



The Probability of the Resurrection of Jesus  
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Notes to accompany lecture

A historical hypothesis H is probable in so far as it is intrinsically a simple hypothesis and,

(1) the general background evidence K makes it probable that H will hold under certain conditions (the prior requirements) and not otherwise,

(2) the historical evidence E1 (the prior historical evidence) is such as would probably occur if these conditions are satisfied and not otherwise, and

(3) the historical evidence E2 (the posterior historical evidence) is such as would probably occur if H is true and not otherwise.

The stronger are (1) and (2) the less we need (3) for H to be probable overall.

The hypothesis that Jesus rose from the dead (H) is rendered probable by general background evidence (K) of natural theology, insofar as that evidence makes it probable that there is a God of the traditional kind who has reason to become incarnate in order to make atonement for our sins, identify with our suffering and reveal truths to us.

This would involve God Incarnate leading a holy human life, giving deep moral teaching, showing that he believes himself to be God Incarnate, teaching that his life is an atonement for our sins, founding a church which continues his teaching (including teaching his divinity and atonement) and makes this available to other generations and cultures.

If God does become incarnate in this way it is probable that he will put his signature on his life by a super-miracle such as the Resurrection. So if (1) is satisfied to some moderate extent, we would need in connection with Jesus (2) a moderate amount of evidence (E1) that the prior requirements were satisfied in connection with Jesus (that is a moderate amount of prior historical evidence that he led a holy life, gave deep moral teaching etc ), and then (3) only a moderate amount of posterior historical evidence (E2) in the form of witness claims etc to the Resurrection, for it to be probable overall that Jesus (was God Incarnate, and) rose from the dead.

The E1 evidence that Jesus satisfied the requirements for living a holy life, giving deep moral teaching, and founding a church which taught his divinity and atonement is strong. That Jesus showed that he believed himself to be God is evidenced by his allowing himself to be worshipped; and by the fact that the Jews believed him to be ‘blasphemous’ (to be understood as arrogating to himself divine prerogatives). At his trial he claimed not merely a very high kind of Messiahship, but the right to replace the sacrificial worship of the Temple by another temple—which God alone had the right to do. His words ‘This is my body’ and ‘This is my blood’ at the Last Supper showed that he taught that the replacement sacrifice was to be himself, and so that his life was an atonement.

The E2 evidence is provided first by witnesses who claimed to have talked with the risen Jesus, often in groups (which could hardly be an illusion); and secondly by witnesses to the empty tomb. Even the Jews acknowledged that the tomb was empty (see Matthew 28.15), and the Gospel story that women discovered this on the first Easter Day is massively supported by the universal Christian custom thereafter of celebrating the eucharist on a Sunday.

It is immensely improbable that prior and posterior historical evidence of this strength would be associated by chance with a prophet who was not God Incarnate (since in all human history, there is only one plausible candidate about whom there is either prior or posterior evidence of the required kind of moderate strength ); and if God brought about this coincidence of evidence he would not have done so unless that prophet was God Incarnate. So not merely do K, E<sub>1</sub> and E<sub>2</sub> make H probable overall, but they make it probable that Jesus was God Incarnate.

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## Notes