

Fort Bend Christian Academy - Honors Apologetics

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*Defending the Physical Resurrection of Christ*

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### Introduction

*“But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” -Paul<sup>1</sup>*

Thousands of years ago Abraham was instructed by God to sacrifice his one and only son, Isaac, at the top of a mountain in Moriah.<sup>2</sup> It was on the third day that Abraham took his son up that mountain and prepared an altar for The Lord. He took his knife out and prepared to slay his son as an expression of his faith, obedience, and commitment to God. Yet, as the knife swung down, God intervened and halted the motion. God made it clear that He Himself would provide His *own* sacrifice instead. Fast forward thousands of years later, and Jesus Christ, a criminal in the eyes of those who persecuted him that claimed to be the divine Son of God, was taken up a hill called Calvary. The death of Jesus was more than an ordinary man being put to shame, but rather, mankind’s motion to end the existence of the Son of God. This time the motion was not

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:12-19

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 22:2

halted. God sacrificed his one and only son – the ultimate sacrifice. He kept His promise and made the provision. Three days later, God’s resurrection of His son from the dead was His loudest “yes” to mankind’s “no.” God was glorified, the sins of the world were forgiven, and the relationship between God and man was restored. The course of the world was radically changed, and the Christian movement was born.

If Christ had not been resurrected, then the freedom we enjoy and hope we have today are complete lies. This is made clear even in the very foundational doctrine of Christianity, the Nicene Creed, and those that disagree with it would be considered heretics.

He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried. The third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures. He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.<sup>3</sup>

The fate of humankind relies on one event that is only about a page long in each of the Gospels: the resurrection of Christ. However, several believers and non-believers alike subscribe to their interpretations of the resurrection. Especially with mankind’s fast-paced yet beautiful journey of intellectuality, it gradually becomes harder to believe in Christ’s resurrection. The purpose of this thesis is to bring historical clarity to the death and resurrection of Christ, and to answer several misleading, yet attractive, hypotheses and theories that deviate from the *physical* resurrection of Christ.

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<sup>3</sup> Nicene Creed

### *Historical Review*

#### **Historical and Medical Examination of Crucifixion**

For there to be a resurrection there must first be a death. Thus, it would be inappropriate to examine the resurrection of Christ without also examining his physical death, as both factors are incomplete without each other. They are of equal importance and not to be separated.

The crucifixion can be best defined as a cruel method of execution in which a victim is hung by his arms from a cross, or a similar structure, until death. Although Jesus' death on the cross is the most well-known crucifixion, he is far from the only (or first, as some may assume) person to die on a cross. The Early Persians were the first to systematically use crucifixion, when crucifixion was in its "infancy stage" and victims were impaled to a tree or upright post with their feet dangling. As time progressed, Alexander the Great's invasion of Persia allowed him to adopt crucifixion as a method of his own and spread it throughout the Mediterranean shores, using it as an instrument to enforce political soundness in places such as Egypt, Syria, Phoenicia, and more. Quintus Curtius Rufus reported that around 2,000 Tyrans were crucified on the order of Alexander the Great during his Siege of Tyre.<sup>4</sup> Roman officials were unaware of this practice until they fought Carthage during the Punic Wars in 3 B.C. Little did the Romans know that as they adopted the method they would learn the crucifixion technique and improve it for the next five centuries, becoming its perfecter to eventually to kill a man who claimed to be the very Son of God. Wherever the Roman Legions went, their monster that was the method of crucifixion would come barging in behind them. It was the most brutal form of execution known to antiquity, with *cremation* (burning) and *decollation* (decapitation) following behind it, in that

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<sup>4</sup> Rufus

order.<sup>5</sup> Being that crucifixion was seen as *most* cruel, it is no surprise that it was considered the most shameful mode of death in the eyes of Rome. Thus, those with Roman citizenship were given a measure of protection, although not absolute, from execution by crucifixion. Execution by crucifixion became reserved for disgraced soldiers, slaves, foreigners, Christians, and political activists.

Although many victims condemned to crucifixion were called robbers, the majority were politically motivated individuals rather than true criminals. It is important to understand that Rome was more concerned with enforcing political unity rather than correcting ordinary criminality.<sup>6</sup> This was why Jesus was presented to Pilate as someone who self-appointed himself as a king who claimed to undermine the Roman authority.<sup>7</sup>

Quite frankly, for this thesis, the word “painful” was insufficient to describe the crucifixion and its preliminary practices. If Rome took five centuries to perfect it, then it was quite reasonable that they went above and beyond the standard of “painful.” Roman soldiers themselves were executed if they did not carry out the crucifixion process properly. The method was so extremely painful that a word had to be created to describe it: *excruciating*. The several preliminary practices were intended to worsen the victim’s psychological and medical condition before their crucifixion, which would ultimately determine how long they would last on the cross.

The first of these was scourging, which was legally allowed to be practiced before every Roman execution. Scourging was accomplished with a flagellum, a short whip with small iron

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<sup>5</sup> Retlief

<sup>6</sup> Retlief

<sup>7</sup> Edwards

balls and sheep bones at the ends of its leather extensions. Roman soldiers that carried out scourging were known as lictors and had full legal jurisdiction to inflict pain at any level of force they preferred. The victim, after being stripped naked of their clothing, was tied to an upright post by their hands and brutally lashed at. As the lictors repeatedly struck the victim's back with full force, the iron balls would cause deep contusions, and the leather thongs and sheep bones would tear the skin and subcutaneous tissues.<sup>8</sup> The critical amount of blood loss and intense pain that would result in circulatory shock lessened the victim's chance of lasting on the cross. However, Jesus was already in a weak condition before his scourging took place. Luke describes that "his sweat became like great drops of blood falling to the ground."<sup>9</sup> This bloody sweat Luke describes, which is a medical condition known as *hemohidrosis*, only occurs in a high emotional state of stress in which the blood escapes into his sweat glands, making his skin soft and fragile and ultimately worsening the pain of scourging. Jesus was also mocked, blindfolded, and physically abused by Roman guards before his trial took place, which would have weakened him psychologically and physically before the scourging took place.<sup>10</sup> After Jesus' scourging, which was limited to 39 lashes by Jewish law, the soldiers continued to mock him by putting a purple robe on his shoulders, a crown of thorns on his head, and a wooden staff in his right hand.<sup>11</sup> When the guards tore off his purple robe, they most likely irritated or worsened his scourging wounds.<sup>12</sup> The appreciable blood loss, physical and mental abuse, and also the lack of food, water, and sleep brought Jesus down to a critically weak state that required immediate medical attention. Unfortunately for Jesus, the crucifixion had yet to even begin.

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<sup>8</sup> Edwards

<sup>9</sup> Luke 22:44

<sup>10</sup> Luke 22: 63-65

<sup>11</sup> John 19: 1-5

<sup>12</sup> Edwards

Victims of crucifixion were required to haul their cross from the flogging site to the site where they would be crucified, which was outside the city walls. The weight of the cross was around 300 pounds, so victims were only required to carry the 75-pound crossbar across their neck.<sup>13</sup> In addition to balancing the crossbar on their neck, their outstretched arms were to be tied to it as they walked during the procession led by a Roman centurion.<sup>14</sup> Upon arrival at the crucifixion, the crossbar would then be attached to permanent stipes in the ground.

Victims were crucified on the cross two ways: by rope or by nail. The Roman method always preferred nails, which were iron spikes ranging from 5 to 7 inches (13 to 18 centimeters) long and 1 centimeter thick. These were the nails that were driven through the wrist, piercing through the flexor retinaculum, median nerve, ulnar nerve and artery, and flexor pollicis longus muscle into the wood of the crossbar. This severed the large sensorimotor median nerve, resulting in shooting pain in both arms, paralysis of the portion of the hand, and contraction of various ligaments. Jesus is historically depicted with holes in his palms; however, this is a common misconception, as it was actually his wrists the nails drove through. The feet of the victim would rarely be nailed to the sides of the stipe, but usual practice called for the feet to be nailed directly in front. This would often be accomplished by bending the knees prominently and pivoting the direction of the legs.<sup>15</sup> The nails, driven between the second and third metatarsals, would penetrate through the deep peroneal nerve, the medial plantar nerve, and the lateral plantar nerve. As a result of this position, the feet carried the weight of the hanging body.

The act of breathing itself made the crucifixion more excruciating. Its uncomfortable position led breathing to become purely diaphragmatic. Contraction of the muscles and

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<sup>13</sup> Edwards

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



overwhelming fatigue hindered respiration, resulting in hypercarbia. In order for the victim to breathe adequately, lifting of the body, pushing up on the nailed feet, flexing of the elbows, and rotation of the penetrated wrists would be required. This array of actions itself was difficult to perform due to the damaged nerve system. Additionally, lifting of the back resulted in scraping of the open scourge wounds against the rough wood of the cross. Deprivation of oxygen led to asphyxia, one of the primary causes of Jesus' death. The other being hypovolemia, a critical loss of blood fluid that keeps the heart from pumping properly which would, in turn, cause organ failure.

“Crucifracture” was a common Roman practice in which Roman guards would hasten the death of victims by breaking their legs. Roman guards and spectators had already recognized Jesus' moment of death, which was at about 3 PM on Friday when he cried out in a loud voice, “it is finished,” and bowed his head.<sup>16</sup> Thus, when the Roman soldiers approached Jesus they pierced his side with a spear, bringing a “sudden flow of blood of water,” a sign of Jesus' death.<sup>17</sup> The spear most likely pierced through Jesus' thorax, or his right lung as some may depict. Taking this entire medical examination into account, the claim that Jesus did *not* die on a cross is largely unreasonable and at odds with modern medical knowledge.

The public humiliation and life-threatening severity of the crucifixion process made it totally reasonable for family members of the victim, or even those slightly associated with the victim, to be utterly ashamed. Those that were crucified were godforsaken. The scriptures had made it clear that “he who is hanged *is* accursed of God.”<sup>18</sup> As Joel Green writes, “Executed publicly, situated at a major crossroads or on a well-trafficked artery, devoid of clothing, left to

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<sup>16</sup> John 19:30

<sup>17</sup> John 19:34

<sup>18</sup> Deuteronomy 21:23

be eaten by birds and beasts, victims of crucifixion were subject to optimal, unmitigated, vicious ridicule.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, taking its full historical meaning into consideration, it should be understood that the cross is offensive to all, believers and non-believers of Christ. If religion is a loose system of beliefs and hopes projected out of humanity’s need and wishes, then the cross is totally irreligious. No human being, individually or collectively, would have projected their wishes, desires, longings, hopes, and needs onto a bloody, naked man nailed to a cross in public humiliation.<sup>20</sup> The abhorrent nature of such an event, which even brought Josephus to tears, simply cannot be a product of religious imagination.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Gospel Accounts of the Death of Christ:**

The nature of the four Gospel accounts are unique in that each writer shared distinctive qualities in their profiles of Jesus. Matthew’s account emphasized Jesus’ kingly position, Mark emphasized his burden-bearing servanthood, Luke emphasized his compassion, and John emphasized his divinity. Yet, all four accounts shared the same similarity: the cross was the climax of their story. As Fleming Rutledge wrote, “in all four accounts, the events prior to the passion are structured to be a prologue to it and to find their culmination in it – with the resurrection as vindication and victory.”<sup>22</sup> Although the four writers had varying secondary details, their core account remained consistent. The importance of their accounts, for the purposes of this thesis, is found where they agree, which in turn help paint the picture of the

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<sup>19</sup> Bockmuehl

<sup>20</sup> Rutledge

<sup>21</sup> Flavius

<sup>22</sup> Rutledge

Christian claim that Jesus resurrected from the dead. Once the claim has been explained, this thesis will determine if it is plausible to believe.

(1) Jesus faced preliminary practices of the crucifixion

All four writers collectively claim that Jesus underwent the physical and mental abuse of the preliminary practices of the crucifixion described above. He faced the severity of scourging, was brutally mocked, and was wounded further after his scourging.

Both Luke and John do not specifically mention Jesus undergoing preliminary practices. They do, however, write that he was *led away* by Pilate to be crucified.<sup>23</sup> Mark provided details of what *being led away* meant. He wrote that Jesus was scourged by Pilate and was delivered to be crucified.<sup>24</sup> The scourging itself was not described in-depth, perhaps because it was not where the writer wanted the focus to be directed. Matthew followed this same pattern as well.<sup>25</sup> They continued in agreement that Jesus was stripped of his clothing and given a purple robe to wear in mockery, was twisted a crown of thorns that was placed on his head, was hit in the head with a reed and spat on, and was ultimately mocked before being led to his execution.<sup>26</sup> Although the accounts of Luke and John did not provide a detailed description like Mathew and Mark, the historicity of the crucifixion process made it reasonable to assume that Jesus was scourged by being *led away for crucifixion*. If Jesus was pardoned from anything related to standard crucifixion practice then the writers would have mentioned it, as it was highly unlikely that such a thing would ever take place. Nevertheless, the four gospel accounts are in agreement that Jesus faced the preliminary practices of crucifixion.

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<sup>23</sup> Luke 23:25, John 19:16

<sup>24</sup> Mark 15:15

<sup>25</sup> Mathew 27:26

<sup>26</sup> Mathew 27: 27-31, Mark 15: 16-20

## (2) Jesus was crucified and died on the cross

All four Gospel writers described the death of Jesus as an extremely depressing event, even so as to include that “there was darkness over all the land.”<sup>27</sup> They also established a theme of abandonment when they include the words of Jesus, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”<sup>28</sup> It was the moment right after this statement that Mark and Luke confirm to be when “he breathed his last,” thus officially stating his death.<sup>29</sup> John, leaving no room for misinterpretation, further confirms his death by writing “they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead,” and that they pierced his side.<sup>30</sup> When John mentions that blood and water came out from his side, this served as medical reaffirmation of his death, as mentioned above in a previous section.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the Gospels are in total agreement: Jesus died. In fact, Christ’s death was verified by Pilate, who himself “marveled that He was already dead.”<sup>32</sup>

## (3) Jesus was buried in Joseph of Arimathea tomb

The Gospel accounts of Christ’s burial served as reaffirmation of the reality of the event. All four accounts reported that Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Sanhedrin. After respectfully wrapping Jesus in a clean linen cloth, he “rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb and departed.”<sup>33</sup> Matthew also includes in his account that Pilate was specifically approached by the chief priests and pharisees regarding the possibility of Jesus’ corpse being stolen by the disciples in their attempt to make a resurrection claim. As a result of this inquiry, Matthew reports that Pilate additionally had the tomb sealed

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<sup>27</sup> Mathew 27:45, Mark 15:33, Luke 23:44

<sup>28</sup> Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34,

<sup>29</sup> Mark 15:37, Luke 23:46

<sup>30</sup> John 19:33

<sup>31</sup> John 19:34

<sup>32</sup> Mark 15:44

<sup>33</sup> Matthew 27:60, Matthew 15:46, Luke 23:53, John 19:42

and supervised by a Roman guard.<sup>34</sup> Although this report was not found in the other Gospels, the main account of all four gospels have yet to show any inconsistency. The burial of Jesus was unanimous between the four. (Arguments against the resurrection concerning the burial of Jesus will be later addressed.)

(4) The tomb was found empty

The next claim all four Gospels agree on is the ultimate climax of their account, which is also the most controversial: the empty tomb. The four accounts provide different details on the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb. The Gospel of John wrote that Mary Magdalene had discovered the empty tomb, while Matthew added the other Mary along to the story, to which Mark added Salome, to which Luke added Joanna and other unspecified women. Although the details are not clear, the main account is still consistent: a group of women discovered the empty tomb. During the time period of this event, the testimony of a woman was considered totally inappropriate and untrustworthy. The Gospel's claim of women being the only eyewitnesses to Jesus' empty tomb would not have lasted long, nor be taken seriously. Given the second-class status of women in first-century Palestine, it was fascinating that they are the chief witnesses, for having such unreliable witnesses would have been an embarrassment to the proclamation of the resurrected Christ. Any later legendary account would have changed the story so that the male disciples would have discover the empty tomb. However, that was not the case. Taking this into analysis, one will quickly realize that the weight of this embarrassment is far too heavy for the claim to be false. The chances of all four Gospel writers making up something of such embarrassment to convince people to give into their lie is far too low. In other words, what they said was so

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<sup>34</sup> Matthew 27:66

embarrassing that it would make no sense as to why they would make it up *and* not change it, which makes it more plausible to believe that what they reported was the truth.

Resurrection or not, the fact that the tomb was discovered empty by a group of his women followers remains standing. The Markan empty tomb narrative was remarkably straightforward and lacked any signs of embellishment by theological or apologetic motifs likely to characterize a later legendary account. It is highly unlikely that the Markan narrative is a legend. Dr. William Lane Craig expounded” on this.

The resurrection itself is not witnessed or described, and there is no reflection on Jesus's triumph over sin and death, no use of Christological titles, no quotation of fulfilled prophecy, no description of the Risen Lord. Even if we excise the angelic figure as, say, a purely literary figure which provides the interpretation of the vacant tomb, then we have a narrative that is all the more stark and unadorned (cf. John 20.1–2). This suggests that the story is not at its core a legend. To appreciate how restrained Mark's narrative is, one has only to read the account in the Gospel of Peter, which describes Jesus's triumphant egress from the tomb, accompanied by angelic visitants, followed by a talking cross, heralded by a voice from heaven, and all witnessed by a Roman guard, the Jewish leaders, and a multitude of spectators!<sup>35</sup>

#### (5) Jesus made appearances after the discovery of his empty tomb

Not one of the Gospels leave out that Jesus physically appeared to his disciples after his death. Mark and Luke wrote that on the road to Emmaus, Jesus appeared to two of his disciples for the first time after his resurrection.<sup>36</sup> Luke was the only Gospel that provided greater detail to this story, writing that he conversed and stayed with them then vanished once they finally recognized him. Once again, these are only secondary details. The main account between all four gospels is that Jesus appeared to his disciples, and having captivated the

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<sup>35</sup> Craig

<sup>36</sup> Mark 16:12-13, Luke 24:28-35

attention of the disciples that were in awe, gave them The Great Commission. This statement of purpose was to “go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.”<sup>37</sup> The only explanation for the remarkably fast growth of the Christian movement and the inspiring spark of apostolic commitment after Jesus’ ascension is that they encountered a physically resurrected Jesus. It is no question that doubt was looming greatly over the disciples.<sup>38</sup> Luke wrote that Jesus had to directly confront their doubt and fright, as they were afraid that Jesus had only *resurrected spiritually*.<sup>39</sup> In direct confrontation, he allowed them to touch his hands and feet where he had been pierced to prove that his resurrection was a *physical resurrection*. John uniquely provided an account of the doubting Thomas, who refused to believe unless he was able to *physically* confirm that Jesus had resurrected. Thomas’ skepticism of Jesus’ physical resurrection shattered after he touched his side and declared Jesus to be his “Lord and [his] God.”<sup>40</sup> The Gospels clearly communicated that Jesus himself cleared the air of doubt and skepticism towards his physical resurrection by *physically* dwelling among his disciples and allowing them to *physically* touch where the piercings of crucifixion were prominent.

The list of eyewitnesses to Jesus’ post-mortem appearances are further confirmed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:5-11, in which he wrote:

[Jesus] was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have <sup>[b]</sup>fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.

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<sup>37</sup> Matthew 16:15, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:27, John 20:21

<sup>38</sup> Matthew 28:17, Mark 16:14, Luke 24: 38, John 20:25

<sup>39</sup> (This notion of thinking is important to this thesis and will be expanded on in a later section.)

<sup>40</sup> John 20:24-29

On this basis of the date of Paul's writing and his personal relationships with many of the eyewitnesses, it is universally accepted by New Testament scholars that the disciples experienced a post-mortem appearance of Christ. Each of these appearances are independently attested to by the Gospel accounts and Paul.

(6) Jesus ascended into Heaven

The Gospels of Mark and Luke share the same core account of Jesus' ascension into heaven. Mark writes that Jesus' ascension into Heaven was followed by being seated at the right hand of God the Father.<sup>41</sup> Luke left out the secondary detail that Jesus was seated next to God, but did mention that Jesus ascended into Heaven.<sup>42</sup> Although Matthew and John excluded this from their accounts, it does not mean it did not happen. As mentioned before, each book has their own distinctive qualities in their profile of Jesus. The addition or emission of certain details is not to say such things never happened, but rather, to have the focus of the reader shifted elsewhere to have their overall message of Jesus expressed.

It is also important to note that the Gospel's claim of Jesus' resurrection was different from their accounts of the individual stories of Lazarus, Jairus' daughter, or the Widow of Nain's son, in which they were raised to life from the dead. The concept of resurrection is to be sharply distinguished from resuscitation, or re-animation. The story of Lazarus being raised from the dead (John 11: 38-44) was not the same resurrection Jesus had, since Lazarus was not restored to an endless physical life. Rather, it was an act of resuscitation since Jesus only restored Lazarus to a physical life that would end at his later death. The same can be applied to the Gospel's other resuscitation accounts. As William Lane Craig wrote,

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<sup>41</sup> Mark 16:19

<sup>42</sup> Luke 24:51



Resurrection is not resuscitation. The mere restoration of life to a corpse is not resurrection. A person who has resuscitated returns only to this earthly life and will die again.<sup>43</sup>

If the "mere restoration of life to a corpse" is not enough to qualify as a resurrection, then what is? What differentiates a resurrection from a resuscitation are three major factors: that the resurrection body is immortal, has a property of imperishability, and possesses enormous power. If the resurrection body is immortal, then it can never die. If the resurrection body is imperishable, then it can never age, be injured, or fall ill to diseases. And if the resurrection body possesses enormous power, then it is possible for it to vanish and reappear from place to place instantaneously with no regard for spatial distances. Craig continues,

Jesus rose to eternal life in a radically transformed body that can be described as immortal, glorious, powerful, and supernatural. In this new mode of existence he was not bound by the physical limitations of this universe, but possessed superhuman powers.<sup>44</sup>

This explains why Jesus was capable of suddenly appearing and disappearing, as seen in John 20:19 and Luke 24:31.

The four Gospels shared the same core account: Jesus faced preliminary practices of the crucifixion, he was crucified and killed on the cross, he was buried in Joseph's tomb, the tomb was found empty by a group of women, and he made physical appearances after the discovery of his empty tomb. Although they varied in secondary details, their main claim was consistent and

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<sup>43</sup> Craig

<sup>44</sup> Craig

uncontradictory. The writers of these Gospels came from diverse cultural backgrounds and were originally non-Christians, but found conviction in the message of Christ, which is why their claims of a resurrected Christ suggest something radical must have happened. For anyone to claim that the Gospel accounts are biased must also understand no historical account is absent from being biased. Nevertheless, now that the central claim of the Gospels has been established, it can now be properly analyzed with the intention of answering this question: is it more plausible to believe that the resurrection of Christ happened rather than not?

### **The Death and Resurrection of Christ Confirmed by Non-Biblical Sources**

The death and resurrection of Jesus was not an event that was exclusive to the Bible. Although the Bible offers the most details on the events, many are firm on their stance that the Bible is not a reliable historical source. However, there are several non-biblical sources that have confirmed Jesus as a real person that died a real death and later had a real bodily resurrection.

The first of these sources was Josephus Flavius, a historian who wrote valuable works on early Jewish history. In his work, he explicitly mentioned Jesus' reputation, condemnation, and resurrection.

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principle men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Flavius

Cornelius Tacitus provided another historical account in which he wrote, “Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus.”<sup>46</sup>

The Gospel accounts show no deviation from the account of Josephus, confirming that Jesus indeed performed miracles, consistently taught several people, and was handed over to Pilate to be crucified by demand of the people. Historical records such as these further prove that Jesus’ condemnation was not an event exclusive to the Bible, but rather, a real historical event. This explains why, to this day, it is held in scholar unanimity and is understood as true by believers and non-believers alike. More importantly, it validates that Christ *did* resurrect and clearly appeared to his disciples. The resurrection of Jesus was confirmed true even by a non-Biblical source, and the sudden growth and fruition of the Christian movement served as evidence of Christ’s resurrection.

### **Revolutionary Thinking in the Time of Jesus**

The pressing political and religious tension of Jesus’ time can be traced back to the Maccabean Revolt, which left the biggest footprint on revolutionary thinking. Although the Maccabean Revolt took place two hundred years before Jesus’ crucifixion, to Jewish folk, it was the most recent successful overthrow of pagan oppressors that reestablished the centrality of the Temple. This thesis will now shortly explain the Maccabean Revolt and its impact on Jewish

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<sup>46</sup> Tacitus

revolutionary thinking so that a better understanding of Jesus' political scenery can be established.

The people of Judea's heart had been broken when the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed by Antiochus IV, the monarch. In that time of pain and oppression, Antiochus IV decreed that the Jews abandon the Torah, defile the Sabbath, and ultimately forget their belief in YHWH.<sup>47</sup> As a result, the priest Matthias and his family had moved from Jerusalem in mourning of the temple. Their family received several warnings from the officials of Antiochus IV to renounce their faith, stop circumcising their sons, and submit to the pagan Gods. Matthias, with burning "zeal for the Torah," killed the official and fled to the wilderness to organize an army.<sup>48</sup> The army was assembled, thanks to the alliance of a similar group with the same burning passion for the Torah known as the Hasideans, and began revolting against the rulers of Judea. They destroyed pagan altars and fought to keep the Temple at the center. Unfortunately, Matthias eventually died of natural causes. His son, Judas (nicknamed Maccabeus), inherited the leadership position of the movement. The Maccabees fought with consistent force because of their strong belief that YHWH would deliver them. In short, they eventually won victory and the descendants of Judas, known as the Hasmoneans, continued the victorious movement. The Hasmoneans established Peace in Palestine and kept the state politically, economically, and religiously anchored in the Torah. Thus, it can be concluded that the "zeal" insurrectionists had for the Torah was birthed at the time of the Maccabean Revolt.<sup>49</sup>

What does the Maccabean Revolt have to do with the political scenery of Jesus? The revolutionary features of the Maccabean Revolt (which are seen again in later revolutionary

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<sup>47</sup> 1 Maccabees 1:29-35

<sup>48</sup> 1 Maccabees 2:23-25

<sup>49</sup> Jamison

movements) were what made the Romans ready to crucify Jesus. This section of the thesis will briefly examine the four features of the Maccabean Revolt.

The first of these features is the centrality of the Temple. The very existence of the movement was ultimately a product of desecration of the Temple. The Maccabee's assembly of a dense army and the generational succession of leadership was evident of the value they held to its presence.

The second of these features was the Zeal, or passion, they held for the Torah. The violent approach the Maccabees took under Matthias was driven by a motive to purify the hearts of Israel's people. Exile from YHWH's presence was their biggest fear, and if the Temple was no longer the center of Israel, then Israel was no longer in the presence of YHWH. This was also why their position on circumcision was strong. Circumcision was their identity, as it was a sign of the Abrahamic Covenant that they were the chosen people of God.

The third of these features was their belief that YHWH would vindicate or deliver them. The first form of this vindication was universally believed to be a *military victory*, one in which YHWH would restore the Temple and their campaign because of their faithfulness and their zeal. This notion was so central in the Hebrew Bible that it was more plausible to believe the first century Jews universally accepted it rather than not. However, there was also a belief in a second form of vindication: *physical resurrection*. In this belief, those who took it upon themselves to become martyrs for the Torah would be rewarded with a resurrection to eternal life. When reading 2 Maccabees, it is obvious that a physical resurrection was a common belief and was expected. This was ultimately why those who believe in a physical resurrection were more likely to participate in a revolution— they either fought against military oppression and won victory, or

they fought against military oppression and resurrected back to life if they were killed. It was ultimately a win-win situation to them.

The fourth of these features was generational succession of leadership. If a revolution took place, there were two outcomes. The first outcome was that if the movement failed, all the revolutionaries partaking in the movement got killed (or crucified), and the revolution died off. The second outcome was that if the movement succeeded, then the biological successor of the movement would take over once the leader died. Leadership of a movement was kept within the family, similar to a power structure that of royalty. This type of leadership was termed “*The Messiah*.” “*The Messiah*” was the leader of the movement and the promised deliverer of the Jews. Thus, when “*The Messiah*” would die, the next person deemed inheritor by lineage would become the new “*Messiah*”.

These four features of the Maccabean revolt became the foundation for future revolutionary or messianic movements that ultimately shaped Jesus’ political scenery. The centrality of the Temple, the zeal for the Torah, the expectation of vindication, and generational succession became the repetitive patterns seen again in the Roman invasion of Palestine, the story of Hezekiah the Archilestes and Judas ben Hezekiah, and the revolts surrounding the death of Herod the Great. This explains why the Jews and followers of Jesus had their own expectations and stereotypes stapled to Jesus and his mission. Thus, Jesus’ intention, mission, and approach were strikingly different from the four features that his political scenery called.

## **The Resurrection of the Dead Theology in the Political Spectrum of Jesus' Time**

In the Gospel accounts, the disciples, after seeing the risen Jesus, shared a great amount of doubt among each other towards the resurrection. Luke wrote that Jesus had to directly confront their doubt and fright as they were afraid that the risen Jesus they saw was only a spirit. As a result of this fright, Thomas himself would not believe until he could physically touch the risen Jesus. The question arose: why was their initial reaction of surprise so great that they refused to believe what they were seeing was true, and how did the political spectrum of their time play a role in this? This section will focus on what people of the past knew the resurrection to be, and where Judaism fell in that spectrum.

It was first important to establish that Christianity was born in a political scenery against its odds. In the ancient classical world, the term “resurrection” meant exactly what is understood of it today: that death could be reversed, and the dead would return to an everlasting human life. The axiom of the time was clear: once a person died, they did not come back to life.<sup>50</sup> It was ultimately understood that a resurrection was totally unrealistic, even to the point that mythology would not make it up. Not even in Greek Mythology was Apollo’s attempt to bring a dead child back to life permitted, as he was punished by Zeus for such an action.<sup>51</sup> If anything, the only image of immortality anybody could achieve, as N.T. Wright points out, was a type of fame so strong that their reputation and beautiful image would last beyond their death.<sup>52</sup> Outside Judaism, the possibility of a resurrection was unanimously rejected<sup>53</sup>

### (1) Ancient Paganism

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<sup>50</sup> Wright

<sup>51</sup> Pindar

<sup>52</sup> Wright

<sup>53</sup> Burkert

Ancient pagans, to their terms, did not accept – or even desire—for the resurrection to be true. The deep imprints of the Greco-Roman culture were left by Homer’s imagination. Two of his gloomy narratives, *Iliad* and *Odysseus*, laid the foundation for life-after-death thinking, both of which covered the existence of the dead, expanded on the life of the underworld (Hades), and ultimately mentioned interactions with the deceased. The Homeric tradition that portrayed life after death in Hades to be hopeless and miserable, influenced several of the other writings and popular beliefs that followed it. By the time its influence included the entire Middle East, Plato had offered his radical and alternative perspective that death was not something to regret, but to welcome. He played a critical role in modifying the three important elements of life: the soul, Hades, and the fate of the dead.

In Plato’s view, the soul was of utmost importance and completely separated from the body, being a non-material aspect that continued to exist even after death. According to this way of thought, the human soul is divine in nature. If the soul was of primary importance, then the body served as a prison hindering it from being set free to Hades. Although Homer had depicted Hades as a depressing environment of misery, Plato radically changed its view to a delightful environment the soul longed for since its time on earth. The Greco-Roman culture’s acceptance of this way of thought became evident in their culture. Vase-paintings from 500 BC depicted the soul as a small human-like creature, commonly referred to as a homunculus, hovering over the bodies of the dead, ready to depart to Hades.<sup>54</sup> As a result of the soul being this sort of creature, the idea of death suddenly transformed to being a delightful event where the soul is finally set free from its prison, the wicked would be severely punished, and justice triumphed at last. There

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<sup>54</sup> Wright



was no need to come back to human life because Hades was perfect for the soul. Besides, why would a soul *want* to leave an afterlife of perfect justice and comfort to return to a world of space, time, and matter?<sup>55</sup> This way of thought made resurrection not something to celebrate, but rather, a terrible mistake.

Early Greek writing hinted that mortals, when dying, viewed themselves as becoming *immortal*. The idea that humans would become stars after their death became very popular in the Hellenistic world, and was referred to as *astral immortality*. Astral immortality meant that humans and stars were made of the same material. Roman emperors, as a result, were worshipped as divine during their lifetime because of the expectation that they would become immortal and one with the stars when they died.<sup>56</sup> This belief had furthered Plato's teachings: the dead, as they believed, would be in the heavenly homes of gods and among the stars. Additionally, the transition of a mortal from the earthly life to the godly life was consistent with the dissolution of their human body—thus, the graves of the deceased played an important role and were not expected to be empty.

Several stories of necromancy, which is having communication with the departed, usually in the form of spiritual visits, are offered in most historical periods. The purpose of necromancy was to receive wisdom or guidance from the dead in a particular moment of crisis.<sup>57</sup> Necromancy was accomplished with a medium, which was a human that could communicate with spirits. Such an event takes place in the Old Testament, when Samuel had appeared to Saul via a medium Saul had requested for.<sup>58</sup> People living in the Greco-Roman culture thought that one

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<sup>55</sup> Wright

<sup>56</sup> Price

<sup>57</sup> Wright.

<sup>58</sup> 1 Samuel 28

might occasionally see ghosts, visions, or spirits of the deceased, but it should be understood that such visitations are *not* resurrections. The visitations or visions were from the *deceased*, not from those that ceased being dead and reverted back to normal human life. One of the fundamentals of ancient paganism was that the dead remained dead, and they did not (nor did they wish to) return to a life as they had before.<sup>59</sup>

## (2) Judaism

The theology of resurrection belonged nowhere except in Judaism. Judaism stood apart from the other religions in their belief that the dead could physically come to life again. Before the ideas of resurrection found in the Old Testament are examined, it is first necessary to explain the Jewish Doctrine, as the primary and most important religious scenery Jesus steps foot into. The expectations for Jesus established by his followers, the interactions between Jesus and the people, and the purpose of Jesus' resurrection were all primarily influenced by the Jewish doctrine. Christianity itself stemmed from Judaism, so it was important that the two were examined and compared.<sup>60</sup>

The Jewish doctrine was set into motion by the promise of YHWH to Abraham that in him, all the families of the earth would be blessed, and his descendants would gain ownership of the land of Canaan.<sup>61</sup> This was known as the Abrahamic Covenant, which God would honor. One of those descendants were the Israelites, who were held captive in Egypt until they had been freed under the leadership of Moses, appointed to do so by YHWH.<sup>62</sup> After having freed the Israelites from captivity, Moses was then instructed to build the Ark of the Covenant, where

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<sup>59</sup> Wright

<sup>60</sup> Earl

<sup>61</sup> Genesis 12: 1-7

<sup>62</sup> Exodus 3

YHWH would dwell. This ark was kept in the temple, which is why the temple was considered so significant to them. It was originally God's intention to dwell among his people like He did with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, but this was not possible because of the Fall of Man, when humankind disobeyed God. Thus, sacrifice was the only way His people could get atonement for their sin. The people's sin, however, was so great that they repeated a cycle of sin, suffering, and salvation. First, their sin would be too great, next, they would be exiled as punishment for their sin, then, they would be atoned for their sin, and then the cycle would repeat. It wasn't until Ezekiel's promise that the cycle had a hope of finally being broken. Ezekiel's promise was that The Messiah would free them from exile, establish YHWH's kingdom, restore the centrality of the Temple, and ultimately fulfill the Abrahamic Covenant. This was fantastic news for the people of YHWH, as His kingdom would be restored, and they would finally be redeemed. The vision of Ezekiel and Daniel confirmed that, including those who previously died, YHWH would resurrect all. Those who were righteous in His eyes would be rewarded with everlasting life, and those who were wicked would be condemned for eternity. The resurrection in the Jewish doctrine was a sign of YHWH's establishment of righteousness and justice. All would be judged, but not all would take part in His kingdom.

The Old Testament had radically gone from an absence in hope beyond death to belief in a bodily resurrection after life after death.<sup>63</sup> According to Judaism's belief, the resurrection was not what had already happened to the dead, but was what *would* happen to the dead. Daniel 12: 2-3 acted as a central passage of the Old Testament that spoke of a *physical* resurrection taking place.

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<sup>63</sup> Wright

“And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever.”<sup>64</sup>

The passage unmistakably spoke of a *physical* resurrection, as it said, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake.” The phrase “sleeping in the dust of the earth” was a clear biblical way of referring to the dead, as God himself used dust of the ground to form man.<sup>65</sup> More clarity on the phrase was offered when examining how God used the same phrase in Genesis 3:19 when He said, “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”<sup>66</sup> It is then obvious that Daniel was speaking of a *bodily* resurrection when he continued the metaphor, using the word “awake” to resemble coming out of “sleep,” which would mean coming out of death.<sup>67</sup>

Before this was written, however, Isaiah had already provided several hints at a resurrection, mainly as a theme of YHWH’s form of vindication to His people.

“He shall see the labor of His soul and be satisfied. By His knowledge, My righteous Servant shall justify many, for he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul unto death, And He was numbered with transgressors, And He bore the sin of many, And made intercession for the transgressors.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Daniel 12:2-3

<sup>65</sup> Genesis 2:7

<sup>66</sup> Genesis 3:19

<sup>67</sup> Wright

<sup>68</sup> Isaiah 53:11-12

Although Isaiah did not specifically mention a bodily resurrection, he did mention what would happen to the servant after his death: he claims victory after his death. He emerges in triumph to “see the labor of his soul and be satisfied,” as well as to “divide the spoil with the strong.”

Although this does not directly address a physical resurrection, Daniel (in Daniel 12: 2-3) does provide evidence that some people were already reading Isaiah this way.<sup>69</sup>

Hosea 6 also mentions YHWH giving His people a new bodily life

“Come and let us return to the Lord; for He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up. After two days He will revive us; On the third day He will raise us up, that we may live in His sight.”<sup>70</sup>

Each of these passages acted as reaffirmation to the Jewish hope that YHWH would vindicate his people, bringing them restoration and freedom. The Book of Daniel clearly spoke of a physical resurrection, while the Book of Isaiah and the Book of Hosea hinted at a physical resurrection, which was to soon come for the people of YHWH. These scriptures acted as reaffirming hope for the blessed that they will be bodily resurrected—a hope found in no other religion at the time.

Judging from the basic political scenery of Jesus, it is no surprise that his followers had imposed on him their political and religious expectations. His resurrection was contrary to the common belief at the time. The disciple’s surprise to the risen Jesus only confirmed that they were not expecting a physical bodily resurrection. The sincerity of the abrupt origination of belief in the disciples was evident through the growth of the Christian movement and apostolic

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<sup>69</sup> Wright

<sup>70</sup> Hosea 6:1-2

commitment. What made Jesus so different from every other revolutionary was that he acted totally different than what his political scenery called for. This was evident in his approach to Roman authority, the message and spread of his movement both before and after his crucifixion, and his resurrection itself.

### **Thesis Proof**

Although his death holds scholarly unanimity, it is no doubt that Jesus' resurrection – or any resurrection for that matter – is uncanny and can be rejected quickly by many. Whether in rejection or approval, the empty tomb must still be explained. Several theories have been formed as to explain the empty tomb.

#### **The Swoon Theory**

The Swoon Theory is a 200-year old hypothesis that seeks to delegitimize the resurrection of Jesus through its claims that his death never occurred in the first place. According to the theory, Jesus only fell unconscious (swooned) on the cross and was mistaken for dead by the Roman Soldiers. It ultimately defends that the miraculous resurrection of the third day was instead a mere resuscitation thanks to the cold temperatures of the tomb that revived the swooned Jesus.

German theologian and critic of the Bible, Heinrich Paulus, pointed out that Jesus' cry right before his "death" was evidence that his strength was reasonably strong for a man that had just been crucified-- strong enough to raise suspicion. Additionally, the suspicion of a possibly unconscious Jesus only increases with John's description of "blood and water" that flowed from Jesus' side when he was pierced, which serves as an indication that Jesus could have still been alive. Thus, the only way to confirm the death of Jesus would have been evidence of physical decay of Jesus' body.

The biggest proponent of the swoon theory in the modern era would be the Islamic position. The Qur'an's explanation of Jesus' crucifixion is in 4:157-158, which states: "that and

for their unbelief, and their uttering against Mary a mighty calumny, and for their saying, 'We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God' -- yet they did not slay him, neither they killed him by Crucifixion, only a confusion was made to them.”<sup>71</sup>

Even then, outside the Qur'an the theory surprisingly still lingers today, despite the various reasons for its unanimous scholarly rejection. Its measly attempt to provide an alternative story to the empty tomb is far-stretched and filled with too many holes that not even non-believers can support.

There is no historical evidence that supports someone surviving a crucifixion without seeking medical attention. In fact, even with medical attention, the chances of surviving are slim to none. The only historical evidence of someone surviving a crucifixion is of Josephus Flavius' account. He writes that he was brought to tears when he found out that three of his former acquaintances were crucified by order of Titus Caesar. After Josephus negotiated with Titus, the three men were taken down from their crosses and given the best medical attention in efforts to help them recover. Even then, two of the men died and the other somehow managed to survive. The survival of the third man was only a result of him being given *the best* medical care offered at the time. However, the other two were treated the same and still did not survive.<sup>72</sup> The chances of surviving the crucifixion with the best medical care offered is one out of three. If the chances are slim with the best medical care, then it is reasonable and appropriate to conclude that the chances of surviving the crucifixion *without* seeking medical attention are none. Even then, the swoon hypothesis is at odds with historical and medical examination of the cross.

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<sup>71</sup> Quran 4:157-158

<sup>72</sup> Life 75:420-421



Jesus' body was already in critical condition before his execution took place. The escape of blood through his sweat glands due to a high emotional state of stress (known as *hemohidrosis*) had softened his skin and made it fragile, worsening the pain of scourging. The pain of scourging would have resulted in a critical amount of blood loss that would have caused deep contusions that would tear the skin and subcutaneous tissues. This amount of pain would have led Jesus into circulatory shock that would lessened his chance on the cross. In the crucifixion itself, breathing was purely diaphragmatic. Contraction of the muscles and an overwhelming fatigue hindered his respiration. As stated earlier in this thesis,

In order for the victim to breathe adequately, lifting of the body, pushing up on the nailed feet, flexing of the elbows, and rotation of the penetrated wrists would be required. This array of actions itself was difficult to perform due to the damaged nerve system. Additionally, lifting of the back resulted in scraping of the open scourge wounds against the rough wood of the cross. Deprivation of oxygen led to asphyxia, one of the primary causes of Jesus' death. The other being hypovolemia, a critical loss of blood fluid that keeps the heart from pumping properly which would, in turn, cause organ failure.<sup>73</sup>

In addition to the crucifixion, Roman Soldiers took extra steps to ensure the death of their victims through Crucifracture, which was when they would break the victim's legs. However, Crucifracture was not practiced on Jesus. Instead, they shoved a spear through his side that most likely pierced through his right lung.<sup>74</sup> The Romans had been perfecting the crucifixion method for five centuries. It is highly unlikely that they mistakenly allowed a victim to survive, or that they could not tell when their victim was dead. Roman soldiers were executed themselves if they did not carry out the process properly or if the victim was still alive.

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<sup>73</sup> John

<sup>74</sup> (For more details on the medical examination of the crucifixion, see section "Historical and Medical Examination of Crucifixion starting at page 4.)

For argument's sake, suppose the hypothesis was true. Suppose that Jesus did swoon and that he was revived in his sealed tomb due to dropping temperatures. He would still be in no shape, as would any man that had just been crucified, to remove the roughly 75 pound burial cloths from his body, then proceed to stand up on his pierced feet (applying weight and pressure onto his wounds, damaged nerves, and broken bones) and gather the strength within him to use his pierced hands (again, applying pressure to his wounds, damaged nerves, and broken bones) to roll the 2-ton stone (after somehow breaking its Roman seal from the inside of the tomb) away and run off into the distance. This is so unrealistic and unlikely to have happened. Any crucified man, even if he managed to fool the executors with 500 years of experience, would still not be able to move the tomb on his own. Perhaps that would have been a greater miracle.

### **The Stolen Body Hypothesis**

If it be established that Jesus could not have swooned, then what if the empty tomb was only an illusion of a resurrection caused by the theft of his body? This is known as the stolen body hypothesis. According to the Gospel Accounts, Jesus' body was placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy member of the Sanhedrin who did not consent to Jesus' sentencing. Skeptics propose that Joseph only offered his tomb as a temporary resting place for Jesus in order to obey Jewish law, which required that all executed victims be buried by sundown in time for Sabbath. Once the Sabbath was over, Joseph moved Jesus' body to a permanent resting place so that his personal tomb would be used for him and his family as he originally intended. The Gospel of Matthew reported that the Roman guards acknowledged Jesus' claim to rise from the dead on the third day and that possible thefts of Jesus' body could be

initiated by his disciples. In response to this, the tomb was sealed and heavily guarded by the order of Pilate. Those that subscribe to the stolen body hypothesis suggest that since Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin, he would have been granted permission to remove the body from the tomb to extinguish the disciples' efforts. The entire proposition seeks to satisfy the purpose behind the removal of Jesus' body and the disciples' reaction of surprise to the empty tomb.

This claim is wholly illogical and unlikely to have happened for several reasons. The first of which is obvious: Joseph did not have an adequate amount of time to sneakily transport a dead body from tomb to tomb. According to the Gospels, Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy man that was a "respected member of the council" of the Sanhedrin (Mark 15:43). This serves as proof that he was a devout Jew and would have been in accordance with the Jewish law, including the law that requires executed bodies to be buried by sundown on the same day of their death. It is very unlikely that Joseph would have removed Jesus' body from the tomb on the Sabbath, as he would be in violation of that law. Sabbath lasts from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday, and the empty tomb was discovered at the crack of dawn on Sunday. Thus, the only time for Joseph to have transported the body would have been after the sundown of Saturday and before the crack of dawn on Sunday. Supposing that Joseph had plotted a plan such as this, it would have required the help of others to either sneak past, distract, or attack the Roman guards, remove the Roman seal from the tomb, roll the 2 ton stone out of the way, remove the roughly 75-pound burial cloths from the corpse, then quickly carry the body to a new tomb. Additionally, all of this would have to have been illuminated by torches since it was pitch dark and there were no sources of light. It is unlikely for Joseph to have moved the body during midnight since it would have been more effective to do so during daylight. The theory suggests that Joseph

accomplished this in secret. If so, the number of people required to accomplish such a task would have caused a large commotion and word would have gotten out. If he managed to accomplish this task in secret, the establishment of Jesus' new burial site would have been announced to the disciples so that they could go and venerate it. Even if the disciples were not informed of the new burial site, it would have been used to immediately shoot down the resurrection claims of the disciples and humiliate them.

The theory fails to answer this question: What “midnight rush” was Joseph in if there is no indication of him in dire need of a tomb? There is no evidence offered that Joseph, or any of his family members, had passed away and needed to be buried immediately. Joseph assembling a team to perform such drastic measures in a hurry for no reason begins to expose that this theory does not provide an accurate explanation for the empty tomb. Additionally, Joseph had no clear motive to move the body, especially without someone knowing. Joseph had sacrificed his social status for Jesus, as he was a member of the Sanhedrin. The Gospels reported that Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but in secret, for fear of the Jews. By offering his grave, he knowingly initiated tension with the Jewish leaders that clearly despised Jesus and allowed for the degradation of his social standing. If Joseph had maintained this type of sacrificial relationship with Jesus, it seems highly likely that he would have considered it an honor to have him buried in his tomb. Additionally, there is no clear indication that Joseph was in such a hurry to move the body elsewhere overnight.

Even to suppose that Joseph was not a loyal follower of Jesus as the Gospels said he was, this claim would still be unlikely. As a result of Jesus proclaiming his resurrection, the Jewish leadership had the tomb heavily guarded to ensure the disciples would not be able to steal Jesus'

body. If Joseph's loyalty was to the Jewish leadership, he would have ensured the body stayed secure in the sealed tomb for at least three days. Even if he had secretly moved the body, he and other Jewish leaders would have revealed the body's new location as a way to discredit the disciples when they began proclaiming Jesus rose from the dead. Nevertheless, the allegation that Jesus' body was stolen presupposes that the body was in fact missing from the tomb.

### **The Hallucination Hypothesis**

In his work, *The Resurrection of Christ: A Historical Inquiry*, German New Testament scholar and historian Gerd Lüdemann argues that Jesus did not literally, physically raise from the dead. Rather, he argues Peter's experience with the risen Jesus was only a hallucination as a result of an overwhelming feeling of guilt. Soon, others, who did not share Peter's trauma, also saw hallucinations of the risen Jesus. His conclusions are based on a careful, historical analysis of all the relevant passages. Peter's guilt complex is the center of his argument.

(15) Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest's courtyard, (16) but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the servant girl on duty there and brought Peter in. (17) "You aren't one of this man's disciples too, are you?" she asked Peter. He replied, "I am not."<sup>75</sup>

According to Lüdemann, it is likely that Peter carried an overwhelming burden of guilt and regret as a result of his denial of Christ. Once Jesus was crucified, his disciples entered a

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<sup>75</sup> John 18:15-17

state of fright and fled from Jerusalem to Galilee, as their intention was to go home in hiding. It was in Galilee that a vision of the risen Jesus had developed as a result of several psychological factors. Peter felt guilty for having denied Jesus, which explains why the vision he had brought forgiveness and relief from that guilt. Lüdemann makes it clear that the risen Jesus is only a psychologically induced vision as a result of Peter's extreme sense of guilt and emotional stress. Peter thus took the vision to be real and proclaimed that Jesus was alive, which started an infectious belief that spread to the rest of the disciples, resulting in the beginning of the Christian movement.

According to Lüdemann, Paul also experienced a psychologically induced vision of the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus.

(1) Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest (2) and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. (3) As he journeyed, he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. (4) Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (5) And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." (6) So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?"<sup>76</sup>

In this case, Paul had also developed a guilt complex in which he felt extremely guilty for persecuting the church. His psychologically induced vision of the risen Jesus had finally relieved him of his guilt, greeting him with forgiveness and mercy. This new outlook had convinced him that Peter and the others were right, and therefore Jesus had been raised from the dead.

Continuing on the hypothesis, many Christians in the movement were certain that these visions had not portrayed Jesus resurrecting physically but being spiritually exalted to heaven. Peter and

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<sup>76</sup> Acts 9:1-6

Paul, however, had insisted that Jesus had experienced a physical resurrection into a glorious immortal body before being exalted to heaven. The appearances of the risen Jesus were collective, resulting in a “mass ecstasy,” or a collective experience. Thus, the Christian movement is a product of a psychologically induced hallucination.

This line of thinking is similar to Leon Festinger’s, in which the disciples were suffering from a “cognitive dissonance”: a state, studied in social psychology, in which an individual fails to come to terms with reality, and instead lives in a fantasy that satisfies their deep longings. It suggests that the disciples wanted so badly to believe in Jesus that instead of coming to terms with his death they claimed he was alive.<sup>77</sup>

The central failure of the Hallucination Hypothesis is that it only offers a way of explaining the post-mortem appearances of Jesus, but fails to explain the empty tomb. The hypothesis’ explanatory power thus becomes narrow, as it is necessary to accept some other independent hypothesis to explain the empty tomb. Denial of the empty tomb would be born out of necessity, for acceptance of the facts would only expose the inadequate explanatory power of the hypothesis.

The issue of the diversity of Jesus’ post-mortem appearances must be taken into consideration as well, as there is a variance in circumstances for each appearance. Jesus appeared to both individuals and groups on different times at different places to believers and non-believers. This type of diversity is difficult to explain by a hallucination. Hallucinations require for the participant to be in a special psychological state, in this case a guilt complex. However, if Peter and Paul were the only two in this special psychological state, then how are

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<sup>77</sup> Wright

the appearances to the others to be justified? The diversity of the post-mortem appearances would have to be explained as some sort of chain reaction, which Lüdemann fails to provide any example of.

Even if one could compile from the casebooks an amalgam consisting of stories of hallucinations over a period of time (like the visions in Medjugorje), mass hallucinations (as at Lourdes), hallucinations to various individuals, and so forth, the fact remains that there is no single instance in the casebooks exhibiting the diversity involved in the post-mortem appearances of Jesus. It is only by compiling unrelated cases that anything analogous might be constructed.<sup>78</sup>

It is highly unlikely that James, the brother of Jesus and an unbeliever, would have experienced a hallucination of the risen Jesus. He is absent from experiencing the same guilt complex as Peter or Paul would, as he had no belief (or desire) of Jesus being the Messiah to cling onto in the first place. Yet, unexpectedly we find James emerge as one of the prominent leaders of the Jerusalem church and a martyr for his faith in the *risen* Jesus. Even Lüdemann himself says it was “certain” that James experienced one of Jesus’ post-mortem appearances but is silent when it comes to explaining how his theory explains the event.<sup>79</sup>

For Peter’s hallucination experience to have been infectious, it would have had to have been the *first* post-mortem appearance to happen, so that no previous appearance could be held in comparison to it by the disciples. However, nowhere in the Bible does it say that Peter’s experience was Jesus’ first post-mortem appearance, despite the common assumption of chronological priority in 1 Corinthians 15:5. It was the women who discovered the empty tomb that have priority instead. The women did not flee into hiding nor publicly deny their association

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<sup>78</sup> Craig

<sup>79</sup> Lüdemann



to Jesus. They could not have shared the same guilt complex as Peter or Paul, thus eliminating them from special psychological conditions leading to hallucinations. Once again, Ludemann's theory fails to explain the empty tomb and its discovery.

The hypothesis fails to support the disciple's sudden belief in resurrection of the dead theology. As previously mentioned in this thesis, the axiom of the time was clear: once a person died, they did not come back to life.<sup>80</sup> It was ultimately understood that a resurrection was totally unrealistic, even to the point that mythology would not make it up. Judaism was the only religion at the time that believed in a resurrection, but only at the return of YHWH. If anything, Peter or Paul would have more likely had visions that fit the first century Jewish category of thinking: visions of Jesus in Paradise, awaiting an eschatological resurrection. A vision of a resurrected Jesus would have been unnatural and totally contradictory to the beliefs of first century Judaism. Jesus' spiritual ascension into heaven would have been a more natural conclusion. Yet, the disciples consistently proclaimed that Jesus resurrected from the dead on the third day after his death.

The disciples were not expecting Jesus to raise from the dead. N.T. Wright wrote,

...something had *happened*, something which was not at all what they expected or hoped for, something around which they had to reconstruct their lives and in relation to which they had to redirect their energies. They were not refusing to come to terms with the fact that they had been wrong all along. On the contrary, they were indeed coming to terms with, and reordering their lives around, dramatic and irrefutable evidence that they had been wrong.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Wright

<sup>81</sup> Wright

The violent death of their leader would have resulted in either of the two outcomes: a new Messiah was chosen and the movement continued under new leadership, or the movement ended. Clinging to the belief that the executed leader was the Messiah was not an option. Yet, that was exactly what the disciples did. The radical transformation and reordering of their lives only points to a discovery of dramatic and irrefutable evidence that they had been wrong. Nor is there any evidence of cognitive dissonance in the writings of Josephus Flavius.

### **Jesus Christ and Mythology**

One of the major objections to the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection was raised by Rudolf Bultmann, a German New Testament scholar who believed that a modern man could not believe in a faith that is bound to the mythical world picture of the New Testament. Bultmann believed that the New Testament kerygma -- the proclamation of God's saving act in Jesus Christ -- is always expressed and contained in the particular cultural form of the writing and must always be translated into the drastically different cultural form of the person to whom it is addressed.

"People cannot use electric lights and radios and, in the case of illness, take advantage of modern medical and clinical means, and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament. And whoever intends to do so must be aware that they can profess this as the attitude of Christian faith only by making the Christian proclamation unintelligible and impossible for the present."<sup>82</sup>

The task of *demythologizing*, which refers to the task of translating the message of Christ into a modern cultural form, must continue as long as Christianity exists. For Bultmann, this

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<sup>82</sup> Bultmann

essentially means that the New Testament's story of the resurrection has nothing to do with Jesus' *physical* resurrection, but rather the early church's rise of faith that the cross was an event of cosmic victory. While maintaining that the disciples believed in more of a spiritual resurrection, this objection is rather serious because it is at odds with any tangibility or physicalness of Jesus' resurrection.<sup>83</sup>

Firstly, it is important to understand the difference between the terms “life after death” and “resurrection.” In the ancient classical world, “life after death” meant the things concerning the soul after its separation from the physical human body. Life after death in Ancient Paganism was understood to be something for the soul, not for the physical human body. Meanwhile, “resurrection” was accepted as true only in Judaism on the ancient political spectrum. Yet, every religion in the ancient classical world understood the term “resurrection” to be exactly what is understood of it today: that death could be reversed, and the dead would return to an everlasting human life. Even Greek Mythology, for example, understood that a resurrection was a physical re-embodiment. Did they permit it? No. Did they understand it to mean a physical action? Yes. Whether ancient classical worldviews believed in a resurrection or not is irrelevant to the conversation here. What *is* relevant is that they all understood “*resurrection*” always denoted *one position* within the spectrum, and that was always a *physical* re-embodiment. If the concept of a resurrection was universally understood by everyone, then it is quite unlikely the disciples and the early church did not grasp the full meaning of the word and misused it, or that they meant

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<sup>83</sup> Jamison: Trevor Jamison's thesis on “The Resurrection in the Minds of the Disciples” provided clarity on this topic

something else. They would not use what everybody knew to be a *physical* action to describe only a *spiritual* action.<sup>84</sup>

The first century Jews expected the arrival of the Kingdom of God to result in the liberation of Israel, the rebuilding of their Temple, and the end to evil, injustice, pain, and death. Why, then, did the early Christians suddenly and consistently proclaim the arrival of the Kingdom of God if the phrase did not match the description? Israel had not been liberated, the Temple had yet to be rebuilt, and evil, injustice, pain, and death were still on a rampage. One answer would be that the disciples *changed the meaning of the phrase* so that it would fit a spiritual description, not a physical one. This answer cannot be correct. The early Christians behaved as if the Jewish-style Kingdom of God was physically present. They reconstructed and re-ordered their lives around as if they had come face to face with dramatic and irrefutable evidence. Something must have happened, something which they did not expect. What must have happened for the early Christian movement to neither be a nationalist Jewish movement nor a private existential experience? Jesus had to have been *physically* raised from the dead.

The followers of *any* messianic movement would not normally conclude that their executed Messiah was still the Messiah and that the Kingdom of God had arrived. Either a new Messiah would have been chosen (usually a familial successor) or the movement would have dissolved.<sup>85</sup> With this information it becomes extremely strange that the disciples not only

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<sup>84</sup> Wright

<sup>85</sup> For more information concerning patterns of Messianic Movements, see “Revolutionary Thinking in the Time of Jesus” (Page 18)

insisted that their crucified Jesus was *still* the Messiah, but also that they reordered their worldview, beliefs, practices, and lives around this belief to the point of martyrdom.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Wright

### Conclusion

Scholarly agreement does not waiver in the fact that Jesus Christ was a real person that attracted a large following. He was a threat to the growing Roman empire and was crucified as a result of his radical claims. The writings of both biblical and non-biblical accounts confirm that Jesus rose back to life on the third day after his death. The theories that provide an alternate explanation to the event in its entirety are admittedly attractive but are either unlikely to take place given historical context or fail to fully explain the effects of what would have been a risen Jesus in the disciples.

The answer the Gospel accounts collectively present becomes the only answer to the empty tomb *that makes sense*. It provides an explanation as to why the tomb was empty, why the disciples had a dramatic transformation in such a small amount of time, and why the Christian movement proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah even after his death. It also serves as a confirmation to the radical claims Jesus made, including the foretelling of his death and resurrection.

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.<sup>87</sup>

It is additionally parallel to accepted beliefs that the dead do not rise from the dead *naturally*. Jesus' resurrection was a *supernatural* event, meaning that it required the intervention of God to raise him from the dead. This means that the only additional hypothesis needed to accept the resurrection of Christ is that *God exists*.

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<sup>87</sup> Mark 8:31

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