



In recent years, studies of Jesus' resurrection have taken surprisingly positive directions. This does not mean that contemporary critical scholars now accept exactly what Scripture states. However, there is a newfound respect for some of the New Testament (NT) reports. We will mention key areas leading to these developments and address their significance.

### **Early Traditions of Jesus' Resurrection Embedded in the New Testament Writings**

Arguably the most exciting development in recent decades is the almost unanimous recognition of scholars that the NT contains many items that predate the book in which they appear. This means the NT authors frequently made use of earlier sources—traditions, creeds, or confessions that they had gathered or received from others. Examples include a reliable statement received from others (1 Corinthians 11:23-26; 15:3ff), repeating the words of what was likely an early Christian hymn (Philippians 2:6-11) and summarizing an early sermon (such as Acts 1:21-22; 2:22-36; 3:13-16). These sources had different applications, such as keeping a reliable record, passing on doctrine, or serving liturgical functions like worship.

Of course, just because the New Testament authors *claimed* to have received accurate material from others does not make it so. But the growing consensus among critical scholars is that many of these traditions present ample indications that the material is in fact reliable. In the case of the resurrection traditions, the crucial portion of the data is taken from known church leaders who were actually present at the events themselves, and whose very lives depended on the veracity of their reports.

## The Gospel Reports of Jesus' Resurrection

Some New Testament writers claim to have witnessed personally the events that they record (John 19:35; Galatians 1:20; 1 John 1:1-3) or to have checked the existing sources for relevant information (Luke 1:1-4). Again, critical scholars do not take this testimony at face value, but there is a growing conviction in recent years that points to a positive verdict. The best critical example is that of influential scholar Richard Bauckham, whose work *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Eerdmans, 2006) applies a startling array of checks and balances to the Gospels.

Scholars are increasingly convinced that particular tests, commonly termed "criteria," establish the credibility of many individual Gospel reports. For example, these tests emphasize material that is attested by multiple sources, is dissimilar from other Jewish or Christian literature, includes Palestinian or Aramaic background, is acknowledged even by ancient enemies of Christianity, or is embarrassing to report.

## Test Case of Jesus' Resurrection

For a variety of reasons, virtually all scholars, no matter how skeptical their orientation, agree that 1 Corinthians and Galatians are among the early, authoritative Christian writings that were written by the apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-7, Paul presents perhaps the earliest tradition of all. He probably acquired it from the apostles Peter and James the brother of Jesus when he visited them in Jerusalem about a.d. 35, a mere five or six years after Jesus' crucifixion (Galatians 1:18-24). Paul inquired of these two witnesses (Gk *historeo*, 1:18), and, in the context of this chapter, discussed the gospel message, which unquestionably included the claim that Jesus had literally risen from the dead (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 15:3-5). Fourteen years later, Paul returned to Jerusalem to discuss the gospel once again with the apostles Peter,

James, and John, to determine whether they all held to the same, central message of Christ's

resurrection (Galatians 2:2). None of the others added anything to Paul's message (Galatians 2:6); rather, they agreed with him (Galatians 2:9).

It is easy to miss the significance of the pre-Pauline tradition in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7. As he reported often, the most sacred proclamation of Christianity, the gospel, centered on the deity, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Romans 1:3-4; 10:9-13). Therefore, Paul prefaced this creedal tradition by asserting that this message was of primary importance (1 Corinthians 15:3). Nothing was more central than the resurrection of Christ. In fact, whether or not we are Christians is determined by how we have responded to it (1 Corinthians 15:1-2).

Whenever we study history, we endeavor to uncover the past. Since the events cannot be repeated, the best method is to study the experiences of those who were there on those occasions. This is why Paul interviewed those who knew Jesus firsthand. Paul was especially interested in learning from those to whom Jesus had appeared after His death (1 Corinthians 15:9-11). Paul had also seen the risen Jesus personally, but His appearance to Paul was somewhat distinctive (1 Corinthians 15:8). By traveling to Jerusalem more than once, he was able to chat with the other apostles about their own experiences of the risen Christ.

Not only did Paul discuss these matters with two of the original eyewitnesses of these events, Peter and James, but he did so almost immediately after the actual events. His initial trip to Jerusalem occurred a mere five years after the crucifixion. In the second visit, John was also present. These were the three most influential leaders in the early church, and their memories would have been fresh at the time Paul spoke with them.

While Paul heard the testimonies firsthand no more than several years after Jesus' death, Peter, James, and John had obviously experienced the appearances even earlier. Therefore we have an unbroken path here that stretches from Paul's hearing this early, eyewitness testimony back to the actual events themselves.

While witnesses may be mistaken, additional pointers attest to the truth of the resurrection

testimony. For example, it is recognized that the early believers were more than willing to die for their proclamation. While this does not necessarily make it true, it does indicate that they certainly believed their testimony to be true and would rather suffer execution rather than deny what they knew to be true about the resurrection. Crucially, they were the only ones who were in a position to know whether or not their testimony was accurate, and they persisted in bearing testimony to the resurrection until their deaths.

No hypothesis has yet been able to viably explain the resurrection testimony in natural terms. Critics have tried often over the centuries, but today only a few scholars even make such suggestions. The evidence for Jesus' resurrection appearances is defensible and very compelling, and it stands as the best indicator of the believer's own future resurrection ([1 Corinthians 15:53-57](#); [2 Corinthians 4:14-18](#); [1 Peter 1:3-9](#))!

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