He Is Risen: Evidence for the Resurrection of Christ

Tom Davis presents biblical evidence for why believing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is reasonable.

One unique thing about the Christian religion is that it is testable. The most important claim the Christian makes is that Jesus rose physically from the dead. Paul taught, “And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:14). Paul is telling the church at Corinth that if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then Christianity is false. When Jesus cleansed the temple, the Jews asked Him what authority He had to chase the people from the Temple. Jesus answered, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). Jesus was saying that the test to authenticate His authority was if He would be raised from the dead. The claim that Jesus was raised from the dead is testable using the same methodology that a historian would use to determine if Alexander the Great invaded India, or if the Roman Senate murdered Julius Caesar.

Early Evidence

To evaluate the truth of historical claims it is important to have accurate historical records. The New Testament contains the historical record of the early church. There are over 5,700 Greek New Testament manuscripts. The earliest manuscript is P52, a papyrus containing part of John chapter 18. This manuscript is dated around A.D. 130. The New Testament was written between the late 40’s and the mid 90’s. The Gospel of John was written sometime between the late 60’s and the mid 90’s. This means that there are 40 to 70 years from the time John was written to the time of the first manuscript evidence. The ancient literature with the second most manuscript documentation is the works of Homer. The *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*

have 643 manuscripts.{1}

When compared to other historical writings, the New Testament manuscript evidence is very good. Only ten manuscripts attest to Caesar's Gallic Wars; the oldest manuscript is dated 900 years after the original writing. What we know of the works of Tacitus comes from two manuscripts. The oldest is 800 years after the original writing.{2} When comparing the manuscript evidence for the New Testament to the rest of the writings of antiquity, the New Testament has more evidence, and the evidence is closer to the dates of the original writings in question. The manuscripts show that what was written by the original authors of the New Testament has been accurately preserved and faithfully passed down through history. There are a few scribal insertions, but today's Bible copies accurately represent what the apostles originally wrote.

Not all the New Testament is relevant to the resurrection of Jesus. The four canonical gospels are relevant to the life of Jesus. Most New Testament scholars agree that Mark was the first gospel and was written in the late 60s. John was the last gospel. He wrote his gospel between A.D. 80 and A.D. 95. Jesus was crucified in A.D. 30 or 33. The gospels were written between 30 and 65 years after the events they describe.

Virtually all scholars agree that there is earlier evidence that must be considered. Paul wrote the book of 1 Corinthians in A.D. 55. Paul writes, "For I passed on to you as of first importance what I also received—that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers and sisters 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 though to one born at the wrong time, he appeared to me also" (1 Corinthians. 15:3-8). Paul is claiming that this is something that he "received." This is an early

church confession that was given to Paul sometime after his conversion experience.

In Galatians Paul states that after his conversion he went to Arabia, then returned to Damascus. Paul writes, “Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas” (Galatians 1:18). Paul’s conversion was a few years after the death of Jesus. Wolfhart Pannenberg claims that “Paul would have been in Jerusalem six to eight years after the events.”{3} The confession was formulated before Paul visited Peter. N.T. Wright comments, “It was probably formulated within the first two or three years after Easter itself, since it was already in formulaic form when Paul ‘received’ it.”{4} The confession that Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 15 was formulated sometime between two and six years after the death of Jesus. There is no time for legendary embellishment.

The Facts

Several facts can be gleaned from the passage in 1 Corinthians 15:

1. Jesus died.

2. His disciples believed they experienced a resurrected Jesus.

3. Paul had an experience that he thought was the resurrected Jesus.

The gospels and Paul’s undisputed letters support these facts.

1. Jesus died

“Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3)

Jesus died by crucifixion during the Passover celebration. This is attested by all four Gospels (Matthew 27:32-54, Mark 15:21-39, Luke 23:26-49, John 19:16-30). The Talmud also

states that “Jesus of Nazareth was hanged on Passover Eve.”{5} At that time, the term “hanged” referred to crucifixion. Jesus’ death is well attested in the ancient literature. Michael Licona sums up the evidence: “Jesus’ death and/or crucifixion are also abundantly mentioned in non-canonical literature. Moreover, there is no ancient evidence to the contrary.”{6}

2. His disciples believed they experienced a resurrected Jesus

“He appeared to Cephas” (1 Corinthians 15:5)

Jesus’ disciples had experiences that they interpreted as seeing the resurrected Jesus. The first person Paul lists in 1 Corinthians 15 is Peter. There is no direct evidence that Jesus appeared to Peter individually. Luke also records an early Christian saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon” (Luke 24:23). We know that Paul met with Peter and James (Galatians 1:18-19; Acts 15:1-21). His knowledge of Jesus’ appearance to Peter probably came from them.

“then to the twelve” (1 Corinthians 15:5)

Jesus appeared to the twelve (minus Judas). Paul was an associate of the apostles; he would have had knowledge of Jesus appearing to these men. Luke and John record Jesus appearing to the apostles (Luke 24:36-49, John 20:19-20). Together, Paul, Luke, and John give three independent attestations of Jesus appearing to the twelve.

“Then he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.” (1 Corinthians 15:6-7)

Jesus appeared to 500 brothers and sisters. There is no other attestation of this appearance. It is unlikely that Paul could have made up this appearance. Paul refers to them as “Most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep” (1

Corinthians 15:6). Paul's statement that most of these people are alive, and that some had died, indicates that he had some knowledge of these individuals. He is saying that these people were available to be questioned about the event.

"Then he appeared to James" (1 Corinthians 15:7)

Jesus' brothers did not believe that He was the Messiah before His death. However, Luke claims that after the ascension, the brothers of Jesus were at the upper room (Acts 1:14). Peter thought that it was important for James to be informed of his escape from prison (Acts 12:17). Later, when Paul visits Jerusalem, Paul gives a report to "James, and all the elders" (Acts 21:18). The book of Acts indicates that James rose to a prominent leadership role in the Jerusalem church. Paul also notes the influence of James. When Paul visited Peter in Jerusalem, he said that he "saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:19). James is also referred to as a pillar of the church (Galatians 2:9). The Biblical evidence indicates that James was once an unbeliever who became one of the most influential leaders in the early Jerusalem church. An appearance of the risen Jesus would explain the transition from unbeliever to leader of the church in Jerusalem.

"then to all the apostles." (1 Corinthians 15:7)

Jesus appeared to all the apostles. There are no clues to the nature of this appearance. This may refer to the appearance to the disciples in Galilee (Matthew 28:16-20). There is no conclusive way to link that passage to Paul's creedal formula in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. The reliability of this appearance rests on its early attestation. Paul probably knew the people involved.

3. Jesus appeared to Paul

"Last of all, as though to one born at the wrong time, he appeared to me also." (1 Corinthians 15:8)

Paul rhetorically asks the Corinthians, “Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” (1 Corinthians 9:1). Luke also records Jesus’ appearance to Paul (Acts 9, 22, 26). These three passages are consistent in the details of what Paul experienced. However, there are some apparent inconsistencies in the details of what Paul’s companions experienced. In Acts 22:9 and 26:13, Paul’s companions see the light that blinded Paul. In Acts 9:3-7 there is no mention of them seeing light. Because not mentioning the light does not necessarily contradict the presence of light, it is reasonable to conclude that the men saw the light. There is also a question as to whether Paul’s companions heard the voice. The word that Luke uses in Acts 22 is the Greek word *acouo*, which can mean “hearing,” “understanding,” or “to obey.” This means that *acouo* can mean to hear but not understand what a voice is saying. This is why the passage in chapter 22 is translated, “Now those who were with me saw the light, but did not understand the voice (*acouo*) of the one who was speaking with me” (Acts 22:9). There is also the question of whether the men with Paul were standing (Acts 9:7) or if they were on the ground (Acts 26:14). The Greek word used in Acts 22:9 is *istemi*, which can mean “stopped,” as in not being able to move. When Luke writes, “The men who were traveling with him stood speechless” (Acts 9:7), this could also be understood as saying that the men did not leave Paul.{7} Michael Licona addresses the issue of these translation difficulties:

> “It is one thing to note a contradiction between two authors. However, it is another thing to claim that an author is contradicting himself, within his same writing no less. Unless Luke was being careless, it seems to me that it is better to be charitable in our interpretations of surface contradictions within the same work if they do not require too much strain.”{8}

Licona was specifically addressing the issue of whether the men heard the voice, but this same concept also applies to the

interpretation and understanding of whether the men were standing or on the ground.

Evaluating Arguments

What can we conclude so far? There are multiple independent attestations that Jesus' followers experienced Jesus appearing to them after He was buried. These experiences occurred with individuals and groups of people. William Lane Craig concludes, "The evidence makes it certain that on separate occasions different individuals and groups had experiences of seeing Jesus alive from the dead."{9}

Marcus Borg (liberal Christian theologian and historian of Jesus and a fellow of the Jesus Seminar) challenges the passage found in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 on two points. First, Borg argues, Paul includes himself in the list of people to whom the risen Christ appeared; implicitly, he regards his own experience as similar to the others.{10} Borg then refers to the record in Acts chapters 9, 22, and 26, claiming that this shows that Paul's experience was a vision. For Borg, this implies that the experience of the other disciples were visions.

There is an important distinction that Borg does not address. The book of Acts begins with Jesus' final appearance to the disciples, which is followed by His ascension into heaven (Acts 1:9). All the appearances to the other disciples took place between the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus. Paul's experience on the road to Damascus occurs well after the ascension of Jesus. This also ignores many details of the appearances recorded in the gospels. Visions do not eat or drink. They cannot be touched. The narratives in the Gospel accounts involve Jesus, in His resurrected body, eating and drinking and being touched. By the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, he would have been familiar with at least some of these stories. Because the ascension occurs between the appearances to the disciples and the appearance to Paul, it is

reasonable to expect some differences in the nature of these appearances.

Borg's second challenge is concerned with the last half of 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul discusses the nature of the resurrected body. According to Borg, Paul "explicitly denies that it is a physical body; instead, it is a spiritual body."{11} In 1 Corinthians 15:44, Paul writes: "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body." Borg takes the term "natural body" to refer to a physical body, while he takes "spiritual body" to mean a body that is not physical. The Greek word that is translated as natural is *psuchikon*. Licona searched the Greek literature and found that *psuchikon* never means physical or material.{12} *Psuchikon* always refers to something natural or unspiritual. *Pnumatikos* is the Greek word translated as spiritual. This word can mean ethereal or refer to something that is not physical. However, *pnumatikos* is not used in the New Testament to refer to a ghost or something ethereal. At the beginning of 1 Corinthians Paul writes, "But I, brothers and sisters, could not address you as spiritual (*pnumatikos*) people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:1). Paul is not referring to people who do not have spiritual bodies here. In chapter 15 he is not claiming that a resurrected body is not physical. In this chapter, Paul makes a similar kind of comparison to what he wrote in verse 3:1. The people are "of the flesh," but when they become spiritual people, they do not lose their physical body. Just as in verses 15:44-49, people do not lose their natural body when they are raised a spiritual body.

A few verses earlier Paul writes, "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or some other grain" (1 Corinthians 15:36-37). Paul is making an analogy between a seed and the plant that it produces, and a body before and after it has been resurrected. A plant is bigger

and more beautiful than the seed that it comes from, but there is continuity between the two. A plant is the same organism that was once a seed. A resurrected body is more glorious than the body was before it died, but both bodies bear the same identity of the person. There is continuity between a natural body and a spiritual body.

The appearances are not the only things to be considered. The tomb Jesus was buried in was found empty by a group of His women followers. John designates that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb (John 20:1). Matthew records that "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb" (Matthew 28:1). Mark writes that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to the tomb. Luke lists Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women as those who went to the tomb. The genre of the Gospels is ancient biography. The writers of ancient biography were not concerned with explaining all the details. They were not overly concerned with exact details. Ancient authors were more concerned with portraying the nature of events. Matthew, Mark and John do not exclude the possibility that other women were present. At that time, women were not viewed as being capable of reasoning well. In the first century, women could be legal witnesses, but they were not trusted to be reliable and reasonable witnesses. If you were looking for witnesses, you found a man if you could. If the evangelists were to make up a story to convince people that Jesus' tomb was found empty, they would have said that the discovery was made by men. Claiming that the empty tomb was found by women would not have been convincing to any first-century audience—unless it really happened. It is highly plausible that the tomb was found empty by a group of Jesus' women followers.

Robert J. Miller raises an interesting point in the resurrection debate concerning Jesus' empty tomb: "The reports that his grave was empty would hardly persuade many. Even if it was confirmed that the grave where they claim he was buried

was empty, what would that prove? Nothing."{13} Miller is right. An empty tomb alone would not cause anyone to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. An empty tomb was not an unusual occurrence. When explaining the facts surrounding the beginnings of Christianity, the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus to His disciples must be explained. Wright observes, "The empty tomb and the 'meetings' with Jesus, when combined, present us with not only a *sufficient* condition for the rise of early Christian belief, but also, it seems, a *necessary* one."{14} Any explanation of the facts surrounding the death of Jesus and the origins of Christianity must explain both the empty tomb and the appearance of Jesus to His disciples after the resurrection. In current scholarship, there is no natural explanation that can explain both the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus to His apostles.

Eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume raised an objection to the resurrection that is common today. Hume starts by asking that if all the historians and the physicians agreed that Queen Elizabeth died, and was dead for a month, then reappeared and reigned on her throne for three more years, should someone conclude that she was raised from the dead? Hume answers:

> "I should be surprised at the concurrence of so many odd circumstances but should not have the least inclination to believe so miraculous an event. I should not doubt of her pretended death and those of other public circumstances that followed it; I should only assert it to have been pretended, and that it neither was, nor possibly could be, real."{15}

Even though all the people who could know agree, and there is no one who disputes the resurrection of the Queen in this hypothetical situation, Hume says that it could not possibly have happened. Hume argues that because all miracle stories are ridiculous, the effect of education on people would "not only . . . make them reject the fact but even reject it without further examination."{16} Hume argued that

resurrections do not conform to our knowledge of past experiences. This is a bad argument for two reasons; first, it is a circular argument. Hume claims that resurrections do not happen; therefore, a resurrection did not happen. Second, it is impossible to gain knowledge based on the conformity of past experiences. Many experiences that lead to more knowledge do not conform to past experiences. History is made up of many unique and unrepeatable events. The origin of the universe only happened once. The origin of life only happened once. The life and death of Alexander the Great only happened once. The only reason to reject the resurrection without a careful investigation of the facts is because of a worldview bias against supernatural events.

Conclusion

A careful examination of the evidence surrounding the claim of the resurrection of Jesus reveals four facts. First, Jesus died of crucifixion under the reign of Pontius Pilot. Second, Jesus' tomb was found empty by a group of His women followers. Third, Jesus' disciples had experiences which they interpreted as seeing a resurrected Jesus. Fourth, Paul had an experience that he interpreted as an encounter with the risen Jesus. Naturalistic explanations have failed to explain these facts. Hallucination hypothesis fails to explain the empty tomb. Stolen body hypothesis fails to explain the appearances. Combining the hypotheses makes the explanation of the facts complex. When formulating historical hypotheses, the simpler explanation is to be preferred. Hallucinations and grave robbers do not provide any illumination for the origins of Christianity. The resurrection provides a simple explanation of the facts and also explains the beginnings of the Christian religion. There are good reasons to believe that Jesus rose physically from the dead.

Notes

1. Norman L. Geisler, Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith*

to Be an Atheist (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 226.
2. F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1981), 9-15.
3. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 84.
4. N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 319.
5. Normon Solomon, *The Talmud: A Selection* (London: Penguin B16.ooks, 2009), 505.
6. Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 305.
7. Ibid., 382-394.
8. Ibid., 390.
9. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics 3rd ed.* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 381.
10. Marcus Borg, "The Irrelevancy of the Empty Tomb" in *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* Paul Copan, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 123.
11. Ibid., 123.
12. Licona, op. cit., 407.
13. Robert J. Miller, "What Do Stories about Resurrection(s) Prove?" in *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* Paul Copan ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 97.
14. N.T. Wright, op. cit., 706.
15. David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 138.
Ibid., 139.

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Did Jesus Really Perform Miracles?

Former Probe intern Dr. Daniel Morais and Probe staffer Michael Gleghorn argue that Jesus' miracles have a solid foundation in history and should be regarded as historical fact.

What Do Modern Historians Think?

"I can believe Jesus was a great person, a great teacher. But I can't believe He performed miracles." Ever hear comments like this? Maybe you've wondered this yourself. Did Jesus really perform miracles?

Marcus Borg, a prominent member of the Jesus Seminar{1}, has stated, "Despite the difficulty which miracles pose for the modern mind, on historical grounds it is virtually indisputable that Jesus was a healer and exorcist."{2} Commenting on Jesus' ability to heal the blind, deaf, and others, A. M. Hunter writes, "For these miracles the historical evidence is excellent."{3}

Critical historians once believed that the miracles attributed to Jesus in the Bible were purely the product of legendary embellishment. Such exaggerations about Jesus' life and deeds developed from oral traditions which became more and more fantastic with time until they were finally recorded in the New Testament. We all know how tall tales develop. One person tells a story. Then another tells much the same story, but exaggerates it a bit. Over time the story becomes so fantastic that it barely resembles the original. This is what many scholars once believed happened to Jesus' life, as it's recorded in the Gospels. Is this true? And do most New Testament historians believe this today?

The answer is no. In light of the evidence for the historicity of Jesus' miracles in the Gospels, few scholars today would attempt to explain these events as purely the result of legend or myth. In fact, most New Testament scholars now believe that Jesus did in fact perform healings and exorcisms.{4} Even many liberal scholars would say that Jesus drew large crowds of people primarily because of his ability to heal and "exorcise demons."{5} But because many of these liberal scholars don't believe in spiritual beings, they also don't believe that these healings should be attributed to the direct intervention of God in the world. Instead, they believe that Jesus' miracles and healings have a purely natural explanation. Many of them think that Jesus only healed psychosomatic maladies.{6} The term *psychosomatic* means mind-body, so psychosomatic maladies are mind-body problems. The mind can have a powerful impact on the health of the body. Under extreme distress people can become blind, deaf or even suffer paralysis. Since psychosomatic problems typically go away on their own, many liberal scholars think that faith in Jesus' ability to heal might help to heal some people suffering from these conditions. But is there good reason to believe that Jesus could cure real sicknesses?

Could These Miracles Be Legendary?

Often, historians who tried to explain away stories of Jesus' miracles as purely the result of legendary developments believed that the "real" Jesus was little more than a good man and a wise teacher. The major problem with this theory is that legends take time to develop. Multiple generations would be needed for the true oral tradition regarding Jesus' life to be replaced by an exaggerated, fictitious version. For example, many historians believe that Alexander the Great's biography stayed fairly accurate for about five hundred years. Legendary details didn't begin to develop until the following five hundred years.{7} A gross misrepresentation of Jesus' life

occurring one or two generations after his death is highly unlikely. Jesus was a very public figure. When He entered a town, He drew large crowds of people. Jesus is represented as a miracle worker at every level of the New Testament tradition. This includes not only the four Gospels, but also the hypothetical sayings source, called Q, which may have been written just a few years after Jesus' death. Many eyewitnesses of Christ would still have been alive at the time these documents were composed. These eyewitnesses were the source of the oral tradition regarding Jesus' life, and in light of his very public ministry, a strong oral tradition would be present in Israel for many years after his death.

If Jesus had never actually performed any miracles, then the Gospel writers would have faced a nearly impossible task in getting anyone to believe that He had. It would be like trying to change John F. Kennedy from a great president into an amazing miracle worker. Such a task would be virtually impossible since many of us have seen JFK on TV, read about him in the papers, or even seen him in person. Because he was a public figure, oral tradition about his life is very strong even today. Anyone trying to introduce this false idea would never be taken seriously.

During the second half of the first century, Christians faced intense persecution and even death. These people obviously took the disciples' teaching about Jesus' life seriously. They were willing to die for it. This only makes sense if the disciples and the authors of the Gospels represented Jesus' life accurately. You can't easily pass off made-up stories about public figures when eyewitnesses are still alive who remember them. Oral tradition tends to remain fairly accurate for many generations after their deaths.{8}

In light of this, it's hard to deny that Jesus did in fact work wonders.

Conversion from Legend to Conversion Disorder

It might be surprising to hear that Jesus is believed by most New Testament historians to have been a successful healer and exorcist.{9} Since His miracles are the most conspicuous aspect of his ministry, the miracle tradition found in the Gospels could not be easily explained had their authors started with a Jesus who was simply a wise teacher. Prophets and teachers of the law were not traditionally made into miracle workers; there are almost no examples of this in the literature available to us.{10} It's especially unlikely that Jesus would be made into a miracle worker since many Jews didn't expect that the Messiah would perform miracles. The Gospel writers would not have felt the need to make this up were it not actually the case.{11}

Of course, most liberal scholars today don't believe Jesus could heal any real illnesses. But such conclusions are reached, not because of any evidence, but because of prior prejudices against the supernatural. Secular historians deny that Jesus cured any real, organic illnesses or performed any nature miracles such as walking on water.{12} They believe He could only heal *conversion disorders* or the symptoms associated with real illnesses.{13} Conversion disorder is a rare condition that afflicts approximately fourteen to twenty-two of every 100,000 people.{14} Conversion disorders are psychosomatic problems in which intense emotional trauma results in blindness, paralysis, deafness, and other baffling impairments.

Many liberal scholars today would say that Jesus drew large crowds of people primarily because of his ability to heal. But if Jesus could only cure conversion disorders, then it's unlikely He would have drawn such large crowds. As a practicing optometrist, I've seen thousands of patients with real vision loss due either to refractive problems or

pathology. But only one of them could be diagnosed with blindness due to conversion disorder. Conversion disorders are rare. In order for Jesus to draw large crowds of people He would have had to be a successful healer. But if He could only heal conversion disorders, thousands of sick people would have had to be present for him to heal just one person. But how could He draw such large crowds if He could only heal one person in 10,000? Sick people would have often needed to travel many miles to see Jesus. Such limited ability to heal could hardly have motivated thousands of people to walk many miles to see Jesus, especially if they were sick and feeble. If Jesus was drawing large crowds, He must have been able to heal more than simply conversion disorders.

Did Jesus Raise the Dead?

"Did Jesus ever raise the dead? Is there any evidence to back this up?" Many secular historians, though agreeing that Jesus was a successful healer and exorcist, don't believe that He could perform nature miracles. Due to prior prejudices against the supernatural, these historians don't believe it's possible for anyone to raise the dead, walk on water, or heal true organic diseases. These historians believe Jesus' healings were primarily psychological in nature.{15} Is there any evidence that Jesus had the power to work actual miracles such as raising the dead?

Yes. It almost seems that the more fantastic the miracle, the more evidence is available to support it. In fact, the most incredible miracle recorded in the Gospels is actually the one which has the greatest evidential support. This miracle is Jesus' resurrection.{16} Is there any reason to believe that Jesus may have raised others from the dead as well?

There is compelling evidence to believe that He did. In John 11 there's the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.{17} A careful reading of this text reveals many details

that would be easy for anyone in the first century to confirm or deny. John records that Lazarus was the brother of Mary and Martha. He also says that this miracle took place in Bethany where Lazarus, Mary, and Martha lived, and that Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem. John's gospel is believed to have been written in AD 90, just sixty years after the events it records. It's possible that a few people who witnessed this event, or at least had heard of it, would still be alive to confirm it. If someone wanted to check this out, it would be easy to do. John says this took place in Bethany, and then He tells us the town's approximate location. All someone would have to do to check this out would be to go to Bethany and ask someone if Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, had ever been raised from the dead. Villages were generally small in those days and people knew each other's business. Almost anyone in that town could easily confirm or deny whether they had ever heard of such an event. If John just made this story up, he probably wouldn't have included so much information that could be easily checked out by others to see if he was lying. Instead, he probably would have written a vague story about Jesus going to some unnamed town where He raised some unnamed person from the dead. This way no one could confirm or deny the event. John put these details in to show that he wasn't lying. He wanted people to investigate his story. He wanted people to go to Bethany, ask around, and see for themselves what really happened there.

What Did Jesus' Enemies Say?

"Sure, Jesus' followers believed He could work miracles. But what about his enemies, what did they say?" If Jesus never worked any miracles, we would expect ancient, hostile Jewish literature to state this fact. But does such literature deny Jesus' ability to work miracles? There are several unsympathetic references to Jesus in ancient Jewish and pagan literature as early as the second century AD. But none of the

ancient Jewish sources deny Jesus' ability to perform miracles.{18} Instead, they try to explain these powers away by referring to him as a sorcerer.{19} If the historical Jesus were merely a wise teacher who only later, through legendary embellishments, came to be regarded as a miracle worker, there should have been a prominent Jewish oral tradition affirming this fact. This tradition would likely have survived among the Jews for hundreds of years in order to counter the claims of Christians who might use Jesus' miraculous powers as evidence of his divine status. But there's no evidence that any such Jewish tradition portrayed Jesus as merely a wise teacher. Many of these Jewish accounts are thought to have arisen from a separate oral tradition apart from that held by Christians, and yet both traditions agree on this point.{20} If it were known that Jesus had no special powers, these accounts would surely point that out rather than reluctantly affirm it. The Jews would likely have been uncomfortable with Jesus having miraculous powers since this could be used as evidence by his followers to support his self-proclaimed status as the unique Son of God (a position most Jews firmly denied). This is why Jesus' enemies tried to explain his powers away as sorcery.

Not only do these accounts affirm Jesus' supernatural abilities, they also seem to support the ability of his followers to heal in his name. In the Talmud, there's a story of a rabbi who is bitten by a venomous snake and calls on a Christian named Jacob to heal him. Unfortunately, before Jacob can get there, the rabbi dies.{21} Apparently, the rabbi believed this Christian could heal him. Not only did Jews seem to recognize the ability of Christians to heal in Christ's name, but pagans did as well. The name of Christ has been found in many ancient pagan spells.{22} If even many non-Christians recognized that there was power to heal in Christ's name, there must have been some reason for it.

So, a powerful case can be made for the historicity of Jesus' miracles. Christians needn't view these miracles as merely

symbolic stories intended to teach lessons. These miracles have a solid foundation in history and should be regarded as historical fact.

Notes

1. Gary R. Habermas, "Did Jesus Perform Miracles?," in *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus,* by eds. Michael J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 124.
2. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and The Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 61.
3. A.M. Hunter, *Jesus: Lord and Saviour* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 63.
4. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire,* 124.
5. See Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision,* 60.
6. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire,* 125.
7. Craig L. Blomberg, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 33.
8. Grant R Jeffrey, *The Signature of God* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998) 102, 103.
9. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire,* 124, 125.
10. Smith, *Jesus the Magician: Charlatan or Son of God?* (Berkeley: Seastone, 1998), 21.
11. Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus, The Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 247.
12. Ibid.
13. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire,* 125.
14. See the National Organization for Rare Diseases' official Web site at www.rarediseases.org/nord/search/rdbdetail_fullreport_pf (5/04/2006).
15. Wilkins and Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire,* 125.
16. William Lane Craig, "The Empty Tomb of Jesus," in *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in*

History, by eds. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 247-261 and Gary R. Habermas, "The Resurrection Appearances of Jesus," Ibid., 261-275.
17. John. 11:1-44.
18. See Alan Humm, "Toledoth Yeshu," at ccat.sas.upenn.edu/humm/Topics/JewishJesus/toledoth.html (2/17/1997).
19. Ibid.
20. Twelftree, *Jesus, The Miracle Worker*, 255.
21. Smith, *Jesus the Magician,* 63.
22. Ibid., 83.

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Are the Ideas of the Jesus Seminar Now Catholic Doctrine?

I am a philosophy major at Oregon State University where Marcus Borg is a professor. Many of the churches in our community ascribe to his teaching.

Here is my question…I have a dear friend that grew up in an evangelical Catholic home and knows Christ as her personal savior. She has been attending the local Catholic church here in Corvallis and recently has been strongly confronted by one of the deacons on issues surrounding the literalism of the Bible (i.e. the ideas of the Jesus Seminar, taught by Borg). The deacon has been telling her that Biblical non-literalism

as Borg teaches is part of Catholic doctrine and part of the Catechism. Is this accurate? Is this indeed an international Catholic teaching or does it depend on the individual parish or person?

I would appreciate any wisdom you might have on this topic. Honestly, it's been really heated here lately, as Borg's new book has just been released. We would love it if either of you (or other speakers from Probe) could come out and do a presentation for all of the confused Christians. There is a strong evangelical movement in Corvallis, but unfortunately, it tends to be strongly anti-intellectual and isn't well respected in the university community. As a student, I want to be able to better understand the critical issues at hand and be able to represent Christ in grace, truth, and love.

Send me whatever thoughts you have…I read article on the Jesus Seminar through Leadership University and that helped, but I really would love even more detailed information if you have any.

Thank you so much for serving as a resource for students of the Word!

Thank you for your recent e-mail concerning the Jesus Seminar. I can empathize with your "dilemma" under the shadow of Marcus Borg at your university.

I don't know if you have checked the Probe Website (www.probe.org) or not, but I would direct you to at least two essays: one that I wrote is called The Jesus Seminar, and a second was written by my colleague, Rick Wade, entitled The Historical Christ. You will find good bibliographical info for further study.

I would rather doubt that the tenets of the Jesus Seminar are now officially sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church

worldwide. I would recommend that your friend ask for official, written documentation from this priest for his assertion that this is true. I am 99% positive that no such position has been taken by the Catholic church and its biblical scholars. There is too much at stake for the church to take such a radical stand which undermines much of what they have held to be true about Jesus Christ.

If you are looking for someone to come and debate Borg, I would suggest that you contact my good friend Dr. J. P. Moreland and/or Michael J. Wilkins at Talbot Seminary in southern California. They edited a book entitled *Jesus Under Fire* which was published by Zondervan in 1995. Each chapter is written by a evangelical scholar, each of which develops and refutes the major arguments of the Jesus Seminar position.

I have been studying this topic for several years, and following the literature, but these men, as New Testament Scholars, are current on this issue and have devoted the kind of study and depth necessary to give good account of themselves with a fine scholar like Borg.

I can appreciate your frustration with the general Christian community. Most are not “armed” for the battle of ideas which we face. That is why I left Campus Crusade in 1973 and began Probe Ministries. At the time I gave oversight to the Campuses in the Southwest U.S. The worldview America has come to embrace generally now once existed only on a few campuses: UC Berkeley, San Francisco State, U. of Wisconsin (Madison), Columbia U., and U. of Colorado.

I found myself hard pressed to respond to the questions of these students. So I decided the Lord was calling upon me not to “curse the darkness”, but rather “light some lamps!” The early Christians, it is said, were effective because they OUT-THOUGHT and OUT-LOVED the ancient world! In fact, for 250 years after the apostles died off, the church did nothing but try to survive and answer/refute/respond to all the doctrinal

challenges which came from the Jewish and Pagan communities without, and from sects and heresies within. They were so busy doing this, that it was not until 325 A.D. (Council of Nicea) that the addressed/clarified the doctrine of the Trinity! The FIRST theology of the early church was APOLOGETICAL theology, and we find ourselves facing the same kind of circumstances and challenges today.

So you hang in there! And tell your friend to do the same. Challenge the priest and don't be bullied by him. If it IS an official position, tell her that I requested that it be documented so I will be able to confirm to others who ask that this is truly official. If I were a betting man (and I am ::::SMILE!::::), your friend will find that no such affirmation of this policy will be forthcoming.

With Warm Regards in Christ,

Jimmy Williams, Founder
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