Arguing from Silence: The Events Surrounding the Resurrection **[1]**

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A complaint which one hears from time to time, is how events surrounding the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are not attested in sources outside of the Bible. For example, a great darkness came over the land (Luke 23:44) and there was an earthquake (Matthew 27:54; also Matthew 28:2). In this article, I will offer one perspective on why this is a bad argument.

I am currently listening to the excellent History of Rome podcast [2]. For the first few episodes, the author apologises for not being able to distinguish between historical fact and myth with any certainty. The reason, he says, was the sack of Rome (in c. 390 BC). When the city was sacked, presumably many records were lost in the fires which burned in the city. Today we are therefore left with only accounts which were written after that time, which contain many embellishments, myths and stories which, at the time, were taken to be fact, but are today regarded with suspicion.

The sack of Rome happened more than 300 years after the founding of the city; therefore, it is assumed that possibly as much as 300 years' of (reliable) history had been lost. The records which were written and kept were not distributed beyond Rome because, why would it be? Rome was the major urban centre, especially in that time period, and it would make little sense to store documents and records in the smaller cities, towns and hamlets which dotted the countryside. Even if those records were kept there, it is unlikely to have survived (unless some fell in a bog or a marsh and was not destroyed, but preserved by the elements) ordinary ageing and wear-and-tear. Even if documents did exist outside the major urban centres, it is unlikely to have been copied by scribes as the documents and records started to age and fade.

So what does the story of Rome have to do with the events around Easter? There are close parallels, actually. Jesus' crucifixion happened by Jerusalem, which was the major urban centre of Judea. Records written about, say, an unnaturally dark daytime, or a (possibly minor) earthquake, or even paranormal sightings (Matthew 27:53–54), would likely have been written by scribes in Jerusalem. These records would also likely have been kept in Jerusalem. This is significant, because in AD 70 Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. The destruction was more complete than the sacking which Rome had undergone four centuries earlier. If we don't expect any records to have survived from Rome, we shouldn't expect any to survive from Judea. (It should also be noted that these records, if they ever existed, would only have had 40 years' time to have been copied and distributed, which—in ancient times—is a minute time frame. This is in contrast to 300 years of history lost from Rome.) Additionally, the fall of Jerusalem also saw the slaughter and imprisonment of many people, reducing the chances that people would ensure that small details such as a minor earthquake which coincided with some Pesach celebration would be preserved for future generations.

The gospels, however, were written by people from Judea about the events of Easter day, but outside of Judea, and copies were quickly made and distributed. This is because these weren't dry records of

natural phenomena of literary works (the value of which would only be recognised centuries later and then copied and distributed), but the gospels served to tell an important story and needed to be distributed to as many people as quickly as possible, as the living witnesses of these events (regarded by the believers as the most significant in all of history) were declining in number. This also meant that when Jerusalem was destroyed, these documents endured because they were not holed up in some scriptorium, but were in people's homes and in early churches.

One may ask, what about the Dead Sea Scrolls? The Dead Sea Scrolls date from the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. So why could other records not be preserved in this way? They *could*, but we need to remember that the Dead Sea Scrolls were written (and probably hidden) by the Essenes. They were a fringe group living on the periphery of Jewish society (that is to say, not in Jerusalem itself). Being a deeply religious group, that is exactly the kind of records which we mostly find they have preserved. They were, of course, also regular people, so also cared about things like the weather and how well the harvest did. But these other interests were not of *prime* importance to them. Therefore they would be unlikely to take pains to preserve records about such secondary matters. The Pharisees and Sadducees were also religious groups in Judea at that time. These groups did live in Jerusalem (and elsewhere); and would have lost many of their own records, which would have primarily been housed in Jerusalem. Again we must look at the nature of what survived: if Roman legions are marching on your city, you grab only the most crucial documents to hide or send away for safekeeping: burdening people and pack animals with heavy scrolls of animal skin which record tide information, weather reports and years old bookkeeping records, would not be sensible. Rather, one preserves religious texts, or possibly genealogies, which record (supposedly) prime reality and will allow future generations to function as needed.

I therefore believe that the argument of silence, which says that the events recorded in the gospels must be fake—or at least suspect beyond the usual standard of required evidence—because no "secular" source attests to them, is fallacious. Rather, the gospels should be recognised as documents which are of great historical significance. With them, we have multiple attestation of events, which is a luxury in the study of ancient history. Without them, we are left with the works of Josephus, and non-Jews writing about Jews. While we owe much to Josephus, he is recognised as not being the best historian of the ancient world, and even his accounts should best be corroborated by other writers. Irrespective of what these sources say, we should not be so quick to dismiss other (that is to say, biblical) accounts because of what these (non-biblical) sources *do not* say.

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