

LECTURE 9: THE HISTORICAL CASE FOR THE PERSON & BODILY RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST

Dr. Paul R. Shockley

www.prshockley.org

Lecture 9 of 12

I. PRELIMINARY MATTER: CASE FOR MIRACLES:¹

- A. If God exists, then miracles are possible.
- B. What is a miracle? 3 Definitions:
 - 1. Former atheist who became a deist philosopher **Antony Flew** once stated: “A miracle is something which would never have happened had nature, as it were, been left to its own devices.”²
 - 2. Atheist **David Hume**: “Now a miracle is a violation of the laws of nature. Yet these laws of nature are themselves established by firm and unalterable experience, so a miracle goes against the very evidence by which we determine matters of fact. Thus we conclude that no human testimony is sufficient to establish the occurrence of a miracle unless the testimony is of such a kind that its being false would be more miraculous than the fact which it seeks to establish.”
 - 3. Evangelical Philosopher Winfried Corduan: “*miracle is an event so unique or unusual, that, given all the circumstances, the best explanation is that God intervened directly.*”
- C. Two Major Arguments Against Miracles:
 - 1. Improbability (David Hume, 1711-1776):³
 - a. All knowledge is to some extent a matter of probability.
 - b. The Knowledge with the highest probability is knowledge of the laws of nature.

¹ The material in this presentation is largely indebted to Norman Geisler, *Baker's Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999); *ibid.*, and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be An Atheist* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 197-217; Winfried Corduan, “Miracles: Liability and Asset” in http://www.apologetics.com/default.jsp?&bodycontent=articles/faith_and_reason/corduan-miracles.html.

² Antony Flew, “Miracles,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 5: 346.

³ David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, Library of Liberal Arts, 1955), 117-41. David Hume's argument against miracles had a powerful impact on Western thought. In fact, it was a foundational element for the Enlightenment worldview whereby secular humanists declared abandonment of faith in a supernatural God, relegating it to false superstitions, primitive beliefs in favor of faith in reason and the scientific method. In fact, this case against miracles worked well in advancing naturalistic evolution because of the belief that God does not exist.

- c. For any alleged miracle, it is more probable that the supposed witnesses were mistaken than that the laws of nature were violated.
- d. Syllogistic argument:
 - 1. Natural law is by definition a description of a regular occurrence.
 - 2. A miracle is by definition a rare occurrence.
 - 3. The evidence for the regular is always greater than that for the rare.
 - 4. A wise man always bases his belief on the greater evidence.
 - 5. Therefore, a wise man should never believe in miracles.⁴

2. Violation of Natural Law:

- a. Syllogistic argument:
 - 1. A miracle is a violation of a natural law.
 - 2. But it is impossible to violate the actual course of events (what is, is; what happens, happens).
 - 3. Therefore, miracles are impossible.

D. Response:

- 1. Not All Explanations Are Created Equal.
 - a. Superseding Miracles: The event appears to defy known physical laws.
 - b. The Configuration Miracle: Set of events that seem too improbable to come together on the basis of coincidence alone

E. Conclusion:

- 1. If God exists, then miracles are possible. The arguments for God's existence (e.g., cosmological, teleological (Intelligent Design and Anthropic Principle), and moral law arguments) give a powerful cumulative case that

⁴ Norman Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to be An Atheist* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 205-6.

we live in a theistic universe. Coupled with both the historical facts of miracles regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ & the reliability of the Bible, using the same criteria for authenticating other historical records, be assured we have the best answers.

2. Be critical/comprehensive when considering miracle claims:

When one person looks at an event and says it is a miracle and another person looks at the same event and says it is not, who is right? Who is to say that that one is right? How can we recognize miracles on such a subjective basis? Remember, not all explanations are created equal. Thus, we want to be ever so careful in claiming what is and what is not a miracle because we don't want to unintentionally misrepresent what has happened. At all times we want to be truthful, factual, and intellectually and emotionally honest before God.

II. CASE FOR CHRIST: MINIMAL FACTS HISTORICAL APPROACH:
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- A. We are going to examine the historical case for the person and resurrection of Jesus Christ using a historical apologetic method. The importance for making a historical case for the person and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is important for the following reason.⁵
- B. **Consider...what determines when an event may be termed “historical”?** When are we justified in concluding that something actually occurred in history? Are there ways to confirm or validate that we have arrived at a sufficient amount of evidence to declare something to have actually happened. How can these conclusions be known with any degree of assurance or certainty?
- C. **What are the tools used by historians?** To be sure there is not unanimous agreement (e.g., revisionists...people for example who rewrite history for various reasons, e.g., The European Holocaust never happened). Nevertheless, here are some standard tools that have been used by those who take seriously the science and art of historical methodology (historiography). In fact, we are going to build a case from the historical nature of Christian events based upon what we call a “*minimal facts*” approach. The “*minimal facts*” are facts that either are accepted or recognized by critics or facts that would be ridiculous for critics to deny.
- D. 12 Minimal Facts most historians (experts on Jesus Christ) agree about Jesus Christ.

⁵ This article is indebted to Gary R. Habermas: *The Resurrection of Jesus: An Apologetic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980; Lanham: University Press of America, 1984); *Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus: Historical Records of His Death and Resurrection* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Publishers, 1984); with Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*, edited by Terry L. Miethe (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1988); *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ* (Joplin: College Press, 1996); “The Resurrection Appearances of Jesus,” in *In Defense of Miracles*, edited by R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), pp. 262-275; “Resurrection Claims in Non-Christian Religions,” *Religious Studies*, Volume 25 (1989), pp. 167-177; “Knowing that Jesus’ Resurrection Occurred,” *Faith and Philosophy*, Volume 2 (July, 1985), pp. 295-302; “Jesus’ Resurrection and Contemporary Criticism,” *Criswell Theological Review*, two parts, Volume 4.1 (Fall, 1989), pp. 159-174 and Volume 4.2 (Fall, 1989), pp. 373-385], “Historical Epistemology, Jesus’ Resurrection, the Shroud of Turin” (Gary Habermas: 1999).

In his work, *The Case for the Real Jesus* Lee Strobel (p. 112), Mike Licona writes:

[Gary] Habermas has compiled a list of more than 2,200 sources in French, German, and English in which experts have written on the resurrection from 1975 to the present. He has identified minimal facts that are strongly evidenced and which are regarded as historical by a large majority of scholars, including skeptics. We try to come up with the best historical explanation to account for these facts. This is called the Minimal Facts Approach.⁶

1. Jesus died by crucifixion.
 2. He was buried.
 3. His death caused the disciples to despair and lose hope.
 4. The tomb was empty (the most contested).
 5. The disciples had experiences which *they believed* were literal appearances of the risen Jesus (the most important proof).
 6. The disciples were transformed from doubters to bold proclaimers.
 7. The resurrection was the central message.
 8. They preached the message of Jesus' resurrection in Jerusalem.
 9. The Church was born and grew.
 10. Orthodox Jews who believed in Christ made Sunday their primary day of worship.
 11. James was converted to the faith when he saw the resurrected Jesus (James was a family skeptic).
 12. Paul was converted to the faith (Paul was an outsider skeptic).
- E. Essentially there are four distinguishable aspects of historical evidence historians typically use to learn about past events: (1) apparent memories (eyewitnesses), (2) the testimony of others (either oral or written (e.g., eyewitnesses, primary and secondary documents), (3) physical traces left behind that may point to the event in

⁶ Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 112.

question (e.g., archeology), and (4) the application of scientific principles or the application of critical interaction.⁷

1. The historian gathers data from these above sources.
2. The historian then applies an array of criteria to help him or her to ascertain what actually occurred in the past (to be sure, certain criteria is considered more valuable than others):
 - a. Early evidence is needed for a case to be well-established
 - b. Eyewitnesses of that event is preferred (“*best relevant evidence*” or “*the rule of immediacy*.”)⁸
 - c. Multiple independent sources significantly strengthen the case.
 - d. Details are enhanced by the principle of embarrassment, surprise, or negative reports whereby the writer (who has a friendly vested interested) makes painful remarks concerning an event, person, and/or himself/herself.
 - e. Antagonistic person or party recognizes the event or person investigated.
 - f. The event coheres with other attested historical events, events, persons, and situational setting.
 - g. Finally, the explanation proposed is scrutinized in order to see if the explanation sheds light on other known phenomena or investigated claims.
- F. Coupled with this criteria to examine historical data, the minimal approach places importance upon, first and most of all, remarkably or extraordinarily well-attested documents on several distinct grounds and, second, whether the material is classified as historical by the majority of critical scholars.
- G. Additionally, let’s keep in mind a complimentary and helpful tool offered by the atheist David Hume. In order to test the credibility of witnesses, Hume writes, “We entertain suspicion concerning any matter of fact when the witnesses contradict each other, when they are but few or of a doubtful character, when they have an interest in what they affirm, when they deliver their testimony with hesitation, or with too violent asseverations [declarations].”⁹ We can outline Hume’s concerns into four questions:¹⁰

⁷ See Earle E. Cairns, *God and Man in Time: A Christian Approach to Historiography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), pp. 33-42; Richard Swinburne, “Historical Evidence” in *Miracles*, edited by Richard Swinburne (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 133-135.

⁸ David Hackett Fischer, *Historian’s Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1970), p. 62. An interesting insight is that Fischer places “remains” of a historical event above “direct observations” of it. Regarding the importance of eyewitness testimony in ancient Greek thought see Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern, Second Edition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 38.

⁹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Chas W. Hendel (New York: Liberal Arts, 1955), 120.

¹⁰ Norman Geisler, *Baker’s Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 779.

1. Do the witnesses contradict each other?
2. Are there a sufficient number of witnesses?
3. Were the witnesses truthful?
4. Were they non-prejudicial?

Thus, let's be mindful of this skeptic's criteria as we use the minimal approach to demonstrate the historical person and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

H. Having examined the nature or "*how to do*" historical inquiry, let's study the evidence for the person and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ using the same criteria historians use.¹¹ Why apply this historical criterion to the person and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ?

1. **Exceptionally Early Evidence & Contemporary Eyewitnesses:**

- a. 1 Corinthians 15:1-7:
- b. The early attestation of the Book of Acts (Luke 1:1-4):

2. **Multiple, independent sources for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ:**

- a. *Gospel of Matthew* (Approx. A.D. 50-60).
- b. *Gospel of Mark* (Approx. A.D. 64, yet prior to A.D. 70).
- c. *Gospel of John* (Approx. AD. 85-95).
- d. Early Patristic Sources (A.D. 70-150).
- e. Anti-Nicene Patristic Fathers (A.D. 150-300).
- f. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (A.D. 300-430).

3. **Ancient Roman Sources:**

- a. Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus (A.D. 55-120) who lived through the reigns of over a half dozen Roman emperors.
- b. Seutonius, who was chief secretary to Emperor Hadrian (reign from 117-138).
- c. Historian Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37/38-97), a Jewish revolutionary who changed allegiance to the Romans in the Jewish revolt in order to have his life, worked under Emperor Vespasian.

¹¹ This portion is from Geisler, Baker's *Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 381-85; Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 187-228. The latter work contains extraordinary and acute citations and detailed arguments from a number of non-Christians sources; it is powerfully tool in terms of historical apologetics as it articulates the facts regarding the person and bodily resurrection of Christ in splendid detail. Geisler's citations are excellent for lecture presentations as used in this CD for the sources that are quoted (pages 381-85).

- d. Thallus (A.D. 52).
- e. Pliny the Younger, a Roman author and administrator under the Emperor Trajan approx. A.D. 112.
- f. Hadrian (ca. 265-339).

4. **Jewish Sources:**

- a. *Talmud* (compiled between A.D. 70-200).
- b. *Toledoth Jesus*, an anti-Christian document, compiled in the 5th century.

5. **Gentile Sources:**

- a. Lucian of Samosata, 2nd Century Greek writer.
- b. *Mara Bar-Serapion*. A Syrian, Mara Bara-Serapion wrote a letter to his son Serapion sometime between the late 1st and early 3rd centuries.

6. **Gnostic Sources:**

- a. *The Gospel of Truth*, second century book written by Valentinus in AD. 135-160.
- b. *The Apocryphon of John*, a 2nd Century work.
- c. *The Gospel of Thomas* (A.D. 140-200).
- d. *The Treatise on Resurrection*, a late 2nd Century work.

7. **Other Sources:**

- a. *Acts of Pontius Pilate* (before A.D. 150).
- b. Phlegon, a freed slave of Emperor Hadrian (ca. 80).

I. **Embarrassing Confessions:**

- 1. Gospels repeatedly assert that Jesus' friends such as Thomas did not believe He had been resurrected despite the testimonies of those who had seen Him. Their unbelief persisted until after He had appeared to them.

J. **Antagonistic Testimony:**

- 1. Antagonistic testimony is given by Jewish sources that confess the empty tomb, even though they try to explain the data naturalistically.
- 2. Conversion of Saul to Paul.

3. The brother James.

K. Critical Interaction:

1. Realizing that historical data must be subjected to critical interaction:
2. Resurrection is not best explained on purely natural grounds.
3. Initially, the effort to dismiss the resurrection because of its incredibility is before the evidence is assessed is presumptuous.
4. If it is even possible that God exists, such an event is also possible, no matter how unlikely it may seem.
5. No one hypothesis is capable of explaining all of the data.

L. Conclusion: A strong defense for the person and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is very well substantiated by the minimal historical facts method alone. We are able to defend the historicity of Jesus Christ by appealing to remarkable and well-attested documents from multiple, independent sources that are both friendly and antagonistic. By using criteria for historical accuracy that is recognized by leading historians for any historical account, we have been able to perform two major apologetic tasks:

1. Refute major naturalistic hypotheses;
2. Provide powerful evidences for the person and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.