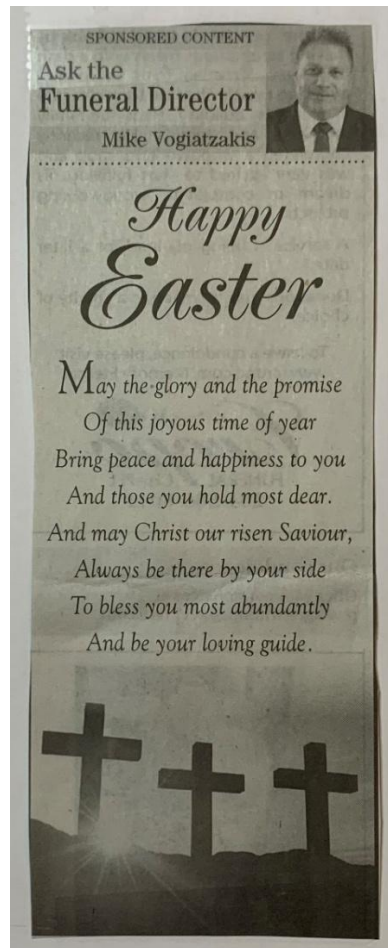


The Mathematical Improbability of Easter According to Jesus



As part of my doctoral studies in Toronto, I had occasion to travel to the Excited States of America to attend and participate in academic conferences. After one such cerebral love-in, I was driving back with a colleague, and we decided to fill the time with a debate whose subject matter was: $2 + 2 = 4$

I argued in favour of the proposition and he in opposition thereto.

This consumed us for the next eight (8) hours or so and ensured that I did not fall asleep at the wheel. Truth to tell, the final outcome of this exercise eludes me to this day. However, all mental gymnastics aside, the answer is 4 if only because of the need for language to be consistent in order for us to be able to communicate effectively. If “2” and “4” meant something different for you numerically than it does for me, then the world as we know it could not function. For that reason, when we take “2” of something (e.g., bananas) and add “2” more bananas, then you always and only end up with “4” bananas. For those of you familiar with a language other than English, you know that in that language $2 + 2 = 4$ as well.

Every single time.

Notwithstanding what appears to be an axiomatic principle, Jesus disagrees with the math. And I will demonstrate this using only the words of Jesus.

Imagine that.

Slide back up to the first page where I have inserted what appeared on the lead page of “Passages” (i.e., the obituaries) in the *Winnipeg Free Press* on April 8, 2023 where the reader by way of “Sponsored Content” is wished a Happy Easter.

As always, I am fascinated by the language utilized with a mind to what is said and what is not said (the latter by its absence is quite frequently – and ironically – more telling).

In this case, the author identifies with the Christian community on Easter weekend with his unmistakable alliance established by means of: *And may Christ our risen Saviour...*

Of note here are two (2) key elements:

1. First of all, the use of “our”; and then,
2. The deliberately charged reference to “Christ”

While the author can and does use the second person (i.e., you and your) in this brief well-wish, it is the use of “our” that ensures the so-inclined reader that all are within the same collective circle of belief.

This is reinforced with reference to “Christ” (as opposed to “Jesus”), itself being a decision that completely changes the conversation.

2,000 years ago, the name Jesus among Jews was as common as John is for current-day North Americans. From a practical perspective this meant that the Palestine of millennia past was very familiar with this name given to many a Jewish boy at birth. In the case of the Christian story, this is recorded as a matter of fact:

The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” (Luke 1.30-31)

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was given the name Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. (Luke 2.21)

Notwithstanding that innocuous rite of passage, it was only later when the title of “Christ” was added that his accusers leveled charges of blasphemy against Jesus which subsequently resulted in his crucifixion. The history behind those charges were of a consequential nature in that the Jews had created and reserved the title of “Christ” for the Messiah. Approximately 500 years before Jesus was born, the Jews had come to believe that a Messiah would be sent by their God to liberate them from their oppressors and to establish the Kingdom of God on earth (seeing as the Jews **were** the chosen people of said God...or so their story goes).

Simply stated, the impasse (nay, chasm) that has separated Christians from Jews to this day is that the former believe the Messiah has come as promised and the latter believe that this is still an event to be fulfilled.

In fact – and of no small consequence – several centuries after the crucifixion of Jesus, Jewish writings acknowledge that the blasphemer was crucified and rightfully so.

Happy Easter.

Now, as a historian of religion, I expect that Jewish texts would – after the fact – support the decision to crucify the blasphemer. After all, the claims made by this “Jesus” and his followers could easily be proven to be false. Since it was the Jews who were the progenitors of the messianic expectation circa 2,500 years ago, then it was the Jews who would determine when said promise came to fruition. This would not be determined by what they considered to be a first-century cult that pledged allegiance to a preacher of falsehoods.

The Jewish position was – and continues to be – clear regarding who Jesus was...or more accurately, who he was not.

Understood.

However, there is another interpretation.

The Christian position was – and continues to be – clear regarding who Jesus was.

What then of the Christian texts and their interpretation which is diametrically opposed to that of the first century CE Jews (and to this day)?

In surveying those Christian texts, it should come as no surprise that they conclude that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah and that he fulfilled the expectations created centuries earlier.

But was he? Was he that Messiah?

Early Christian preaching – as recorded in those Christian texts – is lucid in its presentation that the early Christians believed that Jesus was the Messiah.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter addressed a very large crowd and by way of an impassioned speech presented his case as to why recent events were in fact a fulfillment of messianic expectations. His conclusion:

Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified. (Acts 2.36)

There is a disconnecting and dysfunctional symbiosis before us.

On the one hand, we have Jewish texts – written after the fact – that concur with the decision of earlier Jews to crucify Jesus of Nazareth as a blasphemer in light of the messianic claims associated with him. I am not surprised with the endorsement after the fact.

On the other hand, we have Christian texts – written after the fact – that concur with the conclusion of earlier Christians that Jesus was the Messiah. I am not surprised with the endorsement after the fact.

I suggest that the best way to address this is to consider the words of Jesus.

I suggest that what you are about to read the way you are about to read it has rarely (if ever) been presented to a Christian congregation from the pulpit in an Easter Sunday sermon.

By way of a foundational statement, I will be presenting the words of Jesus to you (or more accurately, the words attributed to Jesus). After all, should not the measure of “Easter” and all that it represents be based on the words of Jesus?

Fair is fair.

To the words then not **about** Jesus on Easter, but rather the words **of** Jesus on Easter.

On numerous occasions the Christian scriptures inform us that Jesus made predictions about what would ultimately befall him. Namely that – and remember, the words of Jesus – he would undergo great suffering, be killed and then subsequently rise from the dead.

I quote the words attributed to Jesus – **verbatim** – from the Gospels claiming to record the same with a focus on the resurrection.

First Prediction:

Mt. 16.21 *...and be killed, and on the third day be raised*

Mk. 8.31 *...and be killed, and after three days rise again*

Lk. 9.22 *...and be killed, and on the third day be raised*

Second Prediction:

Mt. 17.23 *...and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised*

Mk. 9.31 *...and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again*

Lk. 9.44+ *...[nothing]*

Third Prediction:

Mt. 20.19 *...and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised*

Mk. 10.34 *...and kill him; and after three days he will rise again*

Lk. 18.33 *...they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again*

Notwithstanding the fact that at no point does Jesus actually say the same thing even though each Gospel writer presents the “same” situation, Jesus does not say the same thing.

But it gets worse.

Much worse.

With no sleight of hand, please pay close attention to the delineation of events as presented to you by Jesus and then reconcile them with your calendar.

To which:

Jesus is crucified on Friday.

Jesus is resurrected on Sunday.

Not my version of the events, but those of the Bible.

Simple question:

How many days have passed?

By my count: two (2).

He is crucified on Friday. Then, two (2) days later, he is raised from the dead.

Goes to sleight of hand?

Matthew and Luke use the same language: **on the third day** (and so on).

If we are feeling gracious, we might look the other way, cough nervously, and concede that:

- “on the third day” would break things down as:
 - Friday = Day 1;
 - Saturday = Day 2; and,
 - Sunday = Day 3

However, and there could not be a more significant “however”, please note the exact language utilized by Jesus according to Mark’s Gospel:

Mk. 8.31 ...and **after** three days...

Mk. 9.31 ...and three days **after** being killed...

Mk. 10.34 ...and **after** three days...

Let’s continue feeling gracious.

Friday = Day 1; Saturday = Day 2; and Sunday = Day 3

That would mean according to what **Jesus says** in Mark’s Gospel, he will be raised on Monday.

Not Sunday. What day was he killed? Friday. Mark’s Gospel records Jesus as saying that he will be raised three days **after** being killed.

The difference in language between the Gospels (i.e., “**on** the third day” as opposed to “**after** three days”) is supported by the underlying Greek text.

Please allow that fact to sink in.

In other words, while describing three (3) **very specific and separate moments** in the ministry of Jesus, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke place decidedly different language into the mouth of Jesus. In fact, diametrically opposed words with respect to the single most important moment of his life. Or, his death. Or his coming back from the dead. It’s so confusing.

But we are not done yet.

Or perhaps more accurately, Jesus is not done yet.

Notwithstanding the calendar of complete chaos on the parallel passages between the Gospels noted above, there is another crystal-clear passage to shed even more light (or perhaps more accurately, more chaos) on the matter.

Consider another seminal passage on this critical subject matter and in this case, from Matthew's Gospel:

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth." (Mt. 12.38-40)

Ugh. Three days and three nights?

Let's continue feeling gracious.

Friday = Day 1; Saturday = Day 2; and Sunday = Day 3

How many nights does this account for?

Exactly: Friday night and Saturday night.

Because if it were three (3) nights, then Jesus would be raised on Monday, not Sunday.

Perhaps the problem lies with the story of Jonah as cited by Jesus from – and we must remind ourselves – what is believed to be the Word of God by many (many) believers:

But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. (Jonah 2.17)

Whoops.

When Jesus addresses the Jewish religious leaders of the day as recorded in Matthew's Gospel, he utilizes a point of reference familiar to those Jews (i.e., a story from their Hebrew Bible). Therefore, the reference to 3 days and 3 nights is accurate from both perspectives: the Hebrew scriptures and the words of Jesus as recorded in the Christian scriptures.

The problem is, Jesus is factually incorrect. Entirely incorrect.

He could not be more incorrect.

And yet, these are the words of Jesus in the "Word of God".

The words of the Messiah, the Christ, the son of God, the words of God in the Word of God.

I had asked the (clearly) non-rhetorical question earlier if Jesus was the Messiah.

Christians – to this day – believe that he is.

But does the math support that conclusion?

Let's stop circling the airport and bring the plane in for a landing to the tarmac called perspective.

“This” is not an inconsequential discussion or subject matter. Unlike the mock-debate that I had with my friend on the road trip back to Toronto, the outcome of this conversation is unmatched in terms of its existential relevance for billions of believers.

According to the scriptures themselves, there is **nothing** more important than the resurrection.

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. (1 Corinthians 15.13-14)

Regardless of what any person or any source might purport, suggest, forward and/or argue on the subject matter, the words of Jesus must be the final authority.

Based on what the scriptures inform us in terms of what Jesus had to say about the resurrection, how much stock can we place in those words and the messianic claims associated with him?

Does $2 + 2 = 4$?

I encourage you to ask anyone that you know, trust and whose opinion you value.

Just don't ask Jesus.

Happy Easter

Ernest P Janzen