

The Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?

I. The importance of the resurrection.

- A. A fundamental doctrine of the faith, 1 Corinthians 15:14-19
- B. All but four of the major world religions are based on mere philosophical propositions. Of the four that are based on personalities, only Christianity claims an empty tomb for its Founder.

- 1. Wilber M Smith notes the following with regard to Buddha:

The original accounts of Buddha never ascribe to him any such thing as a resurrection; in fact in the earliest account of his death, namely the Mahaparinibbana Suta, we read that when Buddha died it was 'with that utter passing away in which nothing remains behind.'¹

- 2. Mohammed died June 8, 632 AD, at the age of 61, at Medina, where his tomb is annually visited by thousands of faithful Mohammedans. All the millions and millions of Jews, Buddhists, and Mohammedans agree that their founders have never come up out of the dust of the grave.²

- C. Christianity rises or falls on the question of Christ's historical, bodily resurrection. Michael Green notes:

Christianity does not hold the resurrection to be one among many tenants of belief. Without faith in the resurrection there would be no Christianity at all. The Christian church would never have begun, the Jesus-movement would have fizzled out like a damp squib with his execution. Christianity stands or falls with the truth of the resurrection. Once disprove it, and you have disposed of Christianity.

Christianity is a historical religion. It claims that God has taken the risk of involving himself in human history, and the facts are there for you to examine with the utmost rigor. They will stand any amount of critical examination.³

II. The claims of Christ that He would be raised from the dead.

Wilber M. Smith makes the following cogent remark about Jesus' claims to rise from the dead:

It was this same Jesus, the Christ who, among many other remarkable things, said and repeated something which, proceeding from any other being would have condemned him at once as either a bloated egotist or a dangerously unbalanced person. That Jesus said He was going up to Jerusalem to die is not so remarkable, though all the details He gave about that death, weeks and months before He died are together a prophetic phenomenon. But when He said that He himself would rise again from the dead, the third day after He was crucified, He said something that only a fool would dare say, if he expected longer the devotion of any of his disciples, unless--He was sure He was going to rise. No founder of any world religion known to men ever dared say a thing like that!⁴

A. Specific references where Jesus predicts His resurrection.

1. Matthew 12:38-40
Matthew 16:21
Matthew 17:9
Matthew 17:22-23
Matthew 20:18-19
Matthew 26:32
Matthew 27:63
2. Mark 8:31-9:1
Mark 9:10
Mark 9:31
Mark 10:32
Mark 14:28
Mark 14:58
3. Luke 9:22-27
4. John 2:19-22
John 12:34
John Chapters 14-16

B. The importance of these claims cannot be overstated.

III. **The resurrection validated by history.**

A. The testimony of Ignatius of Antioch (c. 50-115 AD)

He was crucified and died under Pontius Pilate. He really, and not merely in appearance, was crucified and died, in the sight of beings in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth. He also rose again in three days.⁵

B. The testimony of St. Clement of Rome (writing in about A.D. 100), speaks of Christ's resurrection to the Corinthians. In his first letter to the Corinthians he says:

Let us understand, dearly beloved, how the Master continually showeth unto us the resurrection that shall be hereafter; whereof He made the Lord Jesus Christ the firstfruit, when He raised Him from the dead. (1 Clement 24)⁶

C. The testimony of Flavius Josephus

Flavius Josephus (born A.D. 37) was a Jewish historian. He became a Pharisee at age 19. In A.D. 66 he was the commander of Jewish forces in Galilee against the Roman invaders. After being captured, he was attached to the Roman

headquarters. He never became a Christian, yet he writes the following about Jesus (c. A.D. 100) in the standard text of the *Antiquities XVIII, 63*.

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 principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the 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.

But scholars have long suspected this to be a spurious reading because "Josephus would not have believed Jesus to be the Messiah or in his resurrection and have remained as he did, a non-Christian Jew."⁷

But Paul L. Maier, a well-respected authority on Josephus, calls attention to a recent manuscript discovery in which the original Josephus text appears.⁸ This text reads:

At this time there was a wise man called Jesus, and his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. Many people among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive. Accordingly, he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have reported wonders. And the tribe of the Christians, so named after him, has not disappeared to this day.⁹

This text, though it does not explicitly affirm the resurrection, is, nevertheless, a strong attestation and witness for it. How so? We must remember that Josephus is a hostile witness. He is a Jew writing under the charge of the Romans. He would hardly have included such an account if it were not true--and generally acknowledged as such. He would hardly have wanted to raise the ire of either the Jews or the Romans.

D. The testimony of historians

1. Roman History Scholar - Thomas Arnold

Arnold wrote the three-volume *History of Rome* and held the chair of modern history and Oxford University. He was well acquainted with the value of evidence in establishing historical facts. This great scholar wrote:

I have been used for many years to study the histories of other times, and to examine and weigh the evidence of those who have written about them,

and I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of a fair inquirer, than the great sign which God hath given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead.¹⁰

2. Textual Critic - Brook Foss Wescott

Taking all the evidence together, it is not too much to say that there is no historic incident better or more variously supported than the resurrection of Christ.¹¹

3. Professor of Ancient History - Paul L. Maier

Dr. Paul L. Maier, professor of ancient history at Western Michigan University, concluded:

If all the evidence is weighed carefully and fairly, it is indeed justifiable, according to the canons of historical research, to conclude that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was actually empty on the morning of the first Easter. And no shred of evidence has yet been discovered in literary sources, epigraphy or archaeology that would disprove this statement.¹²

E. **Biblical Testimony regarding Jesus' death.**

JESUS WAS DEAD.

A. Gospel accounts confirming the death of Jesus:

Matthew 27:50, 54, 57-60

Mark 15:37, 39, 44-45

Luke 23:46-47, 51-53

John 19:30-42

B. The scourging (whipping)

1. The Biblical testimony

Matthew 27:26

Mark 15:15

John 19:1

2. The manner and effects of scourging.

a. The whipping of a victim is described by John Mattingly:

The adjudged criminal was usually first forcefully stripped of his clothes and then tied to a post or pillar in the tribunal. The awful and cruel scourging was administered by the lictors or scourgers. Although the Hebrews limited by law the number of strokes in a scourging to forty, the Romans set no such limitation; and the victim was at the mercy of his scourgers.

The brutal instrument used to scourged the victim was called a flagrum. . . . It can readily be seen that the long lashing pieces of bone and metal would greatly lacerate the human flesh.¹³

- b. Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, the Church historian of the 3rd century, wrote in his *Epistle of the Church in Smyrna*, concerning the Roman scourging inflicted on those to be executed: the sufferer's "veins were laid bare, and that the very muscles, sinews, and bowels of the victim were open to exposure."¹⁴
- c. A medical study of the death of Christ was published in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*. Regarding the scourging of Jesus, we read:

Flogging was a legal preliminary to every Roman execution, and only women and Roman senators or soldiers (except in cases of desertion) were exempt. The usual instrument was a short whip (flagrum or flagellum) with several single or braided leather thongs of variable lengths, in which small iron balls or sharp pieces of sheep bones were tied at intervals. Occasionally, staves also were used. For scourging, the man was stripped of his clothing and his hands were tied to an upright post. The back, buttocks, and legs were flogged either by two soldiers (lictors) or by one who alternated positions. The severity of the scourging depended on the disposition of the lictors and was intended to weaken the victim to a state just short of collapse or death. After the scourging, the soldiers often taunted their victim.

As the Roman soldiers repeatedly struck the victim's back with full force, the iron balls would cause deep contusions, and the leather thongs and sheep bones would cut into the skin and subcutaneous tissues. Then, as the flogging continued, the lacerations would tear into the underlying skeletal muscles and produce quivering ribbons of bleeding flesh. Pain and blood loss generally set the stage for circulatory shock. The extent of blood loss may well have determined how long the victim would survive on the cross.

. . .

The severe scourging, with its intense pain and appreciable

blood loss, most probably left Jesus in a preshock state. Moreover, hematidrosis had rendered his skin particularly tender. The physical and mental abuse meted out by the Jews and the Romans, as well as the lack of food, water, and sleep, also contributed to his generally weakened state. Therefore, even before the actual crucifixion, Jesus' physical condition was at least serious and possibly critical.¹⁵

- d. Dr. C. Truman Davis, a medical doctor who has meticulously studied crucifixion from a medical perspective, describes the effects of the Roman flagrum used in whipping:

The heavy whip is brought down with full force again and again across [a person's] shoulders, back, and legs. At first the heavy thongs cut through the skin only. Then, as the blows continue, they cut deeper into the subcutaneous tissues, producing first an oozing of blood from the capillaries and veins of the skin, and finally spurting arterial bleeding from vessels in the underlying muscles. The small balls of lead first produce large, deep bruises which are broken open by subsequent blows. Finally the skin of the back is hanging in long ribbons and the entire area is an unrecognizable mass of torn, bleeding tissue. When it is determined by the centurion in charge that the prisoner is near death, the beating is finally stopped.¹⁶

- C. The Via Dolorosa (The Way of Sorrows): Journey to Golgotha
After the scourging, the victim had to journey to the site of the crucifixion. In the case of Jesus, this meant traveling through the streets of Jerusalem to the hill of Golgotha, just outside the city. Typically, the victim had to carry his own crossbar to the site of execution. Dr. Pierre Barbet points out that "they began to use a long piece of wood, which was used for barring doors and was called the *patibulum* (from *patere*, to be open)."¹⁷

Jesus, because he was too exhausted, was unable to carry his crossbar, so a certain Simon from Cyrene was pressed into service to take the crossbar to the site of execution (Mark 15:21).

- D. The crucifixion
Crucifixion probably first began with the Persians. Alexander the Great introduced the practice to Egypt and Carthage and the Romans appear to

have learned of it from the Carthaginians. Although the Romans did not invent crucifixion, they perfected it as a form of torture and capital punishment that was designed to produce a slow death with maximum pain and suffering. It was one of the most disgraceful and cruel methods of execution and usually was reserved only for slaves, foreigners, revolutionaries, and the vilest of criminals. Roman law usually protected Roman citizens from crucifixion, except perhaps in the case of desertion by soldiers.

As regards the details of crucifixion, the criminal was thrown to the ground on his back, his arms outstretched along the patibulum (crossbar). The hands could be nailed or tied to the crossbar, but nailing apparently was preferred by the Romans. The archaeological remains of a crucified body, found in an ossuary near Jerusalem and dating from the time of Christ indicate that the nails were tapered iron spikes approximately 5 to 7 inches long with a square shaft three-eighths of an inch across. Furthermore, ossuary findings have documented that the nails commonly were driven through the wrists rather than in the palms. Although scriptural references are made to nails in the hands, these are not at odds with the archaeological evidence of wrist wounds, since the ancients customarily considered the wrist to be a part of the hand.¹⁸ It has been demonstrated that the ligaments and bones of the wrist can support the weight of a body hanging from them, but the palms cannot. Anatomically, it is quite possible to drive a properly positioned spike into the wrist without producing fractures.¹⁹

After both arms were fixed to the crossbar, the patibulum and the victim, together, were lifted onto the stipe, i.e., the vertical post. Next, the feet were fixed to the cross, either by nails or ropes. Ossuary finding suggest that nailing was the preferred Roman practice. Although the feet could be fixed to the sides of the stipe, they usually were nailed directly to the front of it. To accomplish this, flexion of the knees may have been quite prominent, and the bent legs may have been rotated laterally.

Dr. Truman Davis describes what happens to the human body after a short time of exposure on the cross. He writes:

As the arms fatigue, great waves of cramps sweep over the muscles, knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain. With these cramps comes the inability to push Himself upward. Hanging by His arms, the pectoral muscles are paralyzed and the intercostal muscles are unable to act. Air can be drawn into the lungs, but cannot be exhaled. Jesus fights to raise Himself in order to get even one short breath. Finally, carbon dioxide builds up in the lungs and in the bloodstream and the cramps partially subside. Spasmodically, He is able to push Himself upward to exhale and bring in the life-giving oxygen.²⁰

After a while, orthostatic collapse through insufficient blood circulating to the brain and heart would follow. The only way the victim could avoid this was to push up by his feet so the blood could be returned to some degree of circulation in the upper part of his body.

When the authorities wanted to hasten death or terminate the torture, the victim's legs were broken below the knees with a club. This prevented the victim from pushing himself upward to relieve the tension on the pectoral or chest muscles. Either rapid suffocation or coronary insufficiency followed. In the case of Christ, the legs of the two thieves crucified with Him were broken, but Christ's were not because the executioners observed that He was already dead.²¹

One of the executioners thrust a spear into Christ's side, and, as recorded in John 19:34, "Immediately there came out blood and water." Davis notes:

[There was] an escape of watery fluid from the sac surrounding the heart. We, therefore, have rather conclusive post-mortem evidence that [Christ] died, not the usual crucifixion death by suffocation, but of the heart failure due to shock and constriction of the heart by fluid in the pericardium.²²

The historian Michael Green lays great importance to the report of blood and water coming out of Christ's side. He says:

We are told on eyewitness authority that 'blood and water' came out of the pierced side of Jesus (John 19:34, 35). The eyewitness clearly attached great importance to this. Had Jesus been alive when the spear pierced his side, strong spouts of blood would have emerged with every heart beat. Instead, the observer noticed semi-solid dark red clots seeping out, distinct and separate from the accompanying watery serum. This is evidence of massive clotting of the blood in the main arteries, and is exceptionally strong medical proof of death. Its is all the more impressive because the evangelist could not possibly have realized its significance to a pathologist. The 'blood and water' from the spear-thrust is proof positive that Jesus was already dead.²³

1. Testimony of the executioners: Jesus was dead.

John 19:23
Mark 15:39-44

2. At once there came out blood and water (John 19:34)
3. Manner of Jewish burial (John 19:39)

- E. The tomb and the stone
- F. The seal
- G. The guard at the tomb
- H. The disciples went their own way

IV. Biblical testimony regarding Easter Day.

- A. The empty tomb
- B. The position of the great stone
- C. The seal
- D. The grave clothes
- E. The Roman guard

V. Christ's post-resurrection appearances (See Chart)

VI. Christ's enemies gave no refutation of the resurrection.

- A. Acts 2:22-36 (esp. 30-33)
- B. Acts 26:19-28 (Paul before Agrippa and Festus in Caesarea)

VII. The transformed lives of the disciples and the NT church

- A. From doubt to conviction
- B. Sunday as the day of worship
- C. The New Testament Church established

VIII. What the resurrection means

- A. Christ is the Son of God (Rom. 1:4)
- B. His doctrine in all of its parts is true (John 14:6)
- C. The Father has accepted the sacrifice of His Son as payment-in- full for all of the world's sins (Rom. 4:25)
- D. All believers shall rise unto eternal life

John 14:19

John 11:25-26

- E. Our bodies shall be raised up on the Last Day.

References

1. Wilber M. Smith, *Therefore Stand: Christian Apologetics*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), p. 385. [\[Return\]](#)
2. Josh McDowell, *Evidence that demands a Verdict: Historical Evidences for the Christian faith*, (Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972), p. 187. [\[Return\]](#)
3. Michael Green, *Man Alive*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1968), p. 61 [\[Return\]](#)
4. Wilber M. Smith, *A Great Certainty in This Hour of World Crisis*, (Wheaton: Van Kampen Press: 1951), pp. 10-11. [\[Return\]](#)
5. Elgin S. Moyer, ed., *Who Was Who in Church History*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), p. 209. [\[Return\]](#)
6. As found in Lightfoot and Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984, reprinted from the 1891 edition published by Macmillan and Company), p. 68. [\[Return\]](#)
7. Paul L. Maier, *Josephus: The Essential Writings* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1988), p. 265n. [\[Return\]](#)
8. Paul L. Maier notes:

In 1972, however, Professor Schlomo Pines of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem announced his discovery of an Arabic manuscript by the tenth-century Melkite historian Agapius, in which this Josephan passage is expressed in a manner appropriate to a Jew, and which corresponds so precisely to previous scholarly projections of what Josephus originally wrote . . . p. 265n.

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9. Maier, p. 264. [\[Return\]](#)
10. As cited by Josh McDowell, *A Ready Defense*, comp. by Bill Wilson (San Bernadino: Here's Life Publishers, 1990), p. 216. [\[Return\]](#)
11. As cited by McDowell, p. 216. [\[Return\]](#)
12. As cited by McDowell, p. 216. [\[Return\]](#)
13. John Mattingly as cited by Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernadino: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972), pp. 203-204. [\[Return\]](#)
14. Eusebius as cited by McDowell, p. 204. [\[Return\]](#)
15. William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, Floyd E., Hosmer, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," *The Journal of the American Medical Association 11* (March 21, 1986): 1457-1458. [\[Return\]](#)
16. C. Truman Davis, "The Crucifixion of Jesus," *Arizona Medicine* (March 1965), p. 185. [\[Return\]](#)
17. Pierre Barbet as quoted in Josh McDowell, *A Ready Defense* (San Bernadino: Here's Life Publishers, 1990), p. 222. [\[Return\]](#)
18. William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, Floyd E., Hosmer, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," *The Journal of the American Medical Association 11* (March 21, 1986): 1462 [\[Return\]](#)
19. Edwards, Gabel, and Hosmer, p. 1460. [\[Return\]](#)
20. As cited by McDowell, *A Ready Defense*, p. 224. [\[Return\]](#)
21. *A Ready Defense*, p. 224. [\[Return\]](#)
22. Cited by McDowell in *A Ready Defense*, p. 224. [\[Return\]](#)
23. Cited by McDowell in *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, p. 207. [\[Return\]](#)