

THE RESURRECTION: History or Hoax?

"If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:13-20).

If devotees of the kingdom of the cults, adherents of world religions or liberal scholars are correct, the biblical account of the resurrection of Christ is fiction, fantasy or a gargantuan fraud. If, on the other hand, Christianity is factually reliable, his resurrection is the greatest feat in human history. No middle ground exists. The resurrection is history or hoax, miracle or myth, fact or fantasy.

First, liberal and conservative scholars alike agree that the body of Jesus was buried in the private tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

- As a member of the Jewish court that condemned Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea is unlikely to be Christian fiction (Mark 15:43).

- Jesus' burial in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea is substantiated by Mark's gospel (15:46) and is, therefore, far too early to have been the subject of legendary corruption.

- The earliest Jewish response to the resurrection of Christ presupposes the empty tomb (Matthew 28:11-13).

- In the centuries following the resurrection, the fact of the empty tomb was forwarded by Jesus' friends and foes alike.

Additionally, when the role of women in first-century Jewish society is understood, what is extraordinary is that this empty tomb story would feature females as the discoverers of the empty tomb. The fact that women are the first witnesses to the empty tomb is most plausibly explained by the reality that—like it or not—they were the discoverers of the empty tomb. This shows that the gospel writers faithfully recorded what happened, even if it was embarrassing. In short, early Christianity could not have survived an identifiable tomb containing the corpse of Christ.

Furthermore, Jesus gave his disciples many convincing proofs that he had risen from the dead. Paul, for example, points out that Christ "appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:6). It would have been one thing to attribute these supernatural experiences to people who had already died. It was quite another to attribute them to multitudes who were still alive.

As the famed New Testament scholar of Cambridge University C. H. Dodd points out, "There can hardly be any purpose in mentioning the fact that most of the five hundred are still alive, unless Paul is saying in effect, 'The witnesses are there to be questioned.'"

Finally, what happened as a result of the resurrection is unprecedented in human history. In the span of a few hundred years, a small band of seemingly insignificant believers succeeded in turning an entire empire upside down. While it is conceivable that they would have faced torture, vilification and even cruel deaths for what they fervently believed to be true, it is inconceivable that they would have been willing to die for

No middle ground exists. The resurrection is history or hoax, miracle or myth, fact or fantasy.

what they knew to be a lie. As Simon Greenleaf, Royall Professor of Law at Harvard put it: "If it were morally possible for them to have been deceived in this matter, every human motive operated to lead them to discover and avow their error.... If then their testimony was not true, there was no possible motive for this fabrication." □

Adapted from Hank Hanegraaff, The Bible Answer Book (Nashville, J. Countryman, 2004).

For further study, see Hank Hanegraaff, The Third Day (Nashville Publishing Group, 2003); Lee Strobel, The Case for Christ (Zondervan, 1999); and see especially, William Lane Craig, Reasonable Faith (Crossway Books, 1996, chapter 8).