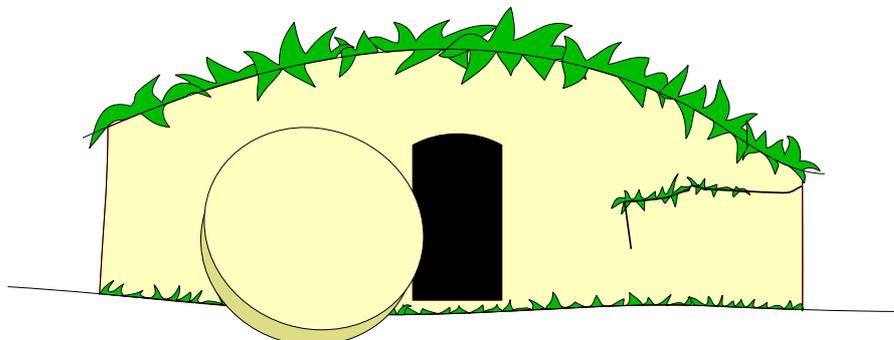


The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

Evidence and Arguments



Contents

1. Introduction	1
The sources	1
The minimal evidence case	2
2. The Facts of the Resurrection	3
Fact 1: The Crucifixion	3
Fact 2: The Empty Tomb	4
Fact 3: The Resurrection Witnesses	6
Fact 4: The Behaviour of the Disciples	9
Concluding Summary	10
3. Alternative Theories	11
Stolen Body Theories	11
Swoon Theories	13
The Substitute Theory	17
Wrong Tomb Theories	18
Hallucination Theories	19
The Allegorical Myth Theory	20
4. Discussion and Conclusion	21
5. Bibliography and Source Material	22
Ancient Sources	22
Modern Sources	24



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The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the fact at the centre of the Gospels. If Jesus did not rise from the dead then he can be discounted as a source of information about God. If, on the other hand, he did rise from the dead, then his testimony becomes all important. Essentially, Real Christianity stands or falls on the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The issues and evidence of the resurrection of Jesus have been known and understood for a long time. Morrison's "Who moved the stone"^[1] is a classic which covered the ground in the 1960s and which still provides a good summary of most of the evidence. However, different alternative explanations of the facts have been proposed since Morrison's time, and these need to be taken seriously and examined. The purpose of this paper is to provide a summary of the facts and a thorough analysis of the options.

References to the Resurrection (*Outside the Gospels*)

Acts 1:22; 2:24,31,32; 3:15,26;
4:10,33; 5:30,31; 10:40;
13:30,33,34,37; 17:31;
Romans 1:4; 4:24,25; 6:4,5,9; 7:4;
8:11,34; 10:9;
1 Corinthians 6:14; 15:4-17,20;
2 Corinthians 4:14, 5:15;
Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 1:20;
Philippians 3:10; Colossians 2:12;
1 Thessalonians 1:10;
2 Timothy 2:8 Hebrews 13:20;
1 Peter 1:3,21

The Sources

The death of Jesus, and his resurrection, are attested by many sources, some of them Biblical, others outside the Bible. The sources include the following:-

- **The four Canonical Gospels:** These contain a detailed description of the crucifixion and some further detailed descriptions of some of the occasions where Jesus appeared to disciples. Modern and postmodern critics of Christianity have attempted to undermine confidence in the witness of the Gospels, but the accounts in them can be shown to contain accurate detail of the locations, the customs and the language of the time of Jesus which implies a good deal of reliability. This investigation looks at a minimal evidence case, so we shall simply treat the Gospels as historical documents and consider their general accuracy in the area of the death and resurrection of Jesus as an important side-issue.
- **The writings of the early Apostles** (Paul, James, Peter, John, Jude). The writings of Paul, especially, are earlier than the Gospels, and contain material which is earlier still. These are important because of their early date. They reflect what was being said about the resurrection of Jesus in the 40 year period after the events, and sometimes as early as 19 years after. Some of the evidence is from eyewitnesses (all the apostles apart from Paul were eyewitnesses to the crucifixion; all of them met the risen Christ).
- **Roman Historians:** Tacitus writes that Jesus was crucified in the reign of Tiberius by the governor of Judea, who he names as Pontius Pilate. Apart from the fact of the crucifixion and the existence of a Christian community, however, Tacitus is silent. Other Roman historians also confirm the existence of a Christian community in Rome as early as 64AD, and possibly as early as 49AD. Some secularists claim that Tacitus is dependent on the Gospels, and is not therefore a reliable witness; this is unlikely as Tacitus denigrates Christianity in his writing.

- **The Jewish Talmud:** One of the *Baraita* says that Jesus was hanged (a word which could include crucifixion) on the eve of the Passover.
- **The New Testament Apocrypha:** This is a source which is often used by postmodern opponents of Christianity to denigrate the canonical Gospels. However, the bulk of the apocryphal writings support the idea that Jesus was crucified and raised to life (some don't mention the crucifixion because they are "sayings gospels" - ie lists of sayings which purportedly came from Jesus. The apocryphal gospels add nothing to the canonical Gospels, so they will not be used here.
- **Early Christian Writers:** Some Christians were writing letters and apologies very early on; Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Rome and Polycarp wrote at the end of the first century. However, apart from confirmation that the canonical Gospels were already written by this time and in circulation they add very little to the sum of the evidence available. They will not be used here.

The Minimal Evidence Case

This is a case using the minimum amount of evidence, and assuming the least in terms of reliability. One can say much more about the resurrection if one decides that the Gospels are correct in all their details, and one can say even more if one uses Old Testament prophecy as well. However, in order to show the strength of the case for the resurrection this paper will only assume that the documents involved have reasonable historical accuracy and, indeed, will look at the veracity of the claims in them as a part of its investigation.

Summary

This paper presents evidence to show that Jesus Christ died and rose again from the dead. The four basic facts provided by the evidence are as follows:-

- Jesus did not survive the crucifixion.
- His tomb was empty.
- Many people saw him alive after the resurrection.
- Those in possession of the facts clearly believed the resurrection.

There have been many attempts to provide an alternative explanation for these facts other than that of the resurrection but none has been even vaguely convincing. All fail to explain one or more of the facts above. We therefore conclude that Jesus rose from the dead.

2. The Facts of the Resurrection

There are four essential facts concerning the resurrection of Jesus. Any theory which purports to explain what happened must explain all four of these facts. If the explanation fails to explain any one of them, then it fails as an explanation and should be discounted.

Fact 1: The Crucifixion

All the witnesses agree that Jesus was crucified. The Gospels give a detailed picture of the crucifixion and the historical records give less detailed pictures, but all agree that Jesus was crucified and that this caused his death.

Crucifixion

Crucifixion was carried out by taking a victim and hanging him up by his arms and legs until he died. There were various forms of the cross; it could be the shape usually depicted, or it could be T shaped or even X shaped. On occasion it might even be a simple upright without a cross bar. It is unclear which shape was used for Jesus; the X shape can be eliminated because a message was attached above Jesus' head, and this could not be achieved easily on an X shape.

The victim was left on the cross until he died of asphyxiation, loss of blood or a heart attack. This might happen quite quickly or might take more than a day. If the victim simply hung from his arms without any other support death followed quite quickly; by supporting himself on his legs the victim could prolong his life at the expense of great pain from the nails in his feet. The victim would struggle for life on the cross until he finally succumbed. If the crucifixion took too long the legs of the victim would be broken; without support he would die within less than half an hour. Crucifixion was a common procedure; the Romans used it because it was cheap, effective and a horrible warning to others.

Cause of Death

The cause of death during crucifixion has been investigated by various people, but the most concise description is in a paper in the Journal of the American Medical Association (Edwards *et al*, 1986). This indicates that there are three possible causes of death for a victim of crucifixion:-

1. **Pulmonary Oedema.** When a human being is suspended from their arms, this puts an intolerable strain on the intercostal muscles (the muscles between the ribs) and causes them to leak body fluid which collects in the lungs and in the pericardium (the sac that surrounds the heart). This would be the clear fluid (described as "water") which issued from Jesus' spear wound, reported in John 19:34. As the lungs fill with fluid it becomes more and more difficult for the victim to breath, until he dies of asphyxiation.
2. **Hypovolemic Shock.** As body fluid seeps from the body the circulation of the blood becomes progressively less efficient. Under these circumstances the body functions gradually shut down as the body conserves its resources. Finally the amount of circulation becomes too slight to sustain life and the victim dies. This is a gradual death and it might not be clear at what time a victim dying from Hypovolemic Shock finally succumbs.
3. **Congestive Heart Failure.** As body fluid is lost the blood becomes progressively thicker and more viscous. Ultimately it can reach the consistency of tar. This places an increasing strain on the heart as it tries to push this viscous blood around the circulatory system. Ultimately the strain becomes too great and the heart fails. Death is rapid.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

As Jesus cried out with a loud voice just before his death it would seem most likely that he died of congestive heart failure. His lungs were clearly not filled with fluid or he would have been unable to shout loudly, and hypovolemic shock has the victim passing gradually into death. Congestive heart failure is what remains, and this is consistent with the evidence.

Could Jesus have Survived?

The process of crucifixion is very rigorous and efficient. It was administered by people who were used to killing and would know whether a body was dead or alive. In any case, if a mistake were made it would be very difficult to resuscitate someone who was on the edge of death from crucifixion even today, with blood transfusions, antibiotics and life support machines. In the ancient world the medicine available was not sufficient to allow a crucifixion victim to recover.

Josephus (Life :75) describes an event where he saw three of his friends being crucified at Jotapata. He went immediately to Titus who ordered them to be taken down from the cross immediately. In spite of the facts that the three had spent only a few minutes on the cross and that they all received the best medical attention available at the time two of them died.

The final possible killing process for crucifixion was the pulmonary oedema, which would kill a victim even if nothing else did. It used to be said that a victim left hanging from his arms with no other support would die in half an hour from pulmonary oedema. However, tests carried out in the United States and reported in the BBC television series “Jesus of Nazareth” showed that the victim would be unlikely to survive for twenty minutes. Once a victim was unable to support themselves, either because his legs were broken, or because he was unconscious, he would die in less than 20 minutes; if he had already been on the cross for some time he would die in considerably less time than even this. A leisurely removal from the cross was all that was required to ensure death.

In the case of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea came to beg Pilate for the body (Matthew 27:57,58; Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50-52; John 19:38). Pilate made enquiries before he allowed Jesus to be brought down (Mark 15:44) and Joseph then went out to buy linen cloth (Mark 15:46). This means that there was a considerable delay, during which time Jesus would have died if he had not already been dead. This set of events is unlikely to have been inserted as part of a fictional narrative as the physiology required was unknown at the time and was only discovered in the 20th century.

The other issue is the wound in Jesus’ side, from which came “water” and blood (John 19:34). As Jesus was up on a cross the spear would have been from below as well as the side. The clear fluid (which looked like water and was thus so named) would have been the tissue fluid from the lungs or pericardium. Thus the spear wound was sufficiently deep to penetrate the lungs or the heart, which means that it must have passed through the liver or the spleen on the way. In the first century this would have been a mortal wound; it would be extremely serious today.

We can be certain that Jesus was dead when he was brought down from the cross.

Fact 2: The Empty Tomb

The most obvious fact about the resurrection accounts is the empty tomb. Jesus was buried in a tomb; no-one was prepared to deny this fact.

The evidence for the empty tomb is of four kinds:-

- **The Evidence of the Gospels:** The Gospel Writers refer to the tomb in spite of the fact that it was, for them, an incidental detail. For the Apostles it was the meetings that they had with Jesus after the resurrection which were the important points, but they still give considerable detail about the tomb.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

- **The existence of Christianity in Jerusalem:** A large number of people were baptised into Christ in Jerusalem early on and it became the early centre for the new Christian Church. The whole idea of resurrection involved the bringing of a dead person to life, bodily; this was the earliest teaching of the Christian Church and one which continued for centuries afterwards. The tomb of Jesus was in Jerusalem. It would have been very easy for potential Christians to visit the tomb and see whether it was empty or not. The authorities in Jerusalem would have had a vested interest in making certain that people visited the tomb of Jesus if there had been a body in it.
- **The Witness of the Authorities:** The Jerusalem authorities proclaimed that the body of Jesus had been stolen, a story that was continued for some centuries. There would have been little point in this had the body of Jesus still been in the tomb.
- **The authorities never managed to produce the body of Jesus.** The production of the body of Jesus would have brought stories of his resurrection to a rapid end. The authorities in Jerusalem, both Jewish and Roman, had a strong interest in producing the body of Jesus. The Jewish religious authorities were effectively under the accusation that they had killed someone who was at the very least a prophet, and the Romans had an interest in keeping Jerusalem quiet. Either would have been greatly advantaged had they been able to point to the tomb of Jesus or produce his body. The fact that they did not do so shows that the body was no longer in their grasp; it had vanished and they could not find it. This means that the tomb of Jesus was empty.

Christian Witnesses to the Empty Tomb

There are two main Christian witnesses to the empty tomb. The first of these is the explicit witnesses of the Gospels. Matthew 28:1-6; Mark 16:1-9; Luke 24:1-12 and John 20:1-8 all give an explicit account that the tomb of Jesus was empty. It is interesting and possibly significant that the empty tomb is not dealt with in any of the epistles, nor does it form a major part of the witness of the Apostles as recorded in Acts. For the Apostles the main evidence for the resurrection was not the empty tomb but the resurrection appearances.

The reason for this is probably that there was no need to mention it. The empty tomb is supposed by the resurrection; the only kind of resurrection mentioned in the Bible is the resurrection of the body. When Paul, for example, writes of the resurrection of Jesus, he is writing of a bodily resurrection which any of his readers would realise required an empty tomb. No-one contemporary with the Apostles, or for many generations afterwards, denied or even questioned the existence of an empty tomb. Instead they tried to provide an alternative explanation to account for it (the idea that Jesus' disciples had stolen the body of Jesus.)

The growing church was initially centred in Jerusalem. According to Acts, the first major congregations of those who followed the Risen Christ were founded in Jerusalem and the Gospel of the resurrection spread from there. There is nothing in any historical account which contradicts this, and later sources confirm it; Tacitus refers to the crucifixion of Jesus in Judea with the implication that the Church spread from there and early Church Fathers such as Irenaeus and early church historians like Eusebius of Caesarea also report that the church spread from Jerusalem. The early church would therefore have had access to the tomb of Jesus; had Jesus still been buried in it the early church could not have started in the way it evidently did.

The Witness of the Authorities

The earliest account of the reaction of the Jerusalem Authorities to the resurrection is in Matthew 28:11-15. Here we read that the chief priests told the guard to say that the disciples of Jesus had stolen the body. The account ends with the words: "... and this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day." (Matthew 28:15). It would be easy for the earliest readers of Matthew

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

to find out whether this point was accurate or not (all they would have to do was to ask a knowledgeable Jew); there is no doubt that this story was in circulation soon after the end of Jesus' ministry.

The account of the theft of Jesus' body continued to circulate through the Jewish community for some time. Justin Martyr, who died in about 165AD, wrote an account of arguments with Jews in his book "Dialogue with Trypho". This includes the charge from the Jews that "his disciples stole him by night from the tomb, where he was laid when unfastened from the cross, and now deceive men by asserting that he has risen from the dead and ascended to heaven." (Justin, Dialogue Ch. 108).

It would be crazy for the Jewish authorities to invent a story like this if the body of Jesus had been in the tomb. It would be far more effective to say "Jesus never rose - look here is his body". They never did this.

The Romans also had a vested interest in producing the body of Jesus if they knew where it was. Jerusalem was a troubled town and the Romans were responsible for Law and Order there. The emergence of a new sect of Judaism, and one which implied that the Jewish authorities had killed a messenger from God, would spell trouble. Indeed, trouble followed as the Jewish authorities attempted to stamp out the infant church. Showing the body of Jesus, or at least indicating his tomb, would have been a good way of forestalling such trouble.

Fact 3: The Resurrection Witnesses

The fact is that after Jesus had been crucified and raised from the grave he was seen by a large number of witnesses. The witnesses are mentioned in a number of passages in the New Testament. The Gospels record several appearances of Jesus shortly after his resurrection and there is a further list in 1 Corinthians 15. In Acts the appearances of Jesus are given as the main reason for believing that he was raised from the dead:-

The Resurrection Appearances	
Person	References
1 Mary Magdalene	Mk 16:9; Jn 20:14
2 Women returning from the tomb	Mt 28:9,10
3 Peter	Lk 24:34, 1 Cor 15:5
4 Emmaus Disciples	Lk 24:13-33
5 The disciples without Thomas	Lk 24:36-43; Jn 20:19-24
6 The disciples with Thomas	Jn 20:26-29
7 The seven by the Sea of Galilee	Jn 21:1-23
8 Five Hundred in Galilee	1 Cor 15:6
9 James	1 Cor 15:7
10 The eleven	Mt 28:16-20; Mk 16:14-20; 1 Cor 15:7
11 At the ascension	Acts 1:3-12
12 Paul	Acts 9:3-6; 1 Cor 15:8
13 Stephen	Acts 7:55
14 Paul in the Temple	Acts 22:17-21; Acts 23:11
15 John on Patmos	Rev 1:10-19

40 God raised Him up on the third day, and granted that He should become visible, 41 not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us, who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead.
(NASB'77 Acts 10:40-41)

There are 12 places where the Apostles are said to have been witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus in that they met him alive after he had been crucified and buried. The list of people who met Jesus is impressive: it stretches from Jesus's closest associates before his crucifixion to

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

sceptics who refused to believe him. It includes more than 500 people, although many of these are not named. There are three more places where Jesus appeared in a dream or a vision. These, however, are never presented as evidence for the resurrection.

The witnesses who met Jesus alive after the resurrection can be categorised as follows:-

The Women

The most well known of these is Mary Magdalene, but there were other women as well. These include “The other Mary” (Mary the mother of James), Salome and Joanna. The women appear to have gone to the tomb in several separate parties and to have split up afterwards as they went from the tomb. Mary Magdalene found the disciples and then returned to the tomb where she met the risen Jesus. Jesus seems to have met the other women as they returned from the tomb at a time when Mary Magdalene was no longer with them (being younger she was able to run ahead to tell the news of the empty tomb to the Apostles.)

The interesting point about the women’s witness is that while Jesus found it worthwhile to meet the women before anyone else, the other disciples never paid much attention to the women’s testimony. The reason for this probably comes from the custom of the times, when the testimony of women was considered to be less reliable than that of men. However, the fact that the disciples did not consider the evidence to be very important but still included it is further evidence in favour of its authenticity. If the story had been invented, then the fact of the empty tomb would have been discovered by a man.

Morrison points out a reason for the testimony of the women being noted in the Gospels but then ignored. He points out that the resurrection, and in particular the empty tomb, was a public event and likens it to the burning down of a large public building such as a town hall. It might be of interest to discover who was the first person to have seen the fire in the town hall, but this would be of no real importance in establishing the truth of the matter; everyone could go and see that the building was burned down. Similarly anyone in Jerusalem could go and see for themselves that the tomb was empty and the witness of the women was of only peripheral interest; it did not prove the event.

The Disciples in Jerusalem

The twelve disciples were all in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion. By the time of the resurrection Judas was probably already dead; certainly he would not have been in the company of the other disciples. Jesus was seen alive by Peter on the day of his resurrection, and then by two more disciples on the road to Emmaus (these were not members of the twelve). By the evening the two from Emmaus had returned to Jerusalem where they met the other disciples and at this meeting Jesus appeared in the upper room. Thomas was not among the disciples and refused to believe their account of the resurrection until he met Jesus himself, with the others, a week later.

The scepticism of Thomas is clear but to some extent it is matched by the scepticism of the other disciples. The disciples initially discounted the words of the women who first found the tomb empty (Luke 24:11) and the discussions of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:22-24) is one of puzzlement not of expectation. It is unlikely that the disciples would allow such statements to appear in the record if it were not so; we can therefore infer that the disciples were initially sceptical.

Nevertheless they were convinced when they met Jesus themselves, saw him eat and possibly touched him (Jesus invited them to do so, but it is not definitely recorded whether they took him up on the offer. [Luke 24:39; John 20:27]. It seems likely that John, at least, did touch Jesus [1 Jn 1:1].)

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

The Disciples in Galilee

There are two incidents recorded in Galilee. One of these involves seven of the disciples who seem to have tired of simply waiting and went fishing to pass the time, and the other includes over five hundred followers of Jesus at one time. There is an account of a meeting with Jesus on a mountain in Galilee (Matthew 28:16) and one might suppose that this was the event at which more than five hundred were present (if not there is another occasion when Jesus was met by disciples in Galilee after the resurrection).

There is an undesigned coincidence here. On this mountain Jesus told those who heard him to go out into all the world and teach the Gospel (Matthew 28:19). In 1 Corinthians 15:6 Paul tells the Corinthians that most of the five hundred witnesses were still alive; this only makes sense if the Corinthians could talk to some of them, which means that they were, indeed, travelling around the world giving a witness to the resurrection.

The Disciples after Galilee

After having met Jesus in Galilee the disciples returned to Jerusalem, where Jesus met them on two more occasions (possibly these are the same). The first of these is recorded in three Gospels; this is the occasion when Jesus gives the great commission to the disciples, to go out into the world and proclaim the Gospel. The other is the occasion when Jesus ascended to heaven.

By the last of these occasions the disciples seem to have been taking their meetings with the risen Jesus as a matter of course. Early on they were startled, surprised and afraid, but at the end the meetings seem to have been much more matter of fact. This is what one would expect, given that the disciples had by this time absorbed the fact that Jesus was raised from the dead. Again, this is not a progression that one would have expected had the accounts been invented.

The Hostile Witnesses

There are two named hostile witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. These are James the brother of Jesus and Saul of Tarsus, who was later known as the Apostle Paul.

James was one of the brothers of Jesus. At the time of Jesus' ministry James refused to believe that Jesus was anything special; John's Gospel records the words: "*For not even his brothers believed in him*" (John 7:5). Similarly Mark 3:21 and Mark 6:4 indicate that Jesus family initially disapproved of his activities and that they were sceptical of his claims. However fairly early on in Acts we find that James had become one of the leading members of the congregation in Jerusalem, and was effectively the head of the new Christian church (Acts 12:17 - James is mentioned specially among the Apostles in Jerusalem, Acts 15:13 - James chairs the council of Jerusalem, Acts 21:18 - James is again the leading light of the Christians of Jerusalem). Even Josephus refers to James as a leading member of the Christian community and describes his death for his faith. The question one needs to ask oneself is why James changed from scepticism to leadership. The answer of the New Testament is that he met the risen Christ.

Saul of Tarsus is an even more well-known figure. He was so opposed to the new church that he persecuted it (1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13). He even set off to Damascus to find more disciples to persecute, before he met the risen Christ on the way and was forced to accept that Jesus was sent from God and had been raised from the dead. He was baptised into Christ Jesus and in time became one of the most active of the Apostles, proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus from Jerusalem to Rome.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

It has been suggested that the meeting between Jesus and Saul was a vision, but there are three arguments against this. The first of these is that Paul did have visions of Jesus, but these are always distinguished from the meeting with Paul on the road to Damascus; there are three visions listed in the appearances above (13,14 & 15); the Bible carefully distinguishes these from the physical appearances of Jesus, of which the appearance to Paul is one. Second, while the others travelling with Paul did not see the whole encounter, being unable to distinguish the words of Jesus and seeing only the bright light that surrounded him, nevertheless they did see some of the encounter and could hear the voice of Jesus. A vision tends to be private to the person who sees it. The third argument is that Paul was changed completely by his meeting with Jesus and was convinced by it that Jesus was risen; it is perfectly possible to have a vision of a dead person and while a vision might have convinced Paul that Jesus was a messenger from God it would not have provided evidence of the bodily resurrection of Jesus which Paul proclaimed from then on.

Summary

The witness evidence is especially important as it is the main reason that convinced the disciples that Jesus was raised from the dead. The disciples accepted meetings with Jesus as being a part of their lives during the 40 days after the resurrection and what Jesus taught during that period became the core of their teaching. Twelve occasions on which Jesus met the disciples are recorded in the New Testament; there may have been many more. The number of witnesses is impressive, there being more than 500, and the witnesses include people who were hostile before meeting the risen Jesus.

Fact 4: The Behaviour of the Disciples

The final fact that has to be considered in reaching a conclusion about the resurrection is the fact that the disciples became changed people because of it. During the time of Jesus' ministry they had followed Jesus and had gradually become aware that he was more than a prophet. When he was killed they lost heart and hid away in fear of further persecution against themselves. The morale of the disciples is summarised by two short passages:-

- 19 *And He said to them, "What things?" And they said to Him, "The things about Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word in the sight of God and all the people,*
20 *and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him up to the sentence of death, and crucified Him.*
21 *"But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, it is the third day since these things happened.* (Luke 24:19–21)

When therefore it was evening, on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews... (John 20:19)

These two passages show the disappointment of the disciples at the death of Jesus; they had thought of him as the coming king, but now he was dead. The John passage also shows the fear of the disciples; they shut themselves indoors for fear of the authorities.

After the resurrection the disciples became changed men. They were confident in the kingship of Jesus and in his resurrection. They were prepared to proclaim the resurrection in Jerusalem and to face the wrath of the priests without flinching. They went on journeys to distant parts of the Roman empire to proclaim the Gospel, and ultimately they died because of it (according to later tradition). The new demeanour of the disciples is shown from an incident recorded in Acts; this occurred after two of the Apostles had been arrested for proclaiming the Gospel.

- 27 *And when they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. And the high priest questioned them,*
28 *saying, "We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and behold, you have*

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us."

29 *But Peter and the apostles answered and said, " We must obey God rather than men.*

30 *"The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross.*

31 *"He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Saviour, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.*

32 *"And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him."* (Acts 5:27–32)

This shows a boldness which was completely absent beforehand. The Apostles were clearly convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead.

This confidence extended to the whole community, not merely to the Apostles. In the summer of 64AD Rome was burned in a great fire, which, for political reasons, Nero decided to blame on the Christians. The consequence was a great persecution in Rome (which seems to have rapidly spread to other parts of the empire). This is described by Tacitus in the following words:-

Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. (Tacitus Annals 15)

This was one of the most extreme deaths one can imagine, but the Christians endured it rather than deny their faith in a resurrected Jesus. Indeed it became almost proverbial that the Christians refused to fight back, something which was considered bad form by many Romans. The point, however, is that they would only do this if they were completely convinced of the resurrection of Jesus.

The persecution didn't wait until 64AD before starting however. There was persecution in Jerusalem long before this. The fact that Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem shows what the authorities there were capable of, and the Acts of the Apostles records almost immediate persecutions after Pentecost. The Apostle Paul also reports that he was among those who persecuted the new Church; at this point he was based in Jerusalem.

The evidence is unequivocal. The disciples of Jesus and the whole of the new Christian Church clearly believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead and were prepared to risk their lives to give witness to this fact.

Concluding Summary

There are four established facts about the resurrection:-

- **Jesus died:** The physiology of crucifixion guarantees that Jesus was dead before he was brought down from the cross.
- **The tomb was empty:** There is no doubt that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was empty on the third day after the crucifixion.
- **Many met Jesus alive after his death:** This includes over 500 witnesses, some of them Jesus' close disciples and family who would easily have recognised him, but also includes hostile witnesses such as James and Paul.
- **The disciples believed that Jesus was raised:** With the evidence before them, the disciples were prepared to face certain death rather than deny their faith in the resurrection.

The only explanation that can account for all four of these facts is that Jesus was raised from the dead. No other explanations can account for all four of these facts.

3. Alternative Theories

A substantial number of alternative theories as to what happened to Jesus of Nazareth after his crucifixion have been proposed over the ages. In the 20th and 21st centuries these were added to with new theories. However, none of the theories proposed accounts for the established facts of the matter.

3.1 Stolen Body Theories

This is the oldest alternative explanation to the resurrection. It appears in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 28:13) and has been repeated down the ages. This theory is of particular interest in that it provides clear evidence for two facts. The less important of these is the fact that the tomb was guarded. The more important is that it was empty; there would be no point in spreading the story that the disciples stole the body if it had still been in the tomb for anyone to see.

Summary of the Stolen Body theory

1. The body was sealed in a tomb with a large stone (2-4 tonnes weight).
2. The supposed thieves never revealed their crime - all the possible suggested thieves had good motives to do so.
3. The stolen body theory doesn't account for the resurrection appearances.

The existence of this objection raises the issue of guards on the tomb. Matthew's Gospel describes the Jerusalem religious authorities asking for a guard from Pilate (Matthew 27:62-66), which would indicate that the guard was taken from Pilate's bodyguard, who would have been Roman soldiers from the Praetorian Guard. These were an élite among Roman soldiers and correspondingly highly experienced and unlikely to sleep on duty. In any case the tomb was sealed by a stone which would weigh anywhere between two and four tonnes. The effort required to move such a stone would attract the attention of even an inefficient and slumbering guard.

There are three versions of the stolen body theory. In the oldest version it was the disciples who stole the body; the other two versions suggest that the body was either removed by Jesus' family for reburial in a family tomb, or by the Jerusalem religious authorities. Each of these has its own individual problems, which will be considered separately, but there is one problem shared by all of them. The theory that the body of Jesus was stolen doesn't explain the resurrection appearances.

The Classical Theory: The Disciples stole the body

The original version of the theory, promulgated since the first century AD, is that the body of Jesus was stolen by his disciples. The problem with this theory is that the disciples spent the rest of their lives proclaiming a gospel based on the resurrection of Jesus. The New Testament was complete before they died (apart from James cf Acts 12:2), so we are reliant on later documents to know their fates, but from the writings of the late first century and second century we know that a high proportion of them died as a result of their activities in proclaiming the Gospel. This shows that they really did believe that the resurrection had occurred. No one will die for a lie that they invented themselves.

The classical theory would indicate that the witness of the apostles about the resurrection appearances is not to be trusted, because the apostles stole the body. This, of course, fails on the witness of Paul and James. Neither of these was among the original disciples and neither would therefore have been involved in a theft of the body. However, both of them were convinced of the resurrection by meeting Jesus alive after it (1 Corinthians 15:7,8).

The classical version of the theory also has all the standard problems of the difficulty of moving the stone without disturbing the guards.

The Family Theory (Tabor)

This variant of the theory asserts that the tomb in which Jesus was laid was never intended to be his final tomb, but that he was laid there because of the nearness of the Sabbath until his family could collect the body for burial in a family tomb. The family collected the body later and transported it back to Galilee, where they buried it in a different tomb. The disciples found the tomb empty and jumped to the conclusion that Jesus had been raised from the dead. This variant of the theory was proposed by a 16th century Jewish mystic, and has more recently been championed by Tabor in a Discovery channel documentary. In this theory the family removes the body of Jesus in innocence and the disciples are deceived by the empty tomb into believing in the resurrection.

This theory has even more problems than the classical theory. Some of the more minor ones are that the only time at which the tomb could have been emptied was on a Sabbath day or in the middle of the night; at such times travelling would have been impossible, especially with the horse and cart that would have been needed to move a body. Not only that but the family would have had to obtain permission from the authorities to open the tomb and get past the guard, which would have meant that the authorities would have known what had happened and would have been able to produce the body; certainly they would not have blamed the disciples for stealing the body.

The empty tomb does not explain the resurrection appearances, and in this case one of the people who met the risen Christ was James the brother of Jesus, one of his family. James above all should have known what the family had done. In fact several of the disciples were related to Jesus, and would soon have known if the family had moved the body and reburied it elsewhere. In any case one would have expected the family to have said something if the disciples had continued to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus while members of the family knew where his body was.

The Sanhedrin Version

In this version the body of Jesus was placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea only as a holding tomb because the Sabbath was approaching. It would have been considered important to manage the burial quickly before sunset so that the body was not above ground on the Sabbath; this was especially important as the particular Sabbath concerned was a feast day. Later the authorities moved the body to another tomb (the Talpiot tomb is often mentioned).

Besides the problem that this does not account for the resurrection appearances, the Sanhedrin theory has several additional flaws. The most obvious of these is that if the Jerusalem religious authorities had moved the body they would have known where it was. When they wished to discredit and destroy the new Christian movement (and there can be no doubt that they did wish to do this) all they had to do was to show where the body was now buried. This would have been a simple matter, and much more effective than spreading the story that the body was stolen by the disciples.

A further problem is that the tomb was visited by the women early in the morning of the day after the sabbath. This does not leave the authorities with much time in which to move the body; the move would have had to have been made at the dead of night. This is minor by comparison to the other objections but it shows that even the detail of events is against the theory of the moved body.

3.2 Swoon Theories

These are theories that Jesus did not actually die on the cross at all, but that he merely fainted and recovered later on. When he appeared to the disciples they assumed that he had been raised to life by a miracle. A variant of this theory was produced by Hugh Schönfield in the 1970s; there were earlier versions.

The swoon theory has the problem that crucifixion was a particularly brutal and effective way of killing people. The medical details have been dealt with in an academic paper [Edwards et al 1986]. This paper is summarised in more detail above, but effectively shows that there would be virtually no possibility of anyone surviving crucifixion.

The damage done by a crucifixion would be severe. Not only would it include serious wounds in the hands and the feet where the nails pierced the victim, but there would be loss of body fluid and thickening of the blood which would be likely to be fatal in themselves. A modern intensive care unit might be able to deal with this, although it would depend on how far the process had gone. In the first century AD medicine was too primitive to allow such a patient to be treated successfully. The biggest problem would have been septicaemia in the wounds brought about by the crucifixion process and, in the case of Jesus, the wound in his side.

Several commentators have noted that there is a record of a crucifixion survivor (although the single survivor is usually blown up into a number of survivors). This is from Josephus (Life :75). In this account Josephus is with Titus at the end of the siege of Jotapata when many of the survivors were being crucified. Among the victims are three of Josephus' friends. As they are being raised to their crosses Josephus urgently begs Titus to have them brought down, which he does immediately. In spite of the fact that the victims could only have been on their crosses for a very short period of time and were given the best medical attention available at the time, two of the three died. The accounts of crucifixion show that it was a very efficient method of killing people.

The Basic Theory

The basic swoon theory presumes that the crucifixion was carried out inefficiently and that Jesus survived but was in a coma. The idea is that Jesus somehow recovered "in the cool of the tomb" and was then able to escape. The theory is usually little more than this; it is vague because a look at the detail tends to undermine the possibility of the theory working.

However, two points often arise, the idea that the executioners were inefficient and the idea that the issue of blood and water from the wound in Jesus' side show that Jesus was alive. These are worth looking at before a more general look is taken at the theory.

Summary of Swoon Theories

- The theory assumes that the crucifixion was carried out inefficiently.
- Crucifixion was generally effective. There is only one example of a crucifixion survivor. This was after a few minutes on the cross and required the best medical attention. Even so, two out of three victims died.
- Jesus was pierced by a spear, which would have killed him had he not already been dead. He was then left on the cross for some time, which would have been fatal. Finally he was left alone in a tomb for 36 hours or more without treatment.
- To survive such an ordeal in the modern day would require a fully equipped intensive care unit. In the first century no such care was available.
- Jesus would then have had to escape from the tomb, which would mean rolling away a stone weighing in excess of two tonnes (from the wrong side), then walking to Emmaus (7 miles on feet that had been pierced by nails).

The Executioners

The people who carried out the crucifixion would be the governor's bodyguard. Usually these would be veteran Roman legionaries on detachment (known as a *vexillation*) or Praetorian Guards sent from Rome with the governor. Such people would be highly disciplined and extremely experienced.

One response to this is the claim that the executioners did not carry out orders. This response notes the account in John's gospel (John 19:31-34) in which the executioners were ordered to speed up the process of crucifixion by breaking the victims' legs. They broke the legs of the other two victims, but when they came to Jesus they saw that he was already dead and hence did not break his legs. This is presented by the proponents of the swoon theory as an example of the indiscipline of the executioners.

In fact it is a sign of their experience. The soldiers at the execution were ordered to hasten the death of the victims; they did not need to carry this out in the case of Jesus as he was already dead. They were therefore acting in accordance with their orders. However, they were cautious and experienced men so they ensured that death had occurred by spearing Jesus in the side.

The spear-thrust must have been from below, as Jesus was up on a cross, as well as from the side. The passage tells us that "blood and water" came out of the wound. The "water" would be tissue fluid, which would have been clear; this would come from the lungs or from the pericardium (the membrane which surrounds the heart). In either case the spear thrust would have been a deep one. To reach the lungs it would have passed through the liver or spleen, and the result would have certainly have been fatal if Jesus had not already been dead.

The executioners were not inefficient.

Blood and Water

The other objection to the idea that Jesus was dead comes from the idea that both blood and water came out of the spear wound. Those who espouse the swoon theory may claim that dead men do not bleed and that therefore Jesus must have been alive.

This is a misunderstanding of the science of dead bodies. Dead bodies do not bleed from superficial cuts to muscle tissue, but some internal organs will bleed for quite a long time after death. One only needs to go to a butcher's shop to know that this is the case, or leave a piece of fresh liver in a bowl in a fridge to see that blood will come out.

Some objectors tell us that blood "gushed" from the wound; this is not what the text says. The text says that blood came out. It may have simply oozed from the wound. The physiology of such a wound would allow a trickle of blood to come from it.

The Basic Theory Continued

The swoon theory depends on the idea that Jesus survived the cross. This is not really tenable. The trauma caused by crucifixion is severe, and has several components.

- The stress on the victim's thorax is such that tissue fluid leaks into the lungs. If the victim is unconscious then they are unable to raise themselves on their legs and would die by internal drowning in a matter of 15 minutes or so. A leisurely bringing down from the cross would be guaranteed to kill the victim once he was unconscious.
- The victim's lungs would be filled with tissue fluid when they were taken down from the cross. This would mean that the victim would find breathing extremely difficult and it would be unlikely that a victim in such a condition would be able to regain consciousness unaided.

- The victim would be wounded in the hands and feet, and would be scourged before crucifixion; in the case of Jesus we know that this regular practice was definitely the case. These wounds would inevitably become infected, so that if the victim managed to survive crucifixion he would die of septicaemia soon afterwards, unless modern treatments were used.
- Jesus was pierced in the side with a spear. This would have caused death even if none of the other probable causes of death had taken effect.
- The main cause of death in crucifixion is the loss of fluid from the body, either by filling the lungs or by a critical reduction of the ability of the circulation of blood to bring oxygen and nutrients to the body tissue. Placing Jesus in a tomb for a protracted period would simply make this worse; he would have been unable to replace lost fluid, and would bleed more and lose more fluid if not already dead.

In other words, the survival of Jesus would have been difficult to have achieved even with a modern intensive care unit. It was certainly beyond Roman medicine to have caused it. Even with modern medicine it would be difficult to save the life of someone brought down from a cross in a comatose condition. At the time of Jesus it would have been impossible.

Supposing, however, that Jesus had managed to survive a minimum of 36 hours in the tomb without water, food or treatment. To escape he would have had to have moved the stone away from the door of the tomb, not pushing it sideways as intended but outwards from the inside. The stone would have weighed a minimum of two tonnes, and he would have had to have moved it with hands and feet pierced by nails and with a deep wound in his side. This is beyond impossible.

Finally, Jesus would have had to have appeared to have been miraculously raised, not only alive but more alive than ever before, untroubled by weakness, illness or wounds. He would have begun by convincing the women in Jerusalem and Peter, and would then have had to walk to Emmaus on feet pierced by nails and back again to Jerusalem.

The theory doesn't hold water!

The Baigent Version

Michael Baigent (Some of whose theories appear in the book "The Da Vinci Code") has a slight variant on the Swoon theory. In his version the survival of Jesus is a conspiracy with Pontius Pilate who changes his mind and has Jesus brought down from the cross soon after the crucifixion. Jesus was drugged with something in the vinegar put to him in a sponge on a spear and revived with myrrh and aloes.

Baigent claims that when the Greek word *σῶμα* (*soma* - translated body) is used in Matthew 27:59; Mark 15:43,45 and John 19:38,40 this indicates a living body, showing that Pilate knew that Jesus was alive. However the word is used for a dead body in Matthew 14:12 and Luke 17:37; there is no other Greek word for body in the New Testament.

The problem with this version of the theory is that it doesn't improve on the standard model. The evidence is lacking and the theory still can't account for the resurrection appearances or the later behaviour of the disciples.

It presumes that crucifixion was much less deadly than was really the case. Jesus still spent six hours on a cross, a situation which would damage most people to the point where they died later, even if they weren't dead when they were brought down. Rendering Jesus unconscious would guarantee his death very quickly, so a drug which placed him in a coma would also kill him. It also presumes that myrrh and aloes can bring someone back from the brink of certain death. If this is the case it is surprising that they aren't used in accident and emergency departments of hospitals!

The Muslim Version

The Muslim version of the swoon theory is followed by only a small proportion of Muslim scholars following the line of the Muslim apologist Ahmed Deedat but, as his organisation has produced much literature which is widely distributed, it is quite likely that one might encounter it in discussion with Muslims.

This version differs from other versions of the swoon theory in that it supposes that a miracle took place. Jesus was kept alive on the cross (albeit in a coma) by the power of God and was fully healed by a miracle in the tomb, so that he was able to appear with complete health and strength afterwards. Presumably there was also miraculous (or possibly angelic) help in releasing him from the tomb. The disciples then decided that Jesus had been dead and that he had been raised from the dead, as they had no knowledge of the miracle.

This theory presumes that there were at least two miracles (the miraculous preservation of Jesus' life in the face of certain death on the cross, and the miraculous recovery of his health on the third day). The standard theory of the resurrection supposes only one miracle, the raising of Jesus from the dead. Occam's razor is not infallible, but it should lead one to be suspicious of this version of the swoon theory.

There are two large problems with the Muslim variant. The first of these is lack of supporting evidence, the second is the words of Jesus to the disciples.

Lack of Evidence

There is no evidence of any kind, anywhere, that Jesus was crucified but did not die. The New Testament contains no hint of the required miracles. For six centuries there was no suggestion of any kind that Jesus survived crucifixion. Even the Qur'an does not support this theory - it says:

They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but so it was made to appear to them. (Q 4:157)

This passage is discussed in more detail lower down, but the point to be drawn from it here is that the Qur'an claims that the Jerusalem authorities did not *crucify* Jesus, not that he was crucified but that his life was miraculously preserved. When this was pointed out in a debate in South Africa the result was a Muslim on Muslim riot.

It is difficult to say more about the lack of evidence; how can one write about something which is completely absent? However, the absence of any hint of this option until the 20th century is significant in undermining the Muslim case. If there were two miracles here, why did none of the great Muslim theologians notice the fact?

The Words of Jesus

The other main problem with the Muslim theory is that the words of Jesus to his disciples concerning the resurrection are reported in the New Testament. Here is a selection:-

- 21 *From that time Jesus Christ began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.* (Matthew 16:21)
- 22 *And while they were gathering together in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men;*
- 23 *and they will kill him, and He will be raised on the third day." And they were deeply grieved.* (Matthew 17:22-23)

18 *“Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death,*
19 *and will deliver him to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify him, and on the third day He will be raised up.”* (Matthew 20:18–19)

5 *And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting at the right, wearing a white robe; and they were amazed.*

6 *And he said to them, “ Do not be amazed; you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who has been crucified. he has risen; He is not here; behold, here is the place where they laid him.*

7 *“But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘ He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see him, just as he said to you.’”* (Mark 16:5–7)

46 *and he [Jesus] said to them, “ Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day;* (Luke 24:46)

The point is that Jesus met his disciples on various occasions before he was raised to heaven and talked with them. He had plenty of opportunity to explain to them what had happened and the disciples had no reason to misreport what he said. The Qur’an backs the idea that the Gospels (or at least the words of Jesus in the Gospels) are inspired by God . Muslims should therefore be prepared to accept their authority in this matter.

3.3 The Substitute Theory

This is the theory that the person crucified was not Jesus at all, but was someone else who was impersonating Jesus, willingly or unwillingly. It is the more common of the two theories propounded by Muslims to account for the resurrection of Jesus.

The theory is based on a passage from the Qur’an:-

They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but so it was made to appear to them. (Q 4:157)

This passage is interpreted to mean that the Jerusalem authorities did not crucify Jesus because he was not crucified at all. However, as some imams will admit, there are several possible readings of this verse. For example, it is possible that the verse is simply voicing the idea that the Jerusalem authorities were not in control at the time, but someone else was.

Summary - the Substitute Theory

This is the theory that Jesus was not crucified himself but that someone else was crucified in his place.

- The theory requires a miracle which conceals the true identity of Jesus and makes the substitute look exactly like him.
- The theory doesn’t account for Jesus’ words to the Jewish authorities and Pilate.
- The theory doesn’t account for Jesus’ words about his death to his disciples.
- Above all, the theory doesn’t account for the empty tomb. Someone was raised from the dead. Why would God raise a traitor like Judas or an enemy from the Romans or the Jerusalem authorities? What happened to the raised person afterwards?

Muslims who espouse the Substitute Theory propose several possible alternative candidates for the person who was crucified. Some suggest that it was in fact Judas, others that it was a Roman soldier and yet others that it was a disciple who volunteered for the role. Whoever it was had their appearance altered by a miracle so that they looked exactly like Jesus, which is why neither the Jewish authorities nor the Romans (nor Jesus’ disciples or even his mother, who was present at the crucifixion) discovered the imposture.

The idea of a substitute is sometimes backed by noting that the Gospel records tell us that Jesus said very little in his defence, which they put down to confusion on the part of someone who had suddenly found themselves in the form of Jesus. However, while Jesus said little in his defence he was not entirely silent. When the High Priest asked him whether he was the Son of God, Jesus replied in the affirmative.

But He kept silent, and made no answer. Again the high priest was questioning Him, and saying to Him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" And Jesus said, "I am; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."
(Mark 14:61–62)

This is not the response of someone who is being crucified as a result of something which in his own mind would seem to be an inexplicable mix-up.

Later, before Pilate, Jesus makes a few very profound statements on his mission and the nature of truth. These are not the kind of words that could easily have been invented and would not have occurred to a substitute on the verge of horrible execution.

The largest problem, however, with the substitute theory, is that it does not account for the empty tomb. The body of the person who was crucified was laid in an empty tomb and on the first day of the week that tomb was empty. The person buried in it had been raised to life. The existence of the empty tomb is one of the best attested facts of the whole matter. Jewish sources refer to it for centuries afterwards. It was well known in the ancient world. Neither Jews nor Romans managed to produce the body of Jesus. The idea of the substitute completely fails to account for it.

3.4 Wrong Tomb Theories

These theories take account of the existence of an empty tomb, but attempt to account for them by indicating that the disciples became confused and went to the wrong tomb later on. When they found it empty they jumped to the conclusion that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

This is a rather unlikely theory from any point of view. The oddest thing about it is that if one walks into a cemetery and accidentally finds an empty grave one doesn't suppose that a resurrection has taken place. Instead one looks around for the correct grave. If the correct grave was empty and there was no other indication one would suspect that a human being had dug up the body for some unknown reason. Resurrection would not be one's first, second or even third thought.

This theory is not only psychologically wrong when presenting the events of the day on which the empty tomb was discovered, it is wrong from then on. It supposes that the disciples never found the right tomb, not even after years of living in Jerusalem. It supposes that no-one else ever found the tomb of Jesus either. This would include plenty of people who would have known.

Summary - Wrong Tomb Theories

These are theories which suppose that the disciples mistook an empty tomb for the tomb of Jesus and supposed therefore that he had been raised to life.

- They suppose that the women, and the disciples couldn't find the tomb.
- They suppose that they jumped to an incredible conclusion - that Jesus was risen.
- They suppose that no-one else ever discovered that the wrong tomb had been visited, not the disciples, not the family of Jesus, not the Jerusalem authorities. Even Joseph of Arimathea was incapable of finding his own tomb.
- They don't account for the resurrection appearances.

- There would have been gardeners and cemetery attendants who would have known which tomb in the area belonged to whom. Any one of these could have corrected the mistake but none of them did.
- The Jerusalem authorities must have taken an interest in the tomb of Jesus. After all, they put a guard on it, and were forced to explain its existence for centuries afterwards. The wrong tomb theory supposes that they made exactly the same mistake as the disciples and were unable to find the real tomb of Jesus.
- The theory even supposes that the owner of the tomb, Joseph of Arimathea, was unable to find his own tomb.

The theory also has the major flaw that a mistaken tomb doesn't produce resurrection appearances. The resurrection appearances of Jesus are the other completely incontrovertible pieces of evidence about the resurrection. The "wrong tomb" theory makes no attempt to account for them.

3.5 Hallucination Theories

These are theories which suggest that the disciples of Jesus had a collective hallucination in which they saw the risen Jesus. Various reasons are given for this hallucination, from drugs to hypnotism. However, all the hallucination theories are equally hard to square with the evidence.

The first problem with the hallucination theories is that the disciples all seem to have shared the same

general experience. Jesus appears, he speaks to the disciples, he answers questions, he is solid and he even eats food. The message he gives is the same to all the disciples. This is not what happens in the case of hallucinations, which are very specific to the individual concerned. When people suffer hallucinations these are rarely the same as the hallucinations seen by other people.

There is also the problem of coherence; the appearances of Jesus conformed to physical laws for the most part (the exception being that Jesus was able to get into a room where the doors were barred). Jesus spoke rationally and there were no other changes to reality. In hallucinations the laws of nature are generally ignored completely, people speak irrationally and other aspects of the scene change.

However, the most important reason for rejecting the hallucination theory is that no amount of hallucinations will produce an empty tomb. The empty tomb existed and the opponents of Christianity testify to its existence by their attempts to account for it. This would not have been the case if the resurrection of Jesus had merely been a hallucination of the disciples.

The Pauline Hallucination

An even weaker variant of the hallucination theory is the picture from some critics that Paul alone had a hallucination. This is more possible than that all the disciples had a hallucination. The problem of consistency is no longer an issue, and there was no physical contact in the case of Paul. Indeed it is possible that Paul saw a vision of Jesus rather than Jesus himself in person.

The theory then goes on to suggest that Paul, having had a vision of Jesus and being convinced that he had risen from the dead then returns to Jerusalem and convinces the other Apostles of the resurrection.

Hallucination Theories

These theories presume that the disciples hallucinated the appearances of Jesus after his death and concluded that he was alive.

- The reports of the appearances of Jesus are too coherent to be a hallucination.
- The hallucination theory doesn't account for the empty tomb.

This is, of course, impossible. If Jesus had not been raised then the disciples would have known where he was buried and the existence of the body of Jesus would have prevented them from believing in the resurrection. The Jewish authorities would not have had to account for the empty tomb and Christianity would not exist in any form.

3.6 The Allegorical Myth Theory

The final set of theories contains theories which presume that nothing like the resurrection actually occurred, but that the disciples of Jesus found the accounts of the resurrection to be a good allegorical method of expressing a spiritual truth, that Jesus in some way lived on through his teachings.

The problems with the theory are that it doesn't account for the behaviour of the disciples and other Christians through the persecutions that followed the crucifixion of Jesus. The early persecution of Christians is well attested and there can be no doubt that Christians not only suffered persecution but that their numbers continued to increase despite this. The disciples of Jesus, both those who remained from the original twelve and those who became followers of Jesus after Pentecost, suffered serious persecution, being arrested by the Jewish authorities soon after Pentecost and later put to death in horrible ways by the Roman authorities. One does not suffer in such a way for a convenient means of expressing a spiritual truth; one simply finds another myth that expresses the same truths. One cannot believe that much persecution would be necessary to stop the growing church in its tracks.

Allegorical Myth

These theories indicate that the resurrection of Jesus was a convenient myth which expresses truths about the teaching of Jesus.

- The myth does not explain why the Christians were prepared to suffer the persecutions that followed almost immediately on their proclaiming the resurrection.
- The myth theory fails to explain the empty tomb.

The point here is that the way that the early church suffered persecution is a powerful witness to the fact that its members were fully convinced that the resurrection was a real, literal, event. They were not simply people who had a philosophical idea expressed in a convenient myth.

A second problem with the allegorical myth theory is that it does not explain the empty tomb. The empty tomb is attested beyond any reasonable doubt; there was exactly such a tomb in Jerusalem. An allegorical myth cannot produce an empty tomb; simply believing that the resurrection of Jesus is a deep spiritual truth will not generate an empty tomb. The problem of the empty tomb gives the *coup de grace* to any allegorical myth theory.

The Critical Theory

The one group that has attempted to salvage the allegorical myth theory is the group of hyper-critics of the early 21st century. These critics have taken the most radical and unlikely theories of the 19th century critics and applied these without discrimination in an attempt to undermine Christianity. According to the hyper-critics, the idea of the resurrection is a late one, putting together ideas from earlier Christian teachers in possibly the late second century.

This version of the theory is even more implausible than the original version of the theory. The resurrection is attested by documents long before the time required by the theory. The resurrection is referred to by early writers such as Clement of Rome (writing 96AD) and Ignatius of Antioch (earliest years of the 2nd century). Writing in the early second century Tacitus describes the persecution of Christians in Rome in the reign of Nero, and other writers confirm this. The critical late myth theory is simply overwhelmed by the amount of evidence which shows that the resurrection was a major part of Christianity before the early 60s AD.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The facts of the resurrection are clear and easy to summarise:-

1. The process of crucifixion was simple, brutal and efficient. The evidence is that a victim was unlikely to survive the experience even if brought down after only a short time, and for a victim to remain on the cross as long as Jesus would be fatal. There is no doubt that if Jesus was crucified he was killed.
2. The tomb of Jesus was empty from the third day after the crucifixion onwards. There is simply too much evidence to conclude anything different. Neither Jews nor Romans were able to produce the body of Jesus after the start of the spread of Christianity, no claim was ever made that Jesus was still in a tomb, and Jewish sources continued to claim that the body of Jesus had been stolen by the disciples. Christianity began in Jerusalem; there would have been no possibility of this if the tomb of Jesus had still contained his body. These reactions would have been completely out of place if the body of Jesus had still been in the tomb.
3. More than 500 people were prepared to testify that they had met Jesus alive after his resurrection. These varied from his disciples who had travelled with him during his ministry (and some of whom were part of his extended family) to opponents such as Saul of Tarsus. In between there were large numbers of people who knew Jesus generally and James the brother of Jesus. The testimony of these witnesses was delivered in circumstances which invited persecution from the start. For those in Judea and Galilee the persecution of Christians was almost immediate. For those in the more extended Roman empire the persecution began in 64AD following the fire of Rome, but was intense and very severe.
4. No explanation other than the obvious one, that Jesus really was raised from the dead, fits the evidence.

Any attempt to explain what happened must fit the first three of these conditions. In fact none of them does. Any hallucination theory or an alternative myth theory doesn't produce an empty tomb, a swoon theory leaves problems with the witnesses and a substitute theory doesn't leave an empty tomb or witnesses.

The only reasonable conclusion that one can draw is that Jesus really was raised to life.

The resurrection of Jesus is a fact of history.

Bibliography and Source Material

Ancient Sources

Justin Martyr:

And though all the men of your nation knew the incidents in the life of Jonah, and though Christ said amongst you that He would give the sign of Jonah, exhorting you to repent of your wicked deeds at least after He rose again from the dead, and to mourn before God as did the Ninevites, in order that your nation and city might not be taken and destroyed, as they have been destroyed; yet you not only have not repented, after you learned that He rose from the dead, but, as I said before you have sent chosen and ordained men throughout all the world to proclaim that a godless and lawless heresy had sprung from one Jesus, a Galilean deceiver, whom we crucified, but his disciples stole him by night from the tomb, where he was laid when unfastened from the cross, and now deceive men by asserting that he has risen from the dead and ascended to heaven.

(Justin Martyr “Dialogue against Trypho the Jew” Chapter 108)

Josephus: Friends crucified at Jotapata.

And when I was sent by Titus Caesar with Cerealins, and a thousand horsemen, to a certain village called Thecoa, in order to know whether it were a place fit for a camp, as I came back, I saw many captives crucified, and remembered three of them as my former acquaintance. I was very sorry at this in my mind, and went with tears in my eyes to Titus, and told him of them; so he immediately commanded them to be taken down, and to have the greatest care taken of them, in order to their recovery; yet two of them died under the physician’s hands, while the third recovered.

(Josephus, Life :75)

Tacitus on Christianity

Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. (Tacitus Annals 15:44,45)

Suetonius on Nero’s Persecution

“During his reign many abuses were severely punished and put down, and no fewer new laws were made: a limit was set to expenditures; the public banquets were confined to a distribution of food; the sale of any kind of cooked viands in the taverns was forbidden, with the exception of pulse and vegetables, whereas before every sort of dainty was exposed for sale. Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition. He put an end to the diversions of the chariot drivers, who from immunity of long standing claimed the right of ranging at large and amusing themselves by cheating and robbing the people. The pantomimic actors and their partisans were banished from the city.” (Suetonius, Nero 16)

Pliny the Younger on Christianity

It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt. For who can better give guidance to my hesitation or inform my ignorance? I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offences it is the practice to punish or investigate, and to what extent. And I have been not a little hesitant as to whether there should be any distinction on account of age or no difference between the very young and the more mature; whether pardon is to be granted for repentance, or, if a man has once been a Christian, it does him no good to have ceased to be one; whether the name itself, even without offences, or only the offences associated with the name are to be punished.

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.

Soon accusations spread, as usually happens, because of the proceedings going on, and several incidents occurred. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ—none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do—these I thought should be discharged. Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food—but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.

I therefore postponed the investigation and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it. It is certainly quite clear that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found. Hence it is easy to imagine what a multitude of people can be reformed if an opportunity for repentance is afforded.

(Letter of Pliny the Younger to Trajan, 10:96,97)

Sulpicius Severus on Nero's Persecution

Is the meantime, the number of the Christians being now very large, it happened that Rome was destroyed by fire, while Nero was stationed at Antium. But the opinion of all cast the odium of causing the fire upon the emperor, and he was believed in this way to have sought for the glory of building a new city. And in fact, Nero could not by any means he tried escape from the charge that the fire had been caused by his orders. He therefore turned the accusation against the Christians, and the most cruel tortures were accordingly inflicted upon the innocent. Nay, even new kinds of death were invented, so that, being covered in the skins of wild beasts, they perished by being devoured by dogs, while many were crucified or slain by fire, and not a few were set apart for this purpose, that, when the day came to a close, they should be consumed to serve for light during the night. In this way, cruelty began to be manifested against the Christians. Afterwards, too, their religion was prohibited by laws which were enacted; and by edicts openly set forth it was proclaimed unlawful to be a Christian. At that time Paul and Peter were condemned to death, the former being beheaded with a sword, while Peter suffered crucifixion. (Sulpicius Severus, Sacred History 29).

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