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scripture and the resurrection

Chris Knight on the historicity of the resurrection.

We have said before that the goal of apologetics is to bring our friends to a real relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Now although there is only one way to God (which we'll look at in a later article), there are many ways to becoming a Christian. The first step is always the grace of God in a person's life, but if we consider how God uses a person's experiences and encounters with other Christians, there are many ways that people can begin their journey to a saving and trusting faith. People may be moved by the Gospel accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ; they may be convinced of the existence of a creator God; they may experience a deep personal awareness of God's reality and call on their life; they may be convinced that Jesus rose from the dead. Each individual has a very different journey to faith.





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The death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection from the dead are two of the key beliefs of Christianity. The resurrection provides God's 'Yes!' to Jesus and all that he had done and taught to his disciples during his earthly ministry. Having accepted that, the Christian life of discipleship follows. At some point, therefore, the sceptic, seeker or the new Christian will need to consider the evidence for the resurrection, 'and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins' (1 Corinthians 15:17).

how do we know about Jesus?

As we consider the resurrection of Jesus with our friends, the same question comes up as with any question about the life and teaching of Jesus: how do we know that what we read in the Gospels is true? Could these documents be hoaxes, or late documents based on misunderstandings or legendary accounts? What reason do we have for trusting them as reliable accounts of what Jesus did and said?

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This is a good question and links in to the question of the authority of Scripture, but is distinct from it. Our initial conversations with friends need only to accept the general historicity and reliability of the Gospels, not their total infallibility or inerrancy. We might move on to discussions on the reliability of the rest of Scripture and on its authority at a later time, but establishing the Gospels as

trustworthy historical documents is a good place to start off.

Specialists in many different areas, ranging from ancient history and classics to law and philosophy, have shown how their own discipline confirms the reliability of the Gospels. Some of these started from a sceptical viewpoint, attempting to demonstrate that the Gospels are *unreliable*, but the evidence and arguments convinced them of the opposite. Some useful resources in this area are listed under *further resources*, but I would like to consider some ideas from a recent book, written from a different area of expertise. J Warner Wallace (Jim Wallace) is a cold-case homicide detective, specialising in 'Forensic Statement Analysis' – that is, the scientific analysis of witness statements to determine their truth and reliability. In *Cold-Case Christianity*,¹ Wallace describes how his sceptical approach had dismissed the Gospels as 'late works of fiction'.² Yet when he came to read them, he realised that they could be treated as a 'cold-case', using his area of expertise, which he used on a daily basis in his police work, to determine how reliable the accounts were.

His book describes in detail the forensic principles he used to assess the Gospels, leading to his conclusion: 'The Gospels actually appeared to be ancient eyewitness accounts.'³ He considers 'four critical areas of concern' to assess a possible eyewitness account:

- Were they even there?
- Have they been honest and accurate?
- Can they be verified?
- Do they have an ulterior motive?

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I give one example here but I urge you to read and study *Cold-Case Christianity* for more – and buy an extra copy to give to a friend.

The feeding of the five thousand is described in all four Gospels, but some of the details in one Gospel only fully make sense when we read the other accounts. For example, in John's Gospel (6:5-9), we are told that Jesus asks Philip where they could buy bread to feed the crowd, although Andrew also gets involved in the reply. Philip and Andrew are not normally key players in the Gospel accounts, so why might they have been involved here? John 1:44 tells us that Philip and Andrew (as well as Peter) were from Bethsaida, but the significance of this is only seen when we read Luke's account and find that the feeding of the five thousand took place near Bethsaida. Jesus was asking one of the locals where to find bread – an impossible task for such a large crowd but if anyone was to be asked, it should, of course, be a local person!

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Two other details in this incident are of note. Mark tells us that the grass was green and John tells us that there was much grass. John adds a further detail that the loaves were barley loaves and also notes that the Passover was near. Passover occurs around the time of the barley harvest, explaining the type of loaves, and the early spring rains (called the 'latter rains') explain the quantity of green grass.

Wallace concludes that 'These meaningless details are just what I would expect to hear from eyewitnesses who were simply describing

what they saw, including the details that don't really matter in the larger narrative.'⁴

This is an example of 'unintentional support' between the Gospels – small details which on their own mean little, but where, when the Gospels are taken together, the details make sense and show an internal consistency which strongly supports the claim that these are truthful, eyewitness accounts which can be trusted.

Other evidence for the reliability of the Gospels and the fact that they are based upon eyewitness testimony comes from the historically and geographically accurate use of names (of people, their titles and of places) in the Gospels (internal evidence) and the corroboration of Gospel themes and details from non-biblical sources and archaeological finds (external evidence).⁵

Now if the evidence suggests (strongly!) that the Gospels are based on eyewitness accounts, the statements they make can, in general, be trusted and need to be treated seriously. At the very least, our friends may then agree to read a Gospel with an open mind and heart and discuss it with us. Resources such as UCCF's *Uncover*,⁶ which works through Luke's Gospel, may be helpful.

evidence for the resurrection

Jim Wallace is so concerned about the eyewitness testimony of the Gospel accounts because 'once you come to trust an eyewitness, you eventually must come to terms with the testimony that eyewitness has offered.'⁷ In the Gospels, that testimony is to the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. For many of our friends, before the resurrection becomes a believable possibility, the Gospels need to be seen as generally reliable historical documents,

which is why we have looked at establishing the eyewitness character of the Gospel accounts.

We will now briefly consider two indicators of authenticity within the resurrection accounts themselves, before looking at the resurrection in further detail in the next article.

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Firstly, part of the purpose of these accounts was to convince non-Christians that Jesus really had risen from the dead (as well as to inform Christians of what happened). If the writers were concocting a fiction to deceive, they did not do a very good job. A good deception will appeal to the intended audience. Yet the first people to bear witness to the resurrection are female (Matthew 28:1-10) – who at that time were viewed as less reliable witnesses. Rabbis taught that their testimony should only be accepted if there was no male testimony to the event. Having women as the first witnesses would seriously weaken the impact of the claims that Jesus had risen – and yet that is what we find. The only reasonable explanation is that the account tells it as it was.

Interestingly, when Paul writes about the resurrection appearances in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 (probably quoting part of a very early creed), the first mention of appearances is to 'Cephas and the twelve', and then to 'five hundred brothers and sisters at one time ... to James, then to all the apostles.' This does not deny that the women saw Jesus first, but this early creed's apologetic purpose is better met by citing the appearances to Peter (Cephas) and

key points

- The reliability of the Gospels as historical documents is important for sensible discussions about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.
- Making a good case for the reliability of the Gospels is an important tool for the evangelist-apologist.
- The fact that the first appearances of the risen Jesus were to women suggests that this is not a fiction invented to convince others.
- The fact that the early followers of Jesus were prepared to die for their claim that Jesus had been raised from the dead demonstrates the certainty of their encounter with their risen Lord.

further resources:

- J Warner Wallace. *Cold-Case Christianity: A homicide detective investigate the claims of the Gospels*. Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2013.
- J Warner Wallace has two websites with excellent resources: coldcasechristianity.com & pleaseconvinceme.com
- Craig L Blomberg. *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels, second edition*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2007
- Peter J Williams. *New Evidence the Gospels were Based on Eyewitness Accounts*. bit.ly/1onYksp
- Gary Habermas. *Recent Perspectives on the Reliability of the Gospels*. bit.ly/1s7TkzC
- Various speakers 'After Life? Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus'. bit.ly/1nfQRhl
- Various Speakers. *Jesus Myths Volume 1 - Introduction*. bit.ly/1pAw366
- Is the Bible reliable? bit.ly/1nnWsjl
- John Warwick Montgomery. *A Lawyer's Defence of Christianity*. bit.ly/1kkqBoC
- FF Bruce *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* Available online at: bit.ly/1pAvCIY
- Richard Bauckham. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006. [A highly detailed and technical scholarly discussion on this topic.]

the twelve disciples, even though these were not the first ones to take place.

Secondly, what also seems certain is that Jesus's first followers sincerely believed that they had encountered the risen Jesus after his death. There is no good reason for them to invent stories about a resurrection and then be persecuted, tortured and killed. Only the certainty of what they had experienced fully accounts for their transformation and later behaviour, with a willingness to suffer and die for what they knew to be the truth.

there is no good reason for them to invent stories about a resurrection

It is true that others have suffered and died for other causes which have turned out to be false – although they believed them to be true. But for the early disciples of Jesus, they not only believed them to be true, they were the original eyewitnesses of these events. Their own experience of the risen Jesus was so clear to them that they had no doubt at all that what they proclaimed about the resurrection was true. They were prepared to stake their lives on it – and many of them did exactly that.

Sceptics often allege that there are serious contradictions in the Bible and particularly in the resurrection accounts. Chapter 4 of *Cold-Case Christianity* examines the perspectival character of eyewitness statements and gives some fascinating examples from Jim Wallace's crime cases of apparent contradictions.⁸ Upon further examination, discrepancies can turn out simply to be descriptions from different perspectives by individuals with different backgrounds and interests. This will affect what is important to them and hence what they recall.

conclusions

Productive conversations about Jesus are vastly aided by an acceptance that the New Testament Gospels are generally reliable, historical documents, based on eyewitness testimony. Given this, we can fruitfully discuss the Gospel accounts of the resurrection or Jesus' miracles or any aspect of Jesus' teaching. The ability to make a good case for the reliability of the Gospels is therefore an important tool for the evangelist-apologist.

In reading the accounts of the resurrection, the key question is what explanation best accounts for all of the relevant evidence. We have touched on two indicators of authenticity: the testimony of the women and the certainty of Jesus' early followers that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead – a certainty which transformed them into bold witnesses to their risen Lord, for which they were prepared to pay with their lives. ■

NEXT TIME – we will continue to consider the resurrection of Jesus, examining the 'minimal facts' approach to the resurrection as well as some of the alternative explanations suggested by sceptics.

REFERENCES

1. Warner Wallace J. *Cold-Case Christianity: A homicide detective investigate the claims of the Gospels*. Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2013
2. *Ibid*:160
3. *Ibid*:17
4. *Ibid*:191
5. See further resources
6. See uncover.org.uk
7. Wallace. *Op Cit*:70
8. *Ibid*:69ff. Chapter 4, Principle #4: Test Your Witnesses