The Resurrection (The Post-mortem Appearances of Jesus)

Our “springboard” for exploring the post-mortem appearance of Jesus, 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

1 Cor 15:3-8:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received,

that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,

and that he was buried,

and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,

and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve.

Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (Revised Standard Version)

1 Corinthians is indisputably considered to be written by Paul, which means that here we have a man that wrote his own letter that claims to have seen the risen Jesus. He also claims that he personally knows hundreds of people that have also seen the risen Jesus, to include the twelve apostles, specifically Peter, and James, the brother of Jesus. Then, to all the apostles.

We know that Paul knew Peter and James from Galatians 1

Recall from the previous lesson:

- This is a short and concise summary statement of the complete gospel
- This is likely a Christian tradition commonly stated and circulated by early Christians to describe the events of Jesus’ resurrection in a simple and easy-to-remember kind of way
- This seems to have been used as an outline for Peter’s sermon in Acts 13, as well as at the end of Mark, which means the events that Paul makes reference to in 1 Corinthians 15 are the same events that are described in the Gospels
- The burial of Jesus is a distinct event separate from his death
- Paul received this tradition sometime before he wrote 1 Corinthians around AD 55, probably from Christians in Damascus after his conversion, or from Peter and James in Jerusalem when he visited them for a few weeks in AD 36. And who does the tradition specifically include? James and Peter! (see Galatians 1)
- Thus, Jesus’ burial (and therefore the empty tomb) was a specific and separate event in the understanding of Jesus’ story according to the earliest Christians.
- This tradition is also likely very early, being from within the first three years after Jesus’ death.
Evidences for the post-mortem appearances of Jesus - Paul’s List of Eyewitnesses

1. Jesus appears to Peter

   • It is very probable that Peter believed and said that Jesus appeared to him:
     
     o Paul spent weeks with Peter in Jerusalem, and would likely know what Peter claimed *(Galatians 1:18)*
     o The appearance to Peter is mentioned in this very early Christian tradition *(1 Cor 15)* that would have started in Jerusalem and been given to Paul 3 years after his Damascus Road experience, or perhaps even sooner (maybe even within 6 months after Jesus’ death)
     o Another possible old Christian tradition mentions Christ appearing to Simon/Cephas/Peter in *Luke 24:34*

        ▪ This Christian tradition from Luke is noted to be placed awkwardly and intentionally within the Emmaus narrative to draw attention to it. This tradition may have been found within an earlier source that Luke used, possibly the “Hebrew Gospel”

     o So, here we have two credible independent sources that refer to Jesus appearing to Peter
     o **Dr. Craig says**, “…Even the most skeptical New Testament critics agree that Peter saw an appearance of Jesus alive from the dead.”

2. Jesus appears to the Twelve

   • Jesus appears to the original twelve disciples, who we would later call apostles
   • Again, this claim appears in Paul’s very early Christian tradition in *1 Corinthians 15*; Paul had contact with these individuals
   • *Luke 24:36-43* is an independent reference to this claim
   • *John 20:19-20* is an independent reference to this claim

     o Jesus appears to the twelve (they immediately assume it was a spirit, not a resurrected Messiah that “failed” to overthrow the Roman empire) and he points out that he has a body, isn’t just simply a spirit, and then he eats something
     o This was to be understood as a **physical** and **continuous** resurrection of the same Jesus that previously died

   • **So, here we have three credible independent sources that refer to Jesus appearing to the Twelve**
   • **Dr. Craig says**, “This is the best-attested resurrection appearance of Jesus.”
3. Jesus appears to five hundred Believers

- This is a big claim that only occurs in Paul's letter to the Corinthians
- Paul makes this claim, then adds that many of these people are alive, though some have passed away
- Paul claims to know these people personally
- Paul could have simply never added this had the appearance never happened; yet, Paul does add it, then seems to challenge his readers to double check his claim
- The New Testament scholar of Cambridge University, C.H. Dodd writes, “There can hardly be any purpose in mentioning the fact that the most of the 500 are still alive, unless Paul is saying, in effect, ‘The witnesses are there to be questioned.’”
- Though this is only one historical document that references this appearance, the boldness of Paul to claim that these individuals are still alive lends a tremendous amount of credibility to it, not to mention the fact that Paul says he knew these people.

4. Jesus appears to James

- This James is Jesus’ younger brother, one who did not believe in Jesus during his lifetime (Mark 3:21 and John 7:1-10)
- Yet, James becomes a significant Christian figure in the New Testament and history:
  - Praying in the upper room in Jerusalem after the ascension (Acts 1:14)
  - Peter, after release from prison, orders that James be informed (Acts 12:17)
  - Called an apostle by Paul (Galatians 1:19)
  - Three pillars of the church in Jerusalem, one of which is James (Galatians 2:9)
  - James is the head of the Jerusalem church and council of elders (Acts 21:18)
  - Josephus says that James was stoned illegally by the Sanhedrin for his faith in Christ (Antiquities of the Jews)

- Why this complete change for James?
- He didn’t believe in his brother’s message before, but now obviously does
- Wouldn’t Jesus’ death by crucifixion have been a confirmation to James that his brother really was out of his mind?
- Since the early Christian tradition by Paul claims that Jesus appeared to James just like he did to hundreds of others, maybe that was what changed James’ mind!
- James apparently died for his faith, for a faith he was against. What would it take for someone to disbelieve, believe, and then die for their faith? If it is widely claimed that Jesus did appear to James, maybe Jesus just simply did appear to James, and since James is fellowshipping with other believers who claim that Jesus really rose from the dead, maybe that appearance affirmed to James that Jesus was resurrected and therefore really was the Messiah!
According to Dr. Craig, skeptical NT scholar Hans Grass affirms the resurrection appearance of Jesus to James based off of James’ conversion.

5. Jesus appears to the Apostles

- This group seems to have been a bit larger than just simply The Twelve (minus Judas Iscariot)
- **Acts 1:21-22** describes the search for a second 12th member to take Judas’ place from among a group of men that had seen the resurrected Lord; Matthias is chosen over “Joseph called Barsabbas”
  - This group must be larger than the Twelve because the Twelve (technically eleven (minus Judas)) are looking for someone to replace Judas, but this must be someone who has seen the resurrected Lord. So, there is obviously a pool of individuals that the Twelve can pull from to replace Judas, Joseph and Matthias being two of them. Perhaps this is a group similar to the 72 (or 70) that Jesus sends out to preach the Kingdom earlier in Luke?
- Again, Paul had personal contact with the apostles

6. Jesus appears to the Saul of Tarsus (Paul)

- The occurrence of this appearance is beyond doubt since Paul references it himself in his own letters
- Jesus appears to Saul as described in **Acts 9**, which Paul references in **1 Corinthians 15**
- Saul of Tarsus (later to be called Paul the Apostle):
  - A “Pharisee of Pharisees”
  - A hater of the Christian “heresy”
  - An active persecutor of the Christian church (**Acts 7**)
  - Endorsed the execution and imprisonment of Christians (**Acts 9**)
- Saul of Tarsus becomes the greatest apostle, working harder than all other apostles, and the author of the majority of our NT
- He abandons a life of prominence for poverty, uncertain travel, labor and suffering, being beaten and whipped, stoned, left for dead, and shipwrecked, in fear for his life, under house arrest, and eventually martyred for his faith in Rome all because he saw Jesus risen from the dead
- What would it take for a man to make this transition? He says Jesus appeared to him, and Paul was obviously a smart and rational man, so it seems like it was simply true!
Evidences for the post-mortem appearances of Jesus – Multiple, Independent Sources

- The appearance to Peter is independently attested by Paul (1 Cor 15) and Luke (24:34), and, according to Dr. Craig, is universally accepted by critics
- The appearance to the Twelve is attest by Paul (1 Cor 15), Luke (24:36-42), and John (20:19-20)
- Jesus appearing to disciples in Galilee is attested by Matthew (28:16-17), Mark (16:7), and John (21)
- Regardless of the mode of the appearances, it is very likely that they happened, which is why their occurrence is not in dispute (think of the fact that skeptics feel the need to come up with naturalistic theories to explain away the appearances!)
- Gerd Ludemann, a defender of the hallucination hypothesis, said: “It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus’ death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ.” Hence, his need to utilize the hallucination hypothesis!
- The appearances also follow a very well-known pattern: Jerusalem, then Galilee, then Jerusalem again. Why? Well, Jesus died and rose again in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, the disciples then would have returned to Galilee where Jesus appeared to them again, then they would have come back to Jerusalem a few weeks later for Pentecost.
- “From the list in 1 Cor. 15 the particular reports of the Gospels are now to be interpreted. Here may be of help what we said about Jesus’ miracles. It is impossible to “prove” historically a particular miracle. But the totality of the miracle reports permits no reasonable doubt that Jesus in fact performed “miracles.” That holds analogously for the appearance reports. It is not possible to secure historically the particular event. But the totality of the appearance reports permits no reasonable doubt that Jesus in fact bore witness to himself in such a way.” – Wolfgang Trilling, NT scholar

Evidences for the post-mortem appearances of Jesus – The Physical Nature of the Resurrection Appearances

Until now, we have really left it open as to whether or not these appearances were actually physical or not. Could they be just psychological in nature?

- These appearances from Jesus were regarded as physical in nature by early Christians
- If these were physical in nature, then some form of psychological explanation of the appearances will not have any explanatory power
- Paul taught taught the resurrection of a physical body based on Christ’s resurrection:
  - Paul taught that the resurrection from the dead was physical in nature; he did not teach the immortality of the soul alone; consider 1 Corinthians 15:12-13, 42-44 (ESV):
“Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.”

“So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.”

- The word “natural” is translated from the word “psychikos” which literally means “soul-ish”
- Paul obviously does not mean that our physical bodies are made out of something akin to a soul. He means oriented toward our human nature
- When Paul refers to the spiritual body, he doesn’t mean one that is solely spirit. He means oriented toward spiritual things.
- Consider 1 Corinthians 2:14-15, where Paul distinguishes between the “natural man” and the “spiritual man”
- Plus, 1 Corinthians 15 taken within context implies that Paul taught a physical resurrection of the dead
  - The Gospel accounts display physical appearances of Jesus
    - The New Testament distinguishes between a vision and a physical appearance of Jesus (think of Stephen’s vision of Jesus in Acts 7)
    - We’ve seen that the NT assumes an empty tomb, which assumes a body!
    - Luke 24 describes Jesus interacting with two disciples on the road to Emmaus, as well as appearing to the disciples and eating with them (the latter also stated in John 20)
    - Also, it would be quite strange that the NT would unanimously bear witness to a false, physical resurrection, and that the NT church would assume a false, physical resurrection for the last 2,000 years if none of these appearances were physical in nature.
    - If none of these appearances were physical in nature, why do we have a NT that assumes that all of them were physical in nature? You would
have to totally corrupt all known oral traditions of the resurrection appearances in a very short period of time in an area where Jesus’ death and resurrection took place. Not to mention, the eyewitnesses are all still alive! Plus, wouldn’t you have two prominent schools of thought that developed: one that says Jesus was raised physically, the other that Jesus was not raised physically?

- How could the Gospel accounts even come to be without a physical resurrection? Pagans would have scoffed at the idea of a bodily resurrection, and Jews didn’t believe in a bodily resurrection of a single individual before the end times, not even a Messiah or the Son of God.

An Explanation for the Post-mortem Appearances of Jesus – The Hallucination Hypothesis

- This hypothesis claims that the resurrection appearances of Jesus were hallucinations in the minds of the disciples
- This theory has a narrow explanatory scope, and therefore would require the conjoining of multiple hypotheses
  - Doesn’t explain the empty tomb. Therefore, you must conjoin multiple hypotheses together (e.g. the conspiracy theory for the empty tomb along with the hallucination theory). Conjoining multiple hypotheses together decreases the likelihood of their ability to explain the data. We are looking for a single and simple explanation that explains all of the data, or at least more data than any other explanation.
  - This theory also does not explain why the disciples came to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. If one of Jesus’ disciples had a vision of Jesus, they would have most likely just assumed that he was dead and they had a vision! At most, they would have assumed that Jesus was assumed into heaven

- Jesus appeared many times, in many places, to many people (to include individuals, groups, friends, and foes)
- The same hallucinations don’t happen many times, in many places, to many people of many different backgrounds. Hallucinations are very subjective and individualistic experiences.