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Resurrection and Reality

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I am a confessing scientist. I trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and believe in his bodily Resurrection from the dead. I am also a scientist; a postdoc researching evolutionary genomics.

I came to believe because I became personally convinced that the God of the Bible is real and that Jesus is alive. As a teenager, I received a personal call to trust Jesus, combined with testimony to God's reality, and I simply responded to it. Today, more than a decade of study and debate later, I believe primarily because I accept the testimony of the first followers of Jesus. Some background beliefs; however, are important too. I bring to the question of the Resurrection the prior beliefs that it is reasonable to believe that God exists and that Jesus fulfills the Hebrew Scriptures. To complement this overview I link below some of the key sources I've recently found useful.

When I look at the universe I see it as brimming with purpose. I believe that God exists. I cannot prove so, and I cannot give a strictly scientific argument, but science (of course) forms part of the evidence I—as a scientist—must weigh. Our universe began with an extremely highly-ordered initial state. If anything could be labeled a miracle, the origin of the cosmos seems to fit the bill. No matter how many intricate scientific details we discover, the initial creation of something from nothing or what Hawking referred to as the breathing of "fire into the equations" will remain extra-scientific or metaphysical. The development of this cosmos was then governed by a set of natural laws which allow the existence of life. On current understanding, the life-friendly set is an extraordinarily rare one in the total conceivable possibility space, and our life-friendly position in that space is sensitive to relatively tiny changes[1]. This finding is widely thought to be surprising for the naturalist. It gets better still, however. These laws are to a remarkable extent comprehensible and even beautiful to us—fallible mortal creatures though we are. Although our ancestors' survival presumably depended on hunting and gathering, we have the capacity to hunt for subatomic particles and gather genomic datasets which give us insight into our origins, amongst many other impressive things such as music, language, and altruistic acts. I find all this consonant with (and even suggestive of) the existence of God, a transcendent personal reality behind the scenes—an author of the cosmic drama (as described in Psalm 19).

It is my pleasure to present this confession from Dr. *Zachary Ardern*, a postdoctoral fellow in evolutionary biology. Ardern studies the evolution of bacteria, hoping to understand more about how novel proteins and functions arise. He muses about evolution and theology too.

Does evolutionary theory give me any insight into or pause on this God question? Some atheists have famously suggested that evolution is a part of science particularly unfriendly to theism or Christianity. In some senses, the evolutionary unfolding of life is well understood (cue cheers from evolutionary biologists!)—particularly regarding the sequence of events and the relationships between organisms. In other aspects it remains deeply mysterious (cue cheers from opponents of evolution!)—for example: we have a lot more to learn about the fundamentals of genetic information, mutation, fitness, and selection before we can really say we understand evolutionary processes. The human brain may be the most remarkable feature of the living world to account for. I suspect, along with many great biologists of the past and present[2], that evolution and nature overall are much less purposeless than many popularizers have suggested. I make this inference based on what I know of evolution, not merely based on mysteries yet unknown. Unpacking some of these mysteries, while being aware of the limits of what we can say scientifically, is part of my work as a scientist.

Asking someone to trust God, however, is asking them to reorient their whole life around a new focus, not just to accept a slightly different shopping list of items or processes in the universe (as is typical for scientific theories). I observe some pointers towards a transcendent and perhaps personality reality: an Author. I also believe that this Author making moral claims on our lives makes the best sense of the moral awareness which humans possess. But most importantly, I think that Jesus gives unique insight into God's nature, and I think this partly because of his remarkable life recorded in the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. I find that the great themes, stories, and characters of the Hebrew Bible are drawn together in a remarkable way in him. For instance the key biblical themes of temple[3], sacrifice, liberation, authority, shepherd, king, prophet, holiness, and healing, among many others, are all expressed and re-envisioned in the life of Jesus, and recorded in a way which is in essence historical rather than mythological[4]. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God promises to visit his people. The gospel writers clearly believed that he had done so in the person of Jesus, and reflected on "the true light that gives light to everyone" in the multifaceted ways available to them.

1. Luke Barnes and Geraint Lewis (2016) 'A Fortunate Universe'. Cambridge University Press.
2. Simon Conway Morris (2004) 'Life's Solution'. Cambridge University Press.
3. Nicholas Perrin (2010) 'Jesus the Temple'. Baker Academic.
4. Richard Bauckham (2017) 'Jesus and the Eyewitnesses' (2nd Edition). Eerdmans.

Against this background of science, Scripture, cosmos, and conscience, **why in particular do I accept the testimony of the first followers of Jesus to his Resurrection?** In short, because the message of the Resurrection was **early**, **persuasive**, and **transformative**.

The good news of the Resurrection was preached from the start; it was not a late development in a different city, decades after the last witnesses had died out. Rather, it was believed and preached in Jerusalem from the beginning of the Christian movement. We can perform a kind of phylogenetic analysis of the early texts to find the oldest strata, the common themes that must have been present at the beginning. The Resurrection is clearly there, found as a central claim of Paul's earliest letters, the gospels, Acts, and most other New Testament letters. The most-cited verse from the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament is Psalm 110:1, which is repeatedly used in reference to Jesus's victory over death. This core Christian claim undoubtedly goes back to the earliest Jewish believers. Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church was written in the 50s AD, approximately 20 years after Jesus's death—already an early source. But it contains an even earlier creedal formula in 1 Cor 15, which is generally held to go back to within 2-3 years of Jesus's death.

The good news of the Resurrection was persuasive, with new churches seemingly springing up wherever the early Christians went to preach. I am personally very impressed by the casual mention of the conversion of many priests from Jerusalem in the book of Acts (chapter 6), the first history of the early church. These people were in the best position to know what had happened, and whether reports of a crucifixion, empty tomb, and post-mortem appearances to many were true. The essential historicity of the book of Acts[5] supports these claims and others which bolster the case that people well equipped to know the truth were persuaded of the Resurrection. This message spread not just in Jerusalem but throughout the Roman Empire, and there is a contentious but credible case that there were even converts in the Italian cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum before their destruction in AD 79[6]. The evidence for this includes a graffito of the Latin phrase "he lives" (*vivit*) designed so as to center around a cross shape including the final "t"—plausibly a simple depiction of both the crucifixion and Resurrection, from within the lifetime of eyewitnesses.

Finally, the message of the Resurrection made an impact. The message was spread by many people, through many difficulties. One of the most important missionaries was Paul of Tarsus, a well-educated Jew whose initial reaction to the Christian movement was to persecute it harshly. Something happened to change his mind; likewise James the brother of Jesus, whose belief appears to have only come after the Resurrection. The wider society of the ancient world came to see the effects of Christianity too[7]. Just one famous example is the Christian rejection of infant exposure, where babies—prior to official acceptance by their father—were left outside to die or to be collected by someone else; generally in order to later be sold into slavery, including prostitution. Likewise, Christians influenced culture and law in their rejection of gladiatorial contests, adultery, and the sexual use of children, and in their reshaping of family life and households. None of this proves that Christianity is true, but it is evidence that the Resurrection was transformative and must have been taken seriously.

Of course, belief in the Resurrection of Jesus is contentious and sometimes thought to be absurd. There are two main objections to the Resurrection that I often come across.

Firstly, some claim the evidence is weak. For instance, some argue that there are more claims of alien abduction than firsthand accounts of the Resurrection, so alien abductions are better evidenced than the Resurrection of Jesus. In response, quantity of claims should not be confused with quality. Most abduction claims seem to follow from media attention given to alien claims. Perhaps more importantly, events such as alien abductions or Elvis being alive simply don't fit either with other things we know or into the broader context provided by either a naturalistic or theistic worldview. Hence, they have a low intrinsic probability. The actual strength of the evidence for the Resurrection needs to be examined rather than dismissed. Work by NT Wright[8], Richard Swinburne[9], and Tim & Lydia McGrew is all helpful here.

Secondly, many claim an inherent improbability or impossibility for a Resurrection, in principle. I understand this move. But we must consider the claimed evidence for God existing in the first place. If we take the laws of nature to be God's means of providential governance of the universe (for which there is a serious case to be made from the nature of these laws[10],[11]), then a theologically significant Resurrection outside the ordinary course of nature is within the realm of possibility. In fact, if Jesus really did uniquely fulfill the Hebrew Scriptures, then his Resurrection makes good sense.

To sum it all up, I find reason to believe that there is an authoritative personal reality undergirding the universe, I believe that Jesus fulfills the Hebrew expectations of this personal reality in surprising and subtle ways, and I see evidence that he rose from the dead. Taking it together with the various strands of my life and experience of the world, I find the Resurrection compelling as a historical event and a foundation for hope. I am also a scientist and find my scientific worldview and practice to cohere well with my faith in the God revealed in Jesus, and so I am a confessing scientist.

5. Colin Hemer (1990) 'The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History'. Eisenbrauns.
6. Bruce W Longenecker (2016) 'The Crosses of Pompeii'. Fortress Press.
7. Larry Hurtado (2016) 'Destroyer of the gods'. Baylor University Press.
8. NT Wright (2003) 'The Resurrection of the Son of God'. Fortress Press.
9. Richard Swinburne (2008) 'Was Jesus God?'. Oxford University Press.
10. Lydia Jaeger (2012) 'What the Heavens Declare'. Cascade Books.
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