

The Resurrection Appearances of Jesus

By Gary R. Habermas

When the New Testament defines and identifies the Gospel data, at least three items are always mentioned: the Deity, death, and resurrection of Jesus.¹ The key to Jesus' resurrection is his post-death appearances. Critical scholars agree that the entire enterprise of the early church-worship, writings, and witness—would never have come about if Jesus' followers were not absolutely convinced that He had conquered death by appearing to them afterwards.

Throughout this essay, I will not assume the inspiration or even the reliability of the New Testament writings, though I think these doctrines rest on strong grounds. I will refer almost exclusively to those data that are so well attested that they impress even the vast majority of non-evangelical scholars. Each point is confirmed by impressive data, even though I can do no more than offer an outline of these reasons.

We must be clear from the outset that not only do contemporary scholars not mind when points are taken from the New Testament writings, but they do so often. The reason is that confirmed data can be used anywhere it is found.

Using almost solely those data that are well-attested and recognized, I will list 10 considerations that favor Jesus' resurrection appearances. Each angle has this in common: it indicates that one or more persons were utterly convinced that they had seen Jesus again after his death. Although I cannot defend the additional thesis here, I and others have argued elsewhere in much detail that this conviction cannot be viably accounted for by any natural means. Perhaps surprisingly, comparatively few skeptical scholars even favor these alternative hypotheses.² Therefore, the most likely conclusion is that the disciples and others really did see the risen Jesus.

Here is the absolute crux of my case: These 10 arguments point to the disciples and others having actual, visual experiences. When juxtaposed with the failure of viable natural alternatives, we have an especially powerful indication that, after His death, Jesus actually appeared to many persons. These appearances were to both individuals and groups. In other words, if multiple evidences point to visual experiences, and natural attempts fail to explain them otherwise, the most likely explanation is that Jesus rose from the dead. *Briefly, the early disciples' experiences plus the failure of naturalistic theories equals the resurrection appearances of Jesus.*

Our first four arguments are drawn from Paul's epistles. The remaining six are taken from other New Testament sources.

(1) For a number of reasons, when recent scholars discuss the resurrection appearances of Jesus, they begin with the apostle Paul. He had clearly been a powerful opponent of the early Christian message (Gal. 1:13-14; Phil. 3:4-7; 1 Cor. 15:9). Paul explains that he was converted from his high rank in Judaism. Clearly, the reason for his change was his belief that he had seen the risen Jesus (1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8; Gal. 1:16). As a scholar on both Judaism and Christianity, Jesus' appearance to Paul certainly qualified him as an exceptionally strong witness to the resurrected Jesus.

(2) Beyond his scholarly and eyewitness testimony, Paul contributes far more to a case for Jesus' resurrection appearances. Few conclusions in current study are more widely held by scholars than that, in 1 Corinthians 15:3, Paul recorded a very ancient tradition that actually predates his book, probably by a

couple of decades. It could very well predate even Paul's conversion to Christianity. After explaining that he received this from others, Paul succinctly reports the Gospel that was preached in early Christianity: Christ died for our sins and was buried. Afterwards, he was raised from the dead and appeared to many witnesses.

Paul tells his readers that he was handing down this teaching that he had received from others (see I Cor. 15:3). His explicit statement here is important, due to the respect that scholars have for Paul's testimony. Further, his claim has been vindicated because there are many textual indications that the words that follow were not composed by him. For example, this list of appearances exhibits a parallel structure, as if it were an ancient catechism whose purpose was to be passed on and learned. Moreover, to identify a few other characteristics, the Greek sentence structure, diction, and some of the words are not Paul's, judging from his other epistles.

Most scholars who address the subject think that Paul received this material about 35 A.D. just three years after his conversion, when he made his first trip to Jerusalem. Paul explains that he visited Peter and James, the brother of Jesus (see Gal. 1:18-19). In the immediate context both before and after, Paul is discussing the nature of the Gospel (see Gal. 1:11-2:10). Additionally, Paul's choice of words in verse 18 shows that he was interviewing or questioning the two apostles in order to gain information. Here we have an exceptionally early tradition from almost immediately after Jesus, centering on the Gospel report, and clearly including Jesus' resurrection appearances.

(3) Paul was so careful to assure the truth of the gospel message that he returned to Jerusalem 14 years after this initial visit (see Gal. 2:1-10). Amazingly, his purpose was to be absolutely sure that what he preached was true (see Gal. 2:2)! For a second time, Paul conducted his ancient research. Besides Peter and James, another major apostle, John, was also present. Could Paul possibly have consulted three more prominent Christian leaders? Crucially, these four witnesses were the most influential in the early church. And with a single voice, they testified at this early date to the resurrection appearances of Jesus. The bottom line was that Paul's Gospel teaching, which included the resurrection (see I Cor. 15:1-5), was approved by the other three apostles. They added nothing to his message (see I Cor. 2:6, 9). Paul's two trips to Jerusalem provided the data and the confirmation that he desired.

(4) In 1 Corinthians 15:11, Paul added still another layer of personal testimony. We already learned that the other major apostolic leaders had approved Paul's gospel message. Now Paul asserts that he also knew what the others were preaching. And as they had confirmed his message years before, Paul now testified that they also taught the same truth that he did regarding Jesus' resurrection appearances (1 Cor. 15:11). In fact, Paul had just recorded separate appearances to two of them: Peter (see I Cor. 15:5) and James (see I Cor. 15:7). Together with John, all the apostles preached the same truth—they were witnesses of the risen Jesus' appearances (see I. Cor. 15:12, 15).

Scholars uniformly regard Paul as the earliest and best witness to the resurrection appearances. Considerations such as these four provide some indications of the value of Paul's testimony to Jesus' resurrection appearances. But Paul's writings are far from the only evidence. There are at least six more confirmations that work together to form an even tighter lattice work.

(5) Besides 1 Corinthians 15:3, scholars usually agree that many other New Testament books also contain early traditions that predate the texts in which they appear. Many of the best examples are found in the Book of Acts, where succinct summaries of early preaching are embedded.³ The center of these early statements is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

(6) Virtually no one, friend or foe, believer or critic, denies that it was their convictions that they had seen the resurrected Jesus that caused the disciples' radical transformations. They were willing to die *specifically for their resurrection belief*. Down through the centuries many have been willing to give their lives for political or religious causes. But the crucial difference here is that while many have died for their

convictions, Jesus' disciples were in the right place on to know the truth or falsity of the event for which they were willing to die.

(7) It is almost always acknowledged that during Jesus' ministry, His brother James was a skeptic (see John 7:5). He was probably one of the family members in Mark 3:21-35 who thought that Jesus was insane! But how do we account for the surprising reports that James later led the Jerusalem church (Gal. 1:18-2:1-10; Acts 15:13-21)? According to the creedal comment in 1 Corinthians 15:7, Jesus appeared to James, yet another pointer to a resurrection appearance.

(8) The tomb in which Jesus was buried was found empty shortly afterwards. The early apostolic preaching of the resurrection began in Jerusalem, where a closed or occupied tomb would have been disastrous! Moreover, the unanimous agreement that women were the earliest witnesses to the empty tomb is another strong consideration, since the widespread prejudice against female testimony indicates that the reports were not invented. Although the empty tomb does not prove the resurrection appearances, it does strengthen the disciples' claim to have seen the risen Jesus.

(9) That Jesus' resurrection was the *very center* of early Christian faith also indicates its reality, since, for this reason, it was repeatedly affirmed by believers and challenged by unbelievers. For example, Paul visited the Jerusalem apostles at least two or three times in order to make sure that his Gospel message was truthful. Indeed, there was no Christianity without this event (see 1 Cor. 15:14, 17). It was the church's central proclamation (see Acts 4:33). Unbelievers attacked this centerpiece of faith, but could not disprove the rock on which it was founded: Jesus' appearances.

(10) Lastly, 2,000 years of attempts by nonbelievers to explain what happened to Jesus in natural terms have failed. The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem had the power, motive, and location to investigate thoroughly the proclamation of the resurrection appearances. They knew of Jesus' death and His burial. Though they were ideally situated to expose the error, they did not refute the evidence. Even many of today's skeptical scholars are without an explanation of what occurred.

For reasons like these 10, the vast majority of contemporary scholars conclude that Jesus' disciples and others thought that they had seen Jesus after His crucifixion. This is what the earliest believers claimed and this teaching is confirmed by an amazing variety of details from a number of perspectives. We might even say that the disciples were overpowered by these evidences themselves, which convinced them that they had seen the risen Jesus. Given that natural theses cannot explain these experiences, Jesus' resurrection appearances remain the best explanation of the historical facts. *The early disciples' experiences plus the failure of naturalistic theories equals the resurrection appearances of Jesus.*

End Notes

¹For examples, see Romans 1:3-4; 10:9; Acts 2:22-36; 3:12-23.

²See Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004), especially pages 79-150; Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), especially Chapter 1.

³Commonly-cited examples include 1:21-22; 2:22-36; 3:13-16; 4:8-10; 5:29-32; 10:39-43; 13:28-31; 17:1-3; 17:30-31.