

Resurrection Objections

Last week, we turned our attention to a book called *The Case for the Resurrection*, by Gary Habermas and Michael Licona. This book undertakes to establish the resurrection as a historical fact by using only evidence accepted by a scholarly consensus to prove its point. In particular, Habermas and Licona rely on five “minimal facts” to build their argument. These five facts are that (1) Jesus died on the cross, (2) the early disciples believed they had seen the risen Jesus, (3) James the Lord’s brother believed that he had seen the risen Jesus, (4) Paul believed he had seen the risen Jesus, and (5) the tomb was empty. Though none of these facts are persuasive on their own, together they support the conclusion that Jesus rose from the dead.

However, for centuries, scholars have been attempting to come up with a naturalistic, non-supernatural explanation for these facts. I agree that if one of these explanations fits the facts as neatly as the resurrection does, we should accept it. After all, we generally think that natural explanations are preferable to supernatural ones. It’s important that we explore these alternatives in good faith, so this morning, let’s consider objections to the resurrection.

There simply isn’t time this morning to examine all the possible alternate theories, so we’re only going to hit the most common ones. Of these, the first is that the resurrection account is A NON-HISTORICAL STORY of some kind: a legend, a parable, or a myth. Maybe all 1 Corinthians is saying is that the disciples thought Jesus was still alive in their hearts.

When we test this theory against our five minimal facts, though, it doesn’t score very well. It’s consistent with Jesus’ death on the cross, but it isn’t consistent with any of the others. To illustrate, let’s look again at 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. This is not the language of a parable or a myth. This is the language of a truth claim. Paul is asserting that these people really saw Jesus after he rose from the dead.

In particular, look at v. 6. Here, Paul says that Jesus appeared to 500 people at one time, some of whom have died, but most of whom remain alive. If this is only a parable, why would Paul bother saying that? A parable is just as valuable whether it comes from the lips of its originator or not. The fact that these people were still around only matters because Paul is offering them as living eyewitnesses of a historical resurrection.

Likewise, it is not at all clear that a legend or a parable can account for the dramatic life changes in James and Paul. Both James and Saul of Tarsus were exposed to plenty of Christian teaching, but none of it converted them. Why would one more story do the trick when so many hadn’t?

Finally, the argument that this is a non-historical story cannot account for the evidence of the very historical empty tomb. If Jesus died and stayed dead, His body

would have stayed there. Generally, as explanations go, this one is extremely unsatisfying.

Next, let's consider the argument that **SOMEBODY STOLE THE BODY**. Maybe it was the disciples; maybe it was the gardener whom Mary Magdalene blames in John 20. Regardless, somebody took it.

This one scores a little bit better than the story hypothesis. It satisfies two of our minimal facts: that Jesus died and that the tomb was empty. However, it founders on the sincere conviction of those who claimed to be eyewitnesses. As we've learned, neither the early disciples, James, nor Paul sincerely believed only that the tomb was empty. Instead, they were convinced that Jesus appeared to them after His death. That's a very different thing.

In fact, if we look only at the fact of the empty tomb itself, almost nobody in any of the accounts seems to think it's very convincing. Even among the disciples, the only one who believes because of the empty tomb is John. For an example of a much more common reaction, let's look at John 20:11-13. Now, scholars are certainly skeptical about the historicity of this account. Typically, the only thing they will use it for is to suggest the gardener as a potential body-snatcher.

However, it certainly does represent the way that early Christians thought. Here, Mary sees the empty tomb, sees angels sitting inside it, and still concludes that somebody has stolen the body! Isn't that what we would think if one of our loved ones died and the body vanished from the funeral home? None of us would jump to the conclusion that the loved one had risen from the dead. Generally, the disciples also found the empty tomb by itself unconvincing, to the point where it isn't even mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15.

Third, let's evaluate the **APPARENT DEATH** hypothesis, also called the swoon theory. According to this way of thinking, Jesus only passed out on the cross, woke up three days later, rolled away the stone, and appeared to the disciples.

This one also doesn't score real well. It only explains the phenomenon of the empty tomb. Obviously, if Jesus only fainted on the cross, He didn't die on it. However, the participants 2000 years ago: the disciples, Jesus' family, the Roman guard, the chief priests, and Pontius Pilate, believed that He did. The Romans certainly knew how to crucify people and make sure they were dead!

Second, this explanation is implausible on its face. It's asking us to believe that Jesus, sleepless, brutally beaten, crucified, in such bad shape that He passes out, and left in a tomb for 36 hours without food or water, somehow wakes up, uses His crucified hands to roll away the heavy stone from inside the tomb, and limps to safety on His crucified feet. Basically, in an attempt to deny a miracle, the proponents of this theory are asking us to believe in a different miracle!

Finally, why would the appearance of this wreck of a human being convince anyone that He had risen from the dead? Even granting all of the above, if Jesus manages to stagger into the upper room, none of the eyewitnesses would think He had risen from the dead. Instead, they would correctly conclude that He actually hadn't died yet.

Similarly, this does nothing to explain either James or Paul. James wasn't going to be convinced because his false-prophet brother survived an execution attempt. Nor would Saul of Tarsus, upon encountering a healed-up Jesus two years later, conclude that this meant that Jesus rose from the dead. This hypothesis simply isn't useful in explaining the facts.

Our fourth alternate hypothesis is HALLUCINATION. According to this argument, all of the post-resurrection appearances of the Lord were the result of the disciples seeing things that weren't there, perhaps as a result of the strain of bereavement.

In order to evaluate this argument, we first have to distinguish between an illusion and a hallucination. An illusion is when the human senses misapprehend something that is actually there. For instance, probably all of us have seen heat shimmer on a blacktop road in the summertime that looks like water. Because the illusion is based on something physical, multiple people can see it at the same time.

However, that's not true when it comes to hallucinations. Hallucinations aren't based on anything real; instead, they occur entirely within someone's mind. As a result, there is no such thing as a group hallucination. There is no known mechanism for transmitting a hallucination from brain to brain. Even if people in the same place are hallucinating at the same time, they will hallucinate different things.

This is a big problem for the hallucination argument. As we've discussed, many of the experiences of the risen Lord were group experiences. Whatever the 500 saw, it certainly wasn't a group hallucination.

Second, most people who hallucinate subsequently recognize that what they saw wasn't real. Only people with a predisposition to believe in the hallucination will continue to believe. However, none of the people on our minimal-fact list had this predisposition. Skeptic James didn't. Persecutor Paul didn't.

Even the early disciples didn't. Look, for instance, at Luke 24:10-11. Once again, the principle of embarrassment comes into play here. Early Christians intent on convincing others to believe in Jesus aren't going to say that even the founders of the movement were skeptical and believed reluctantly! That is, unless it's true. The same men who dismissed the story of the women at the tomb would also have dismissed a hallucination—correctly—as “seeing things”. Finally, of course, hallucination can't explain the absence of Jesus' body from the empty tomb.

Our final attempt to explain away the resurrection is A COMBINATION of theories. This approach attempts to pair theories with each other in order to overcome the weaknesses of each. Thus, persons unknown stole the body, the early disciples hallucinated that they had seen Jesus, and Paul became a Christian because he wanted to gain control of a new religious sect. All the evidence is explained, and we don't have to be Christians! Hooray!

However, there are two serious problems with the combination approach. The first of these is that in addition to inheriting the strength of its component parts, it also inherits their weaknesses. If the evidence doesn't support the contention that Paul converted because of his lust for power (and it doesn't), then the whole theory fails.

Second, the whole exercise has the flavor of ad hoc hypothesizing about it. This is what people do when a hypothesis they like is falsified by contrary evidence. Rather than rejecting the falsified hypothesis, they add another hypothesis to it that addresses the contrary evidence. No matter the amount of contradiction, this is a process that can go on indefinitely.

Let me give you an example. Let's say we're in high school, and I have a crush on a cute girl. I tell you, "I think she likes me."

You reply, "Actually, she just went out with George last weekend."

At this point, my hypothesis has been falsified, but I don't want to accept that, so I say, "She just went out with him because of her friends."

You answer, "Actually, they can't stand him." Falsification Number Two.

I say, "Oh, they just pretend like that in front of you."

You see how it works? As long as I want to cling to my original belief, I will always be able to manufacture one more reason to do so. Similarly, people who want to deny the resurrection will always be able to manufacture one more reason to do so (sometimes flatly goofy stuff like "Jesus had a twin brother!"), even though the resurrection has vastly more explanatory power than any alternative theory, and even though the resurrection has all kinds of evidence supporting it and the alternatives have none.

What's really going on here is that the combination-theory folks are committed to a philosophical belief in naturalism, so they will deny supernatural events like the resurrection, regardless of the evidence. Let's not be like them, friends. Let's follow the evidence wherever it leads, and it leads to Jesus as Lord.

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