

UNDERSTANDING THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST

Approaching the Bible

In order to examine the evidence for the resurrection we must place ourselves in the historical situation. The events surrounding the life and death of Christ didn't occur at a place where we can gain no knowledge of them. Rather, they occurred in history, on earth, and were recorded by men who witnessed the events.

When we approach an ancient document such as the Bible or another ancient document such as Tacitus' History of Rome (115 A.D.) we must come to the text with an understanding attitude. This does not mean that we assume the text to be 100 per cent true. But we need to be able to ask the right questions. In the first century much less writing took place than does in our time. Many were illiterate, few could read, much less write, and paper or parchment (leather) to write on was expensive. The incentive to fabricate was not as it is today. In other words, The National Enquirer, could never have been published at this time. A high regard was given to writing and the luxury to create fictional material was virtually non-existent, for instance there was no such thing as a novel or a newspaper, although there were artistic writings such as poetry. The Bible however, is a much different kind of literature. It was not written as a poem or story, although it also contains poetry. It was for the most part written as history and is intended to communicate truth throughout.

The gospel of Luke begins:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word [Paul, Peter, etc] have handed them down to us, it seemed fitting for me as well,

having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught. (Lk 1:1-4)

Luke was not an apostle, he was however the companion of Paul and probably dictated some of his letters. Luke tells us that he is writing in consecutive order because the other gospels, Matthew, Mark and John, are written more by topic than chronologically.

How do we know anything historically? There is no "scientific" proof that Lincoln was the president. We cannot recreate him in a laboratory or bring him back to life. We cannot reproduce the experiment. We cannot calculate an equation that tells us that he was. But we can assert with a high degree of probability that Lincoln was indeed our president and was assassinated in 1865. We do this by appealing to historical evidence. Many people saw Lincoln. We have some of his writings and even his picture, not to mention his likeness on our pennies. But none of this "proves", in a scientific sense, that Lincoln ever lived or was the president.

The kind of evidence used in historical research is the same kind as that used in a court of law. In a courtroom case certain kinds of evidences are appealed to in order to determine what exactly happened, eyewitnesses are questioned, motives are examined, and physical evidence is scrutinized such as fingerprints or journal writings.

It is the same kind of evidence that we appeal to in order to establish Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Granted, the evidence is not as great as that for Lincoln, nor as recent. But it is better evidence than we have that Plato ever lived, or Homer, or many historical figures that we take for granted.

Historical Evidence Outside of the Bible

Often people are uncertain about the existence of Christ, but few scholars would disagree that a man named Jesus lived roughly between 2 BC and about 33 AD. History documents that this man was not a myth but a real person and the historical evidence for this is excellent. For instance, the Roman historian Tacitus, writing in about 115 A.D., records the events surrounding Emperor Nero in July of A.D. 64. After the fire that destroyed much of Rome, Nero was blamed for being responsible:

Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus [Christ], 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 Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition [Christ's resurrection] 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 center and become popular. (Bettenson, p. 2)

In about 112 A.D. the Roman governor of what is now northern Turkey wrote to Emperor Trajan regarding the Christians in his district:

"I was never present at any trial of Christians; therefore I do not know what are the customary penalties or investigations, and what limits are observed. . . whether those who recant should be pardoned. . . whether the name itself, even if innocent of crime, should be punished, or only the crimes attaching to that name. . . . Meanwhile, this is the course that I have adopted in the case of those brought before me as Christians. I ask them if they are Christians. If they admit it I repeat the question a second and a third time, threatening capital punishment; if they persist I sentence them to death. For I do not doubt that, whatever kind of crime it may be to which they have confessed, their pertinacity and inflexible obstinacy should certainly be punished. . . the very fact of my dealing with the question led to a wider spread of the charge, and a great variety of cases were brought before me. An anonymous pamphlet was issued, containing many names. All who denied that they were or had been Christians I considered should be discharged, because they called upon the gods at my dictation and did reverence. . . and especially because they cursed Christ, a thing which it is said, genuine Christians cannot be induced to do." (Bettenson, p. 3)

These passages indicate that Christianity was wide spread in the Roman empire within 80 years of Christ's death. Again, these are eyewitness accounts, not historians looking back years later.

The popular historian Will Durant, himself not a Christian, wrote concerning Christ's historical validity, "The denial of that existence seems never to have occurred even to the bitterest gentile or Jewish opponents of nascent Christianity" (Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, vol. 3, p. 555). And again, "That a few simple men should in one generation have invented so powerful and appealing a personality, so lofty an ethic and so inspiring a vision of human brotherhood, would be a miracle far more incredible than any recorded in the Gospels" (*Ibid.*, p. 557).

It is a substantial thing that an historian who spends his life considering historical facts should affirm the reality of Christ's existence as well as the rapid growth of the early movement.

The Jewish historian Josephus, writing for the Roman government in the 70's A.D. records some incidental things regarding Christ and the church. He confirms that John the Baptist died at the hand of Herod (this same incident is recorded in the gospels) as well as the death of, "The brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James. . . he delivered them to be stoned" (Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, Book XVIII, ch. V, p. 20; Book XX, ch. IX, p. 140). Again we have sources external to the Bible that demonstrate the historical reliability of the text. Josephus, who was probably alive during the time of Christ, is attesting to the reality of his existence. What this also tells us is that within 40 years of Christ's death, the knowledge of who he was was widespread enough that Josephus could reference him and expect his readers to know exactly who he was talking about.

The Accuracy of the Biblical Records

The question often arises when discussing the biblical records, "How can a document that has been copied over and over possibly be reliable? Everyone knows there are tons of errors in it." While it is true that the documents have been copied many times, we often have misconceptions about how they were transmitted. All ancient documents were copied by hand before the advent of the printing press in the 16th century. Great care was exercised in reproducing these manuscripts. When we think of copying manuscripts we often assume that one copy was made and then another from that and another from that and so on, each replacing the copy it was reproduced from. This is not how manuscripts copying worked. Copyists were usually working from one or two documents that were very old. They would make many copies of their source copy, all the while preserving their source and comparing the copies they have made.

Josephus tells how the Jews copied the Old Testament. "We have given practical proof of our reverence for our own Scriptures. For although such long ages have now passed, no one has ventured either to add, or to remove, or to alter a syllable; and it is an instinct with every Jew, from the day of his birth, to regard them as the decrees of God, to abide by them, and, if need be, cheerfully to die for them" (Against Apion, Book I, sec., 8, p. 158). Josephus statement is no exaggeration. The Jewish copyists knew exactly how many letters where in every line of every book and how many times each

word occurred in each book. This enabled them to check for errors (Shelly, Prepare to Answer, p. 133). The Jews believed that adding any mistake to the Scriptures would be punishable by Hell. This is not like the modern secretary who has many letters to type and must work hard to keep their job, and consequently feels that mistakes are inevitable. Great care is exercised with scriptures when someone holds a conviction such as this.

But even with the great amount of care exercised in copying, errors have crept into the manuscripts. No one questions that spelling errors, misplaced letters, and word omissions have occurred. What is not true is that these errors have gradually built up over time so that our copies look nothing like the originals. This view was commonly held until recently.

In 1947 the accuracy of these documents was confirmed by the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls were found in caves in the desert near the Dead Sea by a shepherd boy. Before the discovery of these scrolls, the earliest Old Testament manuscripts we had were from about 980 A.D. The manuscripts discovered in the caves dated from 250 B.C. to shortly after the time of Christ. In careful comparison of the manuscripts it was confirmed that the copies we had were almost precisely the same as those which date over 1000 years earlier. Old Testament scholar Gleason Archer said that even though there is such a difference in dates of the manuscripts, "they proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 per cent of the text. The 5 per cent of variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling." No other historical literature has been so carefully preserved and historically confirmed.

When we come to the New Testament we see a similar phenomenon. There are over 5,000 Greek New Testament manuscripts in existence. This is by far more than any other historical documents, which usually have maybe a dozen copies from very late dates. The New Testament manuscripts are many and old and they are spread over a wide geographical area. What this enables the New Testament historian to do is collect manuscripts from Jerusalem and Egypt and Syria and other places and compare them for variations. And variations do exist, but as with the Old Testament they are relatively few and rarely important to the meaning of the text. What these manuscripts demonstrate is that different families of texts existed very early that were copied from the original or good copies of the original. This allows us to trace the manuscripts back to the source as one would follow the branches of a tree to get to the trunk. Aside from the manuscripts themselves, "virtually the entire New Testament could be reproduced from citations contained in the works of the early church fathers. There are some thirty-two thousand citations in the writings of the Fathers prior to the Council of Nicea (325)" (Moreland, Scaling the Secular City, p. 136).

There is one more important feature of the Bible to examine before we move to the evidence of Christ's resurrection, that is their historical reliability. Unfortunately I cannot go into the history of this topic. Many critics have challenged the historical accuracy of the Bible and have been proved wrong. Let me provide one example. Historians questioned the accuracy of the accounts surrounded Pontius Pilate's crucifixion of Jesus. Pilate found nothing wrong with him and was reluctant to crucify an innocent man. The Jews put pressure on Pilate saying that if you refuse this "you are no friend of Caesar" (John 19:12). At which point Pilate gave in to the Jews. This did not fit any historical records we had of Pilate who was a cruel and dominating man, not likely to give in to a group of Jews whom he hated. Many believed that this account was historically inaccurate because of the way in which it portrayed Pilate.

Later it was discovered that Pilate had been appointed by a man named Sejanus who was plotting to overthrow Caesar. Sejanus was executed along with many of his appointees (Delashmutt, Sejanus, p. 55, 56). What this demonstrated was that Pilate was in no position to get in trouble with Rome. The Jews had him in a tight place. If word returned to Rome that Jerusalem was in rebellion, Pilate would be the first to go. The gospel account was confirmed as accurate.

Many facts recorded in the Bible have been challenged with the same result, later archeology confirms the reliability of the biblical records down to the smallest detail. A respected Jewish archaeologist has claimed that, "It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference" (Shelly, p. 103). This is a strong statement for any archaeologist to make because if it were not true, he would quickly be condemned in his own field.

The conclusion that one draws from this material is that the Bible is a reliable historical document. Its accuracy has been proved numerous times. Its historical inaccuracy has never been demonstrated. So that when we approach the Bible, we do so with a good amount of confidence that what it records actually happened. If this is true, then we need to come to terms about what the Bible claims. We cannot dismiss it out of hand because we were not there, regardless of the difficulty of what is said.

Miracles and Modern Man

This brings us to the issue of miracles. The Bible records many miracles occurring over a period of more than 4000 years. It is easy to get the misconception that miracles

were common occurrences in the biblical times. This is not the case. It is the nature of history to record events out of the ordinary. The Bible is no exception. The very reason that these things were recorded is because they were unusual occurrences of supernatural activity.

We must be careful, however, when we approach the Bible to be willing to entertain the idea that something outside of what we see, hear, and feel could exist. All of these sensory experiences are in the realm of science. But science, which deals with the laws of nature, can say nothing of the supernatural. Science has its limits -- especially in the area of the miraculous -- because miracles are by definition non-repeatable, non-natural, and non-ordinary events. If miracles exist and if they function as I've described, then we would not expect everyone to have experienced a miracle in their lifetime.

We cannot rule out miracles because we have never personally witnessed one. In other words it is wrong to reason that a miracle cannot occur on logical grounds (by reason alone) because one has never seen one (something that can only be validated by experience). It is certainly possible that supernatural events have indeed taken place throughout the history of mankind. And it is better to come with an attitude that maintains that it might be possible and with reliable witnesses we may be convinced that something supernatural has taken place. Let's leave this question open.

Those who lived a long time ago were not necessarily more gullible than we are. We commonly assume that ancient peoples believed miracles occurred regularly. This is not true in the sense that we use the term miracle. They certainly wouldn't have been able to explain as much about the natural world as we can. But this does not make them ignorant individuals willing to believe any abnormal event is a supernatural occurrence. They were awed by things that we can explain using the "laws of nature." But they were also aware of a difference between things that occurred naturally, such as lightning, and those which didn't, such as people rising from the dead. They were men who lived day to day without these amazing experiences just as we do.

The Biblical Record

At this point I would like to move on to the direct evidences for the resurrection of Christ. There are a certain number of historical facts that we can glean from the biblical records. They are: Jesus died by crucifixion, he was buried in a tomb known to the authorities, his disciples were distraught because of his death, his tomb was found

empty, the disciples believed that they saw Jesus risen from the grave, this experience changed their lives, the message was central to early church teachings, and it was preached in the very city in which Jesus died (Miethe, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*, p. 19, 20). These historical facts will be the basis of our argument for Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus died by crucifixion. Crucifixion was a most painful and certain means of death. Christ was whipped by Roman soldiers before his crucifixion (Mt 27:26-31). The Roman method for this was to give thirty-nine lashes before crucifixion. (Forty lashes was considered legally dead after which point an individual could no longer be punished.) The effect of this was to induce considerable blood loss. The Romans used what was called a "cat-of-nine-tails." This whip had many ends to it and usually had pieces of bone, glass, and metal shards attached to it which would rip open the flesh. After being whipped Jesus was forced to carry his own cross to the place of crucifixion. The gospel records indicate that in his weakened state, he was unable to carry the cross (which would have been carried on his wounded back Mt 27:32). Incidentally, Jesus was probably not a weak man. Before his preaching ministry he had been a carpenter and during his ministry he walked hundreds of miles throughout Israel.

Jesus was then nailed to a Roman cross at which point his death came within hours. The Jews were concerned that no bodies would be left on crosses at sundown that evening because it was the beginning of the Sabbath. "The Jews therefore, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away" (Jn 19:31). Crucifixion victims, depending on their health and the method of crucifixion, could last days on a cross. Victims died primarily through blood loss, dehydration, and suffocation. In order to breath when on a cross, it is necessary for the victim to push up with their legs to release the pressure on the lungs. This is a painful process because of the nails in both the hands and feet or ankles. The purpose of breaking the victims legs was so that they would be unable to push themselves up to breath and thus dies more quickly.

However, when they came to Jesus the Roman guards realized he was dead already. "The soldiers therefore came, and broke the legs of the first man, and of the other man who was crucified with Him; but coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs; but one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately there came out blood and water" (Jn 19:32-34). John records this detail of piercing Jesus side to indicate that he was in fact dead. In an article published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* the doctors examining the historical evidence concluded that the spear probably pierced the sack of fluid that surrounds

the heart (JAMA, Vol., 255, No. 11, 1986, p. 1455ff). If he had not been dead before this time, he was surely dead now.

The gospel records indicate that upon his death two prominent Jewish admirers came to gather Christ's body. "And after these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. And Nicodemus came also, who had first come to Him by night; bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight" (Jn 19:38). These men were both of the ruling class of the Jews (seventy-one men in all) and well known in the community as well as to Pilate. The mention of prominent men indicates that this account is not fictitious. If the disciples had created this story it would have been counterproductive to make up a person that was supposed to be in a prominent position. This could easily have been refuted were it not true. (Moreland, p. 167).

"And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away. And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the grave" (Mt 27:59-61). Archaeological evidence confirms the description of this tomb being that of a rich man, which was rare in this day. The probable location described in the gospels correlates with the specific location of the Garden Gate at the north Wall of Jerusalem where tombs have been excavated like those described in which Jesus was laid (Ibid.)

There are some important features to this account. First, this was not a poor man's grave. Only the rich had tombs carved in rock and situated in a garden area. Second, the tomb was identified by Joseph, Nicodemus, and the women who watched where he was buried. The grave is also carefully marked by the Jewish and Roman authorities as this same passage records,

Now on the next day, which is the one after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am to rise again.' Therefore give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, lest the disciples come and steal Him away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first" Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how." And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone. (Mt 27:62-66)

It is also important to note here, that a Roman guard is a group of soldiers not an individual. The seal which was placed over the grave was a wax seal with rope, to break this Roman seal was punishable by death in the Roman empire.

We know also that the disciples were very disillusioned by Jesus' death. The man they had followed around Israel for three years, whom they believed would be the next ruler of the nation, had just been crucified. They had expected a Messiah who would be king, not a criminal to be convicted and killed in the most humiliating way. They probably felt that their lives had been wasted for the past few years and they had publicly been made fools. Of course, they realized that what they had experienced with Christ for the last three years was significant. But how and what was significant, they did not yet understand. The disciples scattered when Christ was arrested in the garden of Gethsemene (Mrk 14:50ff). Peter denied ever knowing Jesus during his "trial" on the night before his crucifixion (Mrk 14:66ff). The disciples were ready to return to their lives as fishermen because they thought it was over (Jn 21:3).

Three days after his burial the tomb was found empty. Each of the gospels reports that Jesus' tomb was found empty (Mt 28: 1-10, Mrk 16:1-8, Lk 24: 1-3; Jn 20:1-10). "But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, bringing the spices which they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus" (Lk 24:1-3). When it had been reported to the disciples by Mary that the tomb was empty, they came running:

Simon Peter therefore came, following him, and entered the tomb and he beheld the linen wrappings lying there, and the face-cloth, which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself. So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb entered then also, and he saw and believed [that the body was gone]. For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. So the disciples went away again to their own homes. (Jn 20:6-10)

This recording is significant, but what is more significant is that the events which followed Jesus' resurrection bear witness to the fact that his body was indeed missing.

An historical question confronts us at this point. What happened to the body. Scholars have generally agreed that the body was indeed gone and many explanations have been put forth to account for this fact. The most common response is that it was indeed stolen. But this view is hampered with many problems. Who would have stolen it? The Jews would not want to steal it. It was they that posted the Roman guard and

they had the most to gain by ensuring that Jesus stayed in his tomb and his teachings died with him. The Romans really had no motivation. It was in Pilate's best interest as a governor whose job was in jeopardy to keep his realm quiet, not to mention that the Romans hated the Jewish religious fanaticism.

The only reasonable explanation for the missing body is that the disciples stole it. But is this plausible? These are the same men who scattered when Jesus was arrested. They were cowardly. They were disillusioned and depressed. And they would need to overpower the Roman guards. It is not likely that they would have had the courage or motivation to carry out such a plan. Why would they steal it? Possibly they wanted to start a new religion, to gain fame and fortune. This is possible but not likely as we will see. The disciples would have put themselves in great risk to steal the body. The Jews and Romans both wanted this disruption stopped, had they believed that the disciples stole the body they would have dragged them into prison and beaten them until they confessed and produced the body. No such thing happened.

A number of incidental details in this account bear the markings of history as opposed to fraud or fiction. The gospels do not portray the disciples in a very glamorous light. If the disciples had propagated this myth we would expect their own accounts of the events to paint them in a better light than we actually see them in. The disciples were not the first to see the risen Christ rather, a group of women were. The disciples were very reluctant to believe that Jesus was alive again when the women reported what they had seen. "Now they were Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James; also the other women with them were telling these things to the apostles. And these words appeared to them as nonsense, and they would not believe them" (Lk 24:10,11). Thomas response was, "Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe" (Jn 20:25). These men knew that when someone died, they were dead. Thomas was no fool.

It is of crucial importance to notice in all the accounts that the women were the first to see the risen Jesus (Jn 20:11-17; Lk 24:1-9; Mrk 16:1-8; Mt 28:1-7). In the first century women had no legal power as witnesses in a court of law. A woman's testimony was unacceptable. But it is to the women that Jesus first appears. If the story is fabricated, why choose women, whose testimony no one would accept, to be the first witnesses? Instead of being a story concocted by the disciples for their own gain, it appears to be an historical record of what actually took place.

When Peter stuck his head in the tomb he saw something unique that made him realize that something out of the ordinary had happened there. He saw the linen wrappings

that Joseph and Nicodemus had used to coat the body. This was done by wrapping the body, head to foot, in cloth and caking on the spices and burial ointments which would be reapplied in succeeding days to help the smell of decomposition. Peter probably saw the wrappings in the shape of a body without a body inside. But he also saw the head cloth, "rolled up in a place by itself." No one stealing the body would have had time to roll up the face cloth and carefully set it aside. This is a curious detail that caught Peter's attention.

But this was only a foreshadowing of what was to come as Peter and the others personally experienced Jesus Christ in the succeeding days.

And while they were telling these things, He Himself stood in their midst. But they were startled and frightened and thought they were seeing a spirit. And He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." (Lk 24:36-39)

This is no less remarkable for us today than it was for them. And we can understand their reluctance to accept him. But they came to believe that they had witnessed something unique as Jesus appeared to them many times over a period of four days. These experiences had a profound impact on their lives.

How their lives changed after they had seen the risen Jesus is another mark of the story's truthfulness. The disciples became the forerunners of a new movement that swept the world. They spoke out for the message. They were persecuted for the message and they ultimately gave their lives for this message: Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Reliable historical sources tell us that all twelve of the disciples except John died as martyrs. Peter was crucified in Rome. Paul was beheaded. And James was stoned to death, to name a few. This is of crucial importance. If they had pulled off a hoax, why would they go to their graves proclaiming that it actually happened. Certainly, many have died for a lie. Nazis gave their lives for what was false. Plenty of other religious followers have died for their faith, but the crucial point here is that the disciples would have known it was a lie, if they had stolen the body or made up the story. They all would have died for what they knew was a lie. Is it plausible to believe that not one of them, under the threat of death would have admitted, "we made the whole thing up?" What they saw changed their lives. They believed they had seen Jesus Christ rise from the dead.

And because of what they believed they saw, these men who were meek suddenly became powerful spokesmen for Jesus Christ. Peter who denied Christ a few weeks earlier preached to over three thousand people in Acts 2

Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know--[he is appealing to their common knowledge of Jesus and what he did] this man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power. (Acts 2:22-24)

Not only were they now bold spokesmen, but of a fundamentally different religion than Judaism. For a Jew of the first century to change his religion or preach some heretical doctrine would be to risk eternal damnation. (Moreland, p. 172). For us in the twentieth century, we are not surprised by new religions, but this kind of hoax is almost unthinkable in first century Judaism whose culture and beliefs changed slowly (Ibid., p. 180). They were convinced that what they saw and experienced was true.

What did the disciples see? Could they have seen a vision that they assumed was the risen Christ? Could it have been an hallucination. Because of the strength of the evidence that something did happen that changed the disciples' lives, some critics have suggested the idea that what they saw was an hallucination. There are two problems with this theory: it doesn't match what we know of the account and it doesn't match what we know of the psychology of hallucinations.

J.P. Moreland summarizes the nature of hallucinations well.

First, hallucinations happen to persons who are high-strung, highly imaginative, and nervous. Second, they are linked in an individual's subconscious to his past beliefs and experiences. Third, it is extremely unlikely that two or more people would have the same hallucination at the same time. Fourth, they usually occur at particular places (places of nostalgia which create a reminiscing mood) and they recur over a long period of time. (p. 177)

I would add further that the idea of mass hallucinations has been disproven in modern psychology. If you hold that what the disciples saw was an hallucination, then you must acknowledge that they experienced this hallucination in groups of three, four, twelve, and even five hundred people.

The hallucination theory does not fit what we know of the disciples' expectations. As I have said earlier, the disciples were not expecting Christ to rise from the dead. They had no concept in Judaism of the Messiah rising physically from the dead with the same body, a body they could touch and interact with. Nor do the descriptions given in the gospels reflect the kind of vagueness that makes up an hallucination. What they experienced was concrete. They could recall and explain it clearly. And because many of them experienced the same thing, separately and together, they could confirm their experiences with each other.

The hallucination theory also fails to explain one other fact: the empty tomb. Had the disciples, and many others, hallucinated Jesus' appearances, the commotion they were causing in Jerusalem could have been easily stopped by producing the body. This is an argument from silence. In other words, there is nothing said in history about whether the Romans and Jews tried to produce Jesus' body. But it is crucial in this case that there is nothing said in recorded history about what happened to Jesus' body other than what we find in the gospels. Had Jesus' body been exhumed by the Jews or Romans and presented to the mass of people who were deluded about his resurrection, it is hard to believe that the early church could have gotten started. But the movement did start and the resurrection of Jesus was the grounds on which it began.

Jesus resurrection from the dead was central to their faith. Peter preached the message in Jerusalem as Acts chapter 2 goes on to say, "Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day." Peter is saying that we know where David's body is. We can go and dig it up. But Jesus' body is missing. Had this not been true, anyone in the audience could have refuted his claim. The Jews or the Romans could have opened the tomb and paraded the body through the city to show everyone that the disciples' message was false. But they didn't because there was no body to find and all of Jerusalem had heard the news (Lk 24:18). Even the Jewish historian Josephus writing forty years later comments on Jesus' death.

It is important to note that the message was preached, not in a remote location where no one could verify the account, but it was preached in Jerusalem where all of these events took place and where the story could have easily been falsified or verified.

It is from this location that the church grew. The movement grew very quickly. Acts records three thousand people being baptized in one day (Acts 2:41). On another occasion five thousand people came to believe (Acts 4:4). This corresponds to what we know of the growth of the early church and it is one of the reasons historians do not

suspect that Jesus was a legend. Legends take many years to accumulate and gain acceptance. Christianity spread immediately. The Jewish authorities were unable to contain its growth because it was so rapid.

The resurrection of Christ is central to the Christian faith. Without it, there is no Christianity. Paul says, "if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain" (I Cor:15:14). Paul who was a vigorous persecutor of the church before seeing the risen Christ maintains that Jesus did rise from the dead. In writing to the Corinthian church he says,

[F]or I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep [died]; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all . . . He appeared to me also. (I Cor 15:3-8)

What he is telling his readers is that many people saw Jesus after the resurrection. He is saying, "if you are skeptical you can go and speak with them yourselves because most of them are still alive!" Paul is so confident of what he and the others saw that he is willing to stake everything on this claim. This was not an event that occurred to a few men in a remote location. It happened in a huge metropolitan city and there were many witnesses to verify it.

Our Response

Christians stake their entire faith on the resurrection of Christ because it is only through this event that forgiveness can come. The gospels and the historical evidence bear out this claim that Jesus rose from the dead. The question is what will you do with the evidence? It has been God's practice to give evidence to those who are willing to respond. Christ appeared to his disciples because they were willing to believe when given enough evidence. He will not give evidence to those who refuse to believe.

And after eight days again His disciples were inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst, and said, "Peace be with you." Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here your finger, and see My hands; and reach

here your hand, and put it into my side; and be not unbelieving, but believing."
Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20:26-28)

Thomas was willing to accept the evidence he saw. The question is, how much evidence will it take for us. As Christ states in the very next verse, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."

There is much more evidence for the truth of Christ's message than is presented here. This is only a brief sketch of some of the historical evidence. There is also the evidence of fulfilled prophecy from the Old Testament, as well as other kinds. The point is that the evidence exists. If the evidence is weak and unconvincing, then we can throw Christianity out and look elsewhere. But if it is true, the message of Jesus Christ applies to us. And we must be willing to submit to it, regardless of what it says about us.

God demands humility from us. If he is indeed our Maker, we cannot approach Him with an attitude that is arrogant and demanding. We must approach Him on His terms. Christ spelled out those terms: mankind is in rebellion toward God and in need of forgiveness. This is exactly what Christ came to offer. "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life (Jn 5:24). And also, "I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10).

Bibliography

Bettenson, Henry, *Documents of the Christian Church*, Oxford Press, London, 1943.

Delashmutt, Gary, *The Xenos Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, Columbus, OH, 1988.

Durant, Will, *The Story of Civilization*, Simon and Schuster, New York, NY, 1944.

Josephus, Flavius, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1974.

McCallum, Dennis, *Christianity: The Faith that Makes Sense*, Tyndale, Grand Rapids, MI, 1990.

Miethe, Terry L., ed., *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*, Harper and Row, San Francisco, CA, 1987.

Moreland, J.P., *Scaling the Secular City*, Baker House Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1987.

Shelly, Rubel, *Prepare to Answer: A Defense of the Christian Faith*, Baker Pub Group, Grand Rapids, MI, 1990.