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# Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?

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# Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?

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According to eyewitnesses, a man named Jesus Christ demonstrated his power over death. They tell us that after he died on the cross and was buried, Jesus suddenly appeared to them alive on the third day. Then he was seen by other followers, including 500 people on a single occasion. Soon word spread everywhere that Jesus had risen from the dead. But could Jesus' resurrection simply be a 2000-year-old legend? Or is it based upon verifiable historical evidence?

If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then the foundation for the Christian Faith would forever be destroyed. Former atheist and skeptic Josh McDowell spent more than seven hundred hours researching the evidence for the resurrection. He explains,

"I have come to the conclusion that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is either one of the most...heartless hoaxes ever foisted upon the minds of men, OR it is the most fantastic fact of history."<sup>1</sup>

Persuaded by the evidence, McDonwell's research led him to the conviction that Jesus' resurrection is "the most fantastic fact of history."

Another ardent skeptic, English journalist Frank Morison believed Jesus' resurrection was mythical and began research for a book proving his case. However, as he examined the evidence, Morison changed his mind as well as the theme of his book. What was it that changed Morison's mind? Before we examine the evidence he discovered, let's set the scene by reviewing what Jesus' followers claim were "eyewitness accounts" of his death and resurrection.

## Jesus Predicts His Own Death and Resurrection

Seven hundred years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah had written about a future Messiah, who would suffer and die for our sins, but later be restored to life. Echoing the prophecy in Isaiah 53, Jesus claimed that he was the Messiah who would be betrayed, arrested, condemned and killed. But then three days later he would come back to life. (See Mark 10:33). Everything Jesus taught and claimed depended on his

resurrection from the dead. If Jesus didn't rise as he promised, his message of forgiveness and hope for eternal life would be meaningless. Jesus was putting his words to the ultimate test of truth.

Bible scholar Wilbur Smith explains, "When he said He would rise again from the dead, the third day after He was crucified, He said something that only a fool would dare say if He expected the devotion of any disciples - unless He was sure He was going to rise."<sup>2</sup>

### **A Horrific Death And Then . . . ?**

Exactly as Jesus predicted, eyewitnesses report he was betrayed by one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot. Then in a mock trial under the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, he was condemned and crucified on a wooden cross.

Jesus suffered on the cross for approximately six hours. Then, at 3:00 in the afternoon Jesus cried out, "It is finished" and died.<sup>3</sup> Suddenly the sky went dark and an earthquake shook the land.<sup>4</sup>

Pilate wanted to verify that Jesus was dead before allowing his crucified body to be buried. So a Roman guard thrust a spear into Jesus' side. The mixture of blood and water that flowed out, according to eyewitnesses, was a clear indication that Jesus was dead. Once his death was certified, Jesus' body was taken down from the cross, tightly wrapped in linen and buried in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. Roman guards then sealed the tomb with a large stone and were under strict orders to watch the tomb 24 hours a day.

Jesus' disciples were so utterly devastated by his death on the cross that they fled for their lives, fearing they too would be captured and killed. But then something happened . . .

### **Something Happened**

According to a New York Times article,

"Shortly after Jesus was executed, his followers were suddenly galvanized from a baffled and cowering group into people whose message about a living Jesus and a coming kingdom, preached at the risk of their lives, eventually changed an empire. Something happened ... But exactly what?"<sup>5</sup>

## **Morison Examines the Evidence**

Morison wanted to know what actually happened that changed Jesus' followers and started a movement that has made such a profound impact on our world. He realized there were five possible explanations:

1. Jesus didn't really die on the cross.
2. Jesus' body was stolen.
3. The disciples were hallucinating.
4. The account is legendary.
5. It really happened.

Morison began examining the facts patiently and impartially to see where they would lead him.

### **1. Was Jesus Dead?**

Morison first wanted verification that Jesus was really dead when placed in the tomb. He learned that Jesus' death was considered factual for nearly 1800 years. Then about 200 years ago, a few skeptics postulated that Jesus didn't die on the cross, but merely lost consciousness, and was revived by the cool, damp air of the tomb. This became known as the "swoon theory."

Morison wondered if Jesus could have survived the cross. He researched both Jewish and Roman contemporary history and discovered the following facts supporting Jesus' death:

- All the accounts affirm he died.
- Pilate verified he died.
- During the lifetime of the eyewitnesses no one disputes his death.
- Secular and contemporary historians, (Lucian<sup>6</sup>, Josephus<sup>7</sup>, and Tacitus<sup>8</sup> cite his death as factual.

Morison became convinced that Jesus was truly dead, a fact almost universally accepted as true by trusted scholars and historians. Morison concludes, "That Jesus Christ died on the cross, in the full physical sense of the term...seems to me to be one of the certainties of history."<sup>9</sup>

## **2. Was Jesus' body stolen?**

Morison wondered if the disciples faked the resurrection story by stealing Jesus' body, and then claiming he was alive. That might be plausible if the tomb was in an obscure area where no one would see them.

However, the tomb belonged to a well-known member of the Sanhedrin Council, Joseph of Arimathea. Since Joseph's tomb was at a well-known location and easily identifiable, any thoughts of Jesus being "lost in the graveyard" would need to be dismissed.

Not only was the location well known, but the Romans had assigned guards to watch the tomb 24 hours a day. This was a trained guard unit comprised of four to 16 soldiers. Josh McDowell notes, "The Roman Guard unit was committed to discipline and they feared failure in any way."<sup>10</sup> It would have been impossible for anyone to have slipped by the guards unnoticed and then move the stone. Yet the stone was rolled away, making it possible for eyewitnesses to enter the tomb. And when they did, the body of Jesus was missing.

If Jesus' body was anywhere to be found, his enemies would have quickly exposed the resurrection as a fraud. Tom Anderson, former president of the California Trial Lawyers Association, summarizes the strength of this argument:

"With an event so well publicized, don't you think that it's reasonable that one historian, one eye witness, one antagonist would record for all time that he had seen Christ's body? ... The silence of history is deafening when it comes to the testimony against the resurrection."<sup>11</sup>

So, with no body of evidence, and with a known tomb clearly empty, Morison accepted that Jesus' body had somehow disappeared from the tomb.

## **3. Were the Disciples Hallucinating?**

Morison wondered if the disciples might have been so emotionally distraught that they hallucinated and imagined Jesus' resurrection.

Psychologist Gary Collins, former president of the American Association of Christian Counselors, explains that, "Hallucinations are individual occurrences. By their very nature, only one person can see a given hallucination at a time. They certainly aren't something which can be seen by a group of people."<sup>12</sup>

Hallucination is not even a remote possibility, according to psychologist Thomas J. Thorburn. “It is absolutely inconceivable that ... five hundred persons, of average soundness of mind ... should experience all kinds of sensuous impressions – visual, auditory, tactual – and that all these ... experiences should rest entirely upon ... hallucination.”<sup>13</sup>

The hallucination theory, then, appears to be another dead end. What else could explain away the resurrection?

#### **4. Is it just a Legend?**

Some unconvinced skeptics attribute the resurrection story to a legend that began with one or more persons lying or thinking they saw the resurrected Jesus. Over time, the legend would have grown and been embellished as it was passed on. But there are three major problems with that theory.

1. Legends simply don't develop while multiple eyewitnesses are alive to refute them. One historian of ancient Rome and Greece, A. N. Sherwin-White, argued that the resurrection news spread too soon and too quickly for it to have been a legend.<sup>14</sup> Even skeptical scholars admit that Christian hymns and creeds were recited in early churches within two to three years of Jesus' crucifixion.<sup>15</sup>
2. Legends develop by oral tradition and are not supported with contemporary historical documents. Yet the Gospels were written within three decades of the resurrection.<sup>16</sup>
3. The legend theory doesn't adequately explain either the empty tomb or the fervent conviction of the apostles that Jesus was alive.<sup>17</sup>

Morison's original assumption that the resurrection account was mythical or legendary didn't coincide with the facts.

#### **5. Did the resurrection really happen?**

Having eliminated the main arguments against Jesus' resurrection due to their inconsistency with the facts, Morison began asking himself, “did it really happen?” Instead of looking for evidence against Jesus' resurrection, he wondered how strong the case was for its actual occurrence. Several facts stood out.

#### **Women First**

Each eyewitness account reports that Jesus suddenly appeared bodily to his followers, the women first. Morison wondered why conspirators would make women central to the plot. In the first century, women had virtually no rights, personhood, or status. Morison reasoned that conspirators would have portrayed men, not women, as the first to see Jesus alive. And yet we read that women touched him, spoke with him, and were the first to find the empty tomb.

### **Multiple Eyewitnesses**

The disciples claim they saw Jesus on more than ten separate occasions. They say he showed them his hands and feet and told them to touch him. He ate with them and later, on one occasion, appeared alive to more than 500 followers.

In Caesarea, Peter told a crowd why he and the other disciples were so convinced Jesus was alive.

“We apostles are witnesses of all he did throughout Israel and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by crucifying him, but God raised him to life three days later ... We were those who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.”<sup>18</sup>

Morison realized that these early sightings of a risen Jesus by so many of his followers would have been virtually impossible to fake.

### **Consistent to the End**

As Morison continued his investigation, he began to examine the motives of Jesus’ followers. He reasoned that something extraordinary must have happened, because the followers of Jesus ceased mourning, ceased hiding, and began fearlessly proclaiming that they had seen Jesus alive.

As if the eyewitness reports were not enough to challenge Morison’s skepticism, he was also baffled by the disciples’ behavior. These eleven former cowards were suddenly willing to suffer humiliation, torture, and death. All but one of Jesus’ disciples were slain as martyrs. If they had taken the body, would they have sacrificed so much for a lie? Something happened that changed everything for these men and women.

It was this significant fact that persuaded Morison the resurrection must have really happened. He acknowledged, “Whoever comes to this problem has sooner or later to confront a fact that cannot be explained away ... This fact is that ... a profound

conviction came to the little group of people – a change that attests to the fact that Jesus had risen from the grave.”<sup>19</sup>

Professor J. N. D. Anderson and author of “Evidence for the Resurrection” concurs, “Think of the psychological absurdity of picturing a little band of defeated cowards cowering in an upper room one day and a few days later transformed into a company that no persecution could silence – and then attempting to attribute this dramatic change to nothing more convincing than a miserable fabrication ... That simply wouldn’t make sense.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Why Did it Win?**

Finally, Morison was bewildered by the fact that “a tiny insignificant movement was able to prevail over the cunning grip of the Jewish establishment, as well as the might of Rome. He explains,

“Within twenty years, the claim of these Galilean peasants had disrupted the Jewish church... In less than fifty years it had begun to threaten the peace of the Roman Empire. When we have said everything that can be said... we stand confronted with the greatest mystery of all. Why did it win?”<sup>21</sup>

By all rights, if there were no resurrection, Christianity should have died out at the cross when the disciples fled for their lives. But the apostles went on to establish a growing Christian movement.

Whatever one believes about the validity of Jesus’ resurrection, clearly “something happened” after his death that has made a lasting impact on our world. When world historian H. G. Wells was asked who has left the greatest legacy on history, the non-Christian scholar replied, “By this test Jesus stands first.”<sup>22</sup> What is that legacy?

Let’s look at just some of Jesus’ impact:

- Time is marked by his birth, B.C.– before Christ; A.D. – in the year of our Lord.
- More books have been written about Jesus than about any other person.
- About 100 great universities were established to spread his teaching — including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, Columbia, and Oxford.<sup>23</sup>
- Jesus’ teaching that all people are created equal laid the bedrock for human rights and democracy in more than 100 countries.<sup>24</sup>

- The high value Jesus placed on each person regardless of sex or race led his followers to promote the rights of women as well as abolish slavery.
- Humanitarian works such as the Red Cross, World Vision, Samaritan's Purse, Mercy Ships and the Salvation Army were founded by his followers.

## **A Surprise Conclusion**

In the book he finally wrote, *Who Moved the Stone*, Morison documents the evidence that led him to a belief in the resurrection. Morison is not alone. Numerous other skeptics who examined the evidence for Jesus' resurrection, also became convinced and accepted it as the most astounding fact in all of human history.

Oxford professor and former skeptic C. S. Lewis, who had once doubted Jesus' very existence, was also persuaded by the evidence for Jesus' resurrection. He writes,

"Something perfectly new in the history of the Universe had happened. Christ had defeated death. The door which had always been locked had for the very first time been forced open."<sup>25</sup>

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## **Endnotes**