

- 1 The resurrection is an historical event that actually happened.
- 2 Jesus did not die, people only thought he did – this view is known as the swoon theory.
- 3 Jesus did die but did not rise. Three explanations are possible.
 - The apostles were deceived what appeared to them was a hallucination
 - The apostles were myth- makers.
 - The apostles were deceivers and designed a conspiracy to deceive the world.

¹⁴ McDowell page 256

¹⁵ McDowell page 257

¹⁶ Kreeft and Tacelli page 182.

There are no other reasonable explanations for the events of the first Easter Sunday.

Kreeft and Tacelli logically argue that if theories 2 and 3 can be disproved the only remaining explanation is 1.

The swoon theory (2) is refuted on the following basis.

- 1 Jesus could not have physically survived the crucifixion.
- 2 The fact that the Roman soldier did not break Jesus legs like he did the other two (John 19:31-33) means that Jesus was already dead.
- 3 John saw blood and water coming from Jesus' pierced heart (John 19:34-35). Jesus lungs collapsed and this is medically explained by the thought that he died of asphyxiation.
- 4 The body was totally wrapped in burial clothing. (John 19:38-42).
- 5 The post resurrection appearances convinced confused and bewildered disciples. As a result their lives were totally transformed and they willingly suffered for their faith in the resurrection.
- 6 How did the swooning corpse overpower the guards?
- 7 How did the swooning corpse remove the great stone blocking the tomb's entrance way?
- 8 After Jesus awoke from the swoon, what happened to his body?

- 9 At this point the swoon theory becomes identical to the hallucination and conspiracy theories because “the disciples testified that Jesus did not swoon but really died and really rose.”¹⁷

The Conspiracy theory is refuted on the following basis.

- 1 No one, even when under threat of death and forced to deny their faith ever admitted to having taken part in a conspiracy of the nature that this theory tries to establish.
- 2 If the story was fantasy then they were in the words of Kreeft and Tacelli “the most creative, clever, intelligent fantasists in history, far surpassing Shakespeare, or Dante or Tolkien.”¹⁸ . Most unlikely from the type of people Jesus chose to be his Apostles.
- 3 The character of the disciples refutes this theory.
- 4 If this theory was true, the Jews could have disproved the theory by producing the body. They did not because they could not.
- 5 There was no motive for such a lie as many of the early followers of Jesus lost their lives upholding the resurrection.
- 6 The disciples could not have gotten away with a conspiracy of this nature because there would have been too many eyewitnesses in the same place and time for the theory to be a lie. If Jesus was in the tomb people could have gone to the tomb to disprove the resurrection.

¹⁷ Kreeft and Tacelli page 184

¹⁸ Kreeft and Tacelli page 185

- 7 The disciple adversaries had the power and resources to disprove the conspiracy.

The Hallucination theory is refuted on the following basis.

- 1 There were too many witnesses of Christ's risen body. Hallucinations tend to be private and highly subjective experiences.
- 2 The witnesses were qualified by their experience to bear witness.
- 3 "The five hundred saw Christ together, at the same time and place."¹⁹
- 4 Hallucinations normally last seconds or minutes, not for about forty weeks.
- 5 Hallucinations are rare and normally happen to people who are mentally ill.
- 6 Hallucinations arise from within, an extension of ones inner thoughts. The body they saw did unusual things completely beyond their control.
- 7 The disciples initially did not expect to see what they saw and their first reaction was to disbelieve.
- 8 Hallucinations do not eat. The resurrected Jesus ate on at least two occasions. (Luke.24: 42-43, John 21: 1-14).
- 9 The disciples physically touched him. (Matt.28: 9; Luke 24: 39; John 20: 27).
- 10 The disciples held conversations with the risen Christ, in which both parties spoke to each other. At times this hallucination held conversations with groups.

¹⁹ Kreeft and Tacelli page 187

- 11 If the appearances had only been a hallucination, Jesus body would still be in the tomb. If this had been the case it could easily be confirmed but it was not.
- 12 The Jews could prove what the disciples were saying by producing the body.
- 13 The hallucination theory only accounts for the post-resurrection appearances, it does not account for the empty tomb, rolled away stone and the inability to produce a corpse.²⁰

The myth theory is disproved

- 1 The account in the Gospels has a radically different style from that used in myths.
 - Psychological depth is clearly visible.
 - Tiny details that would only be present in an eyewitness account are given.
- 2 There was not enough time for a myth to begin to develop before the Gospels were prepared. If they were myths they could easily be disproved.
- 3 The first eyewitnesses were women. Women were of low social status in the first century and would not be a credible base to start a myth.

Having dismissed the swoon, conspiracy, hallucination and myth theories we have only one alternative and that is to accept the Gospel accounts as historical fact.

In conclusion

²⁰ Kreeft and Tacelli page 187-189

“The earliest record of the Christian movement (the Book of Acts) reports that the church proclaimed a resurrected Christ as the source of its courage and drive. The first Christians weathered intense persecution for their resurrection-faith; yet they persevered--some even unto death. Had the notion of the resurrection been fabricated, it would have unravelled under the relentless social and political pressures it faced. As former Nixon aide Charles Colson has pointed out in his book “Loving God”, he and the other White House conspirators could not pull off the Watergate cover-up, despite their unmatched political clout. When the crunch came, the truth was quickly flushed out. The early Christians had no such power to obfuscate or intimidate; but they never recanted. Their resolve is best explained by their knowledge of the resurrection.

Those hostile to these determined followers of Jesus could have easily refuted the nascent movement by simply exhuming the dead body of Jesus and displaying it as the decisive evidence against any claim to his resurrection. Both the religious and the political authorities of the day had reasons to resent these Christians and to stop their evangelism. But there is no evidence that anything of the kind occurred. The tomb was empty.

Belief in the resurrection of Jesus is entirely different from the fascination many people have in supposedly supernatural events (of the "X-Files" variety) that have no logical support. When Christians observe Easter they stand on the solid ground of history, looking upward with rational hope for a better life in the world to come.”²¹

²¹ http://hisdefense.org/articles/groothuis_easter.html 23 February 2002