

Questions Surrounding Jesus' Resurrection - Part 2

Dr. John Ankerberg

Is there compelling historical evidence that demonstrates that after Jesus was honorably buried He arose from the dead? In order to answer this important question I believe we need to examine 12 historical facts about Jesus' life that are accepted by almost all critical scholars—non-Christian and Christian alike. Today we want to present the evidence for four of these facts from both secular sources and early Christian sources. After we do I think you will understand why these facts are accepted by the majority of critical scholars today.

To begin I would like you to hear from Dr. Gary Habermas who is known and respected as one of the premier scholars in the world on the historical research surrounding Jesus' resurrection.

*** Excerpt***

Dr. John Ankerberg: You've written a book entitled *The Historical Jesus*, and you have outlined a very unique approach where you have picked twelve historical facts that are agreed to by virtually all critical scholars. Tell us how you picked out these facts.

Dr. Gary Habermas: Well, first, my purpose in doing this was to have common ground that critics and believers can share together and say, "Now what do we do with this common body of facts?" The twelve begin at Jesus' death by crucifixion. I think there are many others throughout His life, but I start with that and go through until the end. And my point is to pick facts, with virtually no exceptions, which will fit two criteria: 1), the vast majority of critical scholars will admit this fact, and I mean 90s, 90 percentile. And 2), I will not use a fact that is not multiply attested at several levels by several sources and looks at this from different perspectives. I think that's a good one-two punch for this.

Now we want to examine four of these facts in this article.

1. Jesus died by crucifixion;
2. He was buried;

3. His death caused His disciples to despair and lose hope;
4. The tomb in which Jesus was buried was discovered to be empty just a few days later.

Is there historical evidence that establishes these facts?

Fact #1: Jesus died by crucifixion

Ankerberg: All right, let's take fact number 1. Jesus died by crucifixion. You not only cite that this came from scripture, but you say it's attested to by over 17 non-Christian secular sources.

Habermas: You have scripture with Paul, with four gospels, with Acts, etc. There are about 17 secular sources for Jesus, 12 of them cite His death with all sorts of details, so 12 out of 17 tell us that He died with this or that.

Ankerberg: Name a few.

Habermas: Well, okay, you've got Tacitus who gives us some information and mentions Pilate and Tiberius Caesar. You've got the Talmud with a reference to Jesus being hanged on Passover eve after they were going to stone Him. You've got another Jewish source, Josephus, who says He was crucified under the leadership of Pontius Pilate. You've got two sources, two very much ignored sources, Thallus, a Greek historian writing about 52 A.D. and Phlegon, a freed man from Emperor Hadrian., writing about 120 [A.D.], about the time of Tacitus and Suetonius. Both of them record the darkness that surrounds the earth during the crucifixion.

You have Mara Bar-Serapion, a Syrian writer, who talks to his son and says Jesus was a man who died for His teachings. And you have the satirist and historian, Lucian—who, by the way, wrote just about our only ancient account of historiography, how to do history, these tools and rules that we use—and Lucian says teasingly about Jesus, He's a crucified sophist and He taught His followers to be brothers and not to fear death. But He died for these things.

Those are few of the sources that we have from secular history. Now, on top of those, we have some unique medical information about death by crucifixion. So much so, that 15 years ago the *Journal of the American Medical Association* could have an article by a team—one pastor, two medical personnel—who write about death by crucifixion and these men write a death certificate for Jesus.

So you have medicine coming in with a dozen secular sources with the New Testament of which Paul is the leader here, everybody admits he's an early eyewitness. This is why John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg do not hesitate to say that the cross has to be undoubted in the life of Christ and is by far the best-attested event.

Ankerberg: John Dominic Crossan [one of the leaders of the Jesus Seminar] claimed on the ABC special with Peter Jennings that Jesus' body was taken down off the cross, then thrown onto a garbage heap and eaten by wild dogs. Is

there any historical evidence for this amazing statement?

Habermas: I could say for the moment that it's interesting that virtually none of his friends have followed him and that doesn't prove anything here or there but maybe it's a hint that the data are not in his favor. One thing I would say to that is, we are devoid of a single fact that says that happened to Jesus. We have a lot of reasons to think that He was buried, and that the tomb in which he was buried was empty. But nothing, not any fact, that says He was thrown into a common grave. Now, you could say well that's usually what is done to crucifixion victims, but see, we have specifically evidence that says that was not done in the case of Jesus.

Fact #2: Jesus was honorably buried

Now the second fact that we want to examine is that Jesus was honorably buried in a tomb. Dr. William Lane Craig talks about the evidence for this fact.

Dr. William Lane Craig: I was somewhat amused when Peter Jennings on the ABC Special said that, according to the Gospels, Jesus was laid in the tomb by His mother and His friends. Now, if the story of Jesus' burial were a late developing legend that accrued over the decades in the early Christian church, that is exactly the sort of pious story that one would expect to find—Jesus was buried by His devoted mother and His faithful disciples. But that's not, in fact, what the Gospels say.

Instead, what the Gospels say is that Jesus of Nazareth was laid in a tomb by this enigmatic figure, Joseph of Arimathea, who appears out of nowhere in the Gospels, and contrary to expectation, gives Jesus of Nazareth an honorable burial in a tomb. Moreover, Mark tells us that this man was a member of the Sanhedrin, the very council which had just condemned Jesus to be crucified and that Joseph singles out Jesus among the trio of men that had been crucified for special care by giving Him an honorable burial in a tomb rather than allowing the body to simply be dispatched into a common grave reserved for criminals. This is extraordinary and requires some sort of explanation.

Ankerberg: Okay. Now why does that take precedence over, say, John Dominic Crossan's theory that He was just thrown on the trash heap and kind of chewed up by the dogs?

Craig: The burial account of Jesus has very strong and independent lines of evidence supporting it. One of the most important is that it's multiply attested in early sources in the New Testament.

Ankerberg: Where?

Craig: For example, it's mentioned in the early tradition that is handed on by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15: "...that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised, and that He appeared."

And the second line of this formula refers to Jesus' burial. This tradition has been dated to within five years after the crucifixion of Jesus. So this can't be written off as some sort of a legendary tale that accrued over the decades and eventually came to be written down in the Gospels.

Moreover, when you compare this formula to the Gospel accounts on the one hand and the early sermons recorded in the Acts of the Apostles on the other, what you discover is that this four-line tradition is an outline of the early Christian proclamation of the crucifixion, 1) the burial by Joseph of Arimathea in the tomb, 2) the resurrection of Jesus, 3) the discovery of the empty tomb, and 4) the appearing of Jesus to various witnesses. So you have here multiple independent attestation of the burial as well as other portions of the tradition.

Ankerberg: Isn't that what historians want?

Craig: The vast majority of New Testament scholars today regard the burial of Jesus as one of the earliest and best-attested facts about the historical Jesus that we have.

Fact #3: Jesus' death caused the disciples to despair

Let's go on to fact number 3: that Jesus' death caused the disciples to despair and lose hope, believing that His life had ended.

Habermas: Now this is recorded in all the gospels depending on what you do with Mark 16. But I think that the reason critics don't really dispute this is because the psychology behind it is just too hard to ignore.

What do you say when your closest friend, around whom you have dedicated three years of your life, and you thought He was the key to your hopes and your family's hopes and dreams, so much so that the disciples thought, "Hey, can we sit on your right hand and your left hand." I mean you know, "You're our future," and He's taken away from you.

He's taken away from you violently, so much so that you have to hide for fear of the Jews, it says there in the gospel of John. And that kind of an account—everything's dashed at once. He's dead and you're sitting around wondering if you should go fishing again.

It is virtually impossible from a psychological viewpoint—psychology comes to the rescue of the New Testament text—How do those guys feel triumphant after going through something like this?

Fact #4: The empty tomb

The fourth historical fact is that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was discovered to be empty just a few days later. Dr. William Lane Craig presents the evidence.

Craig: These four facts—the honorable burial of Jesus; the discovery of His empty tomb; the post-mortem appearances of Jesus; and the origin of the disciples' faith that God had raised Jesus from the dead—represent the views of the majority of New Testament critics who have written on these subjects.

And I want to emphasize, I'm not talking here about conservative scholars or Fundamentalists; I'm talking about the broad mainstream of scholarship. Those who deny it tend to be radical critics on the left-wing fringe of New Testament scholarship. But the majority of scholars who have written on these subjects agree with the honorable burial, the empty tomb, the post-mortem appearances, and the origin of the disciples' faith in the Resurrection of Jesus.

Now, specifically with regard to the empty tomb, the majority of scholars who have written on this subject agree that the tomb of Jesus was probably found empty by a group of His women followers early on Sunday morning. That represents the historical core of the empty tomb narrative as we find it in Mark.

Ankerberg: Why do they find it credible?

Craig: The empty tomb story enjoys multiple independent lines of evidence. For example, as I've already indicated, the burial account supports the empty tomb story. If the burial account of Jesus is historically accurate, then the inference that the tomb was found empty is not very far at hand because the Resurrection faith could not have arisen and flourished in the face of a closed tomb.

Secondly, I think that the empty tomb story is also multiply and independently attested in early sources. It's attested in the pre-Markan Passion source, that is, the source that Mark used for writing his Gospels. But we also have independent sources for the empty tomb in Matthew and Luke and also in John. This is evident, for example, from the fact that Matthew has a quite different account of the empty tomb, employing the idea of a guard, a story which Matthew did not invent out of whole cloth but which represented a tradition which Matthew received.

Most scholars recognize that John's account of the empty tomb and the burial of Jesus is independent of the three Synoptic Gospels.

I also think that the empty tomb is implied, at least, in the formula handed on by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. When you look at the third line of that formula which says, "And he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures," that third line corresponds to the empty tomb narrative in the Gospels and to the empty tomb in the sermons in the Acts of the Apostles. So again, it is a summary in outline form of the wider story of the empty tomb.

Women Are Not Good Witnesses!

The early historical accounts say it was women who were the first to discover the fact that Jesus' tomb was empty. Dr. Craig explains why, if a writer were inventing this story about Jesus, he would not have named women as the early witnesses of the empty tomb.

Craig: Another earmark of the historical credibility of the empty tomb story is the surprising fact that the tomb was discovered empty by women. Now, in order to appreciate why this is remarkable, you need to understand two things about the role of women in first century Jewish society. First of all, women were, quite frankly, second-class citizens. For example, one later rabbinic saying says, “Blessed is he whose children are male, but woe to him whose children are female.” This was clearly the era of pre-feminist consciousness.

Secondly, the testimony of women was regarded as so unreliable that they were not even allowed to serve as witnesses in a Jewish court of law. Now, in light of this fact, how remarkable must it seem that it is women who are the chief witnesses to, and the discoverers of, Jesus’ empty tomb? Any later legendary account would certainly have made male disciples, say, Peter and John, come to the tomb first and discover it empty. The fact that it is discovered empty by women whose testimony in that society was regarded as worthless is most plausibly explained by saying that, like it or not, they were the discoverers of the empty tomb and the Gospels record what, for them, was a very embarrassing and awkward fact.

Habermas: Number one, if you’re explaining the gospel accounts and you want to make a great preaching point, don’t pick the women as your first witnesses because, as Luke 24:11 says, your audience doesn’t accept them. So why put them out there unless Jesus really appeared to them? So the testimony of the women is important.

Number two, the empty tomb is preached very early. You’ve got Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 saying He died, He was buried, what went down is what came out, and what came out is what appeared. You’ve got the fact that this was proclaimed in Jerusalem and I’ve got to say if you’re going to proclaim the Resurrection and you want to start with the empty tomb—and by the way they didn’t start with that, the appearances are much more important. But I said you don’t use women and you don’t want to proclaim early if at all possible, you want to go a little bit and they don’t.

But thirdly, don’t do it in Jerusalem. That’s the place where it can be disproved. Because if the Jewish leaders or Romans were to get that body out, now some critics say what will that body look like in 50 days? Still, “Look,” they’ll say, “Hey fellas, here the garment is still on and He’s crucified. Look boys, what do you say about this?” So Jerusalem is the wrong place to do it.

So here’s some of the data we have just to start with there that say that the tomb was empty, here’s the location, here’s the women, here’s the earliest sources, I think we’ve got a good start there on the Resurrection preaching.

