

A Case for the Resurrection of Christ—Part 1

[By David P. Diaz, Ed.D.](#)

Introduction



Who was Jesus of Nazareth?^[1] Was he an ordinary man, a deceiver, prophet, charlatan, God incarnate? No matter what one thinks, Jesus is arguably the most important figure the world has ever known. It has been said:

Had Jesus never been born, this world would be far more miserable than it is. In fact, many of man's noblest and kindest deeds find their motivation in love for Jesus Christ; and some of our greatest accomplishments also have their origin in service rendered to the humble Carpenter of Nazareth.... Jesus Christ, the greatest man who ever lived, changed virtually every aspect of human life—and most people don't know it."^[2]

While he was alive, Jesus told people that the Kingdom of God was at hand (Mk. 1:15; Mt. 4:17).^[3] He predicted that he must suffer and die but would be raised

from the dead (Mk. 8:31; 9:12, 31; Mt. 16:21). He also told his followers to make disciples and proclaim his “good news” to the ends of the earth (Mk. 16:15; Mt. 28:19; Acts 1:8) so that all could share in eternal life (Jn. 3:14–16; 17:3).

In the following series, which will consist of two parts, I will make a case for Jesus’s resurrection. This singular event represents the core message of the Christian Gospel or “good news.” If Jesus was not raised, the Christian message should be rejected. The apostle Paul put it bluntly when he said, “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.... If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:14, 32 [NIV]).

As you read this paper, please understand this: I am not asking you to believe in God or miracles.^[4] Moreover, I’m not asking that you believe the Bible contains truth or even venerable lessons in life. I’m simply asking that you not deny such claims out of hand. As you read the following article, I encourage you to (1) choose what you consider to be the most plausible or probable explanation for the facts that are presented and (2) suspend, insofar as possible, any preconceived bias that you may have regarding the resurrection of Jesus. In other words, be open-minded and objectively evaluate the evidence.

Someone may say, “Well, you are only recommending that we be open-minded about the existence of God and miracles because it supports your theory.” That’s a fair point. However, from a Christian perspective, *if God exists then miracles are possible*. Any being that holds power over the cosmos, can intervene whenever he chooses to do miraculous works by his will and for his purposes. The *possibility* of the existence of such a God is grounded in the insight that human knowledge is finite. In other words, it would be unreasonable to make the claim that God does not exist because, for finite humans, reality perpetually remains an open field of discourse.^[5]

God and Miracles

Any discussion of the resurrection must, at least briefly, address the existence of miracles. The resurrection of Jesus, if it happened as he predicted and as described in the Bible, would doubtless be a miracle. Though I do not intend to make a case for the existence of God or miracles in this work, I do want to point out some crucial considerations about each.

“ *The possibility of the existence of God is grounded in the insight that human knowledge is finite.*”

According to Christian doctrine, the very possibility of miracles hinges on the existence of God. For Christians, if there is no God, then there would be no miracles. Without God, natural laws acting on elementary particles would likely be the sole governing force in the universe, and any talk of supernatural causes would be irrelevant. However, if God exists and created the universe, including the laws of physics, he can temporarily suspend or control those laws to accomplish his purposes.

The Reliability, Accuracy, and Truth of the New Testament

Most of what we know of the events surrounding the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is found in the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Thus, when talking about the resurrection of Christ, it is natural to want to know if these documents are trustworthy. Maybe the historical claims in the Bible aren't or can't be shown to be true. Perhaps there is good reason to doubt the veracity of the New Testament. But before you draw any hard and fast conclusions, let me take a moment to explain three terms that are often repeated, often confused, and also misunderstood. They are: “reliability,” “accuracy,” and “truth.”^[6]

What is Reliability?

“An ancient document can be considered “reliable” if the text we possess today accurately represents the authors’ original words.”

With respect to biblical documents, reliability refers to the *consistency* of the ancient texts, especially across multiple manuscripts and over time. *An ancient document can be considered “reliable” if the text we possess today represents the authors’ original words at a high level of confidence.* In other words, reliability has to do with how faithfully the original manuscripts have been transmitted and whether our current texts and the translations based on them dependably represent the original writings.

What complicates the situation is that the original manuscripts no longer exist. The currently accepted text of the Greek New Testament is based on *copies* of the originals, which have also been copied and recopied numerous times throughout history. Nevertheless, by assembling and comparing the text of all existing manuscripts, scholars can get a good idea of how reliably the words have been transmitted and can even revise obvious errors (e.g., misspellings, grammatical mistakes, etc.). Such work is the job of textual critics. The methods used by these scholars help them determine what the original authors wrote.

Since the New Testament was originally written in Greek, seeking to restore a virtually pure text is an essential objective of textual critics as well as those who are translating the Greek New Testament into other languages. This process involves using the best available manuscripts of the Greek New Testament.^[7] Fortunately, there are thousands of ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament on which the Greek text has been built. And, if certain manuscripts are not consistent with others, then textual critics attempt to figure out why and adjust the current Greek text so that it more reliably represents the originals.^[8] Based on the definition of “reliability” that I offered above, I believe one can claim that the current text of the New Testament is *reliable*.^[9]

Scholars have noted that, when comparing the thousands of New Testament manuscripts, there are many *variant readings* (i.e., differences between manuscripts). However, while it is true that there are a great number of differences across Greek manuscripts, agnostic New Testament historian Bart Ehrman dispels our greatest fears: “The first thing to say about these 300,000 or 400,000 [variants] is that most of them don’t matter for anything. They are absolutely irrelevant, immaterial, unimportant.”^[10] He concludes: “As it turns out, the majority of mistakes you find in manuscripts show us nothing more than that scribes in antiquity could spell no better than my students can today.”^[11] Textual critic Daniel Wallace concurs: “Of the hundreds of thousands of textual variants in New Testament manuscripts, the great majority are spelling differences that have no bearing on the meaning of the text.”^[12]

The takeaway from this discussion is that there is good reason to believe that the text of the New Testament is reliable. Importantly, whether one wants to use the New Testament for the purpose of study or for the sake of argument, he or she must accept that it possesses at least some level of textual reliability. If one thinks the text is not at all reliable, then *nothing* one says about it can be demonstrated to be accurate or true, not to mention inaccurate or false. Without a certain level of acceptance of textual reliability, one cannot use the New Testament for *any* historical purpose, whether it be to support or reject its claims.

What is Accuracy?

A reliable document isn’t necessarily an “accurate” one. If I step on a scale 20 times over two or three consecutive days and get the exact same weight, that measurement is *reliable*. Reliability means achieving *consistent* results from one measurement to the next. However, if someone changes the calibration of that scale, it may be reliable but not *accurate*. In other words, the scale may still record the same weight every day, but the reading may not reflect one’s actual weight. In the same way, even if the New Testament text is reliable, this does not mean it has accurately recorded historical events. Even if the text is a reliable representation of the original manuscript, it is only “accurate” to the extent that it *correctly presents the facts*.

Demonstrating the accuracy of the New Testament involves corroborating

factual claims by comparing them with *independent biblical sources, non-biblical (neutral) texts, and archaeological artifacts*. These comparisons can sometimes provide enough independent evidence to justify a belief in the accuracy of a biblical claim. However, in many cases, the evidence is equivocal. Therefore, *solely by using historical methods*, one should not expect to establish the accuracy of all, or even most, of the facts expressed in ancient documents. The accuracy of any purported fact or narrative detail must be examined individually, and any decisions about accuracy must be made on a case-by-case basis.

What is Truth?

Assessing “truth” involves attempting to answer specific *propositions* about the text.^[13] For a proposition to be true, it must *correspond to reality*. So, if the reality of a situation is as a proposition claims it to be, then the proposition is true, and if not, it is false. For example, the propositions “Jesus was born in Bethlehem” and “Jesus rose bodily from the dead” are examples of historical propositions that are either true or false. If the propositions match reality, then they are true, and if not, they are false.

However, the truth of some propositions cannot always be determined through historical methods. For example, any historical claim that rests solely on an individual’s subjective experience will be difficult, if not impossible, to validate. Furthermore, metaphysical or theological truth claims are impervious to historical verification. Jesus’s proposition (Jn. 14:6), “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me,” is a claim about his divine nature and represents a theological doctrine of faith. Such a claim is not a historical claim but a metaphysical and theological one, which makes it resistant to purely historical proof.

In the following sections, we will be looking at four historical propositions (i.e., purported facts about the beliefs of early Christians). We will examine each proposition to determine whether there are sufficient reasons to think any of them accurately represents the *beliefs of the earliest Christians*.

Four Purported Beliefs of Early Christians

about the Resurrection

Just the Facts

There are four propositions about the beliefs of the earliest Christians. (1) They believed Jesus *died by crucifixion* and was *buried*. (2) Specific *individuals* had experiences that led them to believe and proclaim that Jesus had risen and appeared to them from the dead. (3) Key *groups* of people believed they saw a risen Jesus. (4) Many of the followers of Jesus believed that he appeared to them in *bodily form*.

You may notice that these four propositions are about what certain people at the time of Jesus *believed*. I'm not assuming, nor am I asking you to assume, that these claims are *accurate* (i.e., that Jesus actually did rise from the dead). However, as I see it, our task is two-fold: We must first determine for ourselves if these four propositions were *believed* by early Christians and, if so, determine which of several hypotheses *best explains these beliefs*.

A Key Passage: 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

Before we look more closely at the proposed beliefs, we will examine a passage in the New Testament that will provide the preponderance of evidence for the truth of the four propositions. The following passage was penned by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Church at Corinth: ^[14]

3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; 7 then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; 8 and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.

The importance of this passage cannot be underestimated. Paul's epistles are the earliest written sources that mention the crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. It is often noted by textual scholars that *earlier writings* are considered more credible sources because they are nearer to the reported

events. Therefore, it is worth noting that the epistle of 1 Corinthians was written no later than 55 A.D., just 25 years after the crucifixion of Jesus.^[15] Even more impressive is that Paul claims to be passing on a tradition from an *even earlier source* than his epistle: “For I delivered to you as of first importance *what I also received...*” (v. 3). Many scholars interpret this to mean that 1 Corinthians 15:3–5 is likely a *set of beliefs*, a *formula*, or *creed*, that predated Paul’s epistle. If so, Paul may have learned this creed at the time of his conversion, just two to five years after Jesus’s crucifixion.^[16] Indeed, it is even possible that the creed *predated* Paul’s conversion.^[17]

“*A creed is a brief statement of belief, formatted in such a way as to make it easier to remember, recite, and even sing (i.e., as a hymn).*”

A creed is a brief statement of belief formatted in such a way as to make it easier to remember, recite, and even sing (i.e., as a hymn). There are a few reasons why scholars believe that 1 Corinthians 15:3–7 contains an early Christian creed. First, Paul uses two Greek terms that imply he is imparting a tradition: “delivered” and “received” (παράδίδωμι and παραλαμβάνω, respectively). In effect, he is saying, “I delivered to you something that I received.” By using such terminology, “Paul asserts that he is about to impart content he received from another; in other words, [a] tradition handed down to him.”^[18]

A second reason for believing this passage is an early creed is that several non-Pauline traits appear in the text. For example, the expression “for our sins” (v. 3) is otherwise absent in Paul’s writings (with one exception: Gal. 1:4). Also, the phrase “according to the Scriptures” (v. 3) is not found elsewhere in Paul’s writings but is used twice in this passage.^[19] Finally, the term “the Twelve” (v. 5) is used nowhere else by Paul but in this passage.^[20]

A third reason to recognize this passage as a creed is that the text displays *parallelism*.^[21] The excerpt starts with an introduction: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received...” As Licona describes it: “The first and third lines are longer, have the same construction... and are followed by a short sentence that leads with the Greek *ὅτι* (“that”). This pattern is then repeated: “...*that* Christ died for our sins... and *that* He was buried, and *that* He was raised on the third day... and *that* He appeared to Cephas...” Creedal statements were typically formatted in a way that facilitated memorization and recitation. In conclusion, 1 Corinthians 15:3–7 is dated early, includes significant non-Pauline wording, and includes parallelism, which has all the earmarks of an early Christian creed.^[22]

It is thought that Paul may have received this creed directly from the Jerusalem apostles—Peter, James, and John. New Testament scholar Mike Licona states, “It is most reasonable to conclude that the tradition in 1 Corinthians 15:3–7 was formed in Jerusalem. Paul received it directly from the Jerusalem apostles or someone he deemed very credible.”^[23] He may also have received it from Ananias within days of his conversion (Acts 9:19–22).^[24] Or, he could have even heard the statements of belief before he became a follower of Jesus (see footnote 17). Although we don’t know for sure, the early dating, formatting, unique wording, and possible apostolic origin of the source suggest that the creed is most likely an accurate reflection of the beliefs of the early Church.

In the following few sections, I will propose four facts that proceed from the creed in 1 Corinthians 15:3–7, some of which are corroborated by independent texts.

Proposed Fact #1: The Earliest Christians Believed that Jesus Died by Crucifixion and was Buried

Jesus’s death and burial were part of the earliest beliefs of the Christian Church. The creed tells us that Jesus *died* on the cross (1 Cor. 15:3; cf. 1:23, 2:2, 8) and was *buried* (1 Cor. 15:4). Each of the four canonical Gospels corroborates the message that *Jesus died by crucifixion* (Mt. 27:45–54; Mk. 15:33–39; Lk. 23:44–48; Jn. 19:28–30) and *was buried* (Mt. 27:57–61; Mk. 15:42–47; Lk.

23:50–56; Jn. 19:38–42).

The crucifixion of Jesus was also attested by non-Christian authors, including Tacitus,^[25] Lucian (*The Death of Peregrine*, 11),^[26] Mara bar Serapion (Letter at British Museum),^[27] and Josephus.^[28] Together, these references represent *early, multiple, and independent attestations* of Jesus's crucifixion. Thus, Fact #1 seems to have been a belief held by the early Christians.

Proposed Fact #2: Specific Individuals Experienced what they Believed to be the Risen Jesus

Peter was apparently the first of the Twelve to claim to see the risen Jesus (1 Cor. 15:5; cf. Lk. 24:34). Jesus was also believed to have appeared to his half-brother James (1 Cor. 15:7) and, ultimately, appeared to Paul (v. 8).^[29] Peter was a *sincere follower* who was *willing* to believe in the appearance of Jesus; however, others were *doubters* (e.g., Thomas), *disbelievers* (e.g., James, the brother of Jesus), and even *enemies* of the Christian Church (i.e., the Pharisee Saul of Tarsus). And yet, each of these came to believe and proclaim the resurrection of Jesus. The early dating of the creed and the diversity of those who purportedly believed they saw a risen Jesus suggests that Fact #2 was a belief held by early Christians.

Proposed Fact #3: Key Groups were Believed to have Seen the Risen Jesus

The creed, as recorded by Paul, tells us that Jesus appeared to different *groups*: “the Twelve” (1 Cor. 15:5), to “more than five hundred brethren at one time” (v. 6), and “then to all the apostles” (v. 7). These appearances took place at different times and locations and included many people. Early dating and the great number of purported witnesses to these appearances suggest this was indeed a historical belief of early Christians.

Proposed Fact #4: The Apostles of Jesus Believed

He Appeared in a Physical Body

As Robert Gundry has pointed out, the Greek word *soma* (σῶμα = body) is never used in the New Testament in isolation from the physical body. It is most often used to denote the physical body itself or the man (as a whole), with particular emphasis on the physical body.^[30] In most contexts, the Greek word *soma* indicates a physical body. For example, in 1 Corinthians 15:35, Paul poses two questions: “How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body [*soma*] do they come?” Paul explains that our resurrection bodies will be *imperishable* (1 Cor. 15:51–53).

Paul also indicates that our resurrected bodies will be modeled after Jesus’s own resurrected body: “[Jesus Christ] will transform the body [i.e., *soma*] of our humble state into conformity with the body [*soma*] of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself” (Phil. 3:21). Thus, Paul believed that people would be raised with the same kind of *transformed* physical body as Jesus himself.

While the creed in 1 Corinthians 15:3–7 doesn’t mention Christ’s *body*, it seems clear from the rest of Paul’s teachings that he believed in a physical resurrection and that the “appearances” mentioned in the creed were meant to be understood as a physical presence. Thus, the early dating of the creed and the corroboration of Jesus’s bodily appearances in the Gospels (Mt. 28:16–20; Lk. 24:13–49; Jn. 20:19–24, 27–29) suggest that early Christians believed that Jesus was resurrected bodily.

[Continue reading in Part 2.](#)

About the Author

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Footnotes

[1] In this paper, I will not attempt to demonstrate that Jesus was an actual historical figure. Instead, I will assume that Jesus of Nazareth existed in first-century Palestine and that he is the same person referred to in the New Testament.

[2] D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?: The Positive Impact of Christianity in History* (Nelson Publishers, 2001), Kindle location 81, 95.

[3] Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotes are from the New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

[4] The use of the term “God” in this essay will refer to the God of Christian theism, with all corresponding traditional attributes and powers as described in the Bible. In other words, when the reader comes across the noun “God” in this paper, he or she should understand that the term is used in reference to the God of Christian theism and not some other “God” or “gods.” Given this distinction, the views that I present on the subject of God and miracles will be consistent with Christian doctrine, which has been inferred from the Christian Scriptures. None of this means that I am asking the reader to assume the *actual* existence of God or miracles, I am only saying that, for this paper, God and miracles are to be understood within a Christian framework.

[5] One might ask, “What would be the difference between one who says that God exists and one who suggests that purple polka-dotted geese are responsible for all of the unexplained phenomena in the world?” The biggest difference is that over 80% of the human population believes in a “God” or “gods,” and nearly 60% believe in a monotheistic God. On the other hand, nobody that I am aware of believes that purple polka-dotted geese are responsible for unexplained phenomena. Beyond that, there is abundant evidence for the existence of God. Indeed, as philosopher William Lane Craig has pointed out: “Christian philosophy

is experiencing a veritable renaissance, reinvigorating natural theology, at a time when science is more open to the existence of a transcendent Creator and Designer of the cosmos.” William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 3rd edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 18.

[6] Disclaimer: my definitions may not be shared by others who study and write on this topic.

[7] Michael Licona, “Greek Manuscripts of the New Testament,” August 17, 2020, <https://youtu.be/5nfn2j1hQHs>.

[8] For an excellent discussion of how the New Testament text was brought together, I recommend Daniel B. Wallace, ed., *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament: Manuscript, Patristic, and Apocryphal Evidence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2011).

[9] To begin your own study of the textual reliability of the New Testament, I suggest you start with a book where the authors defend two opposing viewpoints: Bart D. Ehrman and Daniel B. Wallace, *The Reliability of the New Testament*, ed. Robert B. Stewart (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011). Be sure to note how each author uses the terms “reliability,” “accuracy,” and “truth.” If you follow the definitions provided here, you should be able to wade through several of the conflicts between the two authors.

[10] Ehrman and Wallace, *The Reliability of the New Testament*, 21.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid. For a discussion about textual variants in the New Testament, see Peter J. Gurry and Elijah Hixson, *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

[13] Within the current discussion, a *proposition* is the meaning of a statement that expresses something that can be either true or false. For example, the statement “My grass is green” is a proposition about the true color of my grass.

[14] The reader should be aware of a few points about this alleged creed. (1) Verse 8 is not typically considered a part of the creed. (2) The parenthetical phrase in the latter half of verse 6 (i.e., “most of whom remain until now, but

some have fallen asleep”) is also likely not a part of the creed. (3) There are some who believe that the creed extends only from verses 3–5a.

[15] Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2010), 305.

[16] Scholars often date Paul’s conversion to between A.D. 31 and 33 (assuming the death of Jesus in c. A.D. 30). See Gary R. Habermas and Mike Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004), 260, n25. To be fair, since 1 Corinthians was written no later than 55 A.D., it is technically possible that Paul didn’t learn the creed until just before writing this letter. However, Paul had plenty of opportunities to learn this creed prior to writing this epistle. He visited Peter and James just three years after his conversion (c. 34–37 A.D.) and later met them again to confirm the content of his teachings (c. A.D. 50).

[17] According to New Testament scholar Dale Allison, “It is even conceivable that the apostle [Paul] first heard the [creed] or some part of it before he became a follower of Jesus, while debating Christian Jews. He cannot have persecuted a group without knowing something about them.” Dale C. Allison, *The Resurrection of Jesus: Apologetics, Criticism, History* (Bloomsbury, 2021), 39.

[18] Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 224.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid. Allison adds that the four “basic concepts—resurrection, ‘the scriptures,’ *Christos*—and the ‘third day’ idiom are Jewish.” This fact would push the creed back to the earliest days of the Church when most believers were Jews. To this same point, says Allison, “The formula uses the Aramaic ‘Cephas’ rather than the Greek ‘Peter.’” See Allison, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, 39–40.

[21] Ibid., 226.

[22] Other examples of early Christian creeds are found in Acts 13:26–31, 32–33; Rom. 1:2–4; 1 Cor. 11:23–26; and Phil. 2:6–11, to name just a few.

[23] Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 227.

[24] Ibid., 229.

[25] “Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus...” Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb, trans., *The Annals of Tacitus Including the Histories: Illustrated* (Digireads.com, 2009), 362.

[26] “The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account... and then it was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws.” Lucian of Samosata, “The Death of Peregrine,” *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, Translated by H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1905), 11-13. http://lucianofsamosata.info/wiki/doku.php?id=home:texts_and_library:essays:peregrine.

[27] “Or [what advantage came to] the Jews by the murder of their Wise King, seeing that from that very time their kingdom was driven away from them?” As cited in Gary R. Habermas and Mike Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004), 49.

[28] “And when, upon the accusation of the principal men among us, Pilate had condemned him to a cross...” *Flavius Josephus: Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 18, Chapter 3.

[29] It should be noted that though the reference to Jesus’s appearance to Paul is not in the creed proper, Paul is writing in the first person and is linking his experience with those in the creed. And although I have only mentioned three individuals, there are reasons to think that Jesus appeared to many other individuals (Jn. 20:11-18; Mk. 16:9).

[30] As cited in William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Edwin Mellin Press, 1989), 87.