

HISTORICITY OF THE GOSPELS

GOOD QUESTION

How does the defense of the historicity of the Gospels relate to the subject of Jesus Christ's resurrection?

ANSWER

Our main source for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the Gospels. Is the resurrection not based on the belief that the Gospels are historically true and God's Word?

**Why do Christians
believe the Gospels are
historically true and
God's Word?**

ANSWER

- The Christian believes that the Gospels are historically trustworthy because they are inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16) and are, therefore, true because God is true.
- The Spirit of God testifies to the truthfulness of the Gospels in the believer's heart (Matt 11:25; 16:17).

ALSO SOME MIGHT ASK

Is there any other evidence that the Gospels are true and so give evidence that the resurrection is true?

There is strong historical evidence that the Gospels are true and thus also is the resurrection.

HISTORICITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AND, IN PARTICULAR, THE GOSPELS

How might we see the historicity of the
Gospels and so the resurrection?

THREE GENERAL TESTS FOR HISTORICITY OF ANY ANCIENT DOCUMENT

- Bibliographical Test
 - Internal Test
 - External Test

FIRST TEST - BIBLIOGRAPHICAL TEST

1. Quantity of manuscripts
2. Earliest copies
3. Early fathers quotations or allusions

QUANTITY OF MANUSCRIPTS

- 5795 NT Greek copies
 - 1757 Homer
- 340 Demosthenes copies
 - 33 Tacitus copies
 - 210 Plato copies
 - 200 Pliny copies
- 83+ Herodotus copies

EARLIEST COPIES OF NT

- John Rylands manuscript (a piece of John's Gospel 18:31-33, 37-38) written 30-40 years after original manuscript around 125-130 AD
- Chester Beatty manuscript (most of NT) written within 140-200 years of the originals
- Sinaiticus and Vaticanus manuscripts (all NT) written 300 years after originals around 320-350 AD

EARLIEST COPIES OF OTHER ANCIENT LITERATURE

- Tacitus (Roman History) written over 750 years after original
- Plato (Tetralogies) written 1300 years after original
- Herodotus (Historian) written 1300 years after original
- Demosthenes (Greek statesman and Orator) written 1100 years after original

COMPARISON OF ANCIENT WORKS WITH NT COMPILED BY CLAY JONES

Author	Book	Date	Earliest MSS	Time Gap	# of MSS
Homer	<i>Illiad</i>	800 BC	c. 400 BC	400	1,757
Herodotus	<i>History</i>	480-425 BC	10th C	1,350	83
Sophocles	<i>Plays</i>	496-406 BC	1,000 AD	1,400	193
Plato	<i>Tetrolgies</i>	400 BC	895	1,300	210
Caesar	<i>Gallic Wars</i>	100-44 BC	9th C	950	251
Livy	<i>Hist Rome</i>	59BC- 17AD	Early 5th C	400	150
Tacitus	<i>Annals</i>	100 AD	850-1050 AD	750-950	33
Pliny	<i>Nat History</i>	49-79 AD	5th C	400	200
Thucydides	<i>History</i>	460-400 BC	3rd C BC	200	96
Demos- thenes	<i>Speeches</i>	300 BC	9th-10th AD	1,100	340
NT		50-100 AD	130 AD	40	5, 795

New Testament Manuscripts

Name	Books	Original Date of Autograph	Earliest Date of Copy	Gap from Original
John Rylands Fragment (P52)	Selection of the gospel of John, includes John 18:31–33, 37–38 and is considered the oldest New Testament fragment known.	AD 85–100	AD 125	25–40 years
Chester Beatty Papyri (P45, 46, 47)	Contains portions of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Pauline epistles, and the book of Revelation.	AD 50–100	AD 200–300	100–250 years
Bodmer Papyri (P66, 72, 75)	Substantial portions of the gospel of John and the earliest copy of 1 and 2 Peter and Jude.	AD 50–70	AD 175–250	105–200 years
Codex Vaticanus (B)	Contains most of the Greek Old Testament and the majority of the New Testament.	AD 50–100	AD 325	225–275 years
Codex Sinaiticus (a)	Earliest copy of a complete New Testament except for several verses: Mark 16 and John 7 and 8. Also includes over half the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint, LXX).	AD 50–100	AD 350	250–300 years
Codex Alexandrinus (A)	Written in uncial Greek script, Alexandrinus possesses the entire Old Testament and most of the New.	AD 50–100	5th century AD	350–400 years
Codex Ephraemi (C)	Ephraemi was erased in the 12th century and then restored by Constantine Tischendorf in the 19th century. It contains portions of every book in the New Testament except 2 Thessalonians and 2 John.	AD 50–100	AD 450	350–400 years
Codex Bezae (D)	The manuscript is a rare Greek and Latin bilingual text of portions of the Gospels, Acts, and 3 John 11–15; 3 John is in Latin only.	AD 50–65	5th–6th centuries AD	400–500 years
Magdalen Papyrus	Small fragment of Matthew 26:7–8, 10, 14–15. German scholar Carsten Thiede argued for middle to late 1st century. If correct, the fragment would be the oldest manuscript of the New Testament.	AD 40–65	AD 75–200	10–160 years
Codex Claramontanus (D2)	Bilingual Greek/Latin manuscript of the Pauline Epistles, including Hebrews.	AD 50–64	6th century AD	500 years
Codex Washingtonianus	Contains the four Gospels.	AD 50–100	4th–5th centuries AD	250–400 years

EARLY FATHERS

- Those who wrote within 200 years or so of the apostles.
- There are 32,000 citations of the NT in the Fathers (Clement, Ignatius, Irenaeus, Justin, Tertullian, etc); virtually all of the NT found in them.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THESE COPIES? ARE
THEY FAITHFUL TO THE ORIGINAL?

Answer

Yes

WHEN WE COMPARE THE 5700 MANUSCRIPTS WE FIND:

- The differences are mainly minor variations in spelling, grammar and style, accidental omission or duplication of words or phrases.
- Only 400 have any real bearing on the meaning of a passage (most are noted in footnotes/margins in modern Bibles).

-
- 97-99% of the NT can be reconstructed beyond any reasonable doubt. Biblical textual critics use methods to compare the manuscripts (time, geography) to get at the originals.
 - No doctrine is founded solely on disputed passages.

CONCLUSION

- The Text of the NT is historically faithful to the original writing and is better than any other ancient texts using the bibliographical test.

SECOND TEST - INTERNAL TEST

Was the NT history written by eyewitnesses?

Yes

Luke 1:1-4, John, Matthew. Strong evidence that the Synoptics were written in the 60s, John in 90s.

**But could these so-called
eyewitnesses have fabricated
the Gospels?**

ANSWERS

- If fabricated why use Luke and Mark who weren't disciples? Why not use Peter and James?
- NT witnesses had little to gain by lying and much to lose as Jews in a Jewish community.
- They all died as martyrs, except John was tortured and exiled.

-
- There is no refutation of eyewitness accounts by critics of the time.
 - The Gospels give a consistent history of Jesus' life from the beginning.
 - The disciples as Jews were trained in Jewish oral tradition. They took seriously the recording of sacred history; they were guardians of the tradition, e.g., 1 Cor. 15:3-8.

CRAIG BLOMBERG WRITES:

“Studying the oral prehistory of the Gospel forms actually reinforces the likelihood that many of the traditions were quite carefully preserved..., the ancient Mediterranean cultures, particularly Judaism, relied heavily on memorization of sacred traditions....To the extent that Jesus’ disciples venerated his teachings and viewed their master as at the very least a prophet from God, one could have expected them to take great care in the oral transmission of his instruction. Up to 90% of his teaching was poetic in structure and memorable inform. Both Jewish and Greco-Roman sources attest to the use of note-taking in a kind of shorthand to record the key thoughts a teacher gave in his public discourse....”

DO WE FIND ANY HELP FROM THE N.T. LETTERS?

- Paul's letters were written between 49-65 AD. In them we have details of the life of Jesus, supporting the historicity of the Gospels only 20 to 30 years after Jesus death and resurrection.

TRUTHS ABOUT JESUS FROM PAUL'S LETTERS

- 1) Jesus was a descendant of Abraham the patriarch.
- 2) Jesus was a direct descendant of King David and so the Messiah of God
- 3) Jesus was born of a woman which suggests he knew of the virgin birth of Christ
- 4) Jesus was born and lived in poverty.
- 5) Jesus was born under the Jewish law and lived under it
- 6) Jesus had a brother named James and other unnamed brothers
- 7) His lifestyle was one of humility and meekness
- 8) He ministered primarily to Israel and the Jews.
- 9) He washed the feet of the disciples
- 10) He instituted a memorial meal on the night he was betrayed
- 11) He was cruelly treated at the time.

-
- 12) He gave testimony before Pontius Pilate
 - 13) He was killed by the Jews of Judea
 - 14) He was buried.
 - 15) He was raised on the third day and was seen alive on various occasions by hundreds of people, many of whom were still alive in his day.
 - 16) Jesus is God
 - 17) Jesus had twelve disciples

 - All of these details are taken for granted in a time when they could be challenged.

IN ADDITION

- We have great eyewitness evidence for His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3-9).
- Paul's letters contain pre-Pauline hymns or creeds of Jesus which date shortly after Jesus death and resurrection, e.g., Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-18; 1 Cor. 15:3-8. These creeds or hymns are regarded as tradition passed down from the time of Jesus (1 Cor. 11:23-25; 15:3-8).

NUMEROUS MARKS OF HISTORICITY

- The form of Jesus' sayings - 90% of His teaching was poetic in structure and memorable in form (Blomberg). Different from Matthew's, Mark's, Luke's prose.
- Distinctive features in His sayings, e.g., Amen, Abba, Aramaisms, use of parables. They stand out in the Gospel writer's prose.

-
- Irrelevant material in the Gospels to the early church's Gentile situation, e.g., use of phrases "kingdom of God", "Son of Man"; controversies with the Pharisees (Sabbath keeping); His comments on Corban.
 - How could they have been written later?

-
- Lack of relevant material to support issues the early church had to deal with, e.g., omission of useful Pauline statements attributed to the Lord, e.g. sayings by Jesus on circumcision, baptism, charismatic gifts, food laws, Gentile missions, church-state relations, church polity.

-
- Counter productive features are given in the Gospels, e.g., Jesus attitude toward legalism, fasting, divorce, women, death on the cross, portrayal of disciples, hard sayings, His anger.
 - These would not encourage the promotion of the faith in that culture.

-
- The NT was written by nine different people each with their own distinct purpose but in essential theological agreement - some quite independent of each other, e.g., John and Mark, Paul and James

**Objection: What about
discrepancies among the
Gospels?**

ANSWERS

- Variation of peripheral material in the ancient world was normal.
- Ancient historians did not quote verbatim but were to be faithful to the gist of what the person said .

-
- Ancient historians always wrote with a purpose not dispassionately as historians since the 19th century have been taught. This would have been pointless to the ancients. Historicity and theology/philosophy were not mutually exclusive.

-
- Concerning the lack of extra-biblical testimony of Jesus we need to remember that ancient writers almost exclusively wrote about political or military leaders and their doings, or focussed on fully-accredited “upper crust” religious or philosophical leaders: Jesus was neither of these in the inconsequential Roman province of Palestine
 - For answers to specific discrepancies see Gleason Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* or Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*

THIRD TEST - EXTERNAL TEST

Includes such things as:

- Extrabiblical writings
 - Archeology

ARCHEOLOGY

Some examples include:

- Inscription referring to Pilate in Caesarea during the time of Tiberius,
 - Jacob's well at Sychar,
- Five porticoes of the pool of Bethesda by the Sheep Gate,
 - The pool of Siloam,
 - Solomon's porch
- Gallio inscription (Acts 18)
- Erastus Inscription (Rom 16)
 - Yohanan crucifixion

These findings corroborate the historicity of the Gospels.

EXTRABIBLICAL EVIDENCE

- Apostolic Fathers
- Roman Historians
- Jewish Historians and Rabbis

APOSTOLIC FATHERS

- Polycarp, Ignatius, Papias, Clement of Rome wrote between 96 and 125 AD.

ROMAN HISTORIANS

- Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, Suetonius, inscription in Pompeii (110-120 AD)

JEWISH HISTORIANS AND RABBIS

- Josephus, Rabbi Eliezer,
Benediction Twelve.

WHAT CAN BE ESTABLISHED ABOUT JESUS FROM NON-CHRISTIAN EXTRABIBLICAL SOURCES?

- Jesus Christ was executed in Judea during the period when Tiberius was emperor and Pontius Pilate was governor (Tacitus)
- The movement spread from Judea to Rome (Tacitus)
- Jesus claimed to be God and that he would depart and return (Eliezer)
- His followers worshiped him as a god (Pliny)
- He was called the Christ (Josephus)
- His followers were called Christians (Pliny, Tacitus)
- They were numerous in Bythinia and Rome (Tacitus, Pliny)
- It was a world wide movement (Eliezer)
- His brother was James (Josephus)

SO WHAT CAN WE CONCLUDE, USING THESE TESTS, ABOUT THE HISTORICITY OF THE GOSPELS?

- The probability of the truth about Jesus and His resurrection in them is high.
- If we dismiss its historicity we would have to dismiss almost all historical documents of ancient history.

R.T. FRANCE WRITES:

All this, and much more, comes to us from the Gospels as a compelling portrait of a real man in the real world of first-century Palestine, and yet one who so far transcended his environment that his followers soon learned to see him as more than a man. It is a portrait which we have, in strictly historical terms, no reason to doubt; it is the philosophical and theological implications which cause many to question whether things can really have been as the Gospels present them. But we have ... sufficient reason to be confident that the Gospels not only claim to be presenting fact rather than fiction, but also, where they can be checked, carry conviction as the work of responsible and well-informed writers.

The basic divide among interpreters of the Gospels is not between those who are or are not open to the results of historical investigation so much as between those whose philosophical/theological viewpoint allows them to accept the testimony of the Gospels, together with the factuality of those records in which it is enshrined, and those for whom no amount of historical testimony would be allowed to substantiate what is antecedently labeled as a “mythical” account of events (*The Evidence for Jesus*).

-
- What about the Historicity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ?

HABERMAS' MINIMAL FACTS

- 1) that Jesus *died by crucifixion*;
- 2) that very soon afterwards, his followers had *real experiences* that they thought were actual appearances of the risen Jesus;
- 3) that their lives were *transformed* as a result, even to the point of being willing to die specifically for their faith in the resurrection message;
- 4) that these things were *taught very early*, soon after the crucifixion;
- 5) that *James*, Jesus' unbelieving brother, became a Christian due to his own experience that he thought was the resurrected Christ; and
- 6) that the Christian persecutor *Paul* (formerly Saul of Tarsus) also became a believer after a similar experience.
- 7) the tomb was empty

MINIMAL FACT ONE

- Jesus was dead - beatings prior to crucifixion, crucifixion, spear in the side, Romans would not let a person down from the cross unless he were dead (no fainting, swooning, etc.).
- Jesus' crucifixion is corroborated by Josephus, Lucian of Samosata and Tacitus
- Most scholars today do not debate the fact that Jesus died on the cross

MINIMAL FACT TWO

- Jesus' disciples believed that he rose from the dead and appeared to them. Eyewitnesses accounts of Jesus alive include:
 - a) diversity - a person, a group, women, a crowd, 500 at one time;
 - b) the use of women as witnesses in that culture (if the resurrection was conjured up by the disciples they wouldn't use women as first witnesses);

MINIMAL FACT THREE

- After the crucifixion, the disciples were in a state of fear, confusion and bewilderment – death for the Messiah was contrary to Jewish concepts of Messiah (they would not have hatched a plan to steal the body away). Stealing the body would mean that:
 - a) they would face hardship and death for a known lie;
 - b) they, as Jewish theists, would risk damnation for a lie;
 - c) they would be rejected by their Jewish community for a lie

-
- However, from their state of fear and bewilderment after Jesus' death, their lives were *transformed* into bold witnesses of the resurrection, even willing to die specifically for their faith in the resurrection message;

-
- The eyewitnesses were changed and transformed - all the disciples were persecuted for their faith and eleven of them died as martyrs - the disciples spread out over the world to preach Jesus as the Risen Lord

MINIMAL FACT FOUR

- The early written or oral tradition of the resurrection (Mark 16:1-8; 1 Cor. 15:3-8:Acts 1-12 speeches).

MINIMAL FACTS FIVE AND SIX

- James (Jesus' brother), and Paul were antagonistic and unbelieving until they met the resurrected Christ; faced rejection by their culture for teaching that:
 - Jesus as God,
 - salvation by Christ alone apart from works of the law including circumcision,
 - faith for Gentiles,
 - no need for sacrifices,
 - crucified Messiah

Both of them were martyred for their belief in the crucified and risen Jesus.

MINIMAL FACT SEVEN

- The tomb was empty:
 - Jesus was buried in a new solid rock tomb (archaeology verifies this type of tomb existed in first-century Palestine)
 - It was protected from intrusion. There were Roman guards (16) protecting it from being opened (fear of punishment, even death, for failure to do their duty). In addition, a large stone was moved.
 - Conclusion: the disciples could not have stolen the body.

-
- The tomb was empty. The tomb was well known because of Joseph of Arimathea, and therefore, easy to verify if it was empty (no hallucination theory, no wrong tomb theory, no shallow grave theory)

Theories on the Resurrection of Jesus Christ

I. Occupied Tomb Theories

Theory	Explanation	Refutation
Unknown Tomb Charles A. Guignebert	The body of Jesus was buried in a common pit grave unknown to His disciples. Therefore, the resurrection account arose out of the ignorance as to the whereabouts of the body.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Not all criminals were buried in a common pit. 2. The New Testament gives Joseph of Arimathea as a witness to the burial in a specific family tomb. 3. The women saw the body being prepared for burial and knew the tomb's location. 4. The Romans knew where the tomb was, for they stationed a guard there.
Wrong Tomb Kirsopp Lake	The women came to the wrong tomb, for there were many similar tombs in Jerusalem. They found an open tomb and a young man who denied that this was Jesus' tomb. The frightened women mistakenly identified the man as an angel and fled.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The women did not come looking for an open tomb, but for a sealed one. They would surely bypass the open tomb if they were unsure of the exact location of the correct tomb. 2. The man at the tomb not only said, "He is not here," but also, "He is risen." 3. The women had noted the tomb's location seventy-two hours earlier. 4. The Jews, Romans, and Joseph of Arimathea knew the location of the tomb and could easily have identified it as proof against any resurrection.
Legend Early Form Critics 18th and 19th centuries	The resurrection was a fabrication to meet the church's needs that evolved over a lengthy period to vindicate a leader long since dead.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recent historical criticism has shown that the resurrection stories are of mid-1st century origin. 2. Paul, in 1 Corinthians (AD 55), speaks of the resurrection as a fact and points to 500 eyewitnesses, many of whom were still alive for anyone to question.
Spiritual Resurrection Gnostics Jehovah's Witnesses	Jesus' spirit was resurrected, though His body remained dead.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This denies the Jewish understanding of resurrection (bodily, not spiritually). 2. Christ ate and was touched and handled. 3. To prove the resurrection false, the Jews could have shown the occupied tomb to their fellow Jews.
Hallucination Agnostics	The disciples and followers of Jesus were so emotionally involved with Jesus' messianic expectation that their minds projected hallucinations of the risen Lord.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Could more than 500 people, in different situations, with differing degrees of commitment to Jesus, with different understandings of Jesus' teachings, all have had hallucinations? 2. Many appearances occurred to more than one person. Such simultaneous illusions are unlikely. 3. The disciples were not expecting Christ's resurrection. They viewed His death as final. 4. The Jews could have pointed to the occupied tomb to prove them false.

II. Unoccupied Tomb Theories

<p>Passover Plot Hugh Schönfield</p>	<p>Jesus planned to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies of both suffering servant and ruling king through a mock death and resurrection. Joseph of Arimathea and a mysterious "young man" were coconspirators. The plot went bad when the soldier speared Jesus, who later died. The "risen Lord" was the young man.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The guard posted at the tomb is ignored in Schönfield's theory. 2. The basis of the theory is faulty. The resurrection myths on which Jesus supposedly based His plot were not evident until the 4th century AD. 3. Such a "resurrection" could not account for the dramatic change in the disciples. 4. All but four biblical witnesses are accounted for, especially the 500 eyewitnesses whom Paul spoke of as still living. 5. The whole plot of enduring crucifixion (and in doing so, alienating His national supporters) seems unlikely.
<p>Resuscitation (Swoon) 18th century Rationalists</p>	<p>Jesus did not die on the cross; He fainted from exhaustion. The cold temperature and spices revived Him.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Medical science has proved that Jesus could not have survived the scourging and crucifixion.¹ 2. Could this nearly dead Jesus make an impression as the risen Lord?
<p>Body Stolen by the Disciples Early Jewish leaders' account</p>	<p>The disciples stole the body while the guards were sleeping.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. If the guards were sleeping, how did they know that the disciples stole the body? 2. Severe penalties, even death, would be imposed for sleeping on duty. The highly disciplined guards would not have slept, certainly not every single one. 3. There is no way that the disciples could possibly have overcome the guard. 4. It is preposterous to believe that the disciples died for a lie that they created.
<p>Existential Resurrection Rudolf Bultmann</p>	<p>A historical resurrection will never be proved, but it is not necessary. The Christ of faith need not be bound to the historical Jesus. Rather, Christ is raised in our hearts.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The early disciples were convinced by historical events, observable phenomena, not on wishful thinking or hallucination or theory. They based their faith on what they saw and what they were told by the risen Jesus (Luke 24:33-53; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8).