

# Is There Evidence for the Resurrection?

*A presentation by Angie Paris Nwankudu*

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## I. Introduction

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is arguably the most pivotal event to happen in human history. We are going to explore skeptics' claims against the resurrection, and how we can answer those claims through evidence agreed upon by a majority of critical New Testament scholars. We're primarily going to look at: the **textual evidence**, the **trustworthiness of the eyewitnesses**, and the **empty tomb** and what this means in regards to the hope of the resurrection.



This handout is designed to help you think through the arguments for the historical credibility of the resurrection. Once you have compiled all of the answers in this worksheet, I would suggest you combine them into one or two paragraphs. My hope is that you'll see the fruit of your labor in working through the information and evidence piece by piece. Once completed, you will have at hand a simple and cumulative argument you can use to make your case for the resurrection as a bona fide historical event! As a bonus, at the end of the handout, I took the liberty to answer questions that were raised for the Q&A portion of my talk. I hope they are of help! Please feel free to contact me with any further questions you may have or answers you're not able to solve at: [angelanwankudu@gmail.com](mailto:angelanwankudu@gmail.com). God bless! *Angela Nwankudu*

**Why do we ask if there is evidence for the resurrection?** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Why is it important to know if the resurrection actually happened? If Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, what are the implications? (Hint: 1 Corinthians 15:12-19)** \_\_\_\_\_

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**What are some common objections to the resurrection?** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Gary Habermas’ “Minimal Facts Approach”**

In the book *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, Gary Habermas and Michael Licona define the “*minimal facts approach*” as a way to study the resurrection that only takes into account information that is “well evidenced and nearly every scholar accepts...”<sup>1</sup> In other words, they only consider facts about the resurrection that the majority of New Testament critical scholars (Christians, skeptics, agnostics, atheists, and the like) accept as historically valid. There will not be 100% agreement on all of the facts, but when the scholars do agree, especially the skeptical ones, “the point they accept must be pretty well established by available historical data.”<sup>2</sup>

**What details about the resurrection do skeptics accept? (Hint: What are 5 of Gary Habermas’ 12 “Minimal Facts” that most scholars accept?)?** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Remember:** These need to be accounted for by any objections raised against the resurrection. Where the objections presumably answer in one area, they fail to answer in another.

**What form of reasoning does J. Warner Wallace suggest we can bring to spiritual investigations like the resurrection?** \_\_\_\_\_

**What does this type of reasoning infer?** \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*, Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2004), 44.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 46.

A critical question for anyone to consider who is interested in investigating the resurrection is the following as asked by Habermas and Licona: “Is there enough evidence for a rational person to be justified in concluding that Jesus’ resurrection was a real event in history?”<sup>3</sup>

## **II. Reliability of the Arguments: of the Eyewitnesses and Their Testimonies**

When investigating the evidence and claims for the resurrection, it is important to first establish the reliability and credibility of the sources. For instance, in the case of historical accounts of the resurrection can we examine Paul’s account or other events from the past for credibility?

**How do historians determine the credibility of historical events?** (Hint: Review Gary Habermas’ list in the talk I gave or review Bart Ehrman’s quote in the slide presentation)? \_\_\_\_\_

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**What historical sources/data do historians have available about the past?**

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**According to skeptic Bart Ehrman, what ancient historian is our primary source of information on “Jewish Palestine?”**

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**Who does Gary Habermas cite as “the most critically-respected witness for Jesus’ resurrection”<sup>4</sup> and why? (Hint: What he records in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 contains the clue; also his testimony counts as “enemy” testimony)**

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<sup>3</sup> Habermas and Licona, 28.

<sup>4</sup> www.garyhabermas.com

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**What is the Kerygma according to Michael Licona?**

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**Conclusion on the oral traditions and writings:** We have *multiple, independent, early sources* available showing that teachings on the resurrection were being taught at the start of the early church leaving hardly any time for legend to develop. Critical scholars accept Paul as a scholar in his own right, one who was apt to provide a trustworthy account and the bulk of whose writings are counted as authoritative.

*Bart Ehrman's take on the number of early sources:*

But most important of all [Ehrman says], each of these numerous Gospel texts is based on oral traditions that had been in circulation for years among communities of Christians in different parts of the world, all of them attesting to the existence of Jesus. And some of these traditions must have originated in Aramaic-speaking communities of Palestine, probably in the 30s CE, within several years at least of the traditional date of the death of Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

*Ehrman on the Apostle Paul:*

The Apostle Paul is our earliest surviving Christian author of any kind. Many readers of the Bible assume that the Gospels were the first books of the New Testament to be written since they appear first in the New Testament and discuss the life of Jesus...But Paul was writing some years before the Gospels...Paul is our earliest available witness, writing within twenty years of the traditional date of Jesus's death.<sup>6</sup>

*This is important to establish because it means the resurrection event was being circulated almost as soon as it happened!*

**Who were some 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century historians that reported second-hand testimony to the Disciples' claims about the resurrection?** \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>5</sup> Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*, 92-93.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 118.

Concerning *Ignatius the Bishop of Smyrna*, Bart Ehrman writes:

[I]t should not be objected that he is writing too late to be of any value in our quest. He cannot be shown to have been relying on the Gospels. And he was bishop in Antioch, the city where both Peter and Paul spent considerable time in the preceding generation, as Paul himself tells us in Galatians 2. His views too can trace a lineage straight back to apostolic times.<sup>7</sup>

**What other 3 incidents pertaining to Paul can we count as evidences of Paul's conviction about the resurrection?** \_\_\_\_\_

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**What other group was radically changed like Paul and suffered the same fate?**

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**What makes their testimony so trustworthy?** \_\_\_\_\_

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*Habermas and Licona had this to say of them: "Such strength of conviction indicates that they were not just claiming that Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to them in order to receive some personal benefit. They really believed it."<sup>8</sup> Remember, as Josh and Sean McDowell remind us: *Who would die for what they **know** is a lie?*<sup>9</sup>*

**Why should the Gospels not be regarded with prejudice or excluded from our investigation of the resurrection?** \_\_\_\_\_

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**What genre have the Gospels been classified as? (Hint: *Plutarch's Lives*)**

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<sup>7</sup> Ehrman, 103-104.

<sup>8</sup> Habermas and Licona, 56.

<sup>9</sup> Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What it Means for Your Relationship with God* (Ventura: Gospel Light, 2009), 218-219.

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**How should we view the “contradictions” of the resurrection accounts given in the Gospels?** \_\_\_\_\_

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William Lane Craig<sup>10</sup> and Josh and Sean McDowell have observed that “*inconsistencies*” do not affect the overall story of the resurrection. Inconsistencies can be found in many other notable historical works, yet, that does not discount those works from being taken as factual history. If eyewitness statements agreed 100% of the time, we would have reason to worry because that might indicate collusion and collaboration, but when multiple eyewitnesses attest to the same event, their testimonies will vary slightly (which is expected), yet, the main point of the event can still be deduced from what the witnesses share.

**What important testimony for the resurrection would affect the credibility of the story and why? (Hint: who were the primary witnesses?)**

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**\*Bonus question: What ancient source provides an opinion about the testimony of this group at that time in history?**

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### **III. Exploring the Empty Tomb**

Now that we have examined the textual evidence and the reliability of the eyewitnesses and their testimonies, we will explore the empty tomb and various naturalistic theories skeptics have developed to account for why the tomb was empty as opposed to the resurrection.

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<sup>10</sup> See William Lane Craig's *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?* page 54.

**Name at least three theories skeptics have offered to account for the empty tomb?** \_\_\_\_\_

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**What does the conspiracy theory propose?** \_\_\_\_\_

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**What precautions were taken by the Jewish authorities in line with the Roman government to prevent tampering with or theft of the body from the tomb?**

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*\*The Evidence for the Resurrection* by Josh and Sean McDowell provides great background information on this!

**What famous archaeological relict ordered by Caesar spoke about tampering with tombs? What was the fate of those found guilty of such a crime?**

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**What is implausible about the argument that Jesus only appeared to have died or have swooned?**

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**What is another archaeological “relic” that though inconclusive as evidence for the resurrection still, as William Lane Craig says, testifies to the amount of suffering Jesus would have endured both before and during the crucifixion?**

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**What did the story about the “donkey people” help to provide archaeological support for concerning Jesus’ sufferings?**

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**What does the wrong tomb theory purport and why is it faulty?**

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**The Apostle Paul reported in 1 Corinthians 15 that Jesus appeared to groups of people at one time. What makes the idea of these appearances as being hallucinations improbable? \_\_\_\_\_**

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Through Jesus Christ’s resurrection, He defeated both hell and the grave, overcame sin, and has become our living hope!

**Q&A:**



1. *What do you find to be the most difficult point to defend when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus?*

In my opinion, the most difficult point to defend concerning the resurrection of Jesus would be its supernatural aspect--the idea that the resurrection was a miracle. That Jesus supernaturally rose from the dead is a hard fact for many to believe, so it's easy to dismiss it as mythological. Josh and Sean McDowell have a chapter on this in their book *Evidence for the Resurrection* (a great resource filled with practical, straightforward information that makes for a comprehensive argument on the resurrection).

In the naturalistic worldview, miracles don't happen. So by default, the resurrection could not have occurred despite the amount of evidence presented. However, to rule out the possibility of miracles, one would have to have at their disposal all available knowledge of every event that has happened since time began to know whether such events have occurred. Just because one has not personally witnessed a miracle does not rule out the possibility that a miracle can or could have happened. I believe such bias against the supernatural has prevented many historians or scholars from accepting the resurrection account. Bart Ehrman is such an example as he agrees with the Gospels' reliability as historical sources, but not everything contained in them because he does not believe in the supernatural.

2. *What do you believe is the most compelling argument for the reliability of the resurrection account in the gospels?*

I believe the most compelling argument for the reliability of the resurrection account in the Gospels is the empty tomb. From the precautions taken to guard the tomb, to having the backing of Rome behind it, to the fact that we have a law in place at the time of Jesus' death prohibiting tomb robbing, lends to the reliability of these accounts. █

3. *What evidence would you start with for the resurrection when speaking to someone who will not listen to scriptural evidence?*

I would start with Bart Ehrman's evidence concerning the Gospels' historical reliability and Paul's writings. Ehrman is not a Christian but an agnostic and a New Testament critical scholar whose work is highly respected in the skeptical community. He dismantles the prejudice skeptics have in not counting the Gospels as reliable sources of history when they are just as compatible as other ancient works from the same period. Ehrman's book *Did Jesus Exist?* is a great place to start. Also, one can cite the testimonies of ancient historians like Josephus and Tacitus, as well as Clement and Polycarp, who recorded the direct testimony of the Disciples.

4. *Source for Bart Ehrman?*

I would proceed with caution when it comes to the use of Bart Ehrman's works because he reflects the writings of one who does not believe in the New Testament as inspired. He writes from a non-Christian perspective, which views the Gospels and other N.T. books as literary works. However, it does not hurt to "take the best and leave the rest" concerning the valuable information that can be mined from his writings. He has received lots of flack from mythicists and other skeptics for "helping" our case to some extent as Christians. So even though Bart Ehrman does not believe in the resurrection (he prohibits himself based on the supernatural aspect of it and apparent contradictions), he does provide great information on the historical reliability of both the Gospels and Paul's writings. The primary book I sourced for this information was *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* by Bart Ehrman. Biola also has a great blog with William Lane Craig on "Why Don't Professional Historians Come to Believe in Jesus' Resurrection?" at <https://www.biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2019/why-don-t-professional-historians-come-to-believe-in-jesus-resurrection>. I have also included other works I cited at the end of this handout.

5. *What main point would you bring up when talking to someone that doesn't believe that Jesus was a historical person, and how would you back it up?*

Again, I would refer to Bart Ehrman's work on this. He cites several extra-biblical attestations to the existence of Jesus and why it is absurd to go against the tide of information to account for His historicity, regardless of the bias one brings to the table. Denying the fact of Jesus amounts to disregarding the existence of someone like Julius Caesar because we do not have conclusive evidence regarding his existence. If the fact of Julius Caesar is not questionable, then the unnecessary and undue burden placed on the preponderance of evidence for Jesus' existence is unwarranted.

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### Works Cited

Bart Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2004).

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