

# *apologetics 7*

the resurrection

**Chris Knight** outlines a 'minimal facts' approach

In this article we will consider further the case for the resurrection of Jesus, based on what is generally called the 'minimal facts' approach. We will then respond to some of the alternative theories which are intended to cast doubt on the resurrection.



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**T**he minimal facts approach to the resurrection is generally associated with Gary Habermas and Mike Licona.<sup>1</sup> Its strength lies in the fact that it seeks to establish a small number of historical facts surrounding the death of Jesus, each of which has strong historical evidence and is therefore accepted not only by Christian scholars, but also by the vast majority of non-Christian scholars. The historical evidence is the key factor – the ‘fact’ needs to be established by scholarly historical examination, using a number of independent sources or lines of argument. The scholarly acceptance generally follows.

Once this list of minimal facts is established, we can consider the conclusions that follow. Which proposed theory best accounts for all of the facts?

## the minimal facts

So what are the minimal facts? Different people have used slightly different lists, largely dependent, it would seem, on how much scholarly agreement they insist upon before adding a ‘fact’ to the list. We will first consider three ‘minimal facts’ and then one more which appears to receive less universal agreement.

### a. Jesus died by crucifixion

This is a basic assertion which we find many times in the New Testament but is also stated by various non-Christian sources, such as Tacitus (a first century Roman historian), Josephus (a late first century Jewish historian), the Jewish Talmud (first to second century) and Lucian of Samosata (a second century Greek satirist).<sup>2</sup> It meets the

historical criterion of multiple independent sources, including ‘hostile’ witnesses and is therefore to be deemed a reliable ‘minimal fact’.

That Jesus was buried after his crucifixion is suggested by the account of Joseph of Arimathea asking for the body of Jesus. We are told that Joseph was a member of the Jewish Council (Luke 23:50), which had been instrumental in having Jesus condemned (Luke 22:66). It seems unlikely that such a story about a member of the Council which had condemned Jesus would be invented.

The burial also occurs in what would appear to be a very early credal statement quoted by Paul (1 Corinthians 15:3–5):

*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas and then to the Twelve.*

The short, stylised phrasing of these statements suggests that this is an early creed (imagine saying ‘We believe’ before each use of the word ‘that’). Paul’s use of technical rabbinic terminology for ‘receiving’ and ‘passing on’ this teaching implies a formal process of learning which would fit the suggestion that he learnt this from his visit to Cephas (Peter) and James a few years after his conversion (Galatians 1:18–19). What is clear is that various statements summarising key parts of Christian belief were formalised early on, including affirmations about Jesus’ death, burial, resurrection and appearances.

## b. soon after his death, his followers had experiences of meeting the risen Jesus

There is widespread agreement with the 'fact' that, shortly after his death, Jesus' disciples reported various meetings with the resurrected Jesus. Paul's list in 1 Corinthians is one early source, with the independent Gospel accounts of the resurrection appearances confirming the appearance to Peter (Luke 24:34) and to the Twelve (Luke 24:36ff; John 20:19ff).

The fact that the Gospels record that it was female followers of Jesus who first saw the risen Jesus is highly significant. No-one in the first century would concoct a resurrection story where the first appearances were to women, whose testimony would be rejected by most people out of hand. Josephus states that women's testimony was inadmissible in Jewish courts.<sup>3</sup>

The first pagan critique of Christianity, by Celsus in about AD 175, dismisses the women's testimony (indirectly confirming its centrality and persistence in the Christian account of the resurrection), citing hysteria.<sup>4</sup> The credal statement in 1 Corinthians 15 does not mention appearances to women, perhaps because they would not generally be credited as reliable, suggesting that the creed served an apologetic, as well as a doctrinal, function.

The relevant historical criterion here is that of embarrassment. Authors will only record events which are difficult or problematic for them if they are sure they are true.

## c. some years later, Saul of Tarsus also reported seeing the resurrected Jesus

Like the other disciples, Saul's resurrection experience turned his life around. Like them, he

was prepared to suffer and die because he was so convinced of the truth of the resurrection of Jesus. His experience of the risen Jesus was so real that nothing would be the same for him again. He turned from persecuting Jesus to proclaiming Jesus.

Paul was certainly not expecting to meet with Jesus. Neither were the earlier disciples. Jews did not have a concept of a dying and rising Messiah. The resurrection was to be a universal event at the end of time. Nevertheless, Paul and the other disciples came to believe firmly that Jesus had risen from the dead. Their experience of the risen Jesus had to be certain enough to overcome their expectations. A vague feeling that Jesus was present 'in spirit' would not seem to fit the bill.

## d. the empty tomb

Although sometimes not included as a 'minimal fact', the historical evidence for the empty tomb is strong and it seems that the majority of scholars do accept it as true. Its strong link with the women coming to the tomb on the third day after the crucifixion argues for it. With the Jewish expectation of an eventual bodily resurrection, the presence of a decaying corpse in the tomb would have totally undermined the disciples' suggestion that Jesus had already risen from the dead.

The Gospels report that the Jewish authorities concocted a plan with the guard at the tomb to say that the disciples had stolen the body in the night (Matthew 28:11ff). This could be dismissed as a fabrication, but if it has an element of truth in it, it is an acknowledgment that the tomb was indeed empty and shows that a more elaborate story was required to explain why it was not possible simply to retrieve the body from the tomb.

## possible explanations

Having agreed some basic facts relating to the death of Christ, the question remains how best to explain them. There are a number of possibilities:

### a. Jesus was not dead but revived in the tomb

This is refuted by the first minimal fact. Crucifixion was an efficient and cruel killing method. Even if Jesus did somehow manage to survive it, we need to ask how a weakened Jesus in such a state could convince his early disciples that he had truly risen from the dead and that they should then risk their lives based on the claim that Jesus had defeated death.

### b. the disciples had hallucinations about Jesus being risen

There are many problems with hallucination theories, especially where collective experiences are proposed. The last three minimal facts undermine the claim. The early disciples and Paul were in very different psychological states and yet claimed a similar experience of the risen Jesus. Why did the hallucinations not continue for all who expressed faith, rather than cease after 40 days? And hallucinations, of course, do not account for an empty tomb. A tomb containing a corpse would have been highly problematic for the first preaching of the resurrection in and around Jerusalem. Gary Habermas presents further critiques of hallucination theories.<sup>5</sup>

### c. the disciples lied

One question to ask about this proposal is 'Why?'. What could have motivated the disciples to lie about the resurrection and continue that lie through torture and death? We would also have to suggest that those disciples were very

poor liars – forgetting, for example, that having women as the first witnesses would do nothing for the credibility of their lie. There is also, of course, the empty tomb to consider, unless we go with adding body-stealing to blatant deception. And again, we come to Paul's own independent experience of the risen Jesus. It seems likely that he discussed his own experience of the risen Jesus with that of Peter and James when they met (see above), and yet there is no indication of any disagreement.

### d. the resurrection stories arose as legends in the early church

Legends take time to arise and replace any historical foundation, typically a minimum of two generations. And yet the creed Paul cites in 1 Corinthians 15 probably dates from no more than a few years after the death of Jesus, and certainly no later than his visit to Corinth in around AD 50. The first Gospels also date from this same general period and certainly in the lifetimes of the first eyewitnesses. There is no time for legend to arise. If the accounts are legends, it is again difficult to understand why the women are given as the first witnesses.

### e. Jesus rose from the dead

Having seen that alternative explanations fail to explain the agreed facts, we can consider the explanation given in the early New Testament documents and throughout Christian history. When we consider just the facts which are historically well-supported and accepted by the vast majority of non-Christian and Christian scholars, the explanation that best accounts for them is that Jesus rose from the dead. It is not that we've exhausted any alternatives so have to fall back on the resurrection, but that this is a good, straightforward explanation for those facts.

## conclusion

There is much more that could be said on this topic – both on the minimal facts themselves, the arguments for the facts given, as well as for further facts which might be included (see *further resources* to explore further). What I hope to have illustrated, however, is a method that we can adopt with enquirers. It will not matter to most people that the majority of scholars accept certain facts – but the underlying historical reasons that they are so widely accepted can be recognised as valid by most people. So we can ask what ‘facts’ our friend would accept concerning the death of Jesus and suggest that we begin thinking together from that starting point about what really happened. What explanation would best fit our agreed upon facts?

We can certainly suggest, for example, that Jesus died by crucifixion and that his early followers believed that they saw him again – giving the reasons we believe those to be highly probable. But let our friend determine the starting point. If the best explanation of your agreed ‘facts’ seems to be that Jesus rose from the dead, with alternative explanations failing in various ways, then they will be open to further discussion. That may be the time to suggest looking more deeply at the source documents and the person of Jesus.

One of the implications of our minimal facts is that lives were transformed. The early disciples of Jesus preached the good news of the resurrection of Jesus and the Christian church has continued ever since. Something needs to account for the disciples’ experiences which turned defeat into victory and fear into boldness. NT Wright concludes: ‘As a historian, I cannot explain the rise of early Christianity unless Jesus rose again, leaving an empty tomb behind him’.<sup>6</sup> ■

## key points

- The resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation for a small number of historically probable facts concerning the death of Jesus
- What facts about the death of Jesus can you agree on with your friend?
- What is the best explanation of those facts?

## further resources

- Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), especially part 3.
- William Lane Craig, *On Guard* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010), especially chapter 9.
- J. Warner Wallace, *Cold-Case Christianity: A homicide detective investigates the claims of the Gospels* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2013).
- A host of talks and articles can be found at [www.bethinking.org/did-jesus-rise-from-the-dead](http://www.bethinking.org/did-jesus-rise-from-the-dead)

## REFERENCES

1. For example, see: Habermas G and Licona M. *The case for the resurrection of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2004
2. For further details, see Gleghorn M. Ancient evidence for Jesus from non-Christian sources. [bit.ly/1vKbljx](http://bit.ly/1vKbljx)
3. Josephus. *Antiquities* 4.8.15 §219.
4. Origen. *Contra Celsum* 2.55.
5. Habermas G. Hallucination Theories to Explain Jesus’ Resurrection? [bit.ly/1wvs7dv](http://bit.ly/1wvs7dv)
6. Wright NT. The New Unimproved Jesus. *Christianity Today*, 13 September 1993:26, quoted by Bill Craig at [www.reasonablefaith.org/the-resurrection-of-jesus](http://www.reasonablefaith.org/the-resurrection-of-jesus).