

9. The Evidential Pointers in the Resurrection Story

Having served six years as a magistrate, I can attest that there is no such thing as infallible memory.¹ That we record events through the act of observation means we are influenced by that act. In the purest sense, then, there is no objective evidence. If an act of robbery took place with three witnesses to the attack, each witness may confirm the *general* act of robbery, but they will each have slightly different ways of describing the violence from the aggressor to the victim, the response of the victim, and the environment in which it took place. In our time, you may get a few minutes of grainy CCTV evidence from a local shop whose camera caught the act, but even these recordings are often hotly disputed by the accused at the witness stand. One party says it was a punch; the other says was an act of self-defence, and it's hard to make out who, indeed, is right. All of these variables allow the defence team to sow the seeds of doubt about allegations against their client. From all of this we, as magistrates, have to decide 'facts.'

Much as memory and eyewitness accounts are the bread and butter of any criminal investigation,, the oral tradition was the common way of preserving history at the time of the Gospels. Written records, taken from memory, became necessary only as events grew more distant in time and subsequent generations began demanding more permanent recordings. If we reject the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles as *reasonable* testimony, we might as well reject vast tracks of history assembled over many millennia, since all history of the period of the Gospels was assembled in this way.

As we have seen, there are some discrepancies in the Gospel account, but there is also remarkable similarity between works that would have been written apart in terms of time and place, with no instant means of communication. Again, a staggering amount of deceit and subterfuge on a huge scale would have had to take place involving many tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of people over several of generations. And for

¹ I recall a scene in the Harry Potter movies in which a teacher pulls out a memory of an event from a memory capsule. It is interesting that as scientists can see the electrical pulses that move around the brain forming our thoughts, one day we may well be able to capture and record the memory as it was. Then, a sceptic in 2,000 years' time might say: 'None of that 21st century history is accurate, and unless we have memories to see and examine ourselves, I am sceptical about the lot of it!' That said, in the movie, the villain has interfered with that memory to make it look as if something else has happened – so perhaps even the potential ability to record memories may not be enough to satisfy the sceptical mind.

what gain? To be rejected and killed by their fellow Jews or killed by their Roman masters? St Paul puts what is at stake into context, writing to the first generation of Christians in Corinth. He lays it out as follows in 1 Corinthians 15:12-19:

Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up — if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.

If there was no resurrection, then, there would be little point in teaching what became known as the Christian story. Faith in Christ would be worthless, all witnesses would be liars, there would be no redemption for sin, all believers would be dead for good, and all Christians would be 'pitiable' people.

There is a clear Old Testament tradition that the resurrection of the dead leads souls to inhabit Sheol, the realm of the dead, with the first unequivocal statement coming in Daniel 12:2: 'And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake. Some to everlasting life, Some to shame and everlasting contempt'.

The Resurrection puts forth the message of an omnipotent God becoming man, in order to associate with man and his sufferings and then to die for them. For one final sacrifice of Himself to replace all the ritual sacrifices that the Jews thought necessary was an entirely alien thought to the Jew of the time, who was more familiar with a fearful, judgmental and jealous God. Despite many hints in the Old Testament, the Jews never had it in mind that the Messiah would die and be resurrected: this was antithetical to their teaching. It is even more surprising that these apostolic and devout Jews would seek to tell their fellow Jews what they had witnessed, as they would know it would have been treated with great scepticism or worse.

The apostolic Jews testified as such in their gospels, then, because that is what they *did* witness. They could not dress it up in a more acceptable way. Paradoxically – and perhaps this was the explanation for the easier adoption of the Resurrection by the Gentile world – it was via the various Dionysian Mysteries and the Eleusinian Mysteries in general

that they were confronted with Gods going to and from the underworld, being born and raised again.

There would have been far easier ways to recruit followers than by inventing an Easter conspiracy, especially since the story shows great humility and compassion in life and in death. For sure, the one thing the Jews did not expect from an earthly intervention of God would be that the agent would die.² This was, more importantly, why Paul and the other Apostles needed to reassure their non-witnessing followers.

Before the Resurrection

John 11:25 contains the seventh of the great 'I am' statements attested to by one of the direct witnesses of Christ, John the Apostle, who says to Martha just prior to the resurrection of Lazarus: 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live'.

It was so unexpected, so contrary to their teachings, and the early Christians were so out on a limb, that one can only presume they really believed what they had witnessed. They were certainly not reading back into history on this most significant point.

Jesus also teaches the resurrection of the dead in opposition to the Sadducees, especially as they flatly denied it. This is reported in all the synoptics: Matthew 22:23-33, Mark 12:18-27 and Luke 20:27-40. Jesus also prophesised his own resurrection in Matthew 16:21:

From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.

And in Mark 8:31:

And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

And Luke 9:22:

... saying, 'The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief

² 2 Esdras 7:29-31, Common English Bible (CEB): 'After these years, my Son the anointed one and all who have human breath will die. The world will be turned back to primeval silence for seven days, as in the earliest beginnings so that no one is left alive. After seven days, the world that isn't yet awake will be roused, and the corrupt world will die'.

priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day’.

The early Christians always viewed that third day raising from the dead, especially as it happened as a fulfilment of the Feast of First Fruits, as symbolising Christ as not only the Passover sacrifice, but three days later, the First Fruits of the Passover offering itself. In retrospect, it always appeared to the Jews who followed Jesus, that His raising on that third day was the ultimate reason why they were celebrating all their Feasts of various kinds and they were building up to that moment. Peter, motivated by what he understood and witnessed (as well as John in Acts 4:1-4) reports that the teaching of the Resurrection leads to their arrest (but also to the conversion of another 5,000 people on hearing their testimony). Acts 2:32-36 claims that the Resurrection is the core teaching of Christ, and for this reason it was our evidence that He was the Messiah. Acts 13:33-34 teaches us that Psalm 2:7, written 1000 years before, had been fulfilled in the death of Christ, and also how Isaiah 55:3 showed us that he would be raised up from the dead – this written 750 odd years before the event. Other Old Testament prophecies could now be viewed for what they are, predictions of the resurrection of the Messiah. Psalm 16:10, Ezekiel 37:7-8, are good illustrations of this. Paul, in Acts 16:18, is recorded as teaching the Resurrection in Athens during a debate with the local Stoics and Epicureans. Then, in Romans 6:1-11, we have Paul teaching in detail, after explaining the Baptism, the implications of the Resurrection to his followers: you are dead in sin, but alive in your belief in God; the resurrected Lord dies for our sins so that we may live eternally like Him. Paul, in Philippians 3:7-11, teaches that he knew the power of Christ by the Resurrection, confirmed by witnesses. Paul, in 2 Timothy 2:16-18, counsels caution when listening to the false teachers of the Resurrection, Hymenaeus and Philetus.

Events That Only Would Have Happened If There Was A Resurrection

Acts 20:7 talks about the ‘first day of the week’ where breaking of the bread, as in the Last Supper, took place. There is no Biblical precedent for observing Sunday as a special day. But the early Christians observed this day right from the very early days of the Church, as they all believed Christ was resurrected on that day. Moreover, if Christ had not risen the tomb, or the ossuary, would have become a point of veneration – but it did not. This is why all the evidence does point to the Resurrection.

Even more remarkable is that evidence given by a female was not considered equal to that given by a male, as in some Arab societies even today. Nonetheless, it is Mary Magdalene leading the charge. If this were a conspiracy or a hoax meant to dupe people, no doubt men would have been used to spread it. Why would Christians rely on second-class citizens to spread the news of the Resurrection?

The next compelling point is that Christ's Ascension into heaven must surely put a stop to His appearances on earth after his death? But if his subsequent appearances were all made up, why not continue to make things up? I would deduce it is because they were faithfully recording these events.

We should also draw comfort in the Resurrection narrative when we study the archaeological find called "The Decree of Caesar" (Diatagma Kaisaros). This is a marble slab of 21 line of Greek, which has been dated from 50 BC to 50 AD. It attests to the absolute sanctity of a tomb and the fact that it will be capital punishment for anyone who would defile or remove the body. It seems strange that the Caesar of the day, for a small back-water in his empire should decide to issue such a decree unless there was a reason. Whilst this of course is not proof in the strictest sense, however, I can only think there must have been one hell of a disturbance in Jerusalem, over the disappearance of a most prominent body, not that of a penniless carpenter's son, but of someone who had aroused potential civil disturbance on at least a city wide scale, if not a nation-wide scale, to cause the issuing of this Decree. The only disappearing dead body, then reappearing formally dead body, now alive, in history, at this time, is Jesus Christ.

The account given to us by Matthew, concerning allegations made by the Jewish authorities of body stealing by the Apostles, may derive significant credence from this marble relic. It would make perfect sense if this was written post the death of Jesus as an attempt to instil order and make sure whatever disturbance was caused between the competing Jewish interests (Pharisees or emerging Christian leaning ones), would be prevented from happening again at the pain of death. Matthew 27:62-66

On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate, saying, "Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise.' Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third

day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead.' So the last deception will be worse than the first." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard.

There is general scholarly consensus that as the Greek and the Roman authorities of the day preferred cremation and as the Jewish rich had a tradition of interment of the body, when the decree talks about "extraction" of those that have been buried, this specifically relates to Jewish practice. At Best the Greco/Roman setting would imply the extraction of an urn of ashes, so this Decree must be Jewish specific. The Decree also relates the offense to the extraction of the body for terrible intentions which fits the account of the allegation against the Apostles that they removed the body to create the resurrection story. Interestingly there is no suggestion of grave robbing being the target of this decree, just the extraction of the body for malevolent purposes.

The startling events described at the end of Matthew 27:52-53, may also have something to do with this decree being issued.

⁵² and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; ⁵³ and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many.

This event, only reported by Matthew happens simultaneously with the death of Jesus. It must have been extremely disturbing. Coupled with Jews who then believed in the resurrection and those that did not arguing about bodies raising from the dead, leaving their tombs and Jesus completely vanishing from His, with all this commotion, you can imagine the Roman authorities taking action to calm this part of their Empire down.

Josephus in Book 19, Chapter 5:3 of the Antiquities of the Jews tells of a Decree from Emperor Claudius (41 AD to 54 AD) guaranteeing the rights of Jews in religious matters and demanding that his decree be written up in marble and posted in the market places. It seems that this format of making the Emperors Decrees known was not unusual. Clearly there was an "incident" of significant magnitude to warrant such a move from Rome. At this

time, there are no other candidates for body removal, from a sealed tomb, in recorded history that would fit the timeline and description for this, other than that of the allegation of the removal from the tomb of Jesus, by the Apostles, according to the Jewish authorities. This is once again a very good bit of supporting evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Always remember: there was almost certainly a terrible death in store for these apostles, if they advocated Jesus as the resurrected Christ. They would have to have a 300-year-forward view of history to do so, imagining it was going to be their descendants, many times down the line, who would benefit from the Roman conversion to Christianity. No. I suggest they did this because they believed what they saw, and nothing else.