

What is wrong with the quality of the evidence that Jesus appeared to the apostles?

We might read the gospels and think the case for Jesus having risen from the dead is not bad. But the fact remains that we are not in the best position to draw that conclusion. There are clues in the New Testament itself that the evidence is not good. It can happen that works look convincing to future generations which don't know what the generation that produced them knew.

There are four resurrection narratives in the New Testament and they have contradictions among themselves. They have differences. Differences are regarded as not being the same as contradictions. But that does not change the fact that what looks like mere differences is in fact contradiction. It depends on what the writer meant in his own head.

The accounts call for harmonisation if you assume that the authors intended that or that God wrote those books and that the story is coherent.

One harmonisation needed is for how Jesus said he would rise after three days and yet he only rose on the third day. Believers take the "after three days" loosely which is very neat. They say the author did not mean it strictly. Matthew says people were raised from the dead when Jesus died. The resurrected people in Matthew came out to visit people after Jesus rose. But even the New Testament only guesses WHEN Jesus rose. It gives no evidence that he really rose on Sunday morning. It is merely assumed. Thus you have Jesus predicting the future as a sign when there are problems with the fulfilment.

Those who harmonise the resurrection narratives firstly assume the angels appeared and Jesus appeared later. They do not try to get the information to fit and leave it at that. No - their harmonisation has a goal: to get you to think the texts vindicate a resurrection. But you can harmonise without vindicating a resurrection. By default if you harmonise texts you have no right to insist that your scheme is the right one. There is more than one way to skin a cat.

For example, if Matthew's account of Jesus appearing in Galilee and then telling the apostles to proclaim the gospel has problems you can say it was a heavenly vision where Jesus appears in the sky and ascends. The problem with Matthew is that he does not pick better stories and his post-resurrection narrative is more interested in refuting the allegation that the disciples stole Jesus' body than he is in Jesus appearing. You can say he picked that story because it was a good one for ending the gospel with. Matthew in any case leaves us with absolutely no evidence that the apostles verified that the risen Jesus had a body of any kind. A missing body proves nothing unless the person rises and you at least can touch him. The were the only authorised witnesses and the essentials. Neither does Mark the earliest gospel help with the risen body problem for his resurrection stories have been added by forgers. It would be odd if God could raise the dead and allow the first attempt to make a record and the first source to give the outline of the story of Jesus could not look after the resurrection record.

Suppose the tomb was found empty and Jesus' body was not seen within it though it should have been. Suppose the Bible says all that. It still does not amount to the Bible saying, "The explanation is that Jesus rose" but "Perhaps the explanation is that Jesus rose." It is not rational to read the Bible as saying "God must have done it." It is an attempt a rational interpretation but it is not. All interpretations are an attempt at being rational. To say the scripture is saying God raised Jesus from the dead is just the interpreter's interpretation not the Bible's. The gospels of Mark and Matthew and Luke make the fatal mistake of not saying if they mean a supernatural or natural resurrection. Scholars point out that the Christian doctrine of Jesus' resurrection means he was miraculously raised from the dead. But apart from the gospel of John that doctrine is not in the gospel. However not a single gospel gives any evidence that if the resurrection happened that it was down to God and not down to some renegade natural law or even a secret potion that restores life. Grave and prevalent irrationality arises from all that for silliness gives rise to more silliness. And the pestilence has always corrupted Christendom. And it is plastered in dishonest thinking and half truth.

Those who leave theology out of their examination of the evidence and say that from a historical standpoint the most you can say is that Jesus rose from the dead are wrong. The most you can say is that Jesus rose from apparent death. That is what you do for anybody who is dead and then is reported as alive. You do not explain how they did it. You don't need to.

PAUL ADMITS THE EVIDENCE IS AWFUL!

St Paul was the main founder of the early Christian Church and its real rock. He was the first Christian writer. He is the only person who wrote about his experience of apparitions of the risen Jesus. He is the person we must study if we wish to

know the how and possibly why of these apparitions. Yet he let it slip that he wasn't sure how real his visions were!

He wrote in Philippians that he didn't know if it was best for him to die or to live. He was in a dilemma he said. Both dying and living were equally appealing to him because if he died he would go to Jesus to be with him forever and if he lived he would be able to serve his friends on earth and teach them the good news. He admitted that it is far better to die and go to Jesus. But he added, "But to remain in my body is more needful and essential for your sake" (Philippians 1:23). This doesn't show much confidence in God. It shows even less in Jesus. Paul believed that nobody can die unless God wills it. God has to let them die. And if God needs a person to live no power on earth will be able to destroy that person. Also Paul talks as if he cannot be done without which blasphemes the providence of God. If Paul were to die then God could get somebody else to take his place. If Paul really couldn't be done without then the other apostles were useless and so were their successors and that is what he thought. And the Church fell into apostasy and away from divine protection when he died. If he was so sure that he was so essential then it is no wonder he got martyred if that happened. And he wasn't a real martyr for he was so sure he would be saved. One way Paul had confidence in God and in another he hadn't. But if Paul was really sure of his visions and if his Jesus had been a miracle-worker there is no way he would have written the way he did. He speaks as a doubter and doubters doubt things here and there but not everything. If the gospel portrait of Jesus is true it would have been impossible for Paul to have been like this.

Paul spends some time in 1 Corinthians trying to make rival or heretical apostles who were having visions and experiences of the divine look pathetic. In 2 Corinthians 12:1 Paul says he will not boast. He then says he knows a man who had mystical experiences fourteen years before. He says he doesn't know if the man was in the body or out of it. This refers to the idea of the person being separable from the body which you get in traditional Christianity. The soul is the real person and the body only some accessory that it drags around. He says the man went to the third heaven and heard things that no man is allowed to mention and of him he will boast. He then admits that he himself is this man and that God afflicted him for being proud of his experience. He says he can't reveal what was revealed to him. He did reveal the resurrection of Jesus so it was separate from all this. Had he been so proud of the resurrection visions he had he wouldn't have needed to go into this experience.

The fact that Paul decided not to say he was the man indicates that he never mentioned it to anybody. And he says he is boasting about it. What is there to boast about? He doesn't tell us what happened or what was said. That is strange boasting. You boast to make others feel inferior but you can't do that if you won't go into details. You wouldn't want to boast about things you can't detail. Johnny doesn't boast about winning the lotto if he doesn't want people to know how much he got or work it out. He says he boasts of this man (12:5) which is odd when he doesn't tell us who he is. By now we can see that the man has to be himself after all for there is no point in boasting about a stranger whose identity you won't reveal. Later in the chapter Paul changed his mind and admitted to being the man (see verse 7) and said that he got a chastisement from God to keep him humble despite having so many revelations. He said God punished him for his pride about the experiences and here he was tempting God to have another go! Doesn't sound very believable or respectful of God. Perhaps Paul didn't care what God did to him for boasting because as long as he could rival or surpass the rival apostles. This shows an extreme bias, all he cares about is his point of view. He even goes as far as to boast about nothing! Paul then boasts in verse 11 that he is in no way inferior in miracles or otherwise to his rival apostles. He talks as if their visions and miracles are as impressive as his. Such a person cannot be trusted. He is like a person who has the same credentials as somebody else and is acting like the other persons are not as good as his. His letters should be thrown out of the New Testament. The saying he won't boast and then doing it despite the threats of God indicate a sick mind.

That Paul didn't boast about his visions of the risen Jesus is telling. It indicates that he wasn't very impressed by them himself. It also indicates that his rivals reported them too and that they said they were taught their heresies by those apparitions. He couldn't prove they were lying and had to resort to nasty tricks to fight their influence. Seeing the risen Jesus is more important than any heavenly vision. Yet he boasted about an inferior experience and kept it quiet for fourteen years as if it was the only important experience he ever had. If that experience was the most important then we have the right to doubt the veracity and reality of his visions of Jesus. He even treats the experience as something that other people should be impressed by though he won't say much about it and there is no reason why it should make a good and lasting impression. When he expects people to be impressed by it he can't think very much of his visions of Jesus. He didn't consider them sacred enough to keep secret for years.

Paul was declaring the experience he had fourteen years before to be the most important thing that happened to him and his answer to all heretics and the reason his followers should keep listening to him. The resurrection appearances by implication were declared to be nothing. It is possible that Paul had a mystical experience and from it worked out that Jesus died and rose again. Perhaps at the time he thought the Old Testament predicted a dying and rising saviour and took the experience to be confirmation of this. Perhaps he saw an entity calling itself Jesus and concluded it was the risen Messiah though the vision never said so. Perhaps the whole death and resurrection story was just an inference and was not revealed by a miracle from Heaven. That means there is no evidence at all that Jesus died and rose and that Paul saw him as a resurrected being. He says elsewhere that he has seen Jesus the Lord. If the thinking in this paragraph is right then we can safely say that the early Christians may not have had visions of a man claiming to have risen from the dead at all but

visions of a heavenly being they interpreted as a risen being but who gave no justification for this inference. Nothing in Paul's writings or in the accounts of those who reported visions actually states that the being said it was a resurrected being. However the view that the vision did say it was a risen crucifixion victim is a useful framework for interpreting the resurrection appearances stories.

The Jerusalem apostles accepted Paul as a minister of the gospel and naturally that his apparitions were genuine. They accepted that deranged impostor – what does that say about their own visions of the risen Jesus? Nothing good!

Perhaps some might say that since the fourteen years before event seems to be about the time Paul fell off his horse near Damascus we could surmise that he had a near death experience and saw the being of light and read all this Christian stuff into the experience. Perhaps that was the only vision he had of Jesus. The others might just have been visions revealed in dreams or in the imagination both of which Christian mystics regards as possible vehicles for divine communication. Skeptics will say that the Damascus vision was caused by a blow to the head and was nothing more!

When the evidence is that bad for the basis of Christian faith, the resurrection appearances, and the apostles are desperate for evidence and scrap the bottoms of barrels it is undeniable that the gospels version of Jesus is entirely fiction.