

The Evidence for the Resurrection – a Judge’s View

Ken Handley

Judge, New South Wales Court of Appeal (1990-2007)

The author was a Judge of the New South Wales Court of Appeal from 1990 until his retirement due to age in 2007. He continues to serve on the Court in an acting capacity. He was Chancellor of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney from 1980 to 2003.

I have been reading and thinking about this topic for about 30 years. I don’t pretend that my research made me a believer because I was one already. However I have tried to use my training to assemble information that might convince a non-believer with an open mind. Chapter 20 of John’s Gospel records what happened on the first Easter Sunday when Peter and John went to the tomb and found it empty. It says that John went in and “He saw and believed”. He does not tell us what made him believe but we can work it out.

Life after death? Many think that is ridiculous! Everyone knows that death is final. But what if someone we knew died and we saw him alive again? What if we talked to him, touched him and saw him eat a meal? It couldn’t happen. But what if it did? What if we saw it with our own eyes? God in human flesh living among us? Many think that is ridiculous! There is no God anyway but if there was how could anyone believe that a human being was God? How could you possibly prove this? Why would God want to be born as a helpless baby, and grow up to die a painful death on a cross as a criminal?

But what if we had met this person? What if we had listened to Him, and witnessed His miracles? What if we had seen Him die and be buried, and then three days later saw Him alive again? Perhaps then we might believe that we had met God in human flesh. We were born in the wrong time and place to be eye witnesses or to listen to those who were but contemporaries recorded what they saw and heard and we can look through their eyes and listen with their ears.

Death was just as final in the first century, and Jesus’ followers, like everyone else in Jerusalem, thought they had seen the last of Him when He died on the Cross. He had told His followers again and again that He would be executed but would come

back to life, but despite all His miracles they did not believe Him. The Gospels record the doubts which greeted the first reports that He had been seen alive. The disciples had the same doubts but by the time the last of them –doubting Thomas had met and spoken to the risen Jesus-- they had all become convinced that He was really alive, that He was God, and that God had trumped death. They were not weirdos or given to philosophical speculation but middle class people, practical men, master fishermen and in one case a taxation official.

Jesus was a carpenter who lived most of his life in an obscure village on the eastern edge of the Roman Empire 2000 years ago. He did not have any political or military power, He did not lead a mass movement, He did not write a holy book, and He was executed as a criminal at the age of 33. It is a miracle that we have ever heard of him.

The study of long past events is the province of the historian, not the scientist. Science cannot prove or disprove historical facts. If we want to know what happened beyond the range of human memory we have to consider the historical evidence. Judges sometimes have to do this. The High Court of Australia had to do this in 1973 in resolving a native land claim in Papua-New Guinea. It had to decide what happened in Port Moresby in 1886.¹ From the very beginning Christians have appealed to the evidence to support their claims. Christianity is based on historical facts which you can check against the evidence, and unlike Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism it is not a closed belief system. Mohammed claimed, and Muslims believe, that the Archangel Gabriel dictated the Koran to him but this occurred, if it did, in private. You cannot test this claim.

The principal events which underpin the Christian faith took place in public, and in some cases were witnessed by hundreds or thousands of people. Jesus' ministry to his close followers occurred in private but even so there were many witnesses. Luke (1:2) says that his Gospel is based on accounts drawn up and handed over by "those who from the beginning were eye witnesses". Clearly he is referring to written material. John's Gospel (21:24) concludes "this is the disciple who testifies of these things, and wrote these things and we know that his testimony is true". Peter in his

¹ *Administration of Papua and New Guinea v Daera Guba* (1973) 130 CLR 353.

public sermon in Jerusalem at Pentecost, 50 days after the first Good Friday, said (Acts 2:32) “This Jesus God has raised up of which we are all witnesses”.

Luke also anchored his Gospel and Acts in secular history. Thus John the Baptist was born at the time of Herod King of Judea. Joseph and Mary had to go to Bethlehem because when Quirinius was Governor of Syria Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world and so on.

We can be confident that Jesus was a real person who lived in Palestine in the first century and was executed about 33 AD when Tiberias was Emperor and Pilate was the Roman Governor. These and other facts about Him are confirmed by the Roman authors Tacitus, Suetonius and Pliny, and the Jewish sources Josephus, Eliazer and the Talmud. We have to rely on Christian sources for evidence that He was seen alive again but there is no reason for rejecting this evidence out of hand. The Christian documentary evidence is early, it is good, there is plenty of it, it comes from more than one source, it is broadly consistent, and it is backed by circumstantial evidence. References in the Gospels and elsewhere in the New Testament to persons, places or events which can be checked against non-Christian sources have been found to be accurate. The evidence from Christian sources about Jesus’ life, death and return to life has been open to public and hostile scrutiny for nearly 2000 years. That evidence has not yet been shown to be inconsistent with objective facts or contemporary documents. The so-called Gospels of Thomas and Judas emerge 300 years after the events.

We are called to love God with all our minds² and He does not demand irrational faith from us. There is more than enough historical evidence to convince people with an open mind that God exists, that Jesus died and He was alive again three days later.

There are references to Christ’s resurrection from the dead in the letter to the Galatians (1:1) written in 48 AD³ and 1 Thessalonians (4:14) written in 50 AD from Corinth. The earliest detailed written account of the evidence for the Resurrection is

² Luke 10:27.

³ Paul Barnett, *The Birth of Christianity*, Eerdmans, Appendix B, pp. 206-210: ‘Dating Galatians.’

in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians written in 53 or 54 AD, 20 years or so after the first Easter. He wrote (1 Cor 15:3-8):

“For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had 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 [Peter], then to the twelve. Then He appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also.”

This is what he had told the Corinthians when he arrived about 50 AD. He obtained most of this information from eye witnesses when he went to Jerusalem about four years after the first Easter⁴. This is a remarkable piece of historical evidence written close to the events when witnesses were still alive.

I had first hand experience of a remarkable parallel. In February 1964 *HMAS Melbourne* sank *HMAS Voyager* during a night exercise. In October 1996, over 32 years later, I sat on an appeal by the Commonwealth from a jury's verdict in a case brought by a naval rating who was on the *Melbourne* that night and claimed to be suffering post traumatic stress disorder as a result. Our decision is in the official law reports.⁵ Survivors who gave evidence at the trial had the clearest recollection of what had happened that night. There had been nothing like it in their lives before or since. The men and women who saw and spoke with the risen Jesus would have said the same.

The 32 years in that case was longer than the 20 years between the first Easter and 1 Corinthians. It was some time before the relevance of this 32 years gap occurred to me. Those of us who are old enough remember where we were in 1963 when we heard that President Kennedy had been assassinated. Most of us remember where we heard of the attacks on the World Trade Centre.

What about the reliability of the historical material in the New Testament? We know quite a lot about the gospel authors. Mark recorded what he remembered of Peter's eye witness version. Matthew and John were eye witnesses. Luke was a

⁴ Acts 9:26; Galatians 1:18 (3 years after his conversion).

⁵ *Commonwealth of Australia v McLean* (1996) 41 NSWLR 389.

Greek physician who, as he says, set out to write a historical account based on the available written materials and the evidence of eye witnesses. He was a companion of Paul in his later journeys and accompanied him to Rome. He had the opportunity to speak to eye witnesses when he went to Jerusalem with Paul about 57 AD,⁶ and during Paul's two year imprisonment in Palestine which followed, and he probably met Peter and Mark in Rome.

Computer analysis of the Greek texts has established that Luke and Matthew borrowed from Mark, but not from each other or John. There is no evidence that John borrowed from the others. Matthew and Luke also borrowed from a written compilation of the sayings of Jesus designated Q, Matthew borrowed from another such compilation designated M, and Luke from another designated L. None have survived. Mark borrowed from no other Gospel and was probably the first. According to Papias, one of the Church Fathers writing about the end of the first century or a little later, Mark recorded what he remembered of Peter's teaching after the latter's death in Rome under Nero in the mid 60's.⁷

About a year after the first Easter, Stephen, a leading Christian, was martyred in Jerusalem. A general persecution followed which scattered the Church but the apostles remained in Jerusalem.⁸ Until then converts in Jerusalem had had ready access to the apostles for first hand information about Jesus. The scattering of the Church created an immediate need for written material and it is likely that Q, M, L, and the other written material referred to by Luke ("Many have undertaken to draw up an account ..." 1:1) came into existence at this time to meet this need. The new Churches in Judea, Samaria and Galilee referred to in Acts could not have survived without Christian writings.

None of the Gospels refer to the Jewish rebellion against Rome that broke out in 66 AD and ended in 70 AD with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple as Jesus had predicted. The Christians did not support the rebellion and those in Jerusalem left before the siege. John alone refers to the death of Peter,⁹ Moreover he says in the present tense (5:2) "... there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool

⁶ Acts 21:15 ("we ... went up to Jerusalem").

⁷ Paul Barnett, *The Birth of Christianity*, Eerdmans, 2005, pp. 158-161.

⁸ Acts 7:54-8:1.

⁹ John 21:19.

which is called in Hebrew Bethesda having five porches". I understand that the Greek is also in the present tense. This was no longer true after Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. The site has been excavated and rediscovered in modern times.¹⁰ We therefore have good reason to think that John's Gospel was written while there was still a pool by the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem with 5 porches.¹¹

Dating the Gospels between the death of Stephen and the 60's and perhaps later is no reason for doubting their accuracy. The period between the first Easter and the outbreak of the Jewish War was about 32 years, the same as in the *Voyager* case. The Gospels were in circulation when eye witnesses were still alive.

Courts expect honest and reliable witnesses to agree in substance but differ in detail and view with suspicious witnesses who give exactly the same evidence. The Gospels are four substantially independent accounts which agree in substance, but differ in details, and they pass this test. The Epistles written between 48 and 64 AD for other purposes contain a wealth of incidental information about Jesus and his teaching which is consistent with the Gospel accounts.¹²

We don't have the original gospel manuscripts or Paul's original letters. You may therefore ask how good, and how early, are the surviving manuscripts and how confident can we be that they were not corrupted by constant recopying. Here again the news is good. The hot, dry climate of parts of the Middle East has preserved papyrus manuscripts from very early in the Christian era. Fragments of the Gospels have been dated to 130 to 150 AD¹³ and from then on the volume and variety of manuscript material builds up steadily until we have two complete New Testaments dating from about 350 AD - one in the Vatican and one in the British Museum.¹⁴ There are nearly 5000 early manuscripts of the New Testament or parts of it in Greek¹⁵ and they are remarkably consistent. The scribes who copied the manuscripts were faithful and accurate. There are variations but none affect any of the central facts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We also have early manuscripts in

¹⁰ Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, InterVarsity, 1960, p. 94.

¹¹ Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History*, Apollos, 1997, pp. 37-8, 65-6.

¹² Barnett, *ibid.*, pp 39-58.

¹³ F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* InterVarsity Press, 1960, p.

17.

¹⁴ Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 16; Barnett, *Is the New Testament History*, Authentic Media, 2002, p. 45.

¹⁵ Bruce, *op. cit.*, p 16.

Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian and Latin which are remarkably consistent both with the Greek material and each other.¹⁶

It is instructive to compare the wealth of the surviving early material for the New Testament with the surviving manuscript material for the classical secular works of Greece and Rome:¹⁷

- (a) The oldest surviving manuscript of Caesar's Gallic Wars dates from 850 AD, some 900 years after his death. 900 years takes us back to within 50 years of the Norman Conquest in 1066. There are only ten good early manuscripts. No one doubts the existence of Caesar, or the history recorded in these manuscripts.
- (b) Most of the books of the Roman historians, Livy and Tacitus, have been lost.
- (c) The works of the Greek historian Thucydides (460-400 BC) survive in eight manuscripts, the earliest dating from 900 AD, some 1300 years after the originals, and a similar situation applies to the works of Herodotus. These books are the basis of the known history of classical Greece.
- (d) Alexander the Great died in 323 BC. The earliest surviving history of his life was written by Arrian about 130 AD, 450 years after his death. 450 years takes us back to the reign of Elizabeth 1. Arrian worked from books written by Alexander's generals and others which have not survived.¹⁸

The letters of the Church fathers, Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp, written between 96 and 110 AD, quote extensively from the Gospels and are consistent with the direct manuscript material.¹⁹ Thus the Gospels were widely known 30 years or

¹⁶ Barnett, *Is the New Testament History*, p 44.

¹⁷ Bruce, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-7.

¹⁸ Barnett, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹⁹ Barnett, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-40, Bruce, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-9.

more before our earliest surviving fragments and this pushes their initial publication well back into the first century.

Archaeological evidence has verified the accuracy of incidental information in the Gospels and Acts. Until 50 years ago there was no evidence outside Christian sources that there was a village called Nazareth in the first century, and sceptics claimed that it was a Christian invention.²⁰ However in 1962 a first century milestone was discovered in Israel which proved that Nazareth existed at that time.²¹ Archaeological work in the Old City of Jerusalem since the Seven Day War in 1967 has confirmed much of the detail in the Gospels and Acts about that city.²²

The authors of the Gospels and Acts could not have got these details right if, as some scholars claim, those books were written late in the first century without access to eye witnesses when Jerusalem was in ruins.

From very early in the Christian era many have found the historical books of the New Testament self-authenticating. Again and again readers have been convinced that this was not a myth and no one could have made it up. Can the New Testament documents alone provide a proper evidentiary basis for Christian faith? A famous Australian wrote:

“... having read and re-read the ... documents ... I see no reason to doubt both their general accuracy and the veracity of those who compiled them. Indeed the more I have read them, the better opinion I have formed of the capacity of those who prepared them and the more convinced I am that they speak of events which actually took place as they are related ...”

This was not a clergyman writing about the New Testament, it was Sir Garfield Barwick, Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia writing about the official records and reports of the events in Port Moresby in 1886 in his judgment about a native land

²⁰ Branscomb, *The Gospel of Mark*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1937, p. 17, refers to skeptics who noted that Nazareth was not mentioned in the Old Testament, Josephus or the Talmud, and it had been said that the name of the sect - the Nazarites or the Nazarenes - had later been wrongly regarded as referring to a place. I am indebted to Bishop Barnett for this reference.

²¹ Barnett, *The Truth about Jesus*, Aquila Press, 1994, pp. 31-3; Finegan, *The Archeology of the New Testament*, Princeton University Press, 1969 (Nazareth 36).

²² Barnett, *The Truth about Jesus*, p. 35, Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

claim in 1973.²³ For nearly 2000 years Christians have been saying the same thing about the historical books of the New Testament. I first read this judgment years before its relevance occurred to me.

What about the circumstantial evidence? Consider Jesus's mission on the evening of the first Good Friday. He was dead and buried, one of His disciples had betrayed Him, the rest had run away, and Peter had denied even knowing Him.²⁴ To all appearances His mission was a failure and the demoralised apostles were in no state to carry it on. You would have said that it would be a miracle if the mission continued.

God changed everything by an act of supernatural power. Jesus' return to life transformed the remaining apostles into men of courage. They were convinced that Jesus was alive again and that he was God in human flesh. Starting in Jerusalem at Pentecost, 50 days after Good Friday, they proclaimed publicly that He was alive and they had seen Him. Their proclamation was made in the city that had witnessed the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, the trials before the Sanhedrin and Pilate, and the Crucifixion. As Luke records (24:18) it had been buzzing with rumours that the tomb was empty and his body was missing. Jesus' return to life was first proclaimed publicly in the city that had watched Him die shortly before.

How were these claims treated at the time? Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost added 3000 new believers to the Church. Many others did not believe but the Jewish and Roman authorities could neither ignore the claims nor refute them so they tried persecution. Peter and John were twice arrested by the Jewish authorities for preaching that Jesus was alive. Jewish persecution continued intermittently until the war with Rome in 66 AD. Roman persecution began under Nero in 64 AD and continued intermittently, at times with great savagery, for nearly three centuries.

The apostles' claims were taken seriously in Jerusalem because Jesus was well known particularly for the raising of Lazarus from the dead at Bethany a few miles away not long before. John records²⁵ that a great many Jews came there not only for Jesus' sake, but also to see Lazarus. The apostles were able to show how

²³ *Administration of Papua and New Guinea v Daera Guba* (1973) 130 CLR 353, 378-9.

²⁴ Mark 14:66-71.

²⁵ 12:9.

prophecies in the Old Testament about the Messiah had been fulfilled in the life and death of Jesus. Claims about His return to life had a credibility that claims about others would have lacked. It was a supernatural event, but not a big deal for the God who created the universe and all life on Earth.

When Peter and John were arrested they were brought before the Sanhedrin which had effectively condemned Jesus to death a few weeks before. There was no cowardice now; Peter told the Sanhedrin that the man they had crucified God had raised from the dead²⁶ and they were witnesses of this. He and John refused to be silenced although they knew they were risking their lives.

There have been many attempts to explain away the disappearance of Jesus' body. It has been said that the women and the disciples went to the wrong tomb, the disciples stole His body, that Jesus only lost consciousness, that the disciples saw visions, or that Jesus simply came to life in their hearts.

These theories are inconsistent with the New Testament documents and the probabilities.

Did He really die? The Roman soldiers were professional executioners. One pierced Jesus' side with a spear and out came blood and water, which is medical evidence of death. His post-Resurrection appearances were not of a badly wounded cripple, but of a man in good health who could walk several miles to Emmaus on the First Easter Sunday. The wrong tomb explanation is pathetic – its location was public knowledge because a guard had been mounted there and the error must have been discovered within hours as rumours of the disappearance of His body began to circulate. The spiritual experience theory does not square with the evidence either. The risen Jesus appeared to more than 500 people at the one time. Luke records Jesus saying to the apostles “a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have”.²⁷ He ate a meal with his disciples, and doubting Thomas saw the marks of the nails in His hands and of the spear in His side. His appearances stopped after forty days, to be repeated only once to Paul on the road to Damascus. If they were visions, why did they suddenly stop?

²⁶ Acts 4.

²⁷ 24:39.

Finally there is the theory that the disciples stole His body and the whole story is a fraud. This is the least probable because the apostles professed and practised a high standard of ethics. We know from modern history that fraudulent conspirators are not prepared to suffer in silence to protect their conspiracy. You may remember how quickly the Watergate conspirators cracked in the 1970s when they faced jail. It would have been a tremendous propaganda victory for the Romans or the Jews to produce a disciple of Jesus who was prepared to say that the whole story was a lie. They never did and although many died for their faith, there was no second Judas. They were not irrational fanatics like the suicide bombers. They had seen and believed. The transformation of the Apostles after the first Easter Sunday is a most compelling piece of circumstantial evidence supporting the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus.

The spread of the Christian Church soon after the first Easter is confirmed by Jewish and Roman sources, and is itself an important piece of circumstantial evidence. According to Barnett, Christian symbols were found in the ruins of Pompeii buried by the eruption of Mt Vesuvius in 79 AD.²⁸ The Church could not have survived and grown so far from Palestine without written materials. For the first 300 years it grew by peaceful means in the face of official opposition and persecution. Its survival and growth is testimony to the conviction with which the disciples, and their successors, preached the Resurrection and the credibility of their preaching.

The holy day for Jews was Saturday, the 7th day of the week. Jesus' followers found His tomb empty on Sunday, the first day of the week, and they made this their holy day. This custom, still followed today, can be traced back to the first Easter Sunday. Christians remember the death of Jesus when they take Holy Communion, and this sacrament can be traced back to the Last Supper, the night before His execution. Both are remarkable pieces of circumstantial evidence.

The point about circumstantial evidence is the way the circumstances can sometimes fit together and point to the same conclusion. The standard direction to

²⁸ Barnett, *Is the New Testament History?*, p. 19.

juries in criminal cases about circumstantial evidence is based on that given by Pollock CB in 1866 in the English case of *Regina v Exall*.²⁹

“It has been said that circumstantial evidence is to be considered as a chain ... but that is not so, for then, if any one link broke, the chain would fail. It is more like the case of a rope composed of several cords. One strand of the cord might be insufficient to sustain the weight, but three stranded together may be quite of sufficient strength. Thus it may be in circumstantial evidence - there may be a combination of circumstances, no one of which would raise a reasonable conviction, or more than a mere suspicion, but the whole, taken together, may create a strong conclusion of guilt ... with as much certainty as human affairs can require or admit of”.

In 1875 Lord Cairns LC said in another English case the House of Lords.³⁰

“... in dealing with circumstantial evidence we have to consider the weight which is to be given to the united force of all the circumstances put together. You may have a ray of light so feeble that by itself it will do little to elucidate a dark corner. But on the other hand you may have a number of rays, each of them insufficient but all converging and brought to bear upon the same point and, when united, producing a body of illumination which will clear away the darkness which you are endeavouring to dispel”.

The circumstantial and other evidence points to only one conclusion, that Jesus died and came back to life, and the combined strength of the evidence is very great.

After Jesus died, as John records (19:39), Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took down His body, and wrapped it, mummy-style, in strips of linen heavily impregnated with 100 lbs of embalming ointment and laid it in the tomb. No one was expecting Jesus to come back from the dead. When the women brought the news early on the Sunday morning that Jesus' body was missing, Peter and John ran to the tomb. John tells us what happened:³¹

“... the other disciple outran Peter and came to the tomb first. And he, stooping down and looking in, saw the linen cloths lying there; yet he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came ... and went into the tomb; and he saw the linen cloths lying there, and the handkerchief ... folded together

²⁹ (1866) 4 F & F 922, 929 (176 ER 850, 853).

³⁰ *Belhaven and Stenton Peerage* (1875) 1 App Cas 278, 279.

³¹ 20:4-8.

in a place by itself. Then the other disciple ... went in also; and he saw and believed”.

The text is powerfully understated. What did John see that made him believe? Clearly the whole mummy had not been removed. If the linen cloths had been unwound before the body was removed this could have been the work of human hands. The only other possibility is that the embalming cloths were intact but empty, and with the weight of the ointment stiff with the cold of a Jerusalem Easter they had collapsed on themselves. Death had not held Jesus nor had the embalming cloths. He had passed through both.

If Jesus really did come back to life consider the implications:

- (1) Science can't prove there is no God, but the resurrection of Jesus proves that there is one.
- (2) Jesus' return to life though an exercise of God's supernatural powers validated all that He said about Himself and the human condition.
- (3) This life is a dress rehearsal.
- (4) What was the purpose of it all? We are told in the Bible that Jesus' death and new life were part of God's plan to rescue us from the consequences of our rejection of Him, what the Bible calls sin. We have all done it our way, and not God's way and that is our problem.
- (5) All of us some of the time, and some of us all the time, have treated God as if He did not exist. If we treated our spouses and friends the same way they would soon give up on us, and seeing them at Christmas and Easter each year would not help.

When I consider Jesus, the blameless Son of God, on the Cross I know I must have a big problem. A problem so big that only the death of God's Son could fix it. If I could fix it myself there was no need for the Son of God to come and die for people like me.

The Christian claim that Jesus came back to life is soundly based on evidence and is not hopeless. His new life is the basis of the Christian hope for this world and the next.