TEACH[R]

# Evaluating evidence for the historical resurrection: A content-centered approach to the resurrection

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**Keywords:** Christianity, deliberative-decision making, historical, rank-order, religious studies, resurrection, secondary education

## Abstract

**The purpose of this article was to investigate the use of deliberative decision-making lessons, such as the rank-order format, for evaluating historical events. In this lesson, students act as an ancient historian by evaluating historical pieces of evidence for the early Christian's claim that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead. Students evaluated eight separate pieces of evidence discussed in historical scholarship by rank-ordering the evidences from strong to weak.**

## Introduction

Engaging in a pluralistic society demands that citizens engage with a variety of ideologies, including the religious ideologies within society (Prothero, 2007). An overwhelming percentage of Americans and Australians, over 75%, identify as religious (Pew Research, 2012, 2014). With 75% of Americans and Australians subscribing to religious beliefs, educators must help prepare students for the religious ideas present in society. By ignoring religion, students are ill-prepared to enter a complex social environment.

Scholars arguing for religious literacy are growing in number (Moore, 2007; Prothero, 2007). One prominent religious literacy advocate, Stephen Prothero (2007), defined religious literacy as "the ability to understand and use the religious terms, symbols, images, beliefs, practices, scriptures, heroes, themes, and stories that are employed in American public life" (p. 17). Prothero's definition applies to all religiously diverse societies that seek to develop a cohesive society. With over 75% of Americans and Australians identifying as religious, and nearly 70% of Americans and 67% Australians identifying as Christians, religious assumptions and practices, and especially Christian perspectives, are inevitable in society (Pew Research, 2012, 2014). With a high percentage of individuals identifying as Christian, fostering religious literacy regarding Christian beliefs includes investigating the central religious belief within Christianity, the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead (Prothero, 2007).

This article presents how deliberative decision-making lessons, precisely a rank-order lesson, might support students' critical thinking skills regarding historical evidences for religious beliefs, such as Christianity's belief in the historical resurrection. This article will first explore deliberative decision making developed by Robert Stahl and others (1995), the deliberative decision method and the rank-order format. Next, the authors will review the historical background of the resurrection and review the meaning of the resurrection in historic, orthodox Christianity. Then examining what history means in terms of investigating an event such as the resurrection. Finally, this article will discuss the implementation of rank-order decision-making activity.

## Review of literature

The concept of active learning and decision-making is one strength of deliberative decision-making activities. Active learning theory holds that "students internalize information best when they are directly involved in their own learning" (Kunselman & Johnson, 2004, p. 87). Decision making, according to Stahl et al. (1995), includes five phases of thinking: conceptual thinking, relational thinking, decisional thinking, affective thinking, and reflective thinking. Conceptual thinking is critical to understanding the ideas and beliefs of individuals. Conceptual thinking "stresses adequate comprehension, description, and clarification of available information, of a situation, phenomenon, or problem, and of the meaning(s) of data and relevant concepts" (Casteel & Stahl, 1997, p 15). Relational thinking seeks the interrelatedness of information. Furthermore, relational thinking emphasizes acknowledgment and construction of connections, associations, or fits among situations, information, concepts, beliefs, or situations. In the third phase of thinking, decisional thinking, individuals or groups consider all the possible alternatives and their resulting consequences, along with personal preferences and needs, to make a decision. The fourth phase of thinking is affective thinking which stresses that individuals or groups give careful consideration to preferences, priorities, emotions, commitments, and value orientations. Finally, Stahl et al. (1995) consider reflective thinking as a unique way of thinking. A way that individuals or groups can only engage in after one or more decisions steps have been experienced through the first four types of thinking. Reflective thinking occurs once a decision has been made, and comprises an individuals' or groups' processing and assessment of information and values to lead to more decisions.

Each of the five phases of thinking contributes to deliberate decision- making exercises, and each of the five phases of thinking is enacted when students decide the strengths and weaknesses of the historical evidences for a claim. Before evaluating the various evidences for the resurrection, students must engage in conceptual thinking so that they have adequate comprehension of the relevant data (Casteel & Stahl, 1997). To effectively assign value to each of the evidences, understanding the historical significance of the various evidences is crucial. Next, students must build upon their conceptual thinking by understanding the relationships the various historical evidences share. The conceptual and relational levels of thinking provides the students' foundation to decide all the possible ways the evidences could be evaluated and the consequences of such evaluations. As students make decisions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of each piece of historical evidence, students move to the next phase of thinking in which they take account of their preferences and biases. Students might investigate how their own cultural and social biases and preferences might differ from other individuals, including contemporaries of Jesus and his disciples. After evaluating the evidences and ranking them accordingly, students might reflect on their own selections, how they differ from their peers, and what might account for such differences. Using the historical resurrection as a case study enables students to engage in each of Casteel and Stahl's (1997) phases of learning as they engage in a deliberate-decision making activity.

### Historical background: What the resurrection is and what it is not

Christianity remains the majority religion in the United States (Eck, 2011; Pew Research, 2014). Christianity, however, is not monolithic in articles' faith or practice. Significant differences exist between Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christianities. Furthermore, Protestantism is further divided into many denominations (i.e., Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican, Episcopalian, Pentecostal and others), which are further variegated into sub-denominations of Baptists, Lutherans, or others. Even with the vast differences across Christianity, Christians have historically held to the belief that Jesus was crucified on a Roman cross, buried, and raised to newly embodied life by God three days later (Wright, 1999; 2002).

> *Students might investigate how their own cultural and social biases and preferences might differ from other individuals, including contempo-raries of Jesus*

The resurrection plays a nonpareil role in the Christian tradition. No form of early Christianity known in history existed without the belief that Jesus was both crucified on a Roman cross and subsequently raised by God bodily three days later (Wright, 1999). The universality of belief in the resurrection is striking because Christian communities, whether ancient or modern, seemed to have few universally shared beliefs. Without the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christianity itself would be futile, according to the Apostle Paul, writer of over half the New Testament (cf. 1 Cor 15). If there were no historical resurrection, Christianity would have disappeared the way other failed-messianic movements disappeared after its would-be messiah was killed (Wright, 1999). Other messianic movements occurred in the Second-Temple period (516 BC to 70 AD), but those leaders who were executed, like Simon Bar Giora in 70 AD, were not proclaimed as resurrected into new bodily life, nor did a religious movement explode from their followers (Wright, 2002). A sustained faith around a crucified and dead messiah simply would not have happened. Jesus was not the only messianic in the second-temple period, but Jesus was the only one proclaimed as vindicated by God in the 'present' and

raised from the dead (Wright, 1999, 2002).

Outside the Christian faith, the resurrection was understood to mean a bodily life proceeding after whatever life-after-death might be immediately experienced by the departed (Wright, 2002). The ancient pagan world denied any possibility of a resurrected body. While there may have been existing in a shadowy afterlife like Hades, as in Homer, or as disembodied souls seeking release from bodily prison, the ancient pagan world agreed unanimously that dead people do not rise again in their bodies from the grave (Wright, 2003). Contrary to the pagan world, Christians were nearly unanimous regarding the belief in a literal resurrection despite having few other beliefs agreed upon with such universality. Wright (2008) summarized the belief about what the resurrection is and is not saying,

> resurrection itself then appears as what the word always meant in the ancient world. It wasn't a way of talking about life after death. It was a way of talking about new bodily life after whatever state of existence one might enter immediately upon death. It was, in other words, life after life after death. (p. 38)

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To claim that Jesus bodily rose from the grave is not merely a faith claim. Rather, the claim is that Christians can argue Jesus' resurrection on historical grounds, based upon the historical records available to us. Before examining the rank-order lesson used in a classroom, next, the authors will define in what sense the resurrection is historical.

### The leading events of the resurrection

Like resurrection, "history" also has multiple meanings (Stahl et al., 1995). The relationship between history as a discipline of study and the resurrection of Jesus, as a supernatural event within history, is complicated. Is an event like the resurrection open to historical inquiry? New Testament theologian and historian N. T. Wright (2003) first defined what sense the resurrection is "historical." History can mean a) an event that happened, whether the event can be proved to have happened or not; b) a significant event meaning the event had popular significance; c) a provable event; d) an event that was written about, or could have been written about; e), "history" might mean history as modern historians understand history via a post-Enlightenment worldview (1992, p. 12-13). Wright (2003) argued for the resurrection event in terms of the first categorical meaning of "history," namely a historical event that can be proved to have happened or not. To reach a historical judgment on whether the resurrection occurred or not requires individuals to investigate the events surrounding the resurrection.

According to biblical and extra-biblical sources, such as Josephus (2017, para. 3) and Tacitus (n.d., para. 54), Jesus was a first-century Jewish religious leader who was executed by the Romans on charges from the religious leaders in Jerusalem. The religious leaders of Jesus' day believed Jesus to be a law-breaker and blasphemer (John 18-19). Jesus was popular with the people, evidenced in his welcome to Jerusalem by a large crowd proclaiming Jesus the "King the Israel" (Jn 12:12-13). However, the religious leaders felt differently and, since Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead in John 11, the religious leaders began plotting Jesus' death (Jn 11:53). The religious leaders were unable to put Jesus to death (Jn 18:31) and therefore sought Pontius Pilate to execute Jesus. While Pilate at first refused to execute Jesus, he finally acquiesced to the demands of the religious leaders (Jn 19:12, 16). Before execution, Jesus was flogged and then nailed to the cross where he hung until his death. A follower of Jesus acquired his body from the Romans and laid Jesus into his tomb (Jn 19:38-42). Jesus was placed in a tomb on Friday, and the empty tomb was discovered Sunday morning.

### Designing the lesson

In modern education, whether sectarian or secular, there is often limited coverage on the historical evaluation of non-tested topics, and even less emphasis on decision-making exercises (Byford, 2013). The resurrection, along with religion in general, is minimized in education as a non-tested topic. Students should be prepared for the post-K-12 world, and education should include the religious beliefs existent in a religious culture (Eck, 2001).

One strategy to help educators actively engage students is through deliberative decision-making lessons. These activities encourage students to carefully consider the investigated material, its relevant information, possible options, and implications (Stahl et al., 1995). Regarding the resurrection, such a remarkable claim is offered as a matter-of-fact in Christian education, thereby ignoring the historical issues and implications connected with the resurrection. The resurrection as a historical event can be examined historically. Students, whether religious or non-religious, can investigate the various historical arguments and evidences for the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus. In such active, investigative situations, teaching functions more like holistic formation; Christian education can be rather than an informational transfer akin to indoctrination.

Christian education has been, for too long, concerned more with "*in*formation rather than *form*ation" (Smith, 2009). For example, forming critical thinking, an essential part of any educational program, cannot happen in an environment where learning is one-way, from the teacher, who is

informed, to students, who lack information. To promote students' critical thinking skills, forming deliberative decision-making skills is possible in school settings (Stahl et al., 1995). Such skills require active learning. The rank-order lesson format is one active learning method that encourages deliberate decision-making and can enhance decision making in a religious studies class.

The authors found the development and differentiation of pedagogical strategies useful to students when engaging in deliberative decision-making issues. In particular, the rank-order format was selected because individuals had a historical situation for investigation requiring the use of multiple stages of thinking (Stahl et al., 1995). Stahl's lesson design remains useful today. Investigating biblical concepts such as the resurrection incorporates decision-making processes, which are relevant in today's classroom. Students' increasingly demand links to societal issues; so incorporating decision-making approaches allows students to become active agents in studying biblical history and societal implications. The decision-making curriculum provides students a biblical values-centered lens while encouraging collaborative discussion, critical discourse, and deconstructing biblical events using the affective and cognitive domains.

Casteel and Stahl (1997) wrote that rank-order lessons are useful when investigating historical problems with options that are:

> all specifically stated; limited in number and limited to only those specified; homogeneous options, i.e., either all "good" or all "undesirable" options; all clearly stated or recognized within the situation and context they find themselves; the only ones that can be considered and decided upon in the situation and to be selected in terms of the priorities of the individual or group such that they are arranged in order from most preferred to least preferred. (p. 11)

This historical problem regarding the historical resurrection meets the requirements of Casteel and Stahl (1997). Rank-order lessons require individuals or groups to make deliberate decisions based on the perceived importance, value, or priority of the options relative to others (Stahl et al., 1995). Students must engage with content while also evaluating the interrelatedness of the information. Upon evaluation of the evidence, individuals then must decide the strength or weakness of the evidences by ranking sequentially, from first to last, each of the varying historical evidences. Rank-order encounters offer students the opportunity and ability to engage in activities that require decisions in ranked, value-laden situations, but also helps students to examine how such decisions, once made, are explained (Casteel and Stahl, 1997). The value of continuing to rank options down to the final two is essential. Stahl et al. (1995) explains that while in some decision-ranking scenarios students can assume their top choice may work, continuing to rank the remaining options ensures "that students continually select the top option from among those remaining, all the way down to the final two" (p. 23).

Before the lesson is presented in class, educators must introduce the students to the historical problem of Jesus' resurrection and the empty tomb and the evidence for the resurrection. Educators must make clear the homogeneous nature of the various pieces of evidence in that each evidence is "good," and there is no "right" or "wrong" way to rank the options. One strength of the rank-order format is the expectation that students not only rank all the options for a given historical problem but explain their reasoning for the ranking provided (Casteel & Stahl, 1997). Students should be prepared to give their rankings and defend them in class. Using the rank-order approach creates an active learning environment in which students engage in decision-making exercises.

When studying Christianity, and in particular the Christian belief about the resurrection of Jesus, it is essential that students engage with the historical evidences for the religious claim that Jesus was raised from the dead. Rather than students passively learning through direct instruction some historical evidences for the resurrection, the authors wanted students to be actively involved by becoming the historian and ranking the evidences for the resurrection from strongest to weakest. Kunselman and Johnson (2004) *listed* specific benefits of historically-based case studies saying such lessons help students a) better understand complex issues and complicated issues; b) discuss policy and decision-making ideologies; and c) engage in informative and focused classroom discussion. Using deliberative-decision making activities, like Stahl and others rank-order method, provides students with a "valid strategy to engage students in higher-order thinking skills, ability to retain content knowledge, and provide active learning for a historically lecture driven subject" (Byford, 2013).

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### Evidence(s) for the resurrection

The eight pieces of evidence presented are not sufficient to establish a belief in the resurrection of Jesus. However, the evidences presented are necessary if the resurrection is argued for and believed to be true historically. Beginning with the evidence concerning women as the first witnesses of the empty tomb and the risen Jesus, Craig (1997) indicated that if the resurrection story was fabricated, women, having low social status, would not have remained the first witnesses in the stories retelling.

If the women had not actually seen Jesus, including women's testimonies was too risky. These important women were named in the resurrection accounts, and it is improbable their names would have been attached to a story that they could not verify (Craig, 1997). The body of Jesus was never produced. Different answers have been offered for this. For example, Crossan (2009) argued that Jesus' body was never produced because he was buried in a shallow grave and eaten by wild dogs. Others (Craig, 1997; Siniscalchi, 2014; Wright, 2003) argued that Jesus' body was never produced because it was raised from the dead. Another evidence deals with the first disciples' testimonies and the subsequent consequences for proclaiming Jesus' resurrection. Most of the early disciples of Jesus were persecuted and killed for their faith (Habermas, 2013). One disciple in particular, Peter denied Jesus before his crucifixion for fear of his own life, yet after the resurrection experience concerning Jesus, Peter willingly suffered beatings and execution (Acts 4). Next, Paul's conversion from persecutor of the Christian faith to missionary and evangelist for Christian faith was directly related to his visions of Jesus (Ehrman, 2008; Siniscalchi, 2014).

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Furthermore, in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Paul explicitly named individuals who also claimed to see Jesus risen from the dead, individuals who could be sought and questioned about their experience (Habermas, 2013; Siniscalchi, 2014). The disciples first proclaimed that Jesus was raised from the dead in the same city where he was crucified and buried. Proclaiming in Jerusalem would have been fruitless if there were no historical evidences because of the large population able to investigate the claims first-hand. Perman (2018) provided a summary of these listed historical evidences.

When the students engage with the multiple evidences for the resurrection, students must engage varying levels of thinking to engage in deliberate-decision making. There is no clear right and wrong way to rank-order the evidences from strong to weak. Students must not only understand the content but evaluate the importance of the evidences. All of the evidences are homogenous; each piece of evidence is "good" (Casteel & Stahl, 1997). Rank-order lessons require students to keep engaging with the options until all available options have been ranked. "This strategy forces individuals to constantly consider the relative importance of several alternatives to one another in the context of a particular problem or situation" (Casteel & Stahl, 1997, p. 11). While the rank-order for the students will differ, the explanation and justification of the various rankings, even for numbers seven and eight, provide insight into how students evaluated and judged the varying evidences.

### Procedures and findings

Students indicated interest in examining the historical evidence for a religious claim, particularly claims central to the Christian faith. By playing the role of a historian tasked with evaluating and ranking various evidences for the resurrection, students learned content surrounding historical arguments employed in the Christian faith while participating in learning through higher critical thinking processes (see Appendix 1). Rankings varied among the evidences.

These statements provide insight into student justifications for ranking the various rankings as more or less weighty. Hannah, a senior, argued that mass sightings (#5) were the greatest evidence for the resurrection because of the unlikelihood of mass hallucination saying "you can't fake hundreds of people seeing the living Jesus." Gabriel, another senior, also believed the mass citings (#5) were most important saying "the more witnesses, the more accurate the fact." Katelyn, a ninth-grade student, argued the groups' testimony (#3) and ultimate death because "they wouldn't have trusted, followed, and believed in something that was not real." Jayden, another ninth-grade student, felt the group testimonies (#5) most significant because the disciples "gave their lives for it." Other students selected other evidences for interesting reasons, too. Anna, a ninth-grade student, chose women as first witnesses (#1) as the most important evidence for the historical resurrection because allowing women's testimony was a "huge cultural no-no." Other selections were chosen, too. John Robert, a ninth-grade student, selected Paul's conversion (#4) saying "Paul would have no reason to convert" without his vision of the resurrected Jesus. Senior, Devin, chose the admission of an empty tomb in the Jewish *Toledoth Jesu* saying this document is "proof something happened."

Whatever the individual rankings assigned, the students' responses reflect varying opinions on the most important evidence for the resurrection. The value of a rank-order lesson is not in students recording the right answers. The value of the rank-order format is in how the students analyze, compare, critique, order, evaluate, and justify their selections. In the cases where students selected the same evidence as the "strongest", the justifications for the rankings were different. Individual engagement with content and various stages of thinking were factors in producing historians with different perspectives on the best evidence for Jesus' resurrection. This activity helped demonstrate how individual (future) historians might investigate the same historical evidence,

actively engage in analyzing and reflecting on the data, and decide differently on the data's significance. The authors assessed the results of the activity as encouraging.

## Conclusion

While this activity intended students evaluate, and judge historical evidences for the Christian claim concerning Jesus' resurrection, this activity was also undertaken to develop historical empathy in students by engaging them in the learning process. Concurrently, students engaged with content concerning historical evidences supporting Christianity's claim that Jesus rose from the dead. Whether or not a student finds evidences convincing, engaging with such ideas fosters religious literacy regarding Christian's belief regarding Jesus' resurrection. This exercise helps students understand that traditional Christianity does not describe Jesus' resurrection as spiritual, but rather as a historical event in space and time, an event open to historical inquiry, validation, or falsification (Wright, 2002). Engaging with this historical exercise will provide students a historical frame of reference when they meet individuals talking about the "risen Jesus" or the resurrection by helping them understand the historical claims underlying such a statement.

When given the list of historical evidences for the resurrection, students may or may not consider the evidence sufficient to believe in the bodily resurrection. In rank-order activities such as this lesson, finding the "right" answer is not the goal. This activity ensures students engage in higher-order critical thinking when they investigate the varying evidences for the resurrection. Doing so demanded students to think, categorize, analyze, empathize, and finally judge various historical evidences (Stahl et al, 1995). Such higher-order thinking activities help students internalize information because students are actively engaged in the learning process (Kunselman & Johnson, 2004). The study of religious beliefs, in particular, Christian beliefs, which are powerful forces in society, requires such active learning so as to help enable students to function as active citizens who are informed regarding religion (Eck, 2001; Moore, 2007; Prothero, 2007). These skills are necessary components of an education which prepares students for post K-12 life.

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## Appendix A
## Evidences for the Empty Tomb

### Directions

**Read through this rank-order lesson and, acting as a historian, rank the evidences from most significant to least significant evidence for the resurrection. After ranking the evidences, indicate your reasons for the rankings selected.**

N.T. Wright (2008), a preeminent New Testament theologian, wrote about the "empty tomb" in his book *Surprised by Hope* stating: in order to explain historically how all the early Christians came to the belief they held, that Jesus had been raised, we have to say at least this: that the tomb was empty, except for some grave clothes, and that they really did see and talk with someone who gave every appearance of being a solidly physical Jesus, though a Jesus who was strangely changed, more strangely than they were able fully to describe. Both the meetings and the empty tomb are therefore necessary if we are to explain the rise of the belief and the writing of the stories as we have them. Neither by itself was sufficient; put them together, though, and they provide a complete and coherent explanation for the rise of the early Christian belief. (p. 59)

Below is a list of evidences for the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus. After reading the evidences, assign a significance rank to each (1 = most significant, 8 = least significant) and your reasoning for your ranking.

1. The Gospels include women as the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, something you would not do if you were making up a resurrection story due to the low-cultural status of women and their word.
2. The body of Jesus was never produced.
3. The disciples claimed to have seen, touched, ate with, etc., the risen Jesus. Would they have willingly been crucified, beheaded, and executed for a lie?
4. Paul's conversion from a persecutor of the church to a proclaimer of Jesus' truth can only be explained by an appearance of the resurrected Christ.
5. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul mentions a list of names of individuals who saw the risen Jesus suggesting that at the time of his writing, they were alive and could be interviewed. He also mentioned a group of 500 who saw Jesus together. Science affirms that mass hallucinations are extremely unlikely.
6. Peter, who denied Jesus three times to a crowd of commoners before Jesus' execution, was willing to go toe-to-toe with religious and governmental officials boldly with the message of Jesus' resurrection and is believed to have been crucified upside down.
7. Early Jewish sources admit the empty tomb thereby providing extra-biblical evidence of resurrection (ex. Toldoth Jesu).
8. Early disciples did not go to obscure parts of the Roman empire to proclaim the resurrection, but began right in Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified and buried. Evidence to the contrary would not have been hard to produce had there been such evidence.

| Assign a significance rank (1 to 8) to each evidence | Evidence | Why was this (relative) ranking assigned? |
|---|---|---|
| | Women as first witnesses | |
| | The body of Jesus never produced | |
| | Disciples' group testimonies | |
| | Paul's conversion | |
| | Mass sightings | |
| | Peter's conversion | |
| | Jewish sources admit an empty tomb | |
| | Location of initial gospel proclamation | |

### Discussion Starters

1. What are the implications surrounding what one believes about the resurrection of Jesus?
2. How would Christianity be different if Jesus' resurrection was originally believed to be purely spiritual?
3. What would modern, intellectual culture say about the belief in a literal, bodily resurrection?
4. What would have happened to the disciples had Jesus never been seen after his crucifixion?
5. In your opinion, what is the central issue concerning the debates about the resurrection of Jesus?