

Resurrection Claims in Non-Christian Religions

By Dr. Norman Geisler

Some critics of Christ's resurrection point to claims that many non-Christian leaders also rose from the dead. If true, the resurrection of Jesus would not be a unique confirmation of his claim to deity. In particular, Robert Price claims that the many post-death phenomena found in other religions rival Christian claims about Christ (Price, 2-3, 14-25). If so, then the resurrection of Christ cannot be used to support the truth of Christianity over other religions.

Apollonius of Tyana. Apollonius of Tyana (d. AD 98) is said to rival Christ's claim to be the son of God, and his biographer Philostratus is supposed to have reported post-death appearances. Actually, stories about Apollonius fit more under the apotheosis category than as resurrection accounts. In an apotheosis legend, a human is deified.

These claims are questionable (see Habermas, "Resurrection Claims"). The biography ends with the death of Apollonius. There is nothing about any resurrection. The after-death record comes from what Philostratus called "stories." They are later legends that were appended to the biography after it was written. The biography is the primary source for his life, along with one other minor one. There is no other confirmation.

The source for Philostratus's stories is said to be "Damis," which many scholars think was a nonexistent person used as a literary device. There is no other evidence. Damis's credibility is not helped by the fact that his birthplace is given as Nineveh, a city that had not existed for 300 years. The writing style also was a popular literary form of the day called "romance" or "romance fiction." It is not to be taken literally or historically. The plot unfolds through contrived situations, it involves exotic animals and formal descriptions of works of art; it has lengthy speeches, and it has frequent historical inaccuracies.

It is also notable that Philostratus was commissioned to compose this biography by Julia Domna, the wife of the emperor Septimus, 120 years after Apollonius's death. Since the author's patroness was to become a high priestess of Hellenistic polytheism, there may have been an anti-Christian polemic agenda in adding a resurrection-like ending. Those writing about Jesus clearly had a very different set of motives. They wanted to show that he was the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior of the world (John 20:31).

The one reported "resurrection" appearance that Philostratus adds in the appendix was a vision to a sleeping man in the year 273, nearly two centuries after his death. The story also was given that Apollonius might not have actually died, but instead been deified. This is in the context of Greek polytheism. Greeks and Romans did not believe in a resurrection in the same physical body. They followed a reincarnation model. The philosophers mocked the apostle Paul when he proclaimed a bodily resurrection on Mar's Hill (Acts 17:19, 32). For the Greeks who believed in immortality, salvation involved deliverance from their body, not resurrection in their body.

Sabbatai Sevi. Sabbatai Sevi was a seventeenth-century Jewish teacher who claimed to be the Messiah and was heralded by a contemporary named Nathan. It was reported many years later that, after Sevi's death in 1676, his brother found his tomb empty but full of light (see Scholem).

Actually, there were two conjectures about Sevi. Many of his followers refused to believe he had really died, so they refused to believe he had risen from the dead. Whatever happened to him, no one ever reported seeing him again. His disappearance, like that of Apollonius, has characteristics of an apotheosis legend. Such legends lack historical support. The story of Sabbatai Sevi itself lacks any kind of evidence. If the story of Jesus grew from such fragmentary reports it would be rejected by any credible scholar. The role of Nathan is conflicting. One letter reported that Nathan taught that Sevi had never died. Another source reported that Nathan had died one month before Sevi, and that they had never actually met one another (Habermas, "Resurrection Claims," 175).

Rabbi Judah. Rabbi Judah was a major figure in Judaism and was involved in the completion of the *Mishnah* in about 200. According to the *Talmud*, after Rabbi Judah died, "he used to come home again at twilight every Sabbath Eve." Allegedly, when a neighbor approached the rabbi's door to greet him they were turned away by his maid. When the rabbi heard of this he stopped coming, so as not to upstage other good persons who returned to their homes after their deaths (*Talmud*, 3.12.103a).

While the rabbi died in 220, the first reference to his appearances came in the fifth century ("Resurrection Claims," 173). This gap is too large to support credibility. No reputable scholar would accept the claims about Jesus if they came from one witness two centuries after he died. In addition, the testimony is too scant. There is only one witness to the event—the maid. Nor is there any attempt to provide substantiation. The only possible confirmatory testimony was the neighbor, who was turned away.

The immediate cessation of the appearances after others inquired about him casts suspicion on whether he had appeared at all. The reason given for his failure to return seems disingenuous. No evidence of an empty tomb or a physical appearance were ever presented. At best there seemed to be only one person with a vested interest who had some kind of subjective experience regarding a person she no doubt missed very much. If it happened at all, this event seems more a candidate for a psychological than a supernatural explanation.

Kabir. Kabir was a fifteenth-century religious leader who combined facets of the Muslim and Hindu religions. After his death in 1518, his followers were divided over whether to cremate his body, which Hindus favor but Muslims oppose. Kabir himself is said to have appeared to stop the controversy. When he directed them to draw back the cloth placed over his body, they found only flowers underneath. His Hindu followers burned half of the flowers, and the Muslims buried the other half.

Little or nothing is extant from contemporaries of Kabir. Some of his teachings may have been written down about fifty years after his death, but these contain nothing about a resurrection (Archer, 50-53).

There is evidence of a growing set of legends that grew up among his followers. These include a miraculous birth, miracles performed during his life, and appearances to his disciples after his death. As Habermas notes, "It was found that this is a very natural and expected process in the formation of Indian legend" ("Resurrection Claims," 174).

Since resurrection of the same physical body is contrary to Hindu belief in soul transmigration to another body, it is unlikely that his Hindu followers, dedicated as they were to Hindu practices, would have come to believe that their leader was raised bodily from the dead.

The scant evidence suggests a contrived plan to pacify both sets of followers and keep the movement together. It looks like a clever plot to satisfy both religious burial practices without offending either.

Conclusion. There is no real comparison between these stories and the accounts of Christ's resurrection. The non-Christian resurrections set the Bible's quality of truth in sharp relief. Consider the significant differences in most, if not all, cases:

Christ's Resurrection

numerous credible witnesses
numerous contemporary records
abundant physical evidence
claims to deity made
other confirming miracles

Non-Christian Resurrections

no credible eyewitnesses
no contemporary records
no physical evidence given
some claims to deification only
no corroborating miracles

"Non-Christian resurrection claims have not been proven by evidence," notes Habermas. "Any of several naturalistic hypotheses is certainly possible and, in some cases, one or more can specifically be postulated as a probable cause.... Simply to report a miracle is not sufficient to establish it, especially if that miracle is going to be used to support a religious system" (ibid., 177).

Sources

J. C. Archer, *The Sikhs*
S. A. Cook, *The Cambridge Ancient History*
J. Ferguson, *Religions of the Roman Empire*
G. Habermas, *Ancient Evidence for the Life of Jesus*
———, "Did Jesus Perform Miracles?" in M. Wilkins, ed, *Jesus Under Fire*
———, "Resurrection Claims in Non-Christian Religions," *Religious Studies* 25 (1989)
L. McKenzie, *Pagan Resurrection Myths and the Resurrection of Jesus*.
R. Price, "Is There a Place for Historical Criticism?" in *Christianity Challenges the University*
G. Scholem, *Sabbati Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*
I. Slotki, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud*