

Did Jesus rise? Let's take a look and see what the evidence suggests.



The Evidence

Of course, not all scholars believe the New Testament presents completely reliable reports. However, despite heavy debate over what Jesus actually said and did, there is a surprising amount of data in the New Testament that can be verified. Let's look at just 3 facts pertaining to Jesus' fate:

1. Jesus' Death by Crucifixion

Jesus' execution by the Romans on the orders of the governor Pontius Pilate is likewise reported by the Jewish historian Josephus (c. AD 95), the Roman historian Tacitus (c. AD 115), the Greek satirist Lucian (c. AD 165), and the prisoner Mara bar Serapion (late 1st – early 3rd century).

2. The Beliefs of Jesus' Disciples that He had been Resurrected & had Appeared to Them

Occasionally, historians come across data that can be established. In a letter written approximately 25 years after Jesus' crucifixion, Paul quotes an oral tradition that can be traced back to Jesus' original disciples. Accordingly, we have what amounts to be eyewitness testimony of the risen Jesus. Here's what it says:

I delivered to you what I also received: Christ died for our sins ... He was buried ... He was raised from the dead on the third day ... He appeared to Peter, then to the 12, then He appeared to more than 500 at one time ... then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Finally ... He appeared to me [i.e., Paul].

History reports that Peter, James, and Paul died as Christian martyrs for this proclamation and that all of Jesus' disciples willingly endured continuous suffering for this message. This suggests that they were not only teaching that Jesus had been resurrected and had appeared to them, they also believed it. After all, liars make poor martyrs!

3. The Skeptic Paul Experienced Something that He was Convinced was the Resurrected Jesus Appearing to Him

We observed Paul's claim to this effect in the oral tradition cited above. Paul was so convinced Jesus had appeared to him that he became a follower of Jesus, boldly

proclaimed the Christian message all over the Roman empire, resulting in multiple beatings and imprisonments and finally his execution.

So What Happened?

No different than many in the other sciences (e.g., archaeologists, geologists, and evolutionary biologists), historians cannot get into a time machine and return to the past in order to corroborate their hypotheses. So, they form certain criteria for assessing their hypotheses in order to see which one best explains the evidence. The hypothesis that is superior in this regard is considered to describe what probably occurred. Accordingly, our knowledge of the distant past is held as "probable" rather than "certain."

Historians assess whether their particular description of the past can account for all of the evidence, whether it can do so without forcing the facts to fit, whether it can do so without much improvising or introducing a "fudge factor," and whether their description is compatible with other widely known facts.

The hypothesis that Jesus was raised from the dead accounts very well for why friends and even a foe of Jesus had experiences of him being alive after his death. One could say that *the resurrection hypothesis* requires God as a fudge factor. However, a fudge factor is an element

introduced for which there is no evidence. Since there is good evidence from philosophy and science that God exists, the fudge factor in the resurrection hypothesis must be said to be very low if it exists at all. Finally, while it's clear that the resurrection hypothesis is incompatible with our knowledge that the dead don't rise *by natural causes*, it's not at all incompatible with God raising the dead. Thus, science has only confirmed that dead critters stay dead apart from an act of God. If Jesus was raised, it would almost certainly have been an act of God. Bottom Line: The resurrection hypothesis does very well at fulfilling the 4 general criteria for the best explanation.

Other hypotheses don't fair as well. The most common one offered is that Jesus' disciples experienced hallucinations of Jesus. While hallucinations can account for appearances of Jesus to individuals such as Peter and James given their grief, it does not do well accounting for the appearance to Paul, since he hated Jesus and would not have been grieving over his death. Hallucinations also don't occur in a group setting. Accordingly, the hallucination hypothesis cannot account for all of the facts and is dead in its tracks.

When all has been assessed, *the resurrection hypothesis* explains the knowable historical facts better than any other hypothesis. Accordingly, Jesus' resurrection from the dead may be said to have "probably" occurred.

What Does This Mean for Me?

If the Union Army had lost the battle at Gettysburg, the world might look completely different than it does. The North would have ended up losing the War, slavery would have remained in the U.S. for some time, the Union would not have been preserved, the Nazis may have won WWII, and you may have been reading this in German.

What if Jesus' resurrection really occurred? Then God exists, there's an afterlife, Jesus is who he had claimed to be: God's divine Son who alone is able to make us acceptable to God. It means there is a heaven after this life to where it is possible to go through the work of Jesus. And it means that God loves you and has a plan for your life!



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A Historian Looks at Easter

A few months prior to Easter, Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas. Jesus was almost certainly not born on December 25. And it wasn't until the fourth century that Christians began to celebrate Jesus' birth on that day, possibly to correspond to the Winter Solstice.

Easter was originally a pagan month named after a pagan goddess. However, the holiday Easter is now celebrated on one day, the Sunday following the Jewish Passover and which Christians have always claimed Jesus was raised.

Easter is of significant importance for Christians. The apostle Paul may have been the earliest Christian author. In one of his letters he wrote, "If Christ was not raised, your faith is worthless" (1 Corinthians 15:17). In the Gospels, Jesus predicted his imminent death and resurrection (Mark 8:31; 9:31). Accordingly, if Jesus was not raised, he was false prophet. Conversely, if Jesus was raised, he was who he had claimed to be.